

D J U N A B A R N E S

Before she wrote the experimental novel Nightwood (1936), Djuna Barnes (1892–1982) sharpened her prose on some extraordinary urban sketches for the popular press. Hers was a city of spectacle: dance halls, boxing matches, World War I soldiers on a pass, feminist protests, and bohemian flamboyance in her own beloved Greenwich Village. Here she turns to the craze for roof gardens, which provided both a means to enjoy the newly romantic vistas of skyscraper New York and a palliative, in the days before air-conditioning, to the city's hot weather.

“ C O M E I N T O T H E R O O F G A R D E N , M A U D ”

FIRST OF ALL, enter the atmosphere.

And this, the atmosphere of a roof garden, is 10 per cent. soft June air and 10 per cent. gold June twilight, and a goodly per cent. of high-hung lanterns and the music of hidden mechanical birds, swinging under the tangle of paper wistaria, fifty feet above, where, between guarding panes of glass, shine the electric signs, plus a few stars, of Broadway.

A good deal of the grace of God is there, too. It is a majestic something that keeps a distance east of the champagne bucket, and goes out upon the dancing space not at all.

The thing that is really lacking is a sense of humor. There are not ten people with a really good laugh in their systems in a whole evening on a roof garden. A sense of humor, of course, is never well fed. Here people scan the menu too often and too long to allow the humor to get upon its basic legs. A woman is a terribly good sport and wants to enjoy herself; her escort is growing old in the attempt to make it an evening of evenings.

“That,” she says, in the very first appeal of the thing, “is the most hideous gown I ever saw; all sliced up where she should be careful and all bunched around where she should be coming out; no arm at all, no arm.”

“What’s wrong?”

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“Everything!” she said with high held glasses. “Everything. Why don’t women get a sense of the decorative when they dress?”

“But, you know,” he soothes, “they are really fearfully and terribly magnetic; they make an appeal.”

And therefore he has gone into history as a blind innocent, with no sense of order, or the law that stands next to the things that are right.

And yet he is right. They make an appeal. Everything on, in and about a roof garden, from the little white and green match-stands to the wide spanning arches of red light, is an appeal. Sometimes it is an appeal for silence; sometimes it is an appeal for laughter; often it is an appeal for help.

Terribly appealing is the soft melange of the French sisters, wound about in their yard or so of silk, their wide, comprehending eyes, their wider, less comprehending mouths, with a generous space for rouge. Appealing the little foot that waits the tango; appealing, too, the dumb, rigid silences of the chaperon, who feels that there is nothing here for her but to maintain her sense of right.

A typical roof garden is the Jardin de Danse. It is at least the best in the sense of its fullness of spectacular dancing, both the dancing of the professionals and those who go up to do likewise—if they can.

The fifty-mile look is here, too. Let me explain.

People from out of town can’t hide it. Even people no further away from home than The Bronx hide it very badly. The born-in-the blood persons, those who seem a part of the place, are those who live in the hotel opposite, or in the apartment just around the corner, or at most, no more than five blocks away.

This doesn’t include Judy O’Grady, who dances up stairs upon the roof of the garden of children’s and husbands’ clothing, swinging in the breeze off a back alley. It is those places about Broadway where the sound of a taxi is personal.

And now the band begins to play.

The conductor, a great, towering figure in white flannels, stands knee-deep in green foliage, which may or may not be false, but which looks extremely like asparagus gone to seed, fine and green and feathery—a soft accompaniment to a fearsome pair of legs.

Up and down and sideways goes the little conducting stick; and up and down and sideways go the head and the bow of the violinist, and up and out goes the laboring chest of the cornetist; and the Chalmerses and the De Vans from Yonkers drift out upon the floor, while the esthetic Four Hundred (who are aware only of that part of their body where rests money in stock and bond value—the breast-bone where hangs the string of pearls, the waist girded tight with priceless stones, the buckled shoe and the fingers holding the brittle champagne glass with Tiffany-encircled fingers); wait a second before they arise, for to be late is to be fashionable, to be hesitant is to be haughty.

“Some day I shall put in such a floor. I don’t think the floors along the avenue have received their proper share of attention. Why not have a dancing space like this in the Blue Room?”

“What’s the matter?” some one says at a table adjoining, and a voice comes back over your shoulder, high and feminine:

“I am suffering; I am unhappy.”

“And why so?”

“Ah,” the voice goes on, dramatically broken, clinging softly to its feminine cadences, “I left the pudding in the oven and the canary hasn’t been fed.” Then the snip snip of pistachio nuts being cracked at the table to the left and the dancers are coming back.

“I felt like a perfect fool,” giggles the youngest Miss Van Allen, “when the music stopped and they just threw about a sort of noise like rice in a sieve and that silly negro with a grin on his face kept batting that poor old drum.”

“I always feel like a nut, anyway,” returns the young man with the hair thrust back as though he has just been reverently handled by an archdeacon.

“Oh, well, we’re having an awfully good time, aren’t we?” they say in chorus, and decide that they are.

Taken from an artistic point of view, the best moment to catch the atmosphere of a roof garden is when every one is just about to sit down, the colors rise and fall and scintillate and surge, crouch, scream and cry and grope and cough and are bold and are clever and are witty and are wise; and every tone is so very apparent in his or

her temperament and taste is so good and so foolish and all taste is worth its modicum of moments.

Around comes the white-coated attendant thrusting a dog with a musical inside at you.

“I just love those little joyous animals,” gush the Van Allens, and the white attendant passes on, the basket of furry folk held out in front of him.

Some one says something about the types of women that find their way into the atmosphere. Each hour has its particular type—those who come in the beginning and care so much, those who come behind and care less, and those who come in almost too late to have made it seem worth while. There is the couple that comes in at 8.30 sharp, intent upon getting all that’s to be got; like a boy at a circus; those who come at 10.30 and dawdle with a glass of something; those who come in from 11 to 12, not even deceptive in their care-less ease.

The real element knows its garden so well that if blindness found them suddenly they could walk with their hands behind them up to a particular table; could, still with their hands behind them, pick out a particular chair, and in the end could find the floor. These men may range from banker to mere journalist, but the woman who comes with them is languid, impressive, wears long, lassitudinous side curls, and strings the contour of her face to the sharp-pitched key of a large expanse of white forehead and a sudden downward wave of well ordered hair. She is essentially crepe; she moves in long, pathetic lines; she is boldly conscious of large hands and ample feet—she has even made them fashionable by endlessly displaying them with a studied simplicity.

A lot of anything can become fashionable if one gets used to it—even the Rosetti neck.

She is called the “dangerous woman.” She likes the name, and she has made the most of it. The pillar of fame is her background; the best possibilities in an ordinary future are hers to do with as the small woman may not. One expects to see Juno pluck grapes——

She doesn’t make a good talker, but he does not wish to talk. She makes few attempts, because she knows that what looked good

in Shakespeare's eyes as a quality to be desired in woman is still good.

"You mustn't take any more of that curry," she tells him, her chin in her palm; "it's too late at night." Thus she has even his dreams in mind.

"It won't hurt me."

She shrugs and, chin still in hand, turns away. He shouldn't feel rebuked, but he does. He knows that the things that may be in an ordinary mind about the effects of curry are doubly full of import in the mind of the dangerous woman. He takes the fork out and lays it across the plate from rim to rim. He has not given up. He's given in.

He could find it in his heart to love her if she would yearn, but she won't. He could become eloquent if she were roguish, but she isn't.

We have all seen her triumphant, sitting high over the tide of lesser beings, a passage to the deeper sea, brooding over the moonlight, queen in her nautical learning, smiling still.

The Miss Van Allens have spotted her long since; they have taken in the shape of her head, the way she does her hair, the exact whole, separately and collectively, they turn to each other and feign horror, and in their mental notes they don't forget.

Women are supreme when it comes to getting back to—shall we say?—supper. If she does nothing else well, this at least she does magnificently. She will leave, thereby making it necessary for the man in the case to leave also, the most picturesque little order of a salad, even if it is lobster in its most excruciating intimacy; she will arise and walk slowly away from the most ravishing pasties and the most vitally tempting glasses of something; she will abandon the best of a bird delayed in its flight; leave it all languidly to go through the mazes of some new step, and finally come back to it coldly, as though she had never known that it existed, or, rather, as if it did not matter whether it existed or not.

And yet of a certainty she is the hungriest thing in the whole of creation!

And then, too, she is as illogical as usual.

"Where is the roof?" she says, stepping out of the elevator and

casting her eyes up toward the perfectly substantial roof of lights and twining flowers.

“We’re on it now,” he assures her, leading her by the elbow to a seat near the red ropes leading from the Dollys’ dressing room; she can see the inimitable Sebastian rush on with the whole of a girl in his arms and dance like a Spaniard of old, with the burden material of his love.

“But I don’t see the sky,” she insists, puffing her three rows of silk girdle about her hips and breaking the paper around the tip of her fan. “I don’t see a single piece of sky.”

“The sky hasn’t come out yet,” he returns, beckoning the waiter, who has already insinuated them into place around the symmetry of one of the thousand little green tables.

“You see, this is a place where people come to enjoy themselves.”

“Well?”

“Well, you can’t, if the sky and mosquitoes get in.”

“Yes, but this is a roof garden.”

“Well, a roof garden can have a roof, can’t it?”

Subsiding, she looks at him as though it were all his fault, which it is partly; for, ten to one, if only women visited roof gardens there would be no roof to the garden. Even if it rained buckets they would prefer to sit under individual umbrellas and soak themselves in the truth of the thing to the very letter.

Therefore, having talked about the dresses, which never seem to please two people alike, and having remarked on some hat and upon some coiffure, and having left the champagne bucket unnoticed upon the floor, and having taken their fair share of the dances, she accepts it, in its good and its bad points, and is humanly sweet about it to him who has disappointed her. She is loyal ever after, as a fact, and brings huddles of other women to see it and explains nonchalantly all the things she could not understand, and is one more of those who can come in without looking interested—the very essence of refinement.

But there’s some one who has got them all beaten, for love of life—little, dark-faced, handsome-eyed, lithe Don Carlos Sebastian with palpitating Dolly in his arms. Breaking through the roses of the

flowering arch, stampeding onto the floor, round and round he whirls, laughing, exuberant, bursting with life, throwing all of a passionate race's feeling into a passionate dance, and the morsel of French in the morsel of silk clings to him and springs away and laughs, too, and grows reckless in his recklessness, and is thrown from foot to foot and balance to balance in a wild movement-loving whirl.

And there they sit, by Jove, the onlookers, and are commonplaceedly interested and say they wonder what the man is saying who gets up to announce the prize winners; and finally the woman glides off in front, coaxing a tired man into just one more step.

Oh, well, it's an awfully jolly thing to be able to dance and to watch others dance; and the roof could come off if you wanted it to, and you loyally don't.