

A Thane For Our Times



Emir Freeze visits the 21st century salon that has everyone talking, and learns from host and founder Vincent Clay that the secret to a good salon is all in the vermouth.



© Sheikh David Photography, 2008

Thursday March 14 2010

The door to London's most notorious villa swings open, and there stands Vincent Clay, resplendent in gold brocade, a diamond stud glinting at me from one fleshy earlobe. He offers me a half-smile, half-sneer, and stumbles briefly on the threshold. There is an awkward pause. I've never been to a salon before, I offer enthusiastically, and he just smiles and leans towards me. "Get ready for everything." He ushers me inside with a flourish, pecking my cheek as I squeeze past him, and then guides me down the corridor, intoning into the cavernous space, *vous êtes arrivé, mon petit, au salon extraordinaire!*

Much of the history of the Thane Salon is now a part of popular folklore. First hosted back in December 2008, the event quickly gained popularity through word of mouth, and before six months was out, Clay's villa had seen two Turner Prize winners, a Whitbread nominee, both grandsons of Andy Warhol and British Broadcasting Corporation icon Sir Terry Wogan pass through its doors. Never far from controversy, it also launched the now ubiquitous pogo-jousting craze; it was the scene of Britain's, and perhaps the world's, first cultural drive-by shooting; and was shut down twice by Islington Council for its connections with the late-night poetry jams that began appearing on North London night buses in early 2009.

When I ask Clay about his role as the driving force behind the salon he is quick to pick up on the sense of being *behind* something, rather than in front of it. "The salon has never been about me, about a leader, some sort of cultural dictator," he offers, gesturing with a bejewelled goblet, "Thane Villa is here to provide a stimulating space for people to share ideas, to create – a sort of

cultural Petri dish. Actually the word Thane has its origins in Anglo-Saxon culture, as a kind of servant. Its exact meaning has shifted over the years, but it has always retained a sense of *subordination*. Macbeth's thane was a sort of tenant to the crown. Thane Salon, and myself as host, have always been subordinate to the guests. They are the real kings and queens here." He settles back into his Yalçin & Rodriguez divan, absentmindedly stroking one of its trademark pornographic figures, embroidered into the silk, and assesses my reaction.

Clay's passion for the cause is evident, but this passion has divided opinion. The term 'demiurge' has been ascribed to the salon's ardent creator, used recently by two very different authors, come to praise (Commodore Graham) and to bury him (Felicity Sachs). "Maybe if all these warring critics got together, you know, combined forces," Clay suggests, "they could do both." Anticipating my next question he quickly adds, "Burying first, of course," and going on to cite Nick Drake's belief that fame, like a fruit tree, only flourishes once its stalk is in the ground. I tell him that I think there is still plenty more for Clay to contribute before the Thane Salon is ready to take on a new subordinate.

Keen to return to the topic of the salon itself, I ask him where he thinks the secret of its phenomenal success lies. He ponders this while experimenting with various elaborate positions on the divan, as if he is some kind of human antenna attempting to receive the answer from the ether. Eventually he settles on a pose not dissimilar to one of the embroidered figures, throws his head back to the ceiling, and shrieks, "All shall be re-

vealed!”

Three hours later and some of London’s creative elite are mingling over martinis and canapés. Horatio Groff exchanges easy banter with Brazilian acrobat Sebao, while the kitchen reverberates to the ebullient laughter of Damien Seratoga, former ‘innovation adviser’ to the Chapman brothers, as he watches Judi Dench miming the opening scenes of Ken Loach’s slapstick retrospective, *Death By Chuckles*. In the corner, two performance artists are spontaneously composing a poem using only the fragments of a mirror they have broken. A woman sneezes, and the artists clap ironically. I want to ask Clay about the invitation process, but before I have a chance he rises to his feet, takes a deep breath, and clasps his hands. The room falls silent as heads turn towards him. There is a moment of expectant silence, underpinned by a thrilling crackle of creative energy, and then he begins. “Welcome, friends, to the 23rd Thane Salon ...”

During the next few hours, as cocktails flow and art is disseminated, I see and hear things I would have had trouble believing if I hadn’t been there, and trouble enjoying if I hadn’t been drinking so determinedly since the evening began. A man with a Dali moustache unfurls an Austrian flag and urinates on it while reciting Barack Obama speeches; three women read earnestly from different telephone directories; and an elderly gentleman, who bears a striking resemblance to Charles Darwin, straps a duck to a table and beats it to death with a self-help manual. What strikes me most is these people’s earnest commitment and dedication. Feeling like some kind of desperate knight of avante garde culture, I go in search of a most elusive grail – the secret of this event’s phenomenal success. When I ask diminutive oracle Pixie Geldof, she leads me by the hand to a dressing room in a secluded wing of the villa, scrawls ‘WIZARD OF OZ’ on my forehead in Vermilion Passion lipstick, and leaves me sat in front of a mirror feeling somewhat violated. This is the closest I come to a revelation.

In the early hours of the morning, the villa finally begins to empty. As I gather my things to leave, I glance through my notebook and feel a hazy sense of disappointment. I’ve experienced the salon first-hand, and met its host, but I still don’t feel I can explain it’s essence, or justify its success. I scribble ‘missing ingredient?’ on an empty

page, stuff the book in my bag, and turn to leave. There in the doorway is a barefooted Clay, cradling a half-empty bottle of Noilly Prat, and grinning lazily. “It’s all in the vermouth, Emír, it’s all in the vermouth.” I smile back, but I’m still too drunk to understand.

The Thane Salon is held bi-monthly at Thane Villa in Finsbury Park, N4, though attendance is strictly by invitation. Mere mortals can peek inside the salon with Alan Yentob this Saturday, 10.55 on BBC One.