

The Londoner: success and all that jazz

DENNIS GOWING, tanned and looking fit after three weeks in Fiji, sat in the upstairs lounge of his Londoner Hotel and made the following observations:

Melbourne has the most and the best theatre restaurants in Australia. Top-line jazz, well presented, will draw sell-out crowds in this city 52 weeks a year, and

Discotheques are here to stay but they will tone down and become more tasteful and sophisticated. Dennis Gowing, ex-used car king (as Kevin Dennis), art collector and businessman extraordinary, now has another score on the board — as a successful entrepreneur.

Surprise

His theatre-restaurant at the Londoner has just had another record-breaking month with sell-out appearances by jazz ace Lon Burrows and George Golla — success of such magnitude to surprise even the blasé Mr. Gowing.

And he predicts big things for an ambitious new show starting next month called "Cockney Capers" which will be a music hall-style revue with Johnny Ladd and Judith Roberts.

He knows the Londoner is not yet a household name in Melbourne like, say, Young and Jackson's but he is confident that this is only a matter of time.

"We have only been here for three years," he says. "I predict it will take seven to reach full potential."

How then did he — a man who surely had nothing left to prove about his ability to succeed — get started in this most competitive of businesses in a city known to be at near saturation point with restaurants and their derivatives?

"Well, it was very nearly a pure whim," he says. "I had Jackson's restaurant in South Yarra and wasn't looking for anything else like that. But this place was up for sale and old buildings fascinate me."

The Londoner building in Alfred Place, City, formerly the Naval and Military Club, is high-ceilinged, gracious and historic.

"So," Mr. Gowing says, "I bought it with the idea of



by TED CAVEY

turning it into a London pub. Simply that.

"Well, that was all right" downstairs but we also had this big room upstairs. It very nearly became a disco but eventually took on the theatre-restaurant concept. Soon Don Burrows and George Golla put the Londoner on the map as a theatre restaurant. "It was a fluke thought to get them really," Mr. Gowing says candidly. "But their success here has been phenomenal."



'Disco is here to stay'

"It proved that Melbourne people will go out to see something good — and that jazz, well presented, can be a winner 52 weeks of the year".

There have been other successes at the Londoner, of course, but it hasn't been all sweetness and light.

"We made a big mistake with the Cobbers, for instance," he says. "They're a great and popular group but their following couldn't pay the prices we had to charge to present them at a theatre restaurant."

Meal

"Consequently, although we had them at \$18 a head, reduced later to \$16 with a good meal etc., they didn't get a response here — it was entirely our fault."

Similarly, the Sydney String Quartet — one of the finest groups in Australia — didn't draw crowds to the Londoner.

"So it is very much a matter of getting the right

acts pitched at the right audience," Dennis Gowing says.

"Recently, I tried very hard to get Slim Dusty here. Unfortunately, his popularity is so phenomenal he's very hard to book. But he would be an enormous success."

Now, Mr. Gowing is concentrating on building the Londoner's reputation for cuisine. He has introduced a new six-course menu and has all food prepared on the premises.

He is so convinced of the drawing power of good jazz that he is experimenting with having jazz played permanently in a downstairs lounge in which patrons would not have to pay a cover charge to get good food, wine and music.

Glad

He is "personally glad, but financially sorry" he didn't ride the disco boom although he doubts whether Melbourne, which saw several major ones open last year, can accommodate many more.

Disco will survive, he believes, but under a quieter, more tasteful and sophisticated format.

But he feels strongly that theatre restaurants give the best value for money and that Melbourne has the most and the best available.

"Our popularity last month speaks for itself: Tiki and John's, although unchanging, is probably still the best. The Last Laugh is brilliant, and Dirty Dick's seems to have come up with a winning formula."

"It's a style of business totally different to anything else I've been involved with but I'm sure that long-term success is there," he says.

Dennis Gowing estimates he has poured more than \$600,000 into getting the Londoner decor and facilities to his requirements.

His past record shows he does depend that kind of money unless the venture has an outstanding chance of success.



Photo: DENNIS BULL

Concert series

A SERIES of free classical music concerts will begin tomorrow night at the Sidney Myer Music Bowl.

The evening concerts, presented by the University of Melbourne and the ABC, will also be held on February 13, 16 and 20. Each concert will begin at 8 pm.

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TOP QUALITY CINEMA.

FRIDAY, FEB 8th 7.30 pm. Marco Balbo's "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 10.00 pm. "BACCO A VALETTI" (M).
 SATURDAY, FEB 9th 1.00 pm. "DOT & THE KANGAROO" (M). 4.45 pm and 7.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M).
 SUNDAY, FEB. 10th 1.30 pm. Duran and Kelly's "ON THE TOWN" (M). Slapper Parry in "BORN TO DANCE" (M).
 8.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 8.00 pm. Benjamin Oboffi in "THE SEVENTH SEAL" (M) and "EMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT" (M).
 MONDAY, FEB 11th 7.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 10.00 pm. Steve Who-Ran's "THE EROTIC ADVENTURES OF FRANCESCO" (M).
 TUESDAY, FEB. 12th 7.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 10.00 pm. Roman Polanski's "KNIFE IN THE WATER" (M).
 WEDNESDAY, FEB. 14th 7.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 10.00 pm. "KNIFE IN THE WATER" (M).
 FRIDAY, FEB. 15th 7.30 pm. "IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER" (M). 10.00 pm. Patric's "LA STRADA" (M).

INTERESTING SHOPS

THE UNIVERSAL WORKSHOP SHOP: Specialises in Hammocks — the super hammocks from Mexico. THE UNIVERSAL FOOD CO-OP: Organic and cheap veges — ask about joining. Open 12 noon to 11 pm every day — specialises in tropical fruits.
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 THE UNIVERSAL CAFE: Open 9 to midnight daily — wide range of brunches and lunches.
 THE UNIVERSAL KITCHEN: Gourmet vegetarian restaurant open 6.30 pm. Tuesday to Sunday. Live entertainment nightly. YUM.

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