

2<sup>nd</sup> August 2007

## Life's a Beach

Dónal Thompson



“Summertime and the living is easy. Fish are jumping and the cotton is high,” suggests Ella Fitzgerald. The Beach Boys, on the other hand, inform us that they “can’t wait till summer (yeah). Because it’s gonna be a summer of love. Hey now (well it’s a love thing)...”

Well, it’s not a love thing with me. I can tell you. For many years I lived in the charming seaside town of San Sebastian and summer for me was about invasion, bad manners, and revolting children.

The invasion begins after the Easter holidays, when swarms of back-packers infest the main train station. I like to sit down and read my newspaper as I wait for a train. But in summer all the seats are occupied, not by people but by backpacks. “Where?” I hear you enquire, “are the backpackers?” I will tell you where the backpackers are. The backpackers are sitting on the floor smoking marijuana or murdering a song on the guitar.

The world is turned upside down. Around the entrance to the train station are the vulturesque landladies of the accommodation racket. These are four or five women who own Bed and Breakfast establishments not good enough to get on the Tourist Board-recommended list. They approach innocent travellers on the platform. “Are you looking for a room?” they demand. Travellers who do not have the *castellano* to cope with the situation are then kidnapped, charged rent, and never seen again.

A reason for celebration, admittedly, if the victim is a backpacker.

On the beach, all is permitted. Bodies that should really never see the light of day can be revealed with varying degrees of nakedness, while young people can wear rubber clothes and go surfing.

I may not condone but I do not condemn.

However, the beach is the beach and the real world is the real world. If I decide to enjoy a cold beer in a bar on the Zurriola Promenade, I do not wish to do so surrounded by pink Rubenesque tourists in ill-fitting bikinis. If they want a drink, they should dress themselves before leaving the beach. Out-of-context beachwear is like out-of-season fruit: poor taste.

Children should be seen and not heard. End of argument. They have sand, they have sunshine, and they are provided with sufficient entertainment. They do not need to run around in the streets like giddy goats. If they wish to run and shout, take them to the countryside.

Last summer I saw a North American gentleman having trouble communicating with the lady at the newsstand in the Boulevard. “Perhaps I can help?” I asked. “It’s incredible!” he blustered, “she doesn’t speak English!” I translated his comment to the lady at the newsstand. We had a good laugh and I walked away. Some people simply don’t deserve help. Summer does not have to be a time when we lose our good manners and taste. After all, we have Christmas for that.

San Sebastian is no more Benidorm than Bambi is Beelzebub. Seats for people, floor for backpacks, beachwear on the beach, streetwear on the streets, children and animals quiet and under control.

Simple rules for the general good.

Once there were travellers. Now there are tourists.

A traveller follows the local customs. A tourist looks for McDonald’s. That’s why we sell them such ghastly souvenirs. The heart has gone out of summer. People just want sea, sun, and sand. So I shall avoid backpackers, the bikini brigade, and all the other flotsam of the season. I will dream of the golds and oranges of autumn and the enchantment of the San Sebastian Film Festival.