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VANITY FAIR

AUGUST 2013

"The nature of
this flower is to bloom."
—ALICE WALKER

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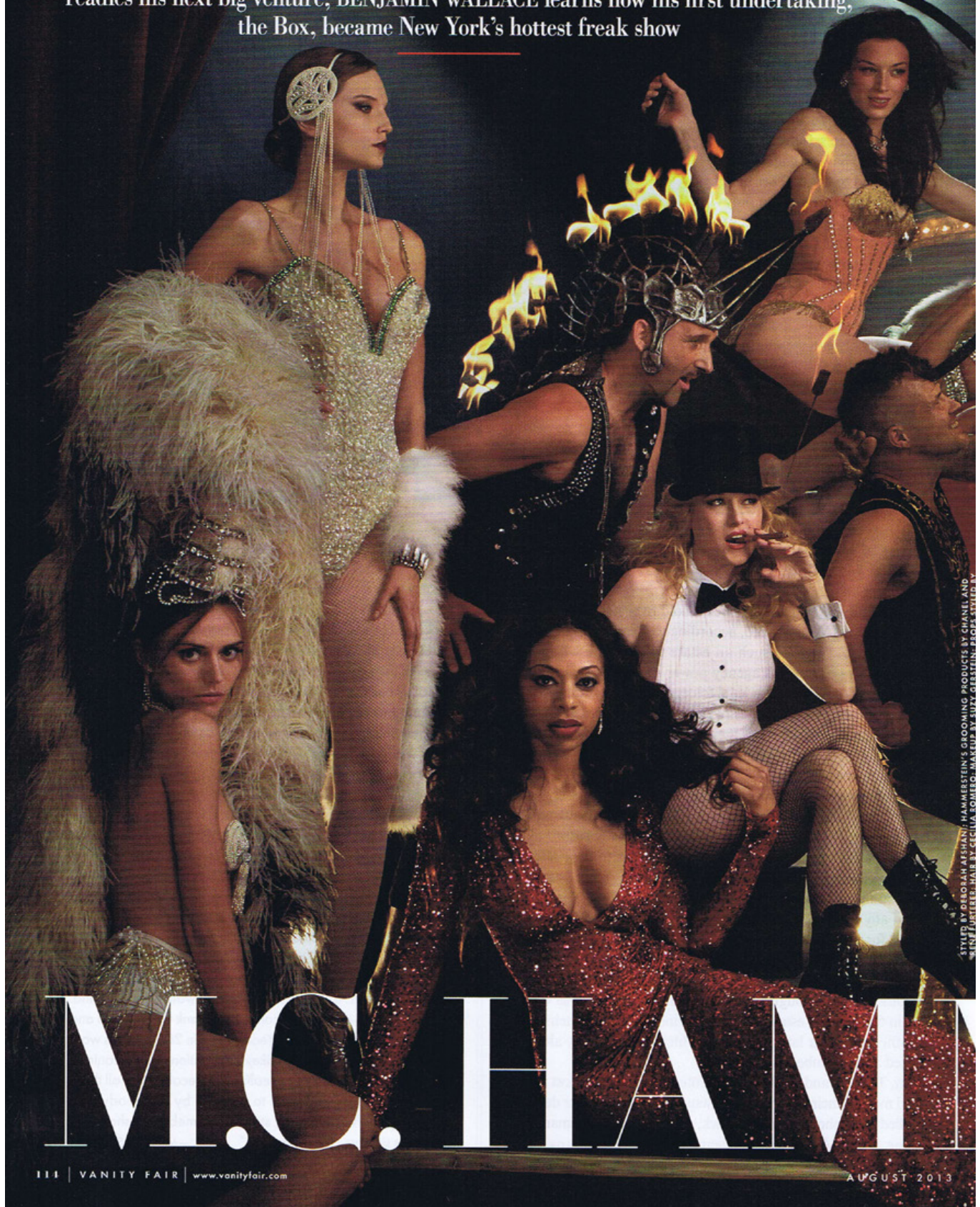
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Simon Hammerstein's pedigree—grandson of the lyricist (*Oklahoma!*, *The Sound of Music*), great-great-grandson of the Gilded Age impresario—might have foretold the creation of his own, hybrid entertainment empire, stretching from Las Vegas to London to Dubai. As Hammerstein readies his next big venture, BENJAMIN WALLACE learns how his first undertaking, the Box, became New York's hottest freak show



STYLING BY DEBORAH ATSHAN; HAMMERSTEIN'S GROOMING PRODUCTS BY GIANEL AND WINN; JEWELRY BY CECILIA SOMERO; MAKEUP BY SUZY GERSTEIN; HAIR BY

M.C. HAMMER



SCENE-STEALER
Simon Hammerstein,
in dinner jacket,
with performers and
models at the Box,
New York City.

HAMMERSTEIN WEARS
CLOTHING BY TOM FORD; SHOES
BY BARKER BLACK.

AMERSTEIN

P

ast midnight, on a recent Thursday, Simon Hammerstein was hosting friends at his notorious theatrical nightclub, the Box, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. The group in and around his booth beside the stage included Jude Law and Ezra Koenig, the lead singer of Vampire Weekend. A sleight-of-hand magician worked nearby in the darkened room, astounding people with flashlit card tricks, while Hammerstein, in a dark suit and collared shirt, kept putting tequilas in friends' hands, matching them shot for shot and occasionally swigging from a bottle. "At some point," he said, looking around the club at the clusters of revelers, "the different, separate groups of guests will start mixing, breaking down. I love the way the boundaries dissolve. I love that about the Box."

At one A.M., the curtains parted for the first of the club's two nightly shows. Against rising music, Kimberly Nichole, the M.C., said, "What's up, motherfuckers?," and began belting out "Freedom," a song from *Django Unchained*. This is the assaultive beginning of any Box show, the moment when the M.C. establishes her power over the room. Light audience abuse is integral to the Box attitude, and Nichole continued in this vein by grabbing the tie of an untucked-button-down-wearing Wall Street bro in the front row and pulling him toward her. When he resisted, she only yanked harder, and security guards helped force him to his feet and pushed him onto the stage, where the curtains closed again as if swallowing him. (Usually, the non-volunteer re-emerges as part of a number, but this one fled out the stage door.)

The rest of the show proceeded without unplanned incident. A vaudevillian couple in old-timey clothes did a sword-swallowing act. The Peres Brothers, acrobats from Spain, demonstrated feats of strength. A transgressive reveal—the chick who turns out to have a dick, say, or the dancer who, shirt removed, turns out to have prosthetic arms, which, themselves removed, turn out to conceal

thalidomide-stunted flipper-shaped arms—is another Box staple. Tonight's featured a performance artist named Narcissister, who wore a mask while doing a darkly themed striptease that ended with her pulling a seemingly ringing cell phone out of her vagina.

Normally, the second show would contain another mix of variety acts, but around 2:30 the curtains reopened to reveal Snoop Lion/Dogg, wearing a tam and sunglasses. He had performed at the Box several times before and was here tonight after appearing on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. As Snoop sang, Hammerstein let out occasional whoops and cries of "Yeah!" with an unceasing smile on his face. "Anybody want to hit this shit?," Snoop asked, handing the enormous, rolled, smoke-emitting, sweet-smelling, indeterminate thing in his mouth down into the crowd. "Blaze this shit up!"

Without any visible prompt, Hammerstein beckoned one of the dancers, and when she stepped forward and leaned down, he met her with a peck on the lips. She backed away and resumed dancing. "Oh, for fuck's sake," Hammerstein said, spotting a friend who was watching the performance through a video camera's eyepiece. "Stop video-ing and let in some joy."

Late nights at the Box used to be Hammerstein's lifestyle but, as his clubs and other projects have multiplied, are now something he enjoys selectively. When he founded the Box, seven years ago, he ran it as a mildly despotic fiefdom—commingling work and play in ways that occasionally got him into trouble. Today, at 35, he no longer directs shows, although he still provides ideas for numbers, often inspired by dreams that come to him when he's napping. This April night marked only his third time drinking in 2013. The first was when he flew to Dubai for the opening of a toned-down sister club, the Act, and the second was on his first night out back in New York, after spending several months in Las Vegas, opening the Act's first incarnation. (He had spent most of the year before that opening a Box in London.) Recently, he has begun to broaden his focus beyond strictly late-night entertainment.

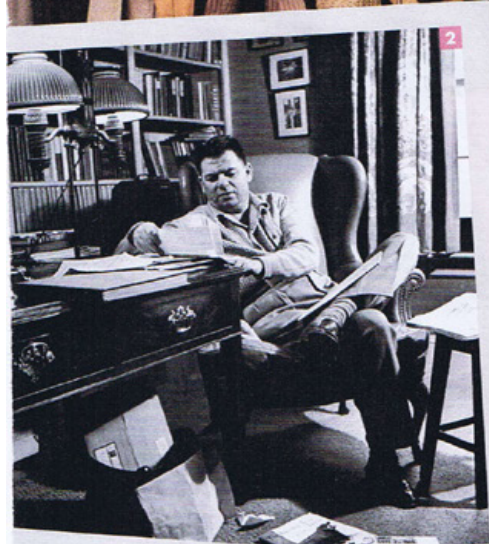
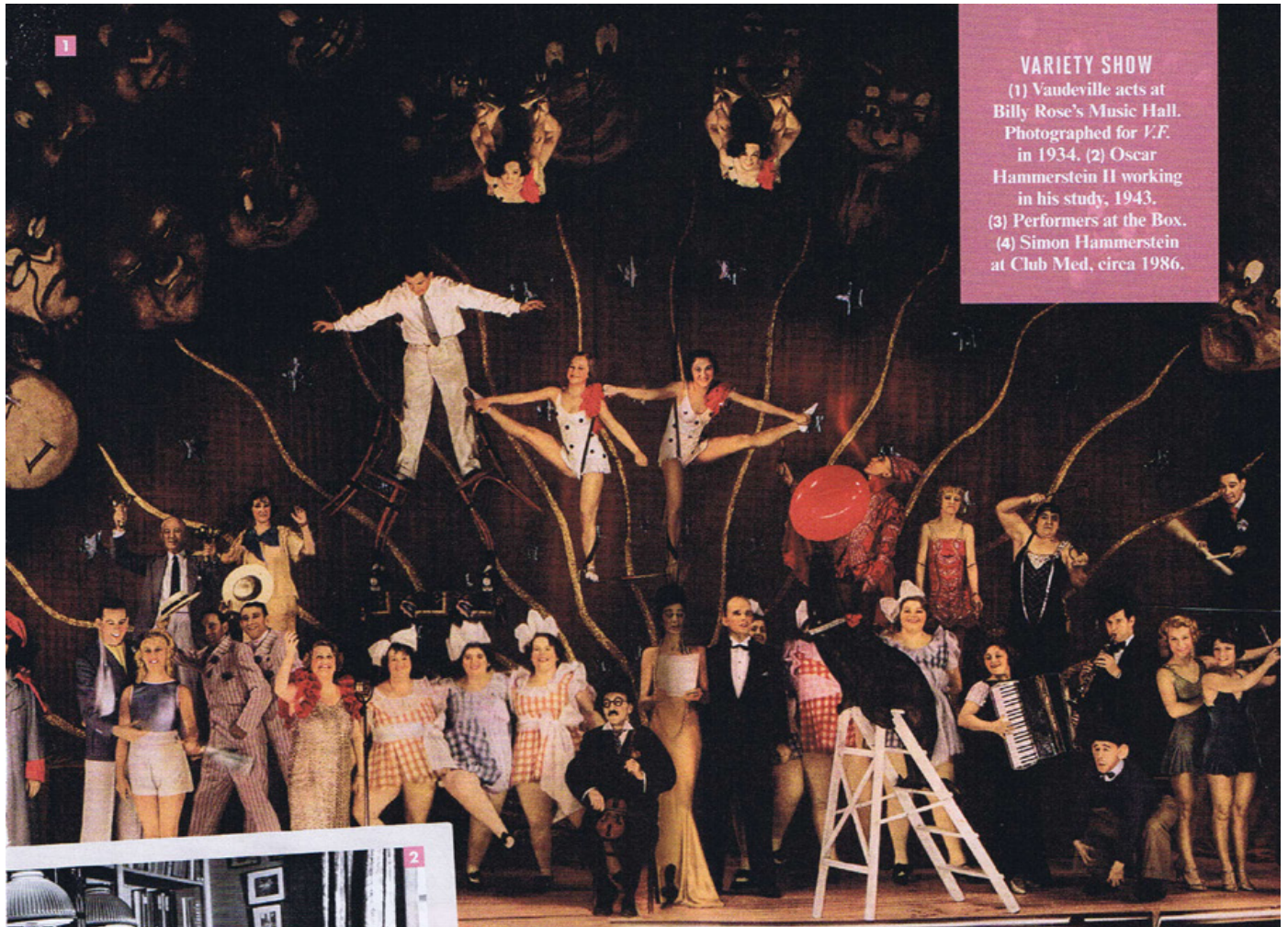
In November, with Box partner Randy Weiner—who helped bring *Sleep No More*, the "immersive," Kubrickian *Macbeth* reboot, to New York—he will open the Diamond Horseshoe, an ambitious, genre-blending nightclub/restaurant/opera house, in the Paramount Hotel, near Times Square. He and Weiner recently created a pop-up venue, Kazino, a Russian supper club in the Meatpacking District, as a new home for the hit "electro-pop opera" *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*, and at press time they were in late-stage talks to open a Box in Paris this October. Hammerstein has been developing a possible reality show about the Box, and also a scripted TV drama set in the world of his

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"WE ALWAYS NEED TO SHOCK THEM," SAYS SIMON HAMMERSTEIN.

VARIETY SHOW

(1) Vaudeville acts at Billy Rose's Music Hall. Photographed for *V.F.* in 1934. (2) Oscar Hammerstein II working in his study, 1943. (3) Performers at the Box. (4) Simon Hammerstein at Club Med, circa 1986.



Simon Hammerstein



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 116 great-great-grandfather Oscar Hammerstein I, a Gilded Age New York opera-house builder whose milieu included Will Rogers, W. C. Fields, Houdini, and Charlie Chaplin.

Family Ties

If the latest Hammerstein is perpetuating a theatrical dynasty, he is more the aesthetic heir to that bearded, be-suited impresario founder (known in the Hammerstein family as O1) than to the sunny, midcentury librettist (O2)—Simon's grandfather and the lyricist behind "Ol' Man River," "Oklahoma!," and "The Sound of Music," among others. Not that his family has uniformly welcomed the homage. "My aunt was disappointed that she invested in the Box," Hammerstein says. "If she'd known what kind of place it was going to be, she wouldn't have."

Hammerstein is self-conscious about his accent, the product of a childhood split between New York and London, which sounds English to American ears and American to English ears. Growing up the child of Dena and James, a British-born actress-producer and a peripatetic theater director who was the son of Oscar Hammerstein II, the giant of American musical theater, Simon was a boy Eloise set loose on the cobbles of 1980s SoHo. In kindergarten, classmates called him "Stop It, Simon." At eight, he set up a table labeled "The Crazy Art Stand" on his parents' doorstep at Mercer and Prince, selling a classmate's paintings and bringing in as much as \$1,800 a day. "You try to go really big," Hammerstein says, explaining

his elementary-school sales strategy. "I think there was something about the audacity of an eight-year-old asking for \$800 for a painting."

"I suppose he was always ready to be an adult," his mother recalls. At 13, in London, where Simon spent most of his school days, he'd hand out passes ("Get a free drink if you're on my guest list") for under-age kids' nights at clubs like Ministry of Sound and the Wag, after brokering deals with the club promoters. At 16 he ran away from Millbrook, a New York boarding school he attended briefly, and took a train to see an N.Y.U. girl he'd met. When he called his father, "he said, 'Just come home.' It really kind of deflated the whole thing." Simon next wrote a Declaration of Independence to his parents, explaining that he didn't want to go back to school, he loved theater, and he wanted to work. ("His dad was actually rather proud of him for that," Dena Hammerstein says.)

That same year, Simon started throwing raves in Brooklyn and Queens warehouses, charging \$20 a head. Maybe a couple thousand people would show up. But the real money was in water. "Thirteen cents a bottle, and you're selling it for three to five bucks," Hammerstein adds, wryly, "Pretty similar to what I'm doing today." At his raves, he was the shirtless skinhead with a dragon tattoo on his left arm, and a beard consisting of a wispy mustache and sparse goatee connected using his mother's mascara. (Hammerstein feels naked without his beard, shaving it only when he's especially blue. "Just to kind of stick the knife in, like I should be depressed.")

When Jude Law came to Broadway to star in Jean Cocteau's *Indiscretions*, in 1995, Dena, a good friend of the play's director, thought the young English actor could use some local company and invited him over to meet her teenage son. Law, then 22, accepted somewhat grudgingly, but when he met the mischievous-eyed, baseball-hat-wearing 17-year-old, the two hit it off over a shared taste for theater and nightlife. "Even then, he had an incredible mixture of swagger and street sense," Law recalls. "He knew where the best parties were on and the most outrageous events. He could go from talking about a rave to Chekhov and back again."

Precocious hustlers more commonly flower in humbler soil than, say, a storied theater family with "wheelbarrows of money," as family friend Israel Horovitz, the playwright, puts it. But Hammerstein felt ambivalent about his pedigree. He had seen his father give much of his life to being a dutiful son, a devoted steward of Oscar II's catalogue of work. "I thought it was unfair to him and his intelligence that he was always in somebody else's shoes. And it made me angry. I didn't want to be Oscar's grandson. When you're a kid, it's 'Oh, this is Oscar's grandson Simon.' No, I'm fucking Simon. You know what I mean?"

Opening Act

By the time he was 19, aided in no small part by his surname and his family's theatrical connections, Hammerstein had "already worked on 40 shows or something ridiculous. And then I was set on becoming the youngest Broadway director ever." When he was 21, his father died of a heart attack. Distracted by grief, Hammerstein moved to Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Horovitz ran a regional theater, and directed several plays there. "He was an enormously talented kid," Horovitz says. "He was a real theater rat."

Returning to New York, Hammerstein found himself bridling at the form's limits. His company, Last Minute Productions, put on what it called "confrontational plays deemed untouchable by commercial theater." But Hammerstein wanted his own theater, and he was searching for a way to bridge his parallel lives—one as an engaged artist, the other as a Bungalow 8 regular. "I was obsessed with: How do you reach your generation with what you do? How do you make it feel relevant?"

He was still casting about for how to realize his vision of social performance when, on a rock-climbing trip in Arizona, he visited the Bird Cage Theater Museum in Tombstone, which had been a hybrid saloon/theater/casino/bawdy house. Something about the two-tiered layout struck a nerve. When Hammerstein got back to New York, he found an old sign factory on Chrystie Street and, teaming up with like-minded partners—Richard Kimmel, an experimental-theater director, and

Randy Weiner, who had co-created *The Donkey Show*, a staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* inside an operating disco—began raising the funds to renovate it. Law recalls Hammerstein leading friends from a bar to the construction site for an impromptu party one night: “He disappears and comes back in his underwear and a Village People costume. He found some builder’s outfit: drill, belt, nail gun, hard hat. The whole thing.”

Hammerstein studied old posters from Ol’s shows and infused the space with their Barnum-esque flair: it would be touted as “A Theatre of Varieties,” and the house dancers would be the Hammerstein Beauties. The partners envisioned their club—which they named for the container-like space, their histories doing black-box theater, and the lewd double entendre—as a home to everything from burlesque to Italian opera to a staging of Jack Kerouac’s play *Beat Generation*. When the club opened, in late 2006, with a live seven-piece orchestra and a celebrity “board of advisers” (Law, Rachel Weisz, and Josh Lucas), it was instantly one of the hottest clubs in New York, booked by Uma Thurman for then boyfriend André Balazs’s birthday party and by Charlotte Ronson for a C. Ronson fashion show, and frequented by Lindsay Lohan.

“The first night was magical,” recalls someone who was there. “It wasn’t about celebrities or rich people. It was beautiful, different, fresh. A marching band marched through. People’s minds were blown. There was a sense of: We’re in the middle of the most exciting thing in the world right now.” Hammerstein seemed, to this person—who had written him off as a manically partying, charmingly bratty trust-fund kid—to have found a purpose.

A month or two in, Hammerstein scheduled a bald, muscular performer with the stage name Buck Angel, who, for a finale, dropped his pants to reveal a vagina. Hammerstein had worried the crowd would hate it. Instead, he saw the room’s energy shift, a crowd of strangers becoming one. “All of a sudden, everyone was breathing in rhythm, and they were fixated. And it was like ‘Oh shit, that’s an important part of the show. We always need to shock them.’”

On a given night, you might have seen Rose Wood, a male-to-female transgender performer who, as part of her act, projectile-vomited (which, on one occasion, she did on Susan Sarandon; the actress was reported to have laughed it off as she was towed dry). Another night you might see a black chanteuse in a Nazi uniform or the Porcelain Twinz, goth sisters from Oregon, performing a burlesque act called Twincest. There were police raids and community-board hearings. At a time when New York had instituted a smoking ban and when clubs were increasingly sanitized, generic homes to electronic dance music, the Box was a thrillingly sordid rebuttal. “It really was raised from the dead

in Lower Manhattan, like this had always been there,” Hammerstein’s friend Matt Stone, co-creator of *South Park* and *The Book of Mormon*, says. “Everyone around you is doing drugs. There’s a transsexual onstage putting a bottle up his ass. At three o’clock in the morning, that’s what I want to do.” An early report by *The New York Times* was generally admiring of what it called a “Moulin Rouge–infused playground.”

The electric sense that anything might happen emanated straight from Hammerstein, whose tailored suits, shaggy hair, and voluminous beard gave him the look of a dandified mountain man, circa *Abbey Road*. He would leap from the mezzanine, clutching aerial silks, and twirl down to the main floor. He’d put on women’s gowns and run around, an antic bearded lady. There was a night when, racing out of the club in his underwear, he demanded that a departing British customer surrender his pants, then put them on and disappeared for half an hour. The line between stage and audience seemingly disappeared. Hammerstein would grab his famous friends and insist on taking them backstage to show off the star-shaped tattoo on the end of M.C. Raven O’s penis. Hammerstein says that when Mick Jagger visited one night he told him the Box was the best thing since Studio 54. When Ian Schrager came, though, “He told us it was sophomoric. He said it was like spring break. It was packed that night. I was a bit crushed.”

Hammerstein’s friend Damian Loeb, the painter, spent dozens of nights at the Box in its early years, taking photographs, which are collected in a Rizzoli book to be published in October. “Every time I felt offended, grossed out or shocked by his seemingly random and inciting Puck-like antics,” Loeb told me in an e-mail. “Simon was always quick to point out the therapeutic advantages in my ‘just getting over it.’” Hammerstein’s bent for theatrical effect inflected his personal life just as much and made his one brief experiment with actual therapy, in his early 20s, an exercise in getting a reaction. “The minute the spotlight’s on you, and it’s all like, Tell us about your day . . . It just makes me a schmuck, actually.”

Shock Troupe

Hammerstein found that *épater-ing les bourgeois* almost always paid off, if not in the short term, then in the longer run. One spring night, in 2007, he debuted a vaudeville-style act featuring a bickering Borat-esque couple and a live human baby. “I just didn’t think through the idea that it’s not right to have a baby in the room,” Hammerstein remembers. Sean Penn was with a group at one table, and Owen Wilson and Kate Hudson, celebrating her birthday, were at another. The moment the curtain went up, the crowd went berserk—and not in a good way. Hammerstein’s friends began scream-

ing at him, and one of them, a successful actor, charged him, though he managed to stay out of range. “They told me I’d crossed the line—how dare I do something like this! I had security literally hiding me. Basically 80 percent of the audience en masse just walked, in the middle of the show.”

Hammerstein spent the next day moping around SoHo, convinced the club was done, he’d gone too far, his name was ruined, and he’d never recover. He’d spent years making the Box a reality, and all his hard work had been dashed in a single evening. Instead, the Box sold out every night for the next two years.

As the Box became the toughest door in New York, Hammerstein grew more demanding, prone to Gordon Ramsay–style tirades, and sometimes got carried away by the power of the velvet rope. He became, in his words, “a real kind of a cock.” “I think what happened when the Box first opened was ‘Oh, they noticed me. I exist. I’m being written about—my grandfather’s not included in it.’ It really was such a nice relief, but at the same time I also probably believed it a little too much, you know?” Hammerstein “got confused about who I was. Am I the character of this nightclub guy who’s meant to be crazy, and getting everyone having lots of fun? Or am I meant to be, I don’t know, watching the books in the morning?”

The line between professional and personal blurred very publicly in early 2009 when Amber and Heather Langley—the sisters who performed as the Porcelain Twinz, and who had left the Box the previous year—threatened to sue Hammerstein, alleging sexual harassment and offers of cocaine, among other things. Once fawning press coverage turned censorious, Hammerstein was now the subject of headlines like NIGHTLIFE SLIME DEFENDS THE BOX and THE IMPRESARIO OF SMUT. Hammerstein agreed to a settlement with the Twinz, which binds him from talking about the case, but his friends point out that he had let the sisters stay in his apartment for a year, and co-signed a lease for their own apartment. “Unfortunately, in our society, when you have a last name like Hammerstein, and are the owner of the hottest nightclub in New York, you have a mark on your head,” says Acantha Lang, a blues singer who M.C.’d at the Box in both New York and London. “I’ve been with the company since the beginning, and I’m female, and I’ve never felt any disrespect or that he was crossing the line.”

“Is Simon an angel? No,” says Mike Merker, a childhood friend, “but I lived with them for a month when Simon wasn’t there. The things they allege were a lot of half-truths.” Hammerstein felt betrayed, and also watched several potential real-estate partners vanish. “If you’re going for institutional

Simon Hammerstein

funding,” he says, “it’s not the best thing you can have written about you.” But it wasn’t all bad news. In the wake of the allegations, the Box’s business improved yet again. “We’re in the infamy business,” Hammerstein says.

These days, the New York club, the only one in which Hammerstein invested his own money, averages \$25,000 in nightly revenue, or an estimated \$6.5 million annually. Its original 40-odd investors were paid back within five years. The London Box and the two Acts are all owned by different configurations of investors, and Hammerstein earns management and trademark-licensing fees, among others, from them. Though British press reports earlier this year suggested that the Box Soho, as the London outpost is known, is seriously in the red, Hammerstein says the newspaper confused start-up debt with operating losses and that, “actually, London’s very healthy, touch wood.” Recent sightings include Rihanna, One Direction’s Harry Styles, Kate Moss, and Stella McCartney, though a less boldface punter reports the same banker-ization as has long characterized the New York club, which he had enjoyed in its early days: “It was almost like being in a cheesy nightclub—‘You want to come in? How much are you going to spend?’”

Thinking Outside the Box

One afternoon in late April, Hammerstein pulled open a door on 46th Street, near Times Square, down the block from the main entrance of the Paramount Hotel, and stepped into a forgotten vestibule. He was wearing a three-piece suit and a baseball cap from his mother’s children’s-theater charity, Only Make Believe. He led the way down

some stairs. Here was the space that, from 1938 to 1951, housed one of the grand nightclubs of the era, Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe, which was also the setting for a 1945 Fox musical of the same name, starring Betty Grable and Dick Haymes.

The cavernous underground room, 10,000 square feet, was under construction. “When you stand over here and see this room, with double-height ceilings in New York City, that hasn’t been touched in 60 years, and you’re in my business,” Hammerstein said, “you get a boner and start peeing yourself. I did walk in here and, I think, tinkle in my pants, because I was like, It’s got the location, the history—it’s got the space.” It also summons the ghosts of Hammerstein past: Oscar I practically invented the Times Square theater district, and Billy Rose produced Oscar II’s *Carmen Jones*.

Randy Weiner has described the Diamond Horseshoe, which continues his and Hammerstein’s project of smuggling theater into non-theatrical environments, as an “immersive opera/nightclub/molecular-gastronomy hybrid.” It’s a much larger, more ambitious, higher-budget project than the Box, and with its genre-busting sophistication and evocation of bygone New York glamour, it is Hammerstein’s least shock-driven venue to date.

It’s also in keeping with his seeming evolution in recent years. He is in the midst of apparently friendly divorce proceedings with his wife of five years, Francesca Zampi. He’s “in transition,” Stone told me.

Since around a year ago, when Hammerstein inadvertently hurt a Box performer’s feelings—during a show, he heckled her (“I was being really offensive”), and she was upset when she later learned who it was—he has become more circumspect in his dealings with staff, more Jekyll than Hyde, according to

Kimmel, his partner. “Now I can get a report: the show’s not that great. I can write back, Fix this, fix that,” Hammerstein says. “Where before I’d be crushed. We’d be screaming at each other at three or four in the morning.” Of his shorter-fused days, he recalled, “It was less about the volume than trying to charge the energy with electricity.” (Oscar I, he noted, “had such bad tyrannical rages that his staff had a room in the basement that they could lock themselves in and lock him out.”)

As he had once resisted being known as Oscar II’s grandson, increasingly Hammerstein was chafing at being pigeonholed as the ringmaster of a louche circus. “Do you think I’ll always be referred to as that *enfant terrible*? Like, I’ll be 60 years old, I’ll always be the guy from the Box?” When he was offered the role of a child pornographer in the movie *Disconnect*, his family and friends prevailed on him to turn it down, lest he reinforce preconceptions about him. (Marc Jacobs ended up with the part, and Hammerstein is still second-guessing his decision not to take it.) “As much as I love the idea of pretending to be a playboy, I’m actually a nester,” he told me. “I like children a lot. I know that seems weird as a nightclub owner, but I think they see that I’m a gigantic kid, and they immediately know that I’m one of them, and I haven’t grown up yet.” □

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