



# BLACKPOOL ILLUMINATIONS

**KNIGHT HOOSON** FINDS TOLERANCE AND ACCEPTANCE IN THE PROVINCES...

**I never love London more than when I am not there**, and right now, I am far away from my adopted home. I am touring the country with a big-budget musical and for my considerable sins we have washed up in Blackpool for two weeks. Perhaps it is a nice place under the summer sun (although I have my doubts), but in the rainy cold of a late winter's day it strikes me as a barnacle clinging to the English coast. The winds blow strong enough to push me over; I struggle to find anything other than rock candy or fish and chips to eat, and there appears to be some serious inter-breeding going on amongst the local folk which has resulted in a town populated with Vicky Pollard clones. Now I know where old shell suits go to die.

However, amidst all the flotsam and jetsam have emerged two unexpected pearls of delight. The first was a visit to Funny Girls Show Bar – the famous drag revue starring Betty Legs Diamond. I am not a big fan of drag shows. I don't find the ability to walk in heels and move your lips in time to the music to be a particularly admirable talent, and have sat through so many shoddy, under-rehearsed debacles masquerading as cabaret to last a lifetime, so I was hesitant to head off to another one.

**However, I was blown away.** The costumes and sets were brilliant with production values that could rival the West End. They have their own renovated art deco movie theatre which has been done up in pastel colours, but it was the dancing and the choreography that really shone. Watching men in drag dancing their (fake) tits off brought to mind the quote about how Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, only backwards and in heels. These girls

can dance! Betty Legs Diamond has high kicks that would put a Rockette to shame. On top of that, their routines were slick, well rehearsed and so polished that I could see my reflection – and it was a look of disbelief on my face. I was forced to eat my hat that night and re-think my stance on drag shows. Funny Girls have set the bar for me for drag entertainment.

**Oddly enough, the other incident which surprised me also involved dance.** We visited the Blackpool Tower Ballroom for a Wednesday afternoon tea dance. This stunning Frank Matcham-designed ballroom has been filled with twirling couples dancing to the tunes of the Wurlitzer organ since 1899. There were probably 50 wrinkled couples strutting their stuff on the dance floor – each trying to out shine the next couple with their dance skills. As they whirled past me, one couple came into my view that were different than all the rest. In a sea of heterosexual couples were two men 'of a certain age' enjoying, nay laughing, their way around the dance floor. These two brought new meaning to dancing the 'Gay Gordon.' Their steps were polished, their jeans a bit too tight for common decency, and a beaming smile never left their faces. Something in me wanted to run up and hug them because they were so cute, so out, and so proud. Even more amazing to me was that no-one else in the entire ballroom seemed even the slightest bit bothered by two men dancing together. Not an eyelid was batted. No-one whispered or pointed. No-one gave a toss. They were all united in the pleasure of a dance. The samba, the rumba, the tango, even the old gay Gordon – they knew them all.

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**As I sat eating my cream tea and watching the scene playing out in front of me,** I wondered if Stonewall really did change as much as we think it did. Did this older generation, who today seem so unfazed by it all, always feel that way? Or have their harsh judgements gotten softer with age? I don't have the answer, but what I saw on the dance floor that day was the future that I have always hoped for gay people. I think we will arrive at a bright future when how we express ourselves is so much a part of the norm that it doesn't even register on the radar.

I must admit that I have been surprised by Blackpool. I never did find decent coffee, but I did learn some valuable lessons.

I am learning that I tend to think in very polar ways: London = good/non-London = bad; and running alongside those assumptions is London = good to be gay/non-London = bad to be gay. I think those assumptions are getting challenged. Maybe Blackpool doesn't need to change. Maybe it's me who needs to change.