

Starry night for the Moon Bears shines brighter than we could ever have imagined

When Lesley Nicol suggested over a year ago that she might organise a small event with the help of fellow members of the Downton Abbey cast, we never imagined that it could grow into the brilliant, stellar, evening held last Thursday night (19th) at Camden's beautiful Gilgamesh restaurant.

For the months preceding the event itself, Lesley worked incredibly hard, ably assisted by our fabulous UK Ambassador, Peter Egan, battling filming schedules for Downton Abbey and conferring over possible cabaret routines with her fellow cast members.

The result was a truly amazing evening, enjoyed by 160 guests, and sponsored entirely by the generosity of Mike and Tracie Spragg. Guests arriving for a welcome drink were amazed to find their raffle tickets being sold to them by Daisy (Sophie McSheera), Anna Bates (Joanne Froggatt) and Miss Baxter (Raquel Cassidy). Not surprisingly there was hardly a ticket left to buy by the end of the evening!

Our joint hosts, Lesley and Peter, ushered guests into dinner created by the award-winning chef Ian Pengelley and served in Gilgamesh's Studio which has been described by Peter as one of the outstanding venues in London, and as Lord Shrimpy Flintshire in Downton, he should know! It was also announced that Lesley has accepted our invitation to become a UK Ambassador for Animals Asia so now we have our very own Mr and Mrs Ambassador!

As dessert was served, Mrs Patmore leapt to her feet to tell the audience briefly about her recent trip to Chengdu and Nanning, including meeting "her" Pickle bear which proved to be a highly emotional experience for her. She finished by breaking into the most beautiful song, "I'll be There" as her promise to Pickle, brilliantly performed and accompanied by the amazing pianist Danny Whitby who is currently conducting the orchestra every night for the West End's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory".

That proved to be a very hard act for poor Jill to follow, as there was barely a dry eye in the house, but, as always, she rose to the occasion brilliantly and informed a riveted audience about the Nanning project, paying particular credit to Animals Asia's amazing veterinary and bear care team and to the Chinese farmer whose enlightened decision to find a humane future for his farmed bears has allowed this to happen. The audience was alternatively saddened by the veterinary horrors being revealed by the team and entranced by the film of "our Smudge", the last little cub born on a bear farm in Nanning, and whose life is now full of fun and love – it could have been so completely different if Animals Asia had not stepped in to rescue him and the 129 other bears from a life of darkness, fear, boredom and captivity.

When Jill had finished her presentation she had to cede her place on the stage to none other than Downton's very beautiful and ridiculously talented Michelle Dockery (Lady Mary), who, again accompanied by Danny, gave an elegant but sexy rendering of the song "Fever".

When the applause died down she, in turn, was followed by the gorgeous Joanne Froggatt (Anna Bates) who read a moving tribute to an individual Nanning bear, Ode to Derek, written during his

recent trip out to Nanning with Lesley Nicol, by Andrew Telling. Suddenly, through Joanne's efforts, the audience "got" what life is like for just one bear, and what it will be in the future. Fabulous!

If that was not enough, Downton's father and daughter then got to the stage to read Pam Ayres' poem "A Moon Bear Song", especially written for us by that most famous of English poets for the Nanning rescue. Peter Egan (Lord Flintshire) and his very naughty but stunning "daughter", Lily James (Lady Rose), would have made Pam proud with their rendition and this paved the way for the beginning of the auction, expertly conducted by Peter. Thanks to his skills, the auction lots were fiercely bid over and swiftly despatched to some very generous (and famous) buyers!

Finally, the ultimate act in the cabaret was introduced by none other than Allen Leech (Mr Branson) who strode onto stage with his guitar, entertaining the audience to a few anecdotes before welcoming Michelle Dockery on stage. He then accompanied her to her most brilliant and hilarious rendition of "Bang Bang", giving intimate details of Lady Mary's love life and her loving relationship with Matthew!!! The audience LOVED it and it took several minutes for the laughter and rapturous applause to die down. What a talented duo!

The evening ended soon after, with our lucky guests departing with a smile on their faces and, more importantly, renewed enthusiasm and inspiration for the Nanning project.

It is hoped that we shall have raised circa £50,000 on the evening and we are incredibly grateful to Mike and Tracie Spragg for their company Empath-e's sponsorship of the evening, to all our guests who attended despite the fact that England were playing what turned out to be a fateful game in the World Cup, to the wonderful Downton cast who gave so much pleasure to so many people, and last, but not least Jill, Peter and the amazing Lesley Nicol whose idea it originally was all those months ago!!