



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

BY DAVID LOWE

I once had dinner with **Lord Mountbatten**... and 400 other people. I once shared a lift with **Wim Wenders** at the Tokyo Film Festival. At the same festival, during the closing ceremony, I sat next to the director **Alan Parker**, who was much more interested in the attractive young lady next to him. **Jeunet** and **Caro**, whom I'd got to know during the festival, came to talk to me and **Alan Parker**, who was very impressed with the fact that they'd put a pig on their poster for *Delicatessen*. We shared a *fou rire* [a fit of giggles] during a performance of classical kabuki (Noh!), went to the restaurant together. I've not seen any of these people since.

This all came back to me in a flash, when a priest told me that when he was in a lift during a recent visit to the Vatican, the lift stopped, the doors opened and the **Pope** walked in. The priest said hello to the **Pope**, which is more than I did to **Wim Wenders**. I didn't exactly ignore him; I tried to pretend that he wasn't there. It was as if **Wim Wenders'** fame was a bad smell in the lift and I wanted to show by my facial expression that I wasn't the cause of it.

I was at a photographer's house once when **Madonna** telephoned. And, talking of photographers, I once went to the circus with **Josef Koudelka** (and some other people). He spent all his time taking pictures of people that weren't me. At the "Bal du 15 août" in Ramatuelle this year, my wife said, "Look there's **Beigbeder!**" I said, "What?" The music was loud. "There's **Beigbeder!**" she repeated, but by the time I turned my head, he was gone. Likewise, once at the tearoom Angelina, my wife came back from the toilets and said that **Brigitte Bardot** was in there arranging her hair. I couldn't go in and check, so I took her word for it.

Also at Angelina's, not the same day, of course, I saw the conductor **Seiji Ozawa**. And, talking of musicians, when I was studying at the Royal Naval College, I was once practising on the college grand piano (I play

very badly), when the door opened and **Alfred Brendel** popped his head into the room. "Just finished!" I said, getting up to leave. **Mr Brendel** was giving a concert later on in the college and wanted to limber up. Maybe I should have started a conversation and formed a lifelong friendship with a brilliant pianist whose interpretations of **Beethoven** and **Schubert** enthral me, but no, embarrassed, flustered, without the right word at the right moment, I missed the opportunity, if opportunity there was.

I got to know **Roland Topor** quite well. We could have developed a good working and social relationship... but he died. I could add that I saw a rough-looking **Serge Gainsbourg** in the Rue de Beaune branch of Felix Potin one day. I didn't speak to him either. I once had lunch with **Amos Gitai** and **Rithy Panh**. They were really nice – for once I was talking to famous people like a normal human being. The occasion was spoiled by this lady who butted in. She was a producer who knew me, but usually snubs me. The producer wanted to make contact with the two famous directors and I was the go-between. Like a groupie sleeping with a roadie to get backstage access to the band. I once met **Roald Dahl**. Hello, thank you, goodbye. And now for my most famous non-encounter. A very long time ago, I was walking through the Luxembourg gardens and I saw **Samuel Beckett**, whom I started to follow – I'd seen his film where he follows an aged **Buster Keaton**, filming him from behind, so my action seemed artistically justified. I watched the writer's every movement – and, just as in his film of **Buster Keaton**, nothing much happened. He looked at the legs of a pretty young girl in a miniskirt. He went into the pissoir. I followed him and, so as not to arouse his suspicion, actually urinated next to the 1969 winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. I was waiting for an opportunity to engage him in conversation – this wasn't it. He left the gardens heading towards Montparnasse. He went into a small grocer's shop, after having chosen a couple of wrinkly apples. He came out and I feigned surprise. I said something completely inane, like "My God, **Mr Beckett**." "What an idiot!" he must have thought, walking away.

"I've just been to the capital," said the man to his friends, "...and the king spoke to me."

"What did he say?" asked his friends, impressed. "Get out of my way," answered the man.