

Note of the meeting of the Wimbledon Philosophical Society held on Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> March 2018 at Southside House.

## Theatre of the Mind

Our host and co-presenters for the evening Richard Surman and Juan Tafur told the entrancing story of the development of Southside House in Wimbledon by the Munthe family after they left the Villa Françon in the south of France. There they had lived a privileged life, almost as a minor Court, attracting a circle of nobility and royalty amongst their guests. Hilda Munthe and her son Malcolm, who were to play a prominent part in the creation of Southside House, enjoyed the freedom of that context to develop their natural aptitudes for acting, game playing and fantasy in general. Malcolm's favourite role as a child was a Knight at the Court of King Arthur with its call to duty, nobility and honour. He would go on thereafter to describe his profession in life as 'gentleman'.

During the War Malcolm had a distinguished record in the SOE, taking great risks to disrupt rail supply lines for munitions being trans-shipped to Norway. When his actions became openly provocative to Germany and he was disowned by the Swedish Government, his parting gift was to blow up the Swedish frigates that

escorted shipments of iron ore to Northern Germany. He then re-entered the war in Italy where he experienced conflict at its most brutal and was himself severely wounded by machine gun fire.

Having enlisted voluntarily as a private he had originally gone to war, Biggles like, in a spirit of adventure. On parade in London he had presented himself in a kilt supported by a belt sporting no less than eight different Regimental badges, tolerated presumably because of his social standing and independent character. His determination not to be borne down by bureaucracy was evident in an amusing episode after the war, when he went to his club on his horse and tethered it to a meter in protest at the new parking regulations.

He came back from the war heavily traumatised and spent the rest of his life afterwards rejecting the encroachment of the modern world and looking for a safe haven where he could anchor his identity and put down secure roots once again.

He lived at first on the South Bank at 3, Cardinal Place located directly opposite St Paul's. One of his first acts of 'invention' was to salvage a Blue Plaque which commemorated Sir Christopher Wren's residence at a completely different address, and affix it to number 3,

having convinced himself that Wren must have lived there. An unintended but beneficial consequence was to preserve the short terrace of Georgian townhouses abutting the Globe Theatre, when the LCC launched their reconstruction program along the river front.

Malcolm was then persuaded by Hilda to join her at Southside House, a farm house at the time which they initially took on lease. Using furniture and objets d'art they had brought across from Francon, supplemented by considerable ingenuity and DIY, they created the context for a new family residence, ostensibly with a three-hundred-year old history. This was the Theatre of the Mind referred to in the title. The magnificence of the House in which we were sitting was undeniable, and hugely appreciated, but the story of its context as a continuous family history and identity was an illusion. It was, however, also Malcolm's very private, fiercely defended reality, based on his deeply rooted need for a place where his identity was secure and unchallengeable.

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After the presentation there was interest from the floor in stories of decadent parties hosted by Malcolm as well as the seeming maleness of the story. Was there any evidence he was bi-sexual? Where did his

extraordinary leadership and practical skills come from? It was suggested that context creates role and the war was perhaps at the outset another theatre for his vivid imagination, which invited him to play a leadership role. Behaviours change from one role to another and we all play many different roles in our own daily lives.

Were there learnings from a philosophical perspective from the extraordinary story we had heard?

The inevitable question concerned reality. Do we create it? Is it less real because delusional? Does delusion matter if no one is harmed and some good is obtained? Malcolm had suffered terribly and took strength from the story he created about Southside House. He was fortunate to have the means, time and freedom at his disposal to ward off what he found intrusive about the external world, by literally fabricating a cocoon for preserving the identity he wished to have. Many who experienced similar trauma didn't have that option. Were there ways of thinking about the elements of his story - place, community and identity – perhaps at the level of schools, hospitals, local politics and institutions, which could act as buffers against alienation in ordinary, everyday life?

Understandably the questions were easier than the answers but there was a unanimous sense from the floor that the meeting was a great success, and that we had been privileged to hear the extraordinary story of Southside House from within its own walls, so well and thoughtfully told by our hosts.