



NIGHT LIFE

A speakeasy, not a gin joint

Creative thinkers get together at a monthly club for performances and parlor games.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

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There's murmured laughter and a sense of eagerness as people wait to get into the Los Feliz club. Finally, at the front of the line, the bouncer checks his list and asks, "Know the password?"

But I've done my homework. I got the e-mail. I give him a sideways glance and growl, "Filthy witch." He nods; I'm in.

Down the stairs, tiny white lights frame long tables and a small proscenium stage. A dashing young man — he's called Mr. Uncertain — taps out tunes on the old 88. But then the bouncer stops me. "You'll want a bookmark, won't you?" Ah yes, the bookmark.

"Gotta see the librarian," he adds with a wink. "Check out the signs that lead to the library."

The library (a.k.a. the bar) is just one important element of this nouveau speakeasy, which is part performance art and part social mixer. Slyly located in the basement of a church, the monthly Smart Gals Speakeasy brings together local artists, writers, thinkers and performers with an audience that can number more than 100.

These tongue-in-cheek events are made even more amusing with the addition of silly yet thought-provoking parlor games. Tonight it's high-stakes Old Maid with vintage cards. "I remember this deck as a kid!" someone exclaims, sparking a new conversation. All at once players start swapping childhood anecdotes with their cards.

Part of the secretive joy of attending a Speakeasy, according to regular participant Jerrod Cardwell, is that "you never know what kind of entertainment you'll see. It's this great cross section of Los Angeles' unique characters all brought together in one place for us."

Now in its third year, the Speakeasy is the brainchild of Christine Louise Berry, a writer and actress who wanted to create a performance experience that's more interactive than regular theater. Her Smart Gals organization puts on the event using volunteer staff, musicians and performers.

The goal of the Speakeasy, says Berry, is community enlightenment and a celebration of the creative life in Los Angeles. "I want people to walk away from here saying, 'Man, I live in a cool city!' " she says. "I want them energized and excited by what they've seen and heard."

Past nights have featured magicians, ukulele players, puppeteers, nouveau burlesque acts and Polaroid artists. At my Speakeasy, writer Georganne Deen enthralled the crowd with readings from her book; she later sang and played keyboard accompanied by a bass player in a Winnie-the-Pooh suit.

A slide presentation from the Center for Land Use Interpretation captured the imagination of Kate Coyne of Hollywood at a recent event. "The Speakeasy reaches out with those weird and slightly off-the-beaten-path elements that are so interesting and incredible," she says.

But enough culture ... let's get back to those bookmarks.

Each month, a local visual artist creates a limited-edition bookmark. The small collectible artworks are the evening's ticket for cocktails — usually wine and sometimes a special theme-related concoction. No bathtub gin, though.

Staffing the bar, er ... library is Marla Smith. By day she runs a machine shop in Harbor City. She's been the unofficial librarian at the Speakeasy since it opened its doors.

"The Speakeasy saved my life," Smith says, by offering intellectual and artistic growth. "I don't have many opportunities on the job to explore creativity." She's even tried her hand at performing. "I did a stand-up routine on the similarities between Jesus Christ and myself."

The other draw for Smith is the crowd — just regular people interested in entertainment and culture. "It's a great way to meet like-minded people. It's not a snob-fest at all," she says.

While the Speakeasies aren't billed as singles events, "there is always a possibility for meeting a potential date. It does happen."

Surveying the dimly lighted basement, where people are chatting and getting ready to leave, Smith offers some tips for newcomers. "Wear comfortable shoes and have an open mind."