

CCBB-Wimbledon

by JaneW

I'm a Lopy. Going to see Lee in anything is a treat. Lee Mead reads the phone book? Oh yes, sign me up!

But going to see Lee in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang is an extraordinary experience. As those who have seen it have said many, many times, Caractacus Potts is the perfect role for him. It hardly requires him to act - the doting daddy, hoping to find love again, well, it could have been written with him in mind. Then there's the songs - his beautiful rendition of 'Hush-a-Bye Mountain'; his charming 'You Two'; song after song all superbly performed - what would be more sublime?

But we're biased, aren't we? We adore Lee. How would someone who can take or leave him react to his performance?

Yesterday I found out.

My very good friend loves musical theatre. We go to the West End together at least once a year, usually accompanied by her 23 year old daughter.

Now my friend and her daughter don't get my obsession with Lee. They're been to see him in Wicked and in a couple of concerts. They like his voice, but don't think he's that good looking (I know - strange!), and agree with his own assessment that he can't dance.

On the other hand they both love the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and were eager to see the stage production. How would they rate Lee against Dick van Dyke?

Sorry you'll have to read on.

And you know my reports. This could take a while.

I stayed with my friend on Wednesday night, and on Thursday morning she drove us to Wimbledon where we were to meet Julie. (Remember Julie-who-is-not-a-fan? Now renamed Julie-who-bloomin'-well-is-a-fan.) Julie, doing what any red-blooded Lee fan would do, had searched out the stage door, and had chosen that as the ideal place to wait. It was her first time seeing CCBB, and the word 'excited' doesn't cover it.

No Lee sightings unfortunately, but she did manage to meet Michelle Collins, who was very pleasant. When we arrived she was signing autographs for a burly group of men I took to be truckers. Michelle I mean. Not Julie. Julie will sign autographs, I'm sure, but probably isn't asked for them as much as Michelle Collins.

Now with the whole gang together we turned away from the stage door (with many a backward glance in my case) to find somewhere for lunch. We decided on Mexican and Julie picked a table in the window with a nice view of the street leading up to the theatre. (Is she getting good at this or what?)

No sightings, but we had a lovely lunch, then after a little wander around a shopping centre headed back to the theatre.

I was very pleased with the seats I booked. Compromise seats I call them. My friend, for reasons I can't imagine, insisted that we wouldn't be "looking up the actors' noses", but I wasn't about to sit towards the back, so stalls row F right in the centre satisfied everyone.

Good grief it was hot in there! I'm told it was worse on the Wednesday evening. How the performers managed in their heavy costumes under the stage lights I don't know. And yet they still dance with such energy...

I'm getting ahead of myself.

So we settled in to our seats. Julie spotted three familiar faces take their places in the front row. I had promised my friend not to spend the whole time talking to other Lee fans (I'd rather exasperated her on our trip to Wicked by, as she put it, 'knowing everyone in the audience') but Julie had made no such promise and waved like mad to get their attention.

And continued waving...then waved some more...

Yeah, we've all been there haven't we? There you are waving frantically while everyone else around you stares at the nutter, and the people you're trying to say 'Hi' to just don't notice. Sigh.

Oh well, it takes more than a few stares to embarrass our Julie ☺.

(However Julie and I did manage to sneak in a quick conversation with one of front rowers - if you're reading this HELLO!! It was nice to get a chance to chat to you - after the show. I think my friend didn't mind too much!)

So the orchestra strikes up – the projections start and on comes LEE!!! Woohoo!

I wish you could have seen the big smile on Julie's face. It was so much more eloquent than all my descriptions.

And my friend and her daughter?

I – erm – didn't actually look at them. Oh come on – Lee was on stage! I think having a glance at Julie was enough not-watching-Lee thanks very much.

And he was looking gorgeous, scribbling in his little notebook, face besmeared with oil. Not looking at all uncomfortable in his shirt and waste-coat despite the heat.

I've no intention of going right through the show bit by bit again (not this time – I save that for my last visit), but I will mention a few key points.

Lee was in excellent voice, from start to finish, note perfect. And as always his interaction with the kiddies (my favourite lass was on again) made me melt (in a much pleasanter way than the whole no air-con thing).

He managed so well during the opening number despite having to push the heavy wreck about, but by 'Toot Sweets', he was – shall we just say gently, glowing profusely? Did that stop him jumping around the stage? Nope it most assuredly did not!

'Hush-a-bye Mountain' – oh wow! The audience was silent, listening intently as Lee's gentle voice washed over us, like the sea he sang of.

I had my fingers crossed for 'Ole Bamboo'. I have seen Lee do it several times now and know he can do it. But wouldn't it be just bad luck if he messed it up while my friend was watching? Well he didn't! He was just perfect.

The audience gave Chitty a big round of applause for turning her lights on.

Slight mishap with the beach scene when again one of the beach huts didn't appear. Fortunately a stage hand opened a door in the scenery so Lee could exit during 'Truly Scrumptious'.

Chitty behaved like the lady she is. No Prima Donna fits that show. Even the fog behaved and rolled in delicate billows which didn't obscure the performers or choke them.

Lots of clapping along during 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' itself.

Actually the audience seemed to be whooping and cheering at every opportunity.

So Chitty soars into the air and the curtain falls to even louder cheering and the house lights go up.

I turn to my friend. She's grinning. So is her daughter.

Did Lee pass muster?

Oh yes!

Was his Ole Bamboo OK?

It was very good. He can dance.

So that I am taking as a BIG thumbs up. My friend seldom enthuses more.

And Julie? Oh she was having a whale of a time.

We all agreed it raced by far too fast - the second half even faster. I loved every moment! As did the others – even the songs that weren't in the film, like 'Bomby Samba'.

And ‘Doll on a Music Box/ Truly Scumptious’! Well Carrie is such an excellent match for Lee. Sparks fly between them. We all agreed there isn’t a weak link in this cast.

So on to the curtain calls – and right from the beginning the audience were giving their all. The only pause in the cheers was for the Matt, the Child Catcher, who got well and truly booed as always.

The kids, Carrie, and Lee came on and the cheering got even louder. The kids, then Carrie got ecstatic applause and I didn’t see how Lee’s applause could be louder. It was! Yes, yes, I was adding to it but it wasn’t just me.

We sang along to the last rendition of ‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’ and Julie and I leapt to our feet – and so did my friend and her daughter!

We were the nearest row to the front standing (the ladies on the other side of me were also really enthusiastic) and Lee gave us a bright smile.

As for my friend – I think I can say that for this show at least, Lee has won her over.

And now I can confidently say – it’s not just us! Lee really is a perfect Potts ☺