

Leeds and Rhyl

Naturally I love any Lee event, but having the GO come to your hometown (OK work-place-town) is something very special.

Off I trotted into Leeds city centre, way too early to meet with TK, but I figured that I could find some where nice to have dinner. Although I know that area of Leeds reasonably well, I'd never been for a meal around there, so I needed to do some exploring. First things first, I thought, best find the theatre. Funny I'd never noticed it before... It should be easy enough to find....

Yeah right.

I followed the brown signs. They led me to Briggate, a road I know very well. Nope. No theatre there. Time to resort to google maps. Great. I could see I'd passed right by the theatre but walking back up the road...no, no theatre there. Hmm perhaps the entrance is elsewhere. I walked around the block – ah ha! A Door! A door surrounded by huge bins – that can't be right. At least a notice attached to the gate told me that the entrance was via a lane off Briggate – where I'd been in the first place.

So back up, back to Briggate and I start looking more carefully at the side roads...

Between two smart modern shops, fronted in red and white there's a narrow ginnel. I stepped into it. This must be how Harry Potter felt when he walked down Diagon Alley. It's a tiny secret world which the modern city has grown around without affecting it. OK so that's an exaggeration, but that's how I felt the moment the painted sign arching above my head "Leeds City Varieties". Magical!

There's a delightful pub right next door to the theatre, and opposite, through an anonymous door and up a steep staircase, a vegan restaurant. I wandered around the area for half an hour longer and found other options, but we all agreed (by 'all' I mean TK and my school friend known as She of the Red Wedding Dress, who was to join us) that the vegan restaurant would be an interesting change from the norm.

Dinner plans sorted then. But first a chance to show TK around some of Leeds' gorgeous Victorian shopping arcades, followed by a wee drinkie in the pub. Not surprisingly several familiar faces appeared as we enjoyed our tippie, some of whom joined us at our table. One person didn't appear: She of the Red Wedding Dress.

TK and I went over the road to bag a dinner table. As we sat I got a text. "I'm at the theatre". Great I went downstairs to collect her...no SotRW. A quick phone call – mystery solved. She's at the Grand Theatre. Opps! I ran over to collect her and five minutes later the three of us were sat together pouring over the menu, and having a good giggle and a catch up.

We finished in plenty of time. Over the road we went into the theatre.

Leeds City Varieties is a jewel of a theatre. I've seen it many times on TV as a kid, watching 'The Good Old Days', I can't believe I haven't visited before. (SotRW and I are planning to visit again.) It has all the charm of the original Victorian Theatre, but has been carefully restored so there is no sense of faded grandeur about it; the grandeur isn't faded one bit.

When I told my colleagues I would be sitting in the front row, they frowned. 'The stage is very high', they said. 'The view from the front row won't be very good.'

As I settled into my seat, between TK and SotRWD, I realised that they were partly right. The stage is indeed rather high, but because there are two sets of stairs leading up to it, the front row is set back a little way. Yes, I'd be staring upwards, but I'm used to that.

Ooo and that mike stand stood right in front of me. Thank you TK for booking the best seats in the house!

Glancing behind me, I saw the auditorium filling up nicely. I greeted many friends as they took their seats; particularly the Northern Ladies, who were there in force. Would it be a complete sell out? If so would Lee keep his promise to sing and dance Me Ol' Bamboo? Read on ☺.

The band came on to cheers. Mason took his seat behind the drums, Mike at the grand piano, Richie on guitar and John, with his violin at the back. Then Lee appeared looking happy, relaxed and delicatble in his tux (Oh my that guy scrubs up well!), taking his place behind the mike.

When the whooping calmed down he began to sing.

I remember first hearing 'Where or When' at the Pheasantry. It didn't make much of an impression on me then, but with repeated hearings I've come to really appreciate Lee's performance, caressing the melody until he builds into a great crescendo on the final sustained note. From the level of applause the rest of the crowd agreed with me.

After drinking in the applause, Lee greeted the audience and as usual he had plenty of complimentary things to say about Leeds in general and the theatre in particular. He mentioned the height of the stage (he said he felt like a Greek god. Funny that, Lee. You looked like one too) and teased the people looking down from the boxes, pretending they were royalty.

Several times he mentioned that Chitty Chitty Bang Bang had been produced by the West Yorkshire playhouse, and he shared his reminiscences of performing at the Grand.

We can often expect Lee to tell us funny stories, and this concert was no different. He told us how he'd been ironing his shirt in the basement, when he heard a rhythmic tapping. He paused to listen (here he mimed himself stopping to listen) the noise stopped and so he started ironing again. The noise returned. He thought 'Eek - ghost!'. Then realised the iron's flex was banging against the ironing board.

I know I didn't do the story justice, but believe me, he was highly amusing when he told it!

There were other comedy moments.

Lee demonstrating a Lofty trip-up while talking about Casualty, made everyone giggle.

'Singing in the Rain': Lee always tells us how he was offered the part but declined it because of the amount of dance training, and then he always does a few comedy dance moves, as if to drive home the point. This time he included a small section of 'Me Ol' Bamboo' much to our delight. His big grin afterwards just shows how proud he is of his new dance skills.

He seemed very pleased with the age range in the theatre, pointing out the oldest fan there (a friend's 80 year old mum), and 10 year old Harry who played Jeremy in Chitty, aww!

No guest at these two concerts; instead the band played three instrumentals, all of which heavily featured John on the violin. I like watching John. He gets so wrapped up in the music; his facial expressions always make me smile. I told SotRWD to watch him. She did. I couldn't. From my otherwise excellent seat John was entirely concealed behind a speaker. Try as I might I only got to see the tip of his bow. SotRWD, was very sympathetic. If laughing at me can be called sympathy. Oh well I just had to listen and watch the others instead.

Back to the singing. Lee gave us all the songs on the album over the course of the evening, and several other favourites. Throughout his voice sounded superb, and if he had a Meady moment, I didn't notice it.

I'm not going to attempt to list every song. But I do have to mention a few that particularly stood out for me.

'Close Every Door': Oh my! It was so good to hear him sing that again. I had almost forgotten the emotion he puts into that song. And it brought back all those wonderful memories of his months as Joseph.

'Hushabye Mountain' mesmerised the audience. Thank you so much Lee for including it! (I look on his Potts as fondly as his Joseph, but with the hope we might see him in the role again in the WE.)

Then his first half closing number – a joyful 'Luck be a Lady'; the Billy Joel composition, 'Lullaby'; 'Ain't It a Kick in the Head'; and stunning renditions of 'Feeling Good' and 'Anthem', which really show off the power and beauty of his voice.

Another song I adore is Lee's version of John Legend's 'All of Me', which sounded brilliant. However, I was just a bit distracted because I had to play peek-a-boo-Lee all through the number. The music stand obscured my view of him whole time. Apologies to the woman sat behind me as my squirming must have got right up her left nostril.

Then finally Lee's single from the album, and my favourite track from it, 'See You In My Dreams', with Lee's Joe Brown accent and Mason's plinky-plink ukulele accompaniment. Charming!

As it finished we leapt up. A quick glance behind. Yep. The whole of the stalls standing and cheering.

We sat down again for ADWD, but bounced back at the very end as Lee and his excellent band took their bows.

Afterwards we went to...I was going to say we went to the stage door, but the City Varieties doesn't have one. Instead the fans gathered in the lane outside the theatre, and nattered away until he appeared.

We'd been told that Lee would be rushing away and not to be disappointed if he couldn't sign for everyone. However the fans queued up, got their autographs and photos and moved away again, in such prompt and considerate way, that everyone who wanted to got their moment with him. When the rest had dispersed Lee came away from the doorway and spoke to the regulars. I can't remember much of the conversation, but everyone praised the lovely theatre, and of course, we complimented him on his performance. After a few minutes the band called Lee away, and off he went with John, disappearing into Leeds centre.

TK and I returned to the TL in time to join the others for a not very wee drinkies in the hotel bar.

The following morning the gang from the TravelLodge met for breakfast bagels before we headed off for Rhyl.

Road trip!! Sitting with TK, singing along to 'Love Songs'. Oh yes. That's a fun way to travel!

On the way I checked out Twitter. He took the band to Morley for dinner after the show. This amused me no end. As a medieval reenactor I go to Morley every year and we always have to plan carefully because almost every takeaway closes by the time we have our pavilions set up. No way would Lee and the band find somewhere to eat after 10pm – unless perchance they stumbled upon the same pizza place we always have to use.

We arrived in Rhyl about 2.30pm, found our hotel without trouble, and checked in. As we were doing so a familiar face appeared. TK and I had a little chat with her.

Our room was lovely. A suite in fact with a single and a double connected. We didn't have time to explore because we needed to collect our tickets then find some grub. A short walk brought us to the theatre, and with tickets in hand we went in search of fish n chips.

Lee had tweeted about very good chip shop recommended by a fan. I can recommend it myself now! Yummy!

Our waitress asked what brought us to Rhyl and we told her about Lee.

"Oh he was here!" She said, "Lovely man. But the poor guy didn't get to eat in peace." Oh dear. The downside of fame.

We finished our meal, and headed back to get changed. We passed the band, with Lee (he didn't see us) and John (he did) following. Surely they can't be going for Fish and Chips again. We looked back at them. No the band had gone the opposite way. Ah but then Lee beckoned to them, and they ran back like chastened school boys. It put me in mind of 'A Hard Day's Night'.

After a shower and a change, we met up with the others and headed to the theatre.

Ooo. That place was big! Big and modern. A lovely venue in many ways but too big for a Lee concert. Still as the audience filtered in I saw many familiar faces, including friends I've not seen for a while, and some new acquaintances that I'd only known through twitter. Lovely to see you ladies!

As I made the long walk to my seat in the front row, I wondered whether I would be sat near someone I knew. How delightful to find myself next to a fan I knew. I didn't know the lady to the left of me but she seemed very pleasant, and beyond her sat two young women who proved to be mightily enthusiastic! 😊

A wide orchestra pit separated the seats from the stage; an expansive stage more conducive to Lee's dancing than that of the previous night. This would be a different experience to the intimate Leeds gig.

It wasn't a big audience, but at least we didn't look lost in the huge venue as I had feared. And when Lee took to the stage, the shouting and cheering made us seem like treble our number. It was as though the whole of the stalls and agreed to make up for the empty seats by supplying decibels.

Again he opened with 'Where or When', and again he transfixed me with his interpretation. Oh my! I realised that my last-minute bought seat, lay right in that part of the stalls he habitually turns towards. I'm not suggesting he could see anything more of the front row than silhouettes, but his eyes often fell on me, turning this little Lopy into Mead mush.

Again Lee wooed the locals by finding lots of nice things to say about Rhyl, the theatre, and the standard of their Fish n Chips. He did seem to have genuine affection for the place, and I must say, the little I saw of the out of season resort, brought back fond memories of seaside holidays with mum and dad. I like the town!

The band played three numbers, and this time I got to enjoy John's facial expressions as well as his music. Unfortunately, some people sat in the vicinity didn't seem to consider the instrumentals as part of the show. The couple immediately behind me talked at full volume though each. It was discourteous, but in all other respects the Rhyl audience was really terrific – involved and appreciative.

My seat also gave me a perfect unobstructed view of Lee during 'All of Me'. I joked at interval that he sang 'All of Me' to me. My neighbour joked back that he'd sang it to her. This pretended argument ended after 'Hushabye Mountain'. Yes, he'd sung 'All of Me' to me, but 'Hushabye Mountain' to her. Honours even. He performed both perfectly.

I think the set list was the same as for Leeds and all too quickly we were swaying along to 'See You in My Dreams'. Then somewhere outside an alarm went off. Lee stopped, as we all listened, agreed it was a car alarm; then he continued. If anything the audience were even more enthused after the impromptu break.

We stood en masse when SYIMD ended, roaring More! More! No one sat back down for ADWD. It was the most joyful, animated ADWD I have ever witnessed and Lee and the band were grinning like maniacs throughout. Wow! Fabulous!

The crowd gathered at the stage door, made up for any discourtesy to the band during the show, by joining us cheering each of the band as they left the building. Lee came out after another announcement to warn us that he might not be able to sign for everyone.

The crowd respected this. Someone asked for a photograph and Lee explained that he didn't have time to pose but told them to 'snap away' as he signed.

We chatted to the band, in particular to John, as one by one the others at the stage door drifted away. Now we didn't block Lee from getting to his car but he did have to pass us to get to it. Once again he stopped and graced up with a few minutes of his precious time, before saying his goodbyes.

We said our farewells to those of us heading back home, those of us staying over decided to wait to wave Lee off. We ambled out of the carpark to stand at the side of the access road (so we would be putting him off manoeuvring). After a few minutes his car sedately rounded the corner and slowed down.

He wound down the window, and smiled up at us. (Do you know Lee looks even more gorgeous when in the driver's seat of a powerful car. Or is that just me?)

"Can I just say..." What on earth is he going to say to us, I wondered.

"I have THE BEST fans."

That's it. I have melted.

We waved as he left.

Thank you so much all the wonderful lovely Lee fans who made these two dates so special. I'll see you in my dreams!