

Aberdeen Panto December 2018

by Jane W

Bing bong Bing: *Ladies and gentlemen this is your train guard speaking. Sorry for the slight delay leaving Doncaster. We have a technical issue with this train. We're looking into it now and hope to be on our way before much longer.*

I checked the time. 10 minutes late so far. No matter. My flight to Aberdeen wasn't till the following morning. My friends would probably beat me to the quirky little restaurant which I'd suggested for dinner, but they'd wait for me

I pictured cocktails and crepes by candlelight.

Bing bong Bing: *Hello ladies and gentlemen this is your train guard again. We've not been able to identify the problem just yet, but the driver is talking to maintenance now. So hopefully we'll be getting you on your way before much longer.*

Hmmmm. An unidentified fault. Never a good thing. The voice on theme tannoy seemed optimistic, but just in case I tweeted my friends. "Train delayed. I'll keep you posted." My Rail Enquiries App told me I could catch another service in 45mins. Time yet for them to fix this one.

Bing bong Bing: *OK, right. So ladies and gentlemen. Can anyone sat in coaches A and C please return to the platform. Leave your belongings behind but return to the platform straight away.*

Do what?!!!!

Bing bong Bing: *This is an announcement for passengers in coaches A and C. Please return to the platform. We've identified the fault and the maintenance teams need to do some work in carriages A and C. If you are seated in either of those carriages please leave them now and return to the platform. We won't go without you. Honest.*

I watched as a line of bemused passengers descended from the train. You could tell this was an abnormal situation: strangers were speaking to each other. In coach D we got as far as looking at one another and shrugging.

Bing bong Bing: *This is an announcement for passengers in coaches D and E. Maintenance are now in Coaches A and C. They're busy trying to fix the problem while the passengers from those coaches are waiting outside in the cold. Meanwhile we're toasty warm.*

Hmmm toasty warm yes. Moving further towards my destination? no. My watch told me I had half an hour till the next available train. I could stay warm a while yet.

Bing bong Bing: *OK so. Maintenance haven't been able to fix the fault so we're going to...ummm...turn everything off and turn it back on again.*

???!!!!???

Bing bong Bing: *This is going to take at least 20 minutes.*

No use waiting to see whether Captain Reboot works. I disembarked and headed for platform 4 where the other train was due in 20 minutes. 5 minutes later the platform filled with weary passengers.

“Fault not fixed then?”

“No, cancelled.”

The new train eventually arrived 15 minutes late. We crammed on board. It chugged its way to Sheffield.

Bing bong Bing: *We apologise for the late running of this service. This is due to having to take on passengers from a cancelled service at Doncaster.*

Oi! You were 15 minutes late getting into Doncaster. Don't blame us!

So eventually, an hour and a half tardy, I arrived at the restaurant to meet the girls. Let the weekend begin.

Surprisingly, considering the BBC had been forecasting high winds at Aberdeen airport all week, our flight left on time and landed a little ahead of schedule with a few bumps but no scares.

We'd made it! Aberdeen!

The four of us had been awake since 4.15 am. Breakfast had been a quick croissant in Birmingham airport so as soon as we'd dropped our bags off at the hotel, we headed off for a proper brekkie at a café. Daylight had just about broken as we walked through the grey city streets, battling with the blustery wind.

Four hours before the matinee.

We lingered over bacon butties and waffles, but eventually we had to face the weather again. With woolly hats pulled over our brows and collars up, we headed out to explore.

Everyone says Aberdeen is the Granite City. I don't think I was prepared for the sheer scale of the place. Wide streets and castlesque buildings – the sort that you'd expect to see Rapunzel leaning out of. Aberdeen has been prosperous in its day and it wears its heritage proudly.

We browsed the Christmas market, then up Union Street we struggled, until we found ourselves in a large square dominated by an enormous Christmas tree. Around us some of the amazing architecture of Aberdeen. And in front of us a wooden totem carved with a (rather scary looking) Partridge in a Pear Tree.

Ooo the twelve days of Christmas. Twelve of these statues to find. Now there's a challenge.

We came across Four Calling Birds at the Christmas fair, and Three French Hens in a church yard.

On the way to the theatre we found Ten Lords a-Leaping, and right outside the theatre Seven Swans were a-Swimming.

An hour and a half till show time.

We bagged an empty table in the theatre café, for a wee drinkie to keep out the chill. Ah – a quick dash out in the cold to WS Smith's needed (via Five Gold Rings) and we were back in time for the big event.

The Saturday matinee.

The panto: Saturday Matinee

OK so let me start by saying up front, this won't be a detailed blow by blow account.

There may yet be other fans heading north who don't want spoilers. Secondly I am intending to go again before the run ends, so hopefully I'll remember more later. So with that in mind on with the show...

It's the Saturday matinee. I've settled into my seat Row K close to the centre aisle.

His Majesty's Theatre, Aberdeen is utterly charming - all white stucco and gilt, tinted pink and purple where the stage lights reflect off the plaster cherubs.

The auditorium fills. Lots of kiddies, all excited, waving glowing magic wands or swords, shuffle into their seats.

I expected a full house. It wasn't. Not quite. Five empty seats next to me testified to a party, a family perhaps, unable to attend. Either that or someone had warned

them about the mad English woman who hadn't washed since 4.30am that morning.

Ooo settle down everyone! It's about to start.

The magic mirror descends to the stage. Hurrah an appropriate special effect (I'm still reeling from that blooming giant gorilla starting Aladdin. Why?!!!.). It sets the scene which leads into the opening number, a cheery ditty from the seven dwarfs, which I enjoyed immensely even though I barely caught a word. There are various ways panto producers portray the titular dwarfs. In this case seven attractive normal height actors, mercifully free of bushy fake beards but encumbered by leg cramping costumes, are the diminutive leads.

I liked these lads. A lot. They only had four scenes but made the most of each and I found myself anticipating their return with almost as much relish as I had for our leading man.

Snow White herself appears next. Jenna Innes, has recently graduated according to the programme blurb. What an exceptional leading lady she is! Pretty enough to turn any evil queen green with jealousy, sassy, vivacious and in every way far superior to demure, simpering heroines who are so often...now what's the right word? Oh yes. Wet.

With the titular leads introduced it's time for some laughs.

Lee's name may be up front and centre on the poster, but for the good people of Aberdeen the real stars are Jordan Young (Muddles) and Alan McHugh (Nurse Nellie McDuff).

Jordan is a very engaging comedian. His boyish goofiness is a change from the naughty innuendos, and self-knowing cynicism most panto comedians give us.

And then we have Alan whose dame forgoes the usual hunt-for-next-husband (no doubt to the relief of any gentlemen in the stalls) in favour of gentler, more motherly humour.

Jordan and Alan are mostly responsible for that key element pantomime – the audience participation.

Oh yes they are!

“Hiya Pals!” shouts Muddles.

“Hiya Muddles!” we shout back.

It's all very gigglesome.

There's some nervous fidgeting in the stalls when the Nurse Nellie brings out a video camera, and trains it on the audience, but I think in all we get off quite lightly. A little bit of fun with popcorn, a few naughty little jests. Nothing too rude, nothing too dangerous.

Those who prefer their entertainment in the hands of experienced professionals will be delighted by this tamer approach.

Me? I prefer a bit of mayhem. Bobby Davro hurtling around the auditorium chasing a toilet roll; Matt Slack pleading with a toddler who's followed big sis onto the stage; Julian Clary putting down a heckler... That sort of thing. That doesn't mean my way is the right way though. Tame can be good too.

But it's time to get on with the show, and we come to the Evil Queen, Juliet Cadzow.

OK, I'm so sorry. I'm sure Juliet is a wonderful actor, but great panto villain she isn't.

I think playing a panto villain must be something of a specialist discipline. It involves creating a reaction from the audience; then building on that reaction. Juliet receives boos aplenty but she didn't seem to know what to do with them, (even though the script anticipated appropriate responses). It all felt quite flat to me. My mind went back to last year. Robin Askwith stalking the stage, sneering down at the front rows, flicking his long tongue like a predatory lizard. OK so she couldn't do the tongue bit. But a bit of sneering and stalking...

Actually, she'd have had problems with the latter. Wardrobe had done her no favours with her long, flowing, vaguely oriental-style frocks. (Oh how I'd love to go sweeping in one of those!) Unfortunately, Juliet looked very uncomfortable as she manhandled her skirts. I'm told that she tripped over her hem on the first weekend so no wonder she seemed very conscious about hitching her costumes up before she made any move.

After some cautious flouncing around the stage Queenie welcomes her 'toy-boy'.

Finally! Lee! He's brought on in his chariot of gold, looking I must say, very regal in his gold and purple crushed velvet tunic and (thank you SO MUCH wardrobe) tight, black leggings.

I adore Lee in panto in any role, but he was made to play handsome princes. Largely because he's so, well, handsome. See he's got it half sorted before we start. He strides about manfully, arms behind his back, maintaining as much dignity as possible while the evil queen attempts to seduce him (I say 'seduce'.

She's no Mrs Potiphar), then later when Muddles and Dame Nellie take the Mick out of him.

But when his Snow White joins him on stage – ahhh Prince Harry of Holby is the perfect romantic lead.

We waited a long time for Lee's first appearance but once he arrives, he's seldom off stage for long. For the most part he's playing the straight man for Jordan or Alan. It reminds me of his first pantos. I could almost hear Julian Clary saying "You're here to sing and look nice."

He's an excellent straight man, with his mobile eyebrows, and his shocked expressions, but I do wish they'd given him more comedy to do. Oh for a bit of Meadstyle slapstick!

I know I'm not giving anything away when I mention Lee's first song. Yes – it's 'Any Dream Will Do', and no, don't be silly, he doesn't get a chance to sing through without interruptions.

With the expected asides to allow for comedy routines, songs and audience teasing, the script allows the story to progress as it should without skipping bits or making me shout (inwardly) "What on earth is going on!?"

Which is impressive as a significant chunk of the dialogue is delivered in the local dialect, Doric.

When some of my friends told me about the Doric passages, I must admit I felt a bit concerned. I'm not great my own dialect and struggle with some of the broader Scottish accents. But rather than causing me confusion, once my ears attuned, I really enjoyed the lapses into Doric. No, I didn't understand all of it but I got enough to laugh at the jokes, and I picked up most of the unfamiliar words quickly enough from the context. Far for spoiling the experience, this Sassenach loves how the Doric rooted the panto in Aberdeenshire, and made me feel like I was watching something unique for the area. A bit like the Brummy genie in the Hippodrome reminding us that, yes, this is indeed Birmingham.

Prince Harry, of course, is ribbed mercilessly about being posh and not understanding the lingo. He doesn't care. He has his princess to woo.

The chemistry between Lee and Jenna is really lovely to watch. When they sing their duet, at a ball to celebrate Snow White's birthday, they hardly take their eyes off one another. Their voices merge beautifully, and though the routine is simple (I think the choreographer believed Lee's protests about not being able to dance) it's elegant and rather sweet.

Once the birthday party is finished evil Queen Lucretia starts making plans to assassinate (not a word used in the actual production you understand) her younger, more beautiful rival. In this case rather than a woodcutter, queenie enlists the help of Muddles and Nellie by...nah. I'll leave that for my detailed report.

Of course, the wicked plan misfires and our heroine finds a refuge with our seven mini heroes – who at last get another turn on the stage.

The first half ends with a big effect worthy of the Palladium (no clues) and Lee singing a slightly revised version of a Greatest Showman song.

Interval; and a little chat with a local lass who'd sussed we were there to see Lee. It might have been something to do with my loud affirmative when Prince Harry asked for a volunteer to keep him warm. She said some complimentary things about his voice and general attractiveness. When we explained that we'd been hoping to see him do some slapstick she seemed surprised. I suppose handsome princes are seldom required to do much in the way of pratfalls.

Interval brought with it a change of seat. Not only had the intended occupants of the seats next to us not turned up, the seats next to our other friends also remained unclaimed. We moved over so we could all be together, for team cheering and booing.

As the lights dimmed ready for the show to restart I wondered how long it would be before Lee...

OOo he's here! Opening the second half along with the chorus in his fourth and final full number. He's worried about his princess, naturally so calls for a search party. Muddles and Dame Nellie would help but they've forgotten the way.

It's in the second half that Lee eventually gets a proper comedy scene. I won't describe it in full here, but it involves lip syncing to a recording. It's amusing, but when I think of Lee doing the trombone in bed routine with Bobby Davro, or the love duet on the wall that ends up in a fight (which at one time looked like becoming a Lee Mead standard), I did think the writer had missed a huge opportunity for some real belly laughs.

Muddles and Dame Nellie leave the stage just as the evil queen enters.

This is Juliet's turn to do something comedic and as was delighted to find she did it extremely well. Again, more verbal than visual, her perfect timing had the audience chuckling.

Even louder chuckles in the next scene, as Jordan and Alan gave us a panto classic. You know those memory test games where yjr players add more and more things to a list and the others have to remember everything? Yep basically one of those. But scripted.

Now to be completely frank I've seen this sought of thing done better. Jordan and Alan were a bit too pat with it, and even when Alan pretended to go wrong he didn't convince. That said, they were funny and the audience loved it.

Anyway it's time to (in the words of Jordan) shovel in some plot, so it's off to...the programme calls it Lucretia's laboratory. That's very modern for a witch queen don't you think? Anyway it's off to the laboratory so Mrs Evil-Pants can prepare the poisoned apple and transform herself into an old crone. This is Juliet's big number. She's not called on to sing or dance (that's the ensemble's job) just to make a few witchy type hand moves as though she's casting spells. She does this... oh dear, she does this really badly. You can almost see her thinking "Now I need to move my left arm."

Lee, bless that lovely man, constantly tells people he doesn't dance just 'moves to music' in a self-deprecating way. (Which those of us that have seen him doing the Ol' Bamboo routine know isn't the case.) Seeing someone on stage who genuinely struggles moving to music makes me appreciate just how graceful the Meadster is.

Now for the highlight of the panto, and a little scene that demonstrates just how talented Jordon Young is. It's simple enough. Dame Nellie asks Muddles what's gone on so far, and Jordan tells us. In Doric. Very fast. With comments. It's a hoot!

Back to the plot: witchy-queen-crone turns up at the cottage with her dodgy fruit and on cue Snow White scoffs it and falls down dead. With a mwah ha ha the queen leaves, as the rest of the cast return to stage.

Muddles has a little moment of comedy before our handsome prince brings her back to life with his kiss. Hurrah!

With the story all but over, the dwarfs have another song, allowing for a bit of audience participation.

The happy couple face the Queen Lucretia, defeat her sorcery, and banish her to...well there's a lot of silliness and jokes to do with the banishment, which I'm not going to spoil for the moment.

We have our happy ending. Awwww!!!! And there's going to be a Royal Wedding. And we're all invited.

And as tradition has it in panto-land before any Royal Wedding, the audience have to sing along with a silly song - in this case the two halves of the stalls competing for who can sing loudest.

It's the finale, all pinks and blues. Cheers for the ensemble, followed by each of the leads. Jordan and Alan get the biggest, but the audience clearly appreciate Lee and the lovely Jenna too.

Alan gives a little speech and sparkly ticker-tape flutters down onto the performers.

Curtain closes on another Meady panto experience.

Our little gang headed out into the biting wind and down to the stage door, which is oddly placed below the theatre at the end of a park.

There weren't exactly crowds awaiting. A couple stood right by the wall huddling in the best shelter. They smiled and said 'hello' in the friendly Aberdonian way. We settled in for a long wait wondering whether he'd come out after the matinee.

Unusually, the stage door has a window in it so we could see performers signing out. I was the only one of our gang close enough to see through it.

"Eh up!" I said as I spotted a familiar figure in a long coat.

I'd expected the couple to accost Lee as soon as he appeared, but they continued stare passed him though the stage door window.

So I accosted him.

"Hya Lee!" I said in a tone that I hope expressed "Look it's us! We've come all the way to Aberdeen to see you."

"Hello!" he said, managing to express "Gosh it's you guys. You've come all the way to Aberdeen to see me!"

We had a lovely chat; about the panto of course, about Aberdeen (he didn't know about the 12 Days of Christmas Statues) and about the wedding of Dofty. He stayed for a good few minutes.

"Are you coming to this evening's performance?"

"Oh yes! And tomorrow's matinee too."

Not a blink. Not a hint of surprise. He's knows his fans now! But I did see a smile that suggested he's really, really pleased to know that somewhere out there a few of his Ladies are cheering him on.

He left us eventually. As always we waited a minute or two before following in his steps.

We rushed back towards the hotel in the decaying light, passed Nine Ladies Dancing, to check ourselves in. After rather a fraught check in and some problems with the keys, we did a quick change and headed out for dinner. Nandos might not be the most exciting meal we've ever had on Meady tours but it was fast.

Then it's back to the theatre for Snow White no 2.

Saturday Evening

I'm back in front of the pink and purple Snow White logo, awaiting my second Aberdeen panto experience. My friends and I are sitting in two sets of two either side of the central aisle. We're all in Row C, and though not quite in the centre, the view is pretty much perfect.

OOo here comes the mirror...

Second time around and my ears are more attuned to the musical, local accents. I catch more of the dwarfs' lyrics – namely their names. No Doc or Dopey here, the writers have eschewed the familiar dwarfs' names for Scottish versions – Gaffer and Dafty for a start. No doubt this is to avoid litigation from that behemoth Disney.

On came Snow White, as lovely and perky as before. On come Muggles and Dame Nellie and the video camera...which goes pretty much as it had on the matinee.

Lee was on fine form, even better than earlier in the day. I like to think he was looking out for his fans in the audience. The others tell me tell me he made eye-contact with then several times – I swear he saw me too.

We had a bloody good audience for the evening show. There might have been fewer kiddies but the grown-ups made up for the lack with louder boos and more extravagant cheers, and peels of laughter. The ladies responded very well to the handsome prince. I'm sure I heard one or two sighs as well as a fair few giggles.

Perhaps the biggest giggle was reserved for a chap in the dress circle who stood up to do the Floss at one point, momentarily putting Alan off his track and giving us all a damn good laugh.

Otherwise there was very little difference between the two shows.

All too soon we were singing along with the final song. Being opposite sides of the aisle we had fun pulling faces at each other as we attempted to out-sing our mates. Then it's time for the Royal Wedding and for the cast to take well deserved bows.

With everything going so well and the audience being for up for it, I expected a standing ovation. Not on this occasion but I hope they'll get one for the last night. They ought to!

We emerged from the theatre into driving sleet. Forcing our way through the high wind we were quickly sodden through. My hood had unzipped itself from my ski jacket so I only had my woolly bobble hat protecting my head. Waterproof? Nope. We head away from the theatre.

"So we're not stage dooring?" I shouted over the noise of the gale.

"No!"

Back in the hotel we delved in our baggage for dry clothes to wear. I had the jeans I'd travelled in but no change of footwear, so I joined the others in the bar wearing nothing more than socks on my feet.

We were so knackered that even a wee drinkies couldn't revive us. I think we were all in bed by 10.30 pm.

Sunday

I didn't sleep well. No idea why. But a lie in, a brew in bed and a shower revived me. As did an enormous full Scottish breakfast which included bubble and squeak and black pudding.

Our plan had been to conserve our energy and check out as late as possible, but Aberdeen was showing off just how pretty it can be under an arch of blue sky with sunlight twinkling off the granite. Without battling the weather we returned to the square where we'd seen the Partridge, this time taking pictures. Then we wandered the streets search for more of the 12 Days sculptures and were rewarded with Two Turtle Doves.

The Sunday matinee was practically a carbon copy of the day before, the only major difference being my seat. Row A, right at the very end. It gave me a different view of the action including occasional glimpses into the wings.

Again at the end of the show Alan made a short speech before glittery ticker-tape fluttered onto the stage.

We'd hoped to speak to Lee again at the stage door but he didn't come out that way. So instead we headed for dinner before returning to the airport. Back to reality.

So what did I think?

Is it my favourite panto experience?

No. Last year's Jack and the Beanstalk at Southend will take a lot of beating in my opinion. Lee in his home town, performing with a good friend and a cast that seemed bonded on day one. I can't see Jack getting knocked off the top of Jane's panto podium.

Did I enjoy Snow White? Oh yes! And I have no doubt that, as with Aladdin in Birmingham, the more I see it the more I will enjoy it.

If you are able to make the trip up into Scotland do. Aberdeen is a lovely city with the most friendly residents you can imagine.

Lee's seventh outing on the panto stage is great fun. He is the perfect prince and his leading lady of the finest fairytale princesses I've seen.

Jordan and Alan are a very funny pairing. Their Doric patter makes this panto different to any other pantomime experience Qdos has given us so far.

If you can get there do – you'll enjoy yourself.