

Opening Act 2

The safety curtain lifts to reveal the slatted screen back in place, and two sentry boxes painted in a very snazzy purple and black zig-zag design. Sorry, you can dis the Vulgarians as much as you like but I love their colour schemes.

There's no big opening number here. The orchestra plays as a little bit of silent exposition occurs.

A couple of sentries march past (so we're in a military state then) then a uniformed woman (a purple uniform of course) pops on to the stage and looks skyward with a pair of binoculars.

Here I must mention 'button watch'. This particular performer seems to have problems with her costume loosing buttons. Jo's got me having a check for missing ones as soon as she arrives on stage.

Anyway, she's excited by what she sees and hurries off, assumedly to type a long report, so misses the arrival of Boris and Goran, or is it Doris and Gordon?

It's not your standard homecoming. Both spies are wearing wet suits and Boris is dragging a prone Goran by his legs. (Though I am informed that Goran now walks on behind Boris. The director must have taken pity on Sam.)

It's another great comedy turn. They are thrilled to be home, after swimming all the way from England. They've beaten the balloon. They're expecting tea and medals from their Baron. And Goran thinks he's lost weight. He hasn't.



The screen raises. The stage has become a square in Vulgaria. The Baron, with his faithful teddy bear, stands on a podium in front of his loyal subjects (the Baron's subjects, not the bear's) who sing the Vugarian National Anthem.

If I move to Vulgaria I want to be an official. Officials get smart purple uniforms. The rest of the population wear grey and have to sing boring anthems that rhyme 'soil' and 'toil'.

The Baron greets the spies graciously and doesn't seem too perturbed when Goran gives him a smacker on the lips. Kiss that is. Not thump.

Grandpa's lavvy is brought before the Baron. The old man steps out as the baron makes a speech, welcoming the famous inventor Caractacus Potts to Vulgaria. His Vulgarian subjects clap him five times, in unison. It's a nice quirk, this stilted applause and manages to sum up the populations attitude to their ruler very succinctly.

So Grandpa has a choice to make. Recreate Chitty in Vulgaria OR get turned into a sausage. Grandpa choses the former, although sausagedom beckons if he fails.

These proceedings are interrupted by the appearance of the Baroness, standing on a balcony at the left of the stage. The locals greet her with applause (five claps) and she bows and waives like a rock-star acknowledging a stadium audience.

Just in case any of the audience missed her hitting the roof in act one, Grandpa mentions children so she can go all wiggy again. She even has difficulty saying the word 'Childcatcher'.

The Baron doesn't allow his wife to side-track him for long. He has his state-car wheeled in. At this point the female official informs the Baron that a car has been seen flying over the border. The Baron gets really excited.

Eventually the bad guys leave the stage to allow Caractacus Senior and his team of elderly assistants to get on with the job of fitting the Baron's state-car with Chitty's float/fly feature.

The Roses of Success

This leads into The Roses of Success which has always been one of my favourite songs from the film. It's even more fun watching it on the stage.

The elderly inventors are of course all played by young ensemble lads. There's been a shedload of cash spent on this production but none of it went on their unconvincing baldy heads. The fake whiskers they wear are quite realistic though. And to hammer home the idea that they have been working for the Baron long term, their lab coats are all grubby and tattered.

They're so entertaining, jumping about the stage while acting dithery, and singing so enthusiastically. They provide the perfect backing for lovely bumbling Grandpa.

I manage not to irritate the audience by singing-along.

Unfortunately by then end of the number the state-car is no nearer being a floating, flying marvel despite being festooned with rockets.

So the Baron makes an appearance to remind us all that Grandpa's life is on the line. His sinister message is somewhat undermined by his teddy-bear waiving to the inventors.



'The Roses of Success' gets a very brief reprise as the old-guys return the state-car to whatever garage it was brought from.

Various purple clad soldiers ensure that Grandpa doesn't get any ideas about sneaking away. They march him off stage as two more march on – a suspiciously fat, and a suspiciously tall soldier.

The Toy Shop/ Lovely Lonely Man

Hurrah!

It's Caractacus and Jemima and Truly and Jeremy in disguise! Jemima sits on her daddy's shoulders, covered by a ridiculously long uniform, while Truly hides Jeremy under her oversized coat.

Caractacus takes off his coat and hangs it on a peg at the side of the stage. I have absolutely no idea how Truly disposes of the other coat because – HELLO!! LEE'S BACK!

The grown-ups quarrel coz Caractacus forgot to hide Chitty. The children take this as a sign that the pair is going to get married. I get the impression the late Mrs Potts must have been frequently vexed by her eccentric husband.

Their row attracts the curiosity of the Toymaker.

Right – I need to back track a bit. At some point after 'The Roses of Success' but before Lee's entrance a peculiar little house, vaguely shaped like a teddy-bear's head, appears on the stage. This is the toyshop.

Ewen Cummins, now playing the Toymaker emerges from it. He's unusual for a Vulgarian as he's not wearing either grey or purple but red dungarees and a bowler hat.

He warns the family to get indoors quickly, and after a little hesitation (can you really ever trust a man in red dungarees?), they follow him inside.

Or rather they stay still and the Toymaker unfolds the toyshop set around them.



It's another quirky piece of design. The two wings of the set are large windows with gingham curtains. The central part is the workbench loaded up with the sort of paraphernalia you might expect given the owner's profession.

Under the bench is a large cupboard, which, like the walls surrounding, is painted as a poppy field. All manner of toys hang on the walls. When I say all manner, I really mean nutcracker dolls and teddy-bears. The Toy Maker must be a specialist.

The family learn that the Baron (being an enormous kid of the brat type) is obsessed with toys, and that children have been banned from the Barony, because the Baroness hates them so much. There's a 'Suppression of Children Act' so it's legal and everything. They also learn about the Childcatcher who regularly patrols the streets, carting any children he finds off to the castle to... actually the fate of the captured children isn't disclosed and that's kinda got nasty implications.

The Toymaker gets the kids to hide in the cupboard while Caractacus and Truly don another set of disguises, a tutu and a bonnet for her; a clown's nose and an orange woolly wig for him.

They adopt doll-like attitudes as on comes the Childcatcher. Oh he's scary. His make-up draws his slender face into gaunt, almost cadaverous, lines. Hi black robes flap about him like dust raven's wings. He moves in a series of grotesque poses, hunching his shoulders and sniffing the air.

Matt Gillett is obviously relishing the part, and the crowd obviously enjoy booing him. (I hope Lee can persuade him to take to panto – what a panto-villain he'd make!)

'There are children here. I can smell them.' He whines.

The Toymaker does his best to persuade the Childcatcher to b*gger off,

but it's only when he's summoned to the castle because the flying car has been found, that he retreats.

'My nose must have been wrong,' he declares as he smirks at the audience. What is the creep up to?

With Chitty stolen, rescuing Grandpa becomes more urgent. The Toymaker agrees to take Caractacus to the castle where Grandpa and the car are being held.

Caractacus and Truly stop arguing. She's all concerned for his safety. Caractacus and the Toymaker crawl off stage through the smallest exit I've ever seen.



As Lee's Rear of the Year disappears, Truly sings 'Lovely Lonely Man' (which could be as much about Lee as Caractacus).

Of all the songs in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang I find 'Lovely Lonely Man' the weakest. Don't get me wrong, it's not a bad song, but compared to the heart-aching-beauty of 'Hush-A-Bye Mountain', Truly's big solo is a bit bland. (Just as well she gets 'Doll on a Music Box' later.)

It's a credit to Carrie Hope Fletcher that she brings a gentle charm to this otherwise mediocre love song.

Carrie is a delightful Truly Scrumptious. She has a real chemistry with Lee – plus a sweet voice and disarming persona.

By now everyone is getting hungry. Truly goes off to find some food leaving the kids hiding in the toyshop.

Who should appear pretending to be a sweet-seller? No other than the evil Childcatcher – boo hiss!!

Oh the schemer! He'd just pretended to believe his nose wrong. He knew all the time that children were hiding in the shop. Talk about lulling people into a false sense of security!

On he comes cycling around the Toymaker's weird little shop, in his equally weird bike-cum-sweetie cart, crying out 'Lollipops!' in the sort of wheedling voice that would have any sensible child running to the nearest copper.

Do our little chums do as they were told and keep hidden in the toyshop? Nope.



The gullible pair climb into his trap on the promise of free sweets and treats. With a jubilant 'mind the step' the Childcatcher tears the candy coloured cover from the cart. Brother and sister are caged. They cry out in desperation.

Too late, Truly returns to see Caractacus's children carted off EEKK!!! Boo Boo Boo!!!

Chu-Chi Face

Another half-stage set. We're again inside the castle, and... I was having problems remembering the set-up exactly, but (thanks to my proof reading friend) I now know that's because the set changes depending on the size of the stage. It's either two beds; a huge comfy chair to the right of the stage and a bed to the left; or two comfy chairs.

The Baron is all excited coz it's his birthday. The Baroness has planned a party, the Toymaker has produced something really special, and he's got the wonderful floating, flying car.

What more could he want?

His Baroness has a very short answer to that question: Her of course.

He tries to appease her by singing 'Chu-Chi Face'.

I'm told that in the film the Baron repeatedly tries to kill the Baroness during this number. That might explain why some of the earlier review accused the performance of 'Chu-Chi Face' of being lack-lustre.

I think that's a bit unfair, though the character in most imminent danger of harm is the Baron's teddy-bear. The Baroness threatens to throw it into the orchestra pit. Mean lady.

Mind you the Baron seems to be addressing the bear rather than his wife.

Though not one of my favourite musical theatre songs, 'Chu-Chi Face' is a total ear-worm.

And it's fun. (Apparently it has a miraculous effect on rowdy small children in the audience, who stay quietly transfixed from the duration of the song. Good news for my proof-reader who was having a trying time of it!) The bit for instance when a load of pressies is brought on and the Barron is totally distracted by them, so he forgets he's supposed to be playing nice with wifey.

They get through to the end of the scene with no casualties, human or teddy-bears.

The set changes...



Teamwork (Reprise)

Underneath the castle are the sewers. It's a grim set, with its dirty walls, pipes and oozing fog. The Toymaker brings Caractacus into the underground slum.

This is where the Vulgarian children, the ones their parents have managed to save, hide from the Childcatcher. They wear dirty clothes, their faces are smeared with grime and their hair is messy (though remarkably clean) birds' nests. They are more concerned with food than playing about. Who wrote this book? Was it Dickens?

The feral kids share out the meagre scraps they've scavenged. It's a bit bleak. One little boy, Toby, doesn't get anything because the others don't like him. The Toymaker tells them off.

Things get worse.

Truly finds them and gives Caractacus the terrible news that his own children have been abducted. And just to underline the pathos a haunting music-box tune seeps into the sewers. Jemima and Jeremy are singing 'Hushabye Mountain'.

Caractacus is desperate.

He tries to recruit the outcast children to help him defeat the Baron, using some inspirational clap-trap. It doesn't work. The kids are way too frightened.

But then he uses his secret weapon: he sings.

It's a reprise of 'Teamwork' this time as a full dance number, where again Lee proves he does more than just 'move to music'.

Mind you, it starts inauspiciously enough. The children sit watching Caractacus suspiciously during the first verse. Then Toby stands and sings (somewhat dubiously) that perhaps they can give the Baron 'quite a fight'.

'Right!' cries Caractacus gratefully.

A girl stands up too, sings another positive line and gets a 'right' from Truly.

Now the song can ramp up. The kids are gaining confidence, and march about the stage in a pseudo military style.

Actually most of the choreography consists of marching, but there are a couple of times where Lee does some complicated step-work. It's almost as if he's saying " 'Me Ol' Bamboo' wasn't a fluke. I CAN do it!"

All the time Lee's voice powers over those of the other performers. 'Come on!' he shouts, more to the audience rather than the children.

The song ends on a high-note – or at least a long note, which shows off Lee's stamina and breath control, not to mention his vocal clout.

It's like the Crispin's Day speech with music. And kids. And fewer arrows.

Yes, let's storm the castle!!!

Is there a plan? Oh yes. Caractacus has one. But he isn't going to tell us what it is. That would spoil the surprise.

The Bomby Samba

Unware of their imminent over-throw, the Baron and Baroness are throwing the party.

I'm scratching my head trying to remember exactly how the scene change between sewers and castle is accomplished. I am pretty sure the screen doesn't come down...or if so it's so brief that surely there's not time to transform the set.

But transform it does, no doubt credit to the back projection, into the Baron's ballroom.

Purple-clad servants, their noses in the air, arrange cushioned chairs around the edges of the room. Two thrones are bought on – one to the left front, the other to the right.

The ensemble mill about, adjusting their party get-ups. Latin American dancing is going to be involved if the faux flamenco costumes are anything to go by. (Naturally they favour Vulgarian national colours - purple and black.)

The Baroness leads her blindfolded husband into the midst of the party. He's still carrying a teddy-bear and still trying to guess the party's theme.

It seems that his wife has banned 'doctors and nurses' after last year. What have those vulgar Vulgarians been up to?

The Baroness announces that the theme is...

Brazil!

Her man-child husband reacts as though she's just said 'Skegness'. He sits sulkily in the left-hand throne, while she tries to 'sell' her Brazilian dream. Around her the ruffle-bedecked Vulgarians nod their encouragement. She's taught them how to samba.

He asks her what a samba is.

You'll be glad he asked.

This is another chance for the ensemble to shine as they demonstrate the Bombay Sapphire - sorry, I'm thinking of gin, I mean Bomby Samba.



The first time I saw Chitty I thought The Bomby Samba too long. Plus I took issue with some of the lyrics.

‘Take the floor like a conquistador!’?

What is this? Strictly Come Cortez?

I have changed my mind since. Not surprisingly, that first time I was waiting for Lee’s reappearance and any time he’s not on stage is too long.

But although Bombay Sapph...Bomby Samba is a longish song, and it doesn’t really advance the plot, I’ve come to love it.

Perhaps you need to watch it a few times to appreciate everything that’s going on.

The Baroness is up front and centre and the first time I watched I concentrated on her solely. That was probably an error. Michelle Collins does a decent enough job. In the first verse she has a couple of nice little comedy moments as the spies distract her from her singing.

Her singing is fine, but she’s not a dancer; she’s tentative at certain points. In particular, when she is lifted up and then has to walk onto the outstretched arms of some of the dancers. She always looked exceeding nervous as she did so. It must be a very difficult move.

Now the spies ARE worth watching. They act as the Baroness’s back-up, subtly undermining her. Their comedy double act works just as well dancing with the ensemble as it does singing their first act duet.

The ensemble really are brilliant! I greatly admire their energy and their almost gymnastic dance-moves. The enthusiasm and sheer joy particularly the women put in gives me a great big grin.

But it's worth sparing some attention for the Baron. Shaun Williamson sits with 'What on earth is this nonsense?' expression on his face, while Teddy, having a life of its own, jiggles about in time to the music.

Award that bear an Olivier!

After the performance the Baroness poses awaiting her plaudits. She gets them from the theatre audience; her husband has to dissemble. He manages some insincere praise then demands his presents.

The Toymaker is summoned.

Doll on a Music Box/ Truly Scrumptious (Reprise)

It's an old joke, but it still gets a giggle. The cast await the Toymaker's arrival staring off stage to the left.

The Toymaker enters on the right and no one notices. He coughs. Everyone is taken by surprise.

More original is the next gag. The Toymaker attempts a short speech in honour of the Baron's birthday. The Baron too eager for his present to listen to speeches keeps saying 'shut up'.

To date, I have only seen Shaun Williamson in the role of Baron Bombast. Is it just him that makes this exchange so funny? I don't know. I hope his replacement has the same sense of timing.

At last the present arrives – or rather presents, contained in two large, colourful boxes.

The taller box opens... its inside is a series of mirrors and it contains a life-sized doll. Of course it's not a really doll. It's Truly in a sort of Bavarian bar-wench costume. The Baron is less than impressed with the arrival of 'another doll' and is about to go into a proper strop (I have not been able to fathom the opinion of the teddy for this one) but the Toymaker reassures him.

The Toymaker shows the Baron a giant key. He walks behind the box and we hear noises of a clockwork mechanism being wound.

Truly sings 'Doll on a Music Box'.

Carrie is simply enchanting. As she rotates upon the turntable, her sweet, pure voice perfectly captures the innocent charm of the doll.

She performs her moves just as an automaton would, brief moments of fluidity interspersed with jerks and stops. On the line 'Waiting for love's first kiss,' she blows a kiss towards the Baron who mimes snatching it from the air.

Every performance I have attended the audience remained silent and spell-bound until her last note fades.

There is just time for the spell to break and applause to start, but it's interrupted as the second box bursts open.

Out jumps Caractacus. He's a clown-doll.



Even Lee can't make an orange wig, blue and yellow pantaloons, and a red nose sexy. He can make them cute though – and he does. Even with the (what to me is) scary clown make-up.

He has a dance to do, too. It's the opposite of Truly's controlled music box routine. Lee flops and wobbles, trading grace for humour. Don't let the silly costume and the tomfoolery fool you. Lee's footwork is as tight as it was for 'Me Ol' Bamboo' and his timing still perfect.

He sags to a stop as the last note sounds.

The Baron laughs; the audience again begin their applause – but Lee jolts up-right.

He takes the music box key from the Toymaker.

It's quite clear from the reactions of both the Toymaker and Truly, that this is not part of the plan. He shuffles behind the music box (Lee adopts that strange gait that he used in Toot Sweets, and he keeps it right through the scene, which makes me wonder if his clown shoes stop him walking naturally) and again we hear the mechanism being wound-up.

Caractacus serenades Truly with (what else?) 'Truly Scrumptious'. This has got to be one of my all-time favourite musical theatre moments. Lee and Carrie between them mesmerize the audience, both with their voices and their performances.

Lee's begins still with all those silly clownish moves, but their frivolity is belied by the intensity of his voice. It's almost as if he's singing to himself at first, but then he turns to Carrie and sings directly to her.

For her part, Carrie's face is a picture of confusion. As the music-box tune starts up she seems to almost forget to move – but she jolts into life, going through her set piece as Lee sings.

His rendition of 'Truly Scrumptious' is completely different to those that have come before. No sugary sweetness here. It's all sincere, almost desperate emotion.

And when Carrie counterpoints him with 'Doll on a Music Box'. Oh my! More magic. Not through clever special effects – this time it's thanks to two extremely talented performers who manage to sell their love story while dressed up in the silliest costumes imaginable.

No wonder Baron and audience alike are quite beguiled.



The song ends: ‘Because I love you Truly’ – pause ‘Honest, Truly, I do.’ You know that both have somehow managed to declare their love.

There’s not enough time for the audience to show their appreciation. The Baron, though delighted with his gift, is thinking about his next treat and calls for his cake.

The Toymaker leads Caractacus to a seat where he flops, bonelessly.

A multi-tiered cake decorated with teddy bears is brought on. You just know from the size of the thing there’s something fishy about that cake.

The Baron isn’t suspicious though, just eager to have the first slice, sticking his tongue out at the audience as if we thought we’d get a look in.

‘Give me what I deserve!’ he cries.

‘Oh you’ll get what you deserve!’ Caractacus exclaims. As he springs up, he calls on the children, and his little rebels arrive to cause havoc.

Caractacus leads the... oh wait, no he doesn’t. Lee needs to get to the side of the stage to take the clown make-up off.

Never mind. The kids are doing well, until the Childcatcher descends onto the stage.

With no interference from any of the grown-ups, the Childcatcher captures one blonde waif and throws her into a cage - which is built into the cake. I really wasn’t expecting the cake to double as a prison.

He goes after his next victim but Caractacus...no Caractacus is still dealing with that make-up.

But it's all OK!

The cavalry arrives in the form of Chitty herself piloted (she's flying) by Grandpa.

With a flash of her headlights the bad guys are confounded and wrapped up in ropes. Caractacus, now devoid of make-up makes it back into the action in time to marvel at his miraculous car.

It seems she broke into Grandpa's cell and rescued him – and Jemima and Jeremy.

Aww! The Potts family are reunited. The relief, the love, Lee projects as he cuddles his on-stage offspring is so uplifting.

Meanwhile the Childcatcher gets hoisted up on a rope.

Congratulations all round.

Lee sings another snatch of 'Teamwork' as around him various Vulgarian courtiers claim their children.

There's one nice moment where one of the women frantically searches the stage before her daughter runs into her arms. (Mind you, as my proof reader points out, she probably has difficulty recognising the poor kid, seeing as the actor keeps changing.)

Time for some changes in Vulgaria, the Toymaker leads the coup by ripping up 'The Suppression of Children Act'.

The spies quickly turn their purple coats (not literally. They're still in samba gear) by declaring that they never liked the Childcatcher. Boris adds that he never liked the Baron, but Goran disagrees. The Baron was a good kisser.

So what do we do with the Baron and Baroness? They don't get made into sausages. The Toymaker banishes them. In a touching moment the Baron declares that he needs neither his toys nor his kingdom (you're a Baron; it's a Barony not a kingdom!) only his Baroness. Touching. At least until the Baroness attempts to remind him of a night involving ice-cream and pickled onions (don't think too much about this. You might need Domestos for the brain) which he doesn't remember at all.

The good guys have won! Hurrah! The Potts family are keen to get back home but Chitty can only carry four of them. The spies have the solution. They will bring Grandpa home in the Vulgarian Air Balloon. This new adventure pleases Grandpa and he calls the spies 'gentlemen'. They are delighted. Then Grandpa proves to be an even better kisser than the Baron.

Chuckles and applause.

They're all ready to go. Caractacus calls out to Truly. She comes forward.

Again Lee gives another masterclass in non-verbal acting. He's unsure; he's gathering his courage; he doesn't know what to say – so he just does down on one knee.

'Truly, will you...?'

'Yes, Caractacus, yes.'

The children were right! They do like each other!

There's nothing uncertain about this kiss; there's nothing stagey about it either. Lee gives Carrie a full-on... I'm going to use the word 'snog'. It conveys the passion but the romance. There's nothing seedy about it.

And it's long! Oh my, it's long. Methinks they like each other a lot.

They part eventually without anyone having to throw a bucket of water over them, and with smiles and waves and general cheering, Truly climbs aboard with Caractacus and his children.

Finale

What song should we sing? Of course it's going to be 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' again.

Lee leads the company in the chorus as Chitty gently lifts into the air. Everyone still onstage moves to the front.

It's almost a relief when the slatted screen descends again obscuring Lee, so you can look back at the spies and the other characters who really deserve more attention than they've been getting.

Time to show some appreciation for what really is an outstanding show.

On come the kiddies' chorus team, then the adult ensemble.

Then Ewen the Toymaker always gets greeted with gusto; Matt G the Childcatcher gets booed (that's OK though – he LIKES it. I checked with him).

Sam Harrison and Scott Paige get cheers and whoops. Very deservedly – the spies have been wonderful entertainment all the way through.

The cheering for the Baron and Baroness is usually a bit more restrained. Only just though. After all Shaun Williamson and Michelle Collins have done great work.

Andy as Grandpa also gets an enthusiastic welcome.

But the wildest, most rapturous cheering is reserved for the rest of the Potts family. It starts as soon as they appear at the back of the stage, and gets louder as they stroll forward.

Jemima and Jeremy take their bows. You can almost sense the audience winding themselves up...Lee gestures towards Carrie...she bows... and the audience erupt into fervent cheering. It can't possibly get louder! Can it?



It can!

Carrie indicates Lee and the noise increases. Oh the adulation!

The orchestra strike up – one more time – ‘Oh you Chitty Chitty Bang Bang...’ all the audience sings along in euphoria.

And as the last note ends...

If there are Lee fans close to the front they spring up. I assume the same can be said of Carrie fans. The crowd only need a little encouragement to stand.

The orchestra gets their own moment in the spotlight, then the cast slowly withdraw.

The last to leave the stage is Lee himself waltzing off stage with Jemima, as the lights come up –

The house lights go up. Look around at the smiley, happy people.

This isn't just the most marvellous Lee experience in years; it's one of the best musical theatre experiences possible.

The buzz in the theatre! The laughter! The Joy! Thank you to the entire cast and crew for making this happen. And especially thank you to Mr Mead – our perfect Caractacus.

And we can finally breathe!