

23 March 2018 The Lowry, Salford Quays

by Jane W

I have a promise to keep.

This is a special report; it's especially for Annie.

When I saw Annie's post saying that she couldn't attend the show and offering her meet and greet ticket, I was gutted for her. She missed out on the Pheasantry last year, so to miss out on the Lowry...sometimes Luck is not a bloomin' Lady at all.

Annie, however, very much is. A lady I mean. In our exchange of messages where I arranged to take her ticket for a friend of mine, she really couldn't have done more to make sure that ticket would get to me. (It was nice being able to chat with you over messenger, lass. I hope we'll be able to talk face to face again before too long.)

There couldn't have been anyone more appreciative of that ticket than my school-chum and oldest friend, Donna. She needed a lift after a rather crappy year – and not having seen her since...crikey, well over a year, I was delighted to have a chance to meet up again.

We arranged to meet at the theatre at 4pm. That would give us plenty of time to collect the ticket from the box office.

My buddies would be converging on Salford Quays that afternoon. So plan A:

Catch train to Manchester – catch tram to Media City – meet Donna at the Lowry – collect ticket – meet the gang. Dinner would be a chancy affair. We'd try to grab something between the Meet and Greet and the show. Having eaten just before a show at the Lowry before though, I wasn't convinced we'd get served in time (it gets BUSY!), so I ate a big lunch and packed up emergency supplies of chocolate bars and oatly biscuits for us all.

Right. I am as sorted as I can be.

I finished work early and off I trotted.

Some of you might remember I'm buying a house. (What do you mean I keep going on about it?) Well while I was waiting for my train I checked my emails in case my solicitor had been in touch – AARRRGHHHH!!! I'm not going to bore you with the details, and it wasn't as though it was disastrous news – but there

were a couple of problems which needed sorting out, and trying to do so before my solicitor left for the weekend, while on a train, on a line with lots of tunnels...

Shall I just say I was a bit STRESSED by the time I reached Manchester?

Thank goodness for my lovely mate. She was also coming by train. The dear lass waited for me, gave me a big hug, listened to my ranting, then kept me company on the tram as I – grad-u-all-y star-ted – to – calm – down.

She persuaded me to take a slight detour via the hotel where we could meet up with the others and dump our bags.

Donna was running late; the meet and greet had been put back...OK Jane, come on now, relax.

A slight hic-up at the box office, rectified by the nice lady on duty: I had Annie's ticket.

And there was Donna! Perfect!

After checking with the staff that the meet and greet would indeed be 6pm rather than 5.30pm we abandoned plan A in favour of eating immediately – something quick but filling.

Ah ha! Pizza Express. For some reason four of us knew the menu by heart and had already decided on our main course (we agreed mains only – eat quickly, get back to the theatre) before we reached out seats. Donna needed to actually look at the menu (I know – weird!) but the place was all but empty, the service speedy and we were back at the Lowry with half an hour in hand.

The Northern Ladies had already checked out where the M&G was to be held. They gave us directions.

The only thing left to worry about was...no, hold on - NOTHING. I could look forward to a few hours of pure escapism.

RELAX!

We followed the Northern Ladies' directions and found ourselves in a long, sweeping, space overlooking Salford Quays. A series of tables had been set-up in front of the window, I don't think any were occupied; we were the first.

The Northern Ladies were close on our heels. They had something of a seat choosing dilemma. Unlike our little gang, they hadn't managed to grab anything

to eat before the M&G and so needed a quick getaway as soon as their time with Lee ended.

With no need to hurry away, the five of us chose a table right in the middle, next to the merch stand, and conveniently opposite the bar. Initially the Northern Ladies selected the table next to us, but a helpful member of staff explained that Lee would come up from the stairs at the far end of the bar area. Sensibly, they scurried off to a table close to that door.

One of the gang got a round in as the rest of us arranged the seats (nicking a chair from a neighbouring table). I found myself with the best view, looking over the water towards Media City and the Coronation Street building (at least I assume it was; it had a big sign saying ‘Coronation Street’ on it).

It was all very civilised. The others chatted to Steve Mead as he set out the stall, while Donna updated me about, well, life. Then she drew out the birthday card I had sent her. I’d made it myself, from a copy of a certain promotional shot from Joseph. You might be familiar with it – it’s the one of Lee behind bars. Yes THAT shot! I don’t need to describe it do I? No – you’ve all gone to that happy visual place I’m sure.

“My plan,” she said, laying the card flat on the table, “is to get Lee to sign the back. Then I can put it in a frame.”

I wish I’d thought of that! Mind you I’d never be brave enough to present Lee with homemade birthday card for signing. Not one showing that pic, anyway. Donna has never been easily embarrassed though (unlike me).

“You’ll want a gold or silver pen,” I said. I wrote the card in the first place so I knew a normal black pen wouldn’t show up against the bottle-green background. One of my friends came to the rescue with a selection of coloured Sharpies. We decided gold would be perfect.

By now we had a new neighbour at the table next to us – a nice young lass who asked if one of us would take a photo of her with Lee when the time came.

“Ooo, if we can make reciprocal arrangements!” I said. Which just goes to show that:

- a. my head still defaults to work mode (I’m writing some training material about the right to work in the UK when...OK, OK boring I know. I’ll shut up), and;
- b. despite all my diatribes about plain English, I really don’t practise what I preach.

“Would you take a picture for us?” my friend translated.

With all this sorted we settled down for some serious chin-wagging.

“Here we go...”.

I turned around. Lee was emerging from the stairwell next to the bar, looking smart, relaxed, business-like and very handsome all at once. He headed to the first table – the opposite end from where the Northern ladies had positioned themselves. Oh dear!

He didn’t rush. He spent several minutes sitting with each group. As I said civilised.

At last Lee sat himself down with the lass at the table next to us. We five continued to chat until our neighbour gave us the signal. My friends took pictures for her (I gather from our brief conversation afterwards that they were lovely.)

Our turn.

Lee drew up a chair next to me (Well, I had made sure there was space available – I’m sneaky) and settled in with a contented sigh.

“Look at that view!”

Later it dawned on me that he must have admired that view several times already by the time he came to us. You wouldn’t have thought it. It sounded like he had only just seen it. That guy understands how to make people comfy.

He asked about our journeys. Ironically Donna, who lives closest, had the most fraught (well as she was travelling during Friday rush hour). Remarkably Lee remembered stopping off once in her hometown for a coffee.

We asked about a tweet he’d made that afternoon – a picture of several women wearing Lee masks. Lee told us all about the incident: They turned out to be a hen party. How I wish I could have gone to a Lee gig for my hen party! (I don’t think I’d have the courage to wear a mask though.

“Would they wear the masks in the theatre?” one of the gang wonder. Now that would be a bit distracting!

From somewhere Lee drew forth a stack of 10 Year anniversary pictures.

“Right,” he said “What’s your name?” He was sort of talking to the whole table, but as everyone was being too polite to go first I jumped in.

“Jane,” I said.

“Jane.” He didn’t ask how to spell it. To Jane (no Y – phew!) Best wishes Lee Mead. “There you go, personalised.”

I think I actually said “Squeal!”

Donna next, then round the table.

The conversation carried on as he wrote: his stay in Manchester, how much he likes the city... I said that I think northerners are very friendly and he agreed. We also talked about the Lincoln concert, and how well he managed in the circumstances. Lee told us that as the Q&A went down so well there he intends to do more. A good idea I thought. With three shows in the weekend he needed to protect his voice and a Q&A gives him an ideal opportunity to rest, while still entertaining the crowd.

Once he finished signing the official cards, Donna piped up.

“Could you sign this for me?” She explained her plan to have the card framed, and passed it over.

Lee laughed when he saw the photograph and said something about bringing back memories. Then Donna said:

“It’s my birthday card from Jane.”

I’d like to tell you what his expression was at this point, but I had my head in my hands.

“Donna’s a HHUUUUGGEEEE Joseph fan,” I said (hoping he got the subtext ‘I don’t give all my friends cards with that photo on them’), “How many times have you seen it, Donna?”

Donna told him. He didn’t look surprised.

We’d come to the end of our time, but before he left us, we had those reciprocal arrangements to call in. I have posted the happy picture on Facebook.

Hard not to love that guy.

So, eventually the meet and greets finished, the Northern Ladies headed off for food and the bar opened to the public.

Julie pretty much bounced into the bar, mum in tow. She took the seat not long since occupied by the ROTY, and joined the happy squeal-ful bunch of fans around the table.

We now had a little over an hour left till show time. It passed quickly enough.

Before long headed into the theatre to find our seats. Julie and mum in row C; Donna in what would have been Annie's seat to the left of row A; and the rest of us front row centre. Normally people moan when there's a lack of leg room, but when the stage is low and the Meadster's mike stand is almost in touching distance, no moans from me.

Behind us the stalls filled up nicely.

8pm: time to begin.

Adam first, as the lights dimmed, then with no fanfare or fuss, the star of the show. The whole theatre hushed.

From his opening lines Lee captivated his audience, and as he purred his way Pure Imagination, I could sense the intense attention focused on that young man on stage.

The audience thundered their applause as he finished. Way to go Lee! The Lowry is with you.

Lee took his bow.

"It's great to be back in Manchester," He said as he introduced himself.

"Salford!" some of us in the front row shouted. To be honest I don't think Salfordians are particularly prickly about their city being mistaken for its rather more well-known neighbour but it's as well to be precise. (Please, please don't mix up Lytham St Annes with Blackpool though, Lee.)

"Back in Salford." He corrected himself. "I've always liked Manches-Salford." He kept this up though most of the links in the first half.

Chances are there were as many Mancunians, Rochdaliens, and residents of Bury, Oldham (Home of the Tubular Bandage, don't you know) and surrounding towns as actual Salfordians. But whatever the audience mix they lapped up his pretended faux-pas, with bursts of increasing laughter.

On to his time in Wicked, and 'Dancing Thru Life' (which contained more dancing through-out the song, not just at the end) and introductions for Tommy, Ian, Ricky and John.

'All of Me' followed (no issues with the high notes this time, he was perfect), 'Without You'...

Then he told the story about singing for Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice which usually leads into 'Anthem'. I did wonder whether he was mixing around the set list. No. It's time for 'Paint it Black'.

Ah 'Paint it Blac'k, reinstated on Lee's set list where it belongs. For a few years after Lee won the role of Joseph, 'Paint it Black' was probably song most associated with him (well if you don't count the songs from the show itself). I still revisit Lee's first performance of it on Any Dream Will Do, thanks to YouTube. For ages I had a recording of it on my shuffle – along with his official recording which featured on his first album. That album version I always thought lacked something compared with his ADWD performance. I'm not sure what. Power, aggression?

Well whatever was missing is back now. In abundance. Other than the choreography (well we can't expect Lee to drop to his knees in his nice new suit) this interpretation is so similar to the one he gave on ADWD. It's a rant at fate. A soul who'd bring the world to an end if he could – lost, and angry, but also frightened and pleading too.

I had wanted Lee to put 'Gethsemane' on his set list. Amazingly Lee's new version of 'Paint it Black' makes it redundant.

And in true Lee fashion, as soon as he finished, he broke the mood completely by doing his Mick Jagger impression. Oh and just to show me he doesn't mind messing up his new suit afterall, he dropped to his knees right in front of the centre seats. Ummm nice – moving on...

To Amanda. Ah what a lovely lass – and looking very glamorous with her hair straightened and, I have to say, a rather daring frock (not one I'd be brave enough to wear!)

Her first song came from the Disney Film, Anaesthesia. I remember those first concerts with Lee, where a rather nervy, but adorable, Amanda shyly performed for Lee's audience. What a difference now! A confident, but still adorable, Amanda took over that stage and performed like a real pro.

I know Lee's fans loved it. From reviews I've seen on twitter, so did the locals.

When she'd finished Lee slinked on and to my great delight they duetted on 'As Long as You're Mine'. Mind you, this wasn't a passionate or even sweetly romantic duet. Not with the Meadster pulling faces at his co-star in an attempt to make her laugh. Just like a brother taunting his little sis. Oh yes, I should know.

Their affectionate hug afterwards was just like two loving sibs as well. Awww!! I do hope that Robyn finds her way onto Kellar Ward. 😊

I know I'm not going to get the order right; I won't even try. 'Leave Right Now', 'Let her Down Easy', and a simply sublime rendition of 'Why God Why' (back on the set list now that Lee was on full vocal form again) occurred in the first half. No 'Maria' though, probably because we'd had 'As Long as You're Mine'. I didn't mind the swap.

And no 'When I Need You the Most' either come to think of it. It's a pretty song but I do keep forgetting about it and to be honest I didn't miss it till we were talking about the show afterwards.

Lee also had one – only one – comedy water break, aka his Strictly audition. Amanda's presence probably negated the need for more, which is a good thing of course...but I do love those water brakes, they're such silly fun.

Other than the differences I've mentioned part one...OK there were a lot of difference to the earlier shows, but part one finished as always – with 'Close Every Door'.

Ah – are any of us that saw Lee as Joseph not transported back to the Adelphi when he sings this? I certainly am. I think perhaps Lee is too. Leastways he delivers it as though it's the one big solo he had to nail. Not surprising that several of us jumped to our feet as the last note rang around the theatre.

I had another friend to find at interval, one of the Stage Loppies, there on her own alas as her sister wasn't able to come. We managed no more than a quick chat unfortunately, which is par for the course at a Lee gig. Still, I wish we'd had time for more.

With Lee's voice back on form 'Feeling Good' was restored as the opening of act 2, where it should be. And what a great opening it is.

But then a change.

As Lee promised us, he announced a Q&A to follow. I'm liking these – they give such an opportunity for surprises.

First, and to give us all some time to think of those questions, 'Hushabye Mountain'.

I couldn't have been sat in a better seat for appreciating Lee's performance. With his stool immediately in front of me, his head lifted, I merely needed to gaze upwards and be spellbound. Just as he immersed himself in 'Close Every Door',

he immersed himself in this most beautiful of lullabies. He became again the young widower, crooning to his children, his expression speaking of loss and grief, but also of hope. Heart-breaking.

The stage lights, a soft ethereal green, fell over his curls casting a filigree of delicate shadows over his face. I was entranced. I'm not sure I even breathed during his last verse. Only when that long, sweet final note faded did I draw a huge breath. To cheer. What else could it be for?

A change of mood – time for questions.

The people of Salford had loads.

This time we didn't get anything as outré as "Why is Southend Pier so long", but there were a few that the Lincolmites had asked a fortnight before:

"How do you deal with your nerves?" (Basically, just get on the stage and be yourself.)

"Who would you like to duet with?" (He talked for some time about Subo at Glamis).

"What inspired you to go into the entertainment business?" (being cast as Danny in the school production of Grease.)

"Would you go into 'I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here!'?" (He loves the show but No! He's been approached about it, but does not want to eat crocodile testicles thank you very much.)

"What musical role would he really like to do?" (Something brand new.)

Along with a couple of questions that the Lincolmites missed "What's your favourite song?" (I think he managed to duck that one.)

My personal favourite, being the most random: "Michael Ball or Alfie Boe?" (Michael Ball.)

The session went on a bit longer than Lee expected. He kept trying to end it, "Shall I do another song?" Nope - there's another question for you.

Including one from the hen party – who did indeed put on their Lee masks. 😊 (I can't do the crying with laughter emoji. Just imagine it.)

Eventually he was allowed to get back to the set list. Just as well. We'd not have wanted to miss 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables' or 'Bring Him Home'.

As it was he had to drop 'Everything'; a pity as I really enjoy that number. But with Amanda performing again, the second half was chocabloc full.

I was chuffed with Amanda's second choice of song.

"It's from the series Smash," she said "Do you know it?"

"Ooo yes!" I called – ah I seemed to be the only one. I don't think I know anyone else who's watched it (if you have please let me know – I'd love to have a chat about Jack Davenport).

'Don't Forget Me' is the climax of the show within the show, and I so enjoyed Amanda's take on it. As did my mate next to me. Well she just enjoyed it not being 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'.

On to Lee's final numbers.

'Anthem', not cut despite its link being used for 'Paint it Black', and the stunning sweet and plaintive 'Blackbird'.

Sigh!

"One more?" Asked Lee.

"Yes! More! More!"

"OK but you'll have to sing along – 'I closed my eyes...'"

Errr Lee have you forgotten something? Aren't you supposed to be wearing your coat for this?

If he had forgotten he covered it perfectly, nipping to the wings where his dresser (Amanda I believe) helped him into the iconic costume.

Twirly, twirly.

"Hurray! Hurray!" The 'kids' choir' redoubled their efforts. I think it was the loudest I've heard us sing. Well Donna was there of course ☺.

No fading out at all this time. Lee ended 'Any Dream Will Do' with the big finish, bringing the whole of the stalls to their feet.

That's how to end a show.

Checking our watches afterward we realised we had half an hour before last orders at the bar. Should we stay for the signing? Let's check the queue...

OMG! The longest yet! I honestly couldn't see the end of it. We'd had our chat with Lee already – Julie, Donna, and Suex had to get off – we made the call. We

said our goodbyes (to those we could find) and for once we abandoned Lee for a bottle of white and a nice, comfy chat about the evening.

I would like to point out to my friends in the pub that I didn't get drunk. No no. Not me.

I got roaring-crocodilopig.

Oops! Well – perhaps I ought not to mix white wine with Mead ☺.

Thank you to everyone for another fabulous evening – thanks to my friends for your wonderful company – thanks for the lift home; thanks to the lovely staff at the Lowry; to Amanda; to Lee's brilliant band; and of course thanks as always to the fabulous Mr Mead.

And thank you Annie. I am so sorry you couldn't make it, but with your ticket you made Donna's day. Possibly even her year.

Hope we'll see you before too long xxx.