

Chitty at Newcastle Royal Theatre

a Review by Lin

2-3 June, 2016

Who knew two years ago when my sister and I began to plan a trip to Scotland that Lee Mead would announce he would be starring as Caractacus Potts in a UK tour of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang – and that they would be in Newcastle Upon Tyne just as we were concluding our amazing holiday! One and a half hours by train from Edinburgh – must be a sign, right?

Well, who needed a sign! Purchase tickets and figure out the details later, that's my modus operandi. :D

So that's how 2nd June found me on a train from Edinburgh to Newcastle. (And you Brits know how to do trains, thank you very much!)

I arrived in lovely Newcastle – at least I think it is lovely. I really only saw the two blocks between my hotel and the Theatre Royal, but that two blocks was gorgeous!

Fortunately, the hotel staff were kind enough to allow me to check in early so I could “freshen up” before the Thursday matinee. And after traipsing around Scotland for the past two weeks, I needed all the freshening I could get, believe me!

I walked to the theatre, found the stage door and waited there for a bit before realizing a) Lee arrives very early while on tour and b) I was too late to have any hope of him coming out to run for a coffee. However, I did meet Carrie Fletcher and Shaun Williamson, both of whom were very gracious. Never mind. A quick “heads up” message from a fellow American fan alerted me to the fact I may be able to catch Lee in between the matinee and evening shows so I would try later.

So, inside to the Box Office to pick up tickets for the three shows, and into my seat – front row for this one! It was row “C”, but that was front row, which I did not realize when I purchased it. Another good sign . . . I was on a roll!

After an interminable (to me) warm up from the orchestra, finally the show began and immediately, there he was – Caractacus Potts, plaid trousers, rolled-up shirt sleeves, and greasy face, looking joyful and mischievous and . . . well, HOT!

(Dick Van Dyke was never hot, just saying.)

What a pleasure it was to see Lee on stage again! And in this role, he truly is able to shine. He just seems so relaxed and comfortable and completely in character. It's been commented on by many others that his scenes with the children are tender and so natural. His voice was sublime, in turn soaring and powerful and soft and gentle. Hushabye Mountain is definitely a highlight, but I love the ensemble numbers like "You Two" and "Teamwork". The way Lee partners with his fellow actors has always been something I particularly enjoy.

And his dancing! We have all heard him lament that he "doesn't dance" – well, he does now! There is a lot of choreography and it is not easy to make it look natural and effortless, but Lee and all the cast are definitely successful in that regard.

And "Me Ole Bamboo" – oh, wow, wow, WOW!!! I was breathless, just watching. And I love how Lee plays up being out of breath (probably truth) and trying to keep up (also probably truth). But he really is a fantastic dancer!

I'm not sure if it was a partially limited view from my seat (the "fog" definitely obscured the beach scene a bit), but Chitty did not seem to fly particularly well till the final rescue scene. I say that because she (is Chitty a "she"??) definitely did soar higher in the evening performance.

But my front row, slightly left seat was perfect for enjoying Mr. Caractacus Potts and the perfect fit of his plaid trousers. (*ahem*)

Too soon, the very happy ending came and I headed for the stage door to see if Lee would show.

Now, I was completely on my own for this trip to Newcastle. My sister had left directly from Edinburgh for home, deciding to forego Chitty. (If it had been a concert, she probably would have come.) It is very strange to be on your own when you are not used to it. Pleasant in a way, but strange.

However, as I was waiting with a nice but not over-large group at the stage door, who should I see but four of Lee's Northern girls walking toward me – what a fun surprise! They had to come even farther North to see Lee in Newcastle, but here they were and it was lovely catching up a bit while we waited for Lee to appear.

And “appear” he did – to a chorus of “Leeeeeeeee” squees from some younger female fans right outside the stage door. ☺ As usual, he took his time to speak to each one, signing and having photos with anyone who wanted one. Eventually he worked his way down to us “regulars” and we did the same . . . minus the “Leeeeeeeee” squee. (Well, I was “squeeing” on the inside, for sure.)

After a bit of dinner, it was back to the theatre for the evening performance. Sadly, the Northern Girls had to return home so I really was on my own for this one.

My seat this time was row F so I had a much better view of the overall, and still was close enough to keep my eyes on Mr. Potts.

The evening audience seemed much more involved with this performance and it was reflected onstage – even Chitty properly flew this time!

I love how the audience clap in time to the Chitty song and during the curtain call. And the look on Lee’s face when he gets the loudest cheers of all is just precious!

The entire production is so well done. I can’t even imagine the amount of technical work and logistics needed to move this show from one venue to the next. I mean, each stage is different in each city. It seemed that this one in Newcastle was quite large, and yet the funfair scene had obviously been adjusted somewhat.

I peeked up the block to the stage door as I was leaving and saw that there were quite a number of people waiting – another indication of how well the show was received.

After a lovely night/morning rest, I was once again ready for Chitty. I went a bit early this time and was in time to speak to Lee for a few minutes as he was arriving, which was lovely. The day before, I had been so exhausted I was barely able to request a photo. At least this time, I was a bit more coherent. ☺

This was my final Chitty. I have to say, I was anxious for Lee to be onstage and found myself impatient with the “Chu-Chi Face/Bombie Samba” bits at this point. But the two Vulgarians, Goran and Boris, (aka Gordon and Doris) were hilarious.

I absolutely adored Chitty – much more than I thought I would. Seeing Lee as the major character and onstage the majority of the time was just heavenly! I do hope

he will continue to do Musical Theatre from time to time. I know it must be exhausting for him, but he is just so darn good at it.

And now I know, no matter what the character, Lee will make him HOT!!!