

2018 March 10 – Lincoln

by Jane W

Thank you to my very good friend! Thank you for offering to take me to take me to Lincoln in your car. And thank you for sticking to your offer to take me, even when you realised that you had a slight diversion to pick me up. An hour and a half diversion! You are a star.

So, instead of sitting at home watching TV on Saturday, I was in a car with two other like-minded Lee fans heading to Lincoln. Road trip!!!

I've said it before. Lee fans are like rock stars. We go to a new place, see the hotel, a restaurant and the venue and that's it. This time we arrived with a little time to have a wander around before we hooked up with our other pal – so we checked into the hotel, put our cases in the room, got changed, had a brew, wandered down to the bar...no of course we didn't look around the city! We were having way too much fun chatting!

Our friend joined us, after a trying train journey (don't mention Sleaford) and off we went to our chosen restaurant.

It turned out that the Northern Ladies had chosen the same restaurant for a birthday celebration and we were given a table very close to them. On another table a little further away sat some more fans.

Dinner, a glass of fizz (raised to the birthday girl), more happy chatter. I couldn't think of a better way to spend my time. Oh wait. Yes I can. It involves Mead.

The evening was mild and pleasant, and I swished along to the theatre in my favourite and most impractical coat (a floor length, purple velvet creation). I felt pretty damn good.

Into the theatre, and my coat quickly became unnecessary in the warmth of the foyer. I bought a bottle of water, and bundled said coat over my arm as I headed to the auditorium.

Having booked somewhat later than the others, I wasn't sat with them. Three seats separated us. Three front row seats... what's the likelihood I'd know my neighbours? High! And I could even guess who they might be.

Full marks to me. I saw the ladies I'd expected making their way towards me. Yes indeed, I'd have the company of friends at least on one side – and with three Northern ladies behind me, I considered myself much in the zone.

One of their gang, alas, wasn't able to come. I moved up into what should have been her place, arranged my velvet coat under my chair with my hand bag, and put water bottle in front of me ready on standby. I reckoned I would need it. The Northern ladies behind me called for one of their party to take the seat I'd just vacated. I didn't know this lady but it was lovely to meet her. We introduced ourselves quickly as the auditorium darkened.

Show time.

Adam first, taking the stage to polite applause augmented by cheers from the dozen or so fans in the first two rows, followed by the man himself to a much louder reception.

"Come with me, and we'll be..." I looked forward to two hours of bliss.

'Pure Imagination' finished. Whoops and cheers! A great way to open.

Lee went into his first little speech, mentioning his previous Lincoln gig, the Christmas concert at the cathedral.

"It was so cold!" He giggled. I shivered remembering that frosty evening.

"But it's hot in here tonight, under these lights." He continued. He reached for his water, and discarded his jacket – causing some very appreciative noises from the stalls.

'Dancing Through Life' (as always accompanied by some Fyero moves) and after introducing his excellent band, on to his next number.

Since over-indulging myself in Lee's wonderful 10 Year CD one song in particular has burrowed into my mind's-ear and made itself a little home there: 'All of Me'. I've not been attempting to evict it. A favourite since I first heard Lee's rendition, (I didn't hear John Legend singing it till many months later), it's been among my highlights at every concert. I can't tell you how glad I am that Lee has now recorded it – but watching Lee perform it live – oh my heart! He's so tender, so still, sending that sweet melody into the air, while those beautiful eyes sweep the auditorium.

That evening a little rasp crept into his lower register, giving the song a slightly rougher, sexier tone than normal. Around him a cloud of stage smoke flowed, and billowed. I gazed up, transfixed by his shadow cast upon the insubstantial fog.

He took his breath for the first chorus, opened his mouth and – nothing. No note.

As the tune dropped for the next syllable his voice returned. He finished the song with a moment of stillness, a silhouette against the misty backdrop. A really, really, beautiful image – but something was wrong.

On to ‘Maria’. My mind went back to the Pheasantry: “There’s this big note in Maria...I’m not a top tenor...”

Would he manage it? He’s been hitting it perfectly up to now, but if his voice let him down for ‘All of Me’...

Kudos to Lee for not wimping out. That rasp was more evident now but he carried on. I could feel everyone surrounding me all willing him on. Slowly the song ramped up then “Maria, Maria, Mar-eee-aaa, Maaaa-reee-aaaa!”

He’d done it! Not with his usual confidence or sustain, but he hit the note squarely and held it for a while. Phew!!!!

He drank more water, did his little water-break routine, chatted, told his stories and made his jokes – just as always, wooing his audience as he did so.

Lee’s more gravelly voice suited ‘With or Without You’.

It suited ‘Paint It Black’ too. His Mick Jagger strutting and pouting causing the theatre to crack-up with laughter before and after the serious business of singing.

I admired Lee so much. I mean I always admire Lee, but that evening more than ever. He ploughed on though that first half – a true professional, not allowing his vocal difficulties to stop him going for it every time, only missing out the most taxing of his first half songs, ‘Why God Why’. Those of us who have seen Lee live numerous times and know what he’s capable of could tell he wasn’t at his best. But did the locals know it?

I doubted it.

‘Close Every Door’: The big finale for the first half and one that has garnered him standing ovations for the last two concerts. He put everything he had into it. Though by now his lower register was quite hoarse, he powered his way through the song, managing a decent crescendo to finish – poorly Lee still being a damn sight stronger than many fully fit Josephs I have heard.

With his last note the applause swelled. The people of Lincoln showed their appreciation, and while there wasn’t a standing ovation this time, the enthusiasm of their cheers demonstrated their satisfaction.

Well done, Mr Mead.

Interval.

Time for the fans to huddle together, as always, discussing part one. Time, I hoped, for Lee to rest up a little – suck on some throat sweets so, fingers crossed, he might be able to continue the concert.

It came time to take our seats again, but before the band returned a stage-hand appeared with – a tea tray. OK. This will be interesting.

Lee walked on. I was pleased to hear cheers from all over the theatre.

He smiled wryly.

And he apologised.

He had a cold. A terrible thing for a singer. He'd been fine during the sound check but now had to admit he was losing his voice.

“I could have just got in the car and gone home,” he said. “I could have sent the house manager on to say sorry...but that's not me. So I'm going to do something a bit different.”

Lee then explained that he's in discussions to do some Q&A sessions in small venues next year, so he was going to turn the second half of the show into a trial run.

He promised to sing a few songs, but in between he'd be asking for questions from the audience. Time to think of some questions while he sang 'Hushabye Mountain'.

The atmosphere around me subtly changed, or so I thought. I could have been imagining it, but it seemed to me with Lee candidly admitting he wasn't well, everyone – audience, band, and Lee himself completely relaxed.

Consequently, his breathy 'Hushabye Mountain' was as lovely as ever, and the applause that followed extra appreciative and supportive.

“So questions then?” and sipping his tea, while one of the front of house-staff wander among us with a radio mike, Lee awaited his first enquiry.

I longed to ask...well I'm not going to say. Put it this way, I couldn't think of a way of phrasing my question correctly. I hoped the other fans could think of something sensible to ask.

The first question came from well outside 'the DNA zone.' I can't quite remember the order all the questions came, but I think the first was about dealing with on stage nerves.

Lee gave this a good deal of consideration. He probably doesn't know how he deals with the nerves exactly, but he tried to give as full an answer as possible.

Another audience member wanted to know lots of things about working on Holby including: "Is Dom a good kisser?" This caused some laughter. And Lee giggled and explained that as he himself is straight he's not qualified to answer. On to the next question.

It seemed the locals could think of plenty.

Then I heard a man's unamplified voice. The lady with the mike reached him.

"Sorry," he said "my wife says I'm not allowed to ask my question."

"Go on ask!" came the cry from the stalls.

"OK," said the man. "Why is Southend Pier so long?"

"Sorry?"

"Southend Pier. It's really long. Why is that?"

Loads and loads of laughter. This gave Lee a chance to show off some detailed knowledge of Southend Pier factoids and share a few reminiscences of his childhood visits there. Alas though, he doesn't know why it's so long.

I'd been expecting Lee to stick to the gentler numbers in his repertoire and he did. I didn't expect he'd include 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables'. I seem to recall from a fortnight ago there was quite a big build in that song; in this instance he kept it very low key. If anything his husky, cracking voice just intensified Marius's sorrow, bringing added poignancy its heart-breaking lyrics. And behind him the smoke billowed like phantoms at those empty tables listening. Oh it was something magical!

Time for more questions, among them one from a lass who suffers from anxiety but who wants to perform. It was delightful to hear Lee's sensible and thoughtful advice. Very tenderly Lee told her not to listen to anyone trying to put her down. "Do what you love and you will succeed."

It was such an endearing exchange that the audience applauded both of them I do hope that lass finds the strength to follow her dream.

I think his next song was 'Everything'. Again nothing too challenging, it didn't strain those vocal chords, and sounded – well a little croaky but fine. Lee made a joke of it saying he sounded like – aarrgh!! Someone from Eastenders. I don't watch Eastenders and can't remember who. In any case Lee did an impression

which had the audience in stitches. I have no idea how accurate it was...but I bet Lee could do a blooming good Ray Winston!

Another chance to rest, chat and sip tea, and of course more questions.

This section included a question about people Lee would like to duet with.

This got Lee thinking, and as he was thinking about who he'd like to perform with, he started talking about women he has already duetted with. I suspect most of the audience weren't familiar with the names of his MT friends. Then he mentioned Susan Boyle. He talked about her in warm terms. Called her a "lovely lady" and pointed out that she too is very nervous.

"I sang with her at..." he frowned in an effort to remember, and looked to the front rows.

"Glamis!" we shouted.

"Palms?"

"GLAMIS!!"

He still managed to mishear – though come to think of, perhaps he was teasing.

In any case Lee smiled down, and with an elegant gesture indicated his fans.

"My loyal ladies!" he told the rest of the audience. We preened 😊

I thought the the Lincolnites? Lincolinians? Lincolnners? (Sneaks off to check Google – oh right first time, Lincolnites apparently) showed great respect with their questions. Mostly they quizzed him on his early career, where and how he learnt his craft, and what it felt like to work with certain people (Andrew Lloyd-Webber).

Only one asked anything close to his personal life, but the question was so innocuous ("Does Betsy want to follow you into show business?") that Lee had no hesitation answering with a relieved "No." He explained why he wouldn't advise anyone to go into show-business – and the pitfalls of chasing fame and fortune. He said that he's much happier with Betsy's current wish – to be become a teacher. Though of course he'll support her whatever she chooses to do.

Another question allowed Lee to clear up a bit of a misunderstanding.

A lady asked what was the strangest thing he's ever been given. This initially seemed to stump him. (Hmmm – I wonder if he was thinking "I can't say such-and-such a thing because the person who gave it to me might be in the front row!") The he started telling us about his interview for a certain Sunday

magazine. The interviewer asked what the strangest thing that had ever happened, and he replied once someone threw their knickers at him.

He gets the magazine, sees his picture on the cover, with the ‘quote’ “I get knickers thrown at me but I don’t touch them.” He laughed. We laughed. There was a good deal of laughing going on that evening.

Time for the “last” song – ‘Blackbird’. By now Lee’s voice had got seriously husky. In parts he faded almost into a whisper. Yet strangely the loss of his voice did nothing to distract from the beauty of the melody twining through Tommy’s intricate guitar work.

The audience, eager to show their appreciation, began to applaud in the pause before the last verse. Including me. Silly Jane! I ought to know better.

We shushed of course as soon as Tommy’s guitar started again, and Lee ended with that sweet repeat “You were only waiting for that moment to arise,” fading as he sang, to a hushed theatre.

Then we applauded again, even louder, as Lee took a deep bow.

“One more song?”

“YES!!! YES!!”

Lee dashed away to put on his dream coat, while Adam led the band in the opening bars of ‘Any Dream Will Do’. Of course Lee couldn’t get into the coat in so short an intro, so with a nod Adam instructed the band to start again.

Still no Lee; another repeat, and on came... no wait he didn’t. The intro repeated again.

And again.

Each repeat bought a more exaggerated yet resigned nod from Adam, and louder and louder titters from the audience.

Eventually, a mischievous face peeked around the wings. Cheers mixed with laughter erupted around the auditorium as Lee, now attired in his iconic coat, picked his way between the stage lights to his spot.

He twirled about.

Adam: nod.

“I closed my eyes...”

Here at least we could help. We sang a long, as we waved our arms, somewhat louder than we normally do. Lee, exhausted as he must have been, gave his all, with smiles and swirls. As he reached the ending, I'm sure none of us expected him to do the big finish. In fact he turned towards Adam, saying (I assumed) something like – just fade it out.

WRONG! That gesture must have meant I'm going for it.

“Give me my coloured coat! My A-maz-ng col-loured COAT!!!!”

Oh Lee! You star!

I leapt to my feet as did a goodly number of the front few rows, in recognition of a brilliant evening rescued from what might have been disaster by a singularly generous and determined young man. Thank you Mr Mead!

Lots of very happy fans ambled back towards the foyer. The crowd surged ahead of us. No need to rush. That foyer wasn't huge and I wanted to let the crowd disappear.

I did wonder how many locals would stay for the signing. Yes, Lee's Loyal Ladies were all delighted with the novel second act and the Q&A – what would the locals think though? Would they bother staying to congratulate him?

Answer – yep!

The queue wrapped around the foyer and back into the auditorium. My drive-ist friend and I being the very last of all. The other two elected to watch the signings rather than join in (and I believe went on camera duty for the birthday girl and her friends).

“Hi Lee,” I said as we reached him “we're the last.”

He thanked us and reached out to sign a third CD for me. I explained that this was a birthday pressy for my best mate who had had to forgo seeing him last year due to being too poorly to fly from Ireland.

He seemed genuinely concerned for her, but gave me a little snippet of information that would warm her heart – he's hoping to do a concert in Ireland. I tried not to squeal as stood back. Oops. I'd forgotten to congratulate him on the show. Good job my companion said everything I wanted to say (much more eloquently) so I could vigorously nod my agreement.

Time to leave, calling bye, bye over our shoulders and waving to Steve on the merchandise desk, we headed off towards our hotel.

There 12 happy fans gathered to talk over a most remarkable concert – and toast the man who, by carrying on regardless, had created a very special experience indeed.

Here's to you Mr Mead. Get well soon!