

Last Weekend in Newcastle

by Jane W

I seem to have an unfortunate habit of putting my friends in the way of temptation.

When the Chitty tour dates were announced I naturally looked for the most convenient venues for me. One of those was Newcastle. I got in touch with Jo.

“Are you going to Newcastle?” I said,

“Oh I think I might,” said she.

It turns out she wasn't intending to, but of course 'Are you going?' is temptation beyond endurance so I apologise Jo, for pretty much forcing you to come to Newcastle when I am sure you would have preferred to spend the weekend nice and cozy at home. Mwah ha ha!

Newcastle was supposed to be my friend's and my first visit to Chitty; it wasn't for either of us. It wasn't mine because I snuck in an extra visit to Nottingham two weeks ago. It wasn't for her because she didn't feel well enough. Jo and I missed her terribly.

Not only did I persuade Jo to trek up to the North of England, I left all the planning to her too. She organised the lot: Theatre tickets, hotel...the only thing I had to do was sort out my train tickets and in the end Jo made my travel arrangements – she gave me a lift. I can't thank her enough.

Anyway...

After a fraught journey Jo arrived at my house for an evening of curry (eventually; our usually efficient curry house let us down) and chit-chat.

Then an early-ish start on Saturday morning to get us to Newcastle in nice time for lunch before the matinee. We found the car park without too much difficulty, then, thanks to a very helpful Geordie chap, got to the theatre. After a quick reccy to check the stage door's location (well...I was a cub leader once – 'Be Prepared' and all that) we found a swish looking place with art-deco style windows to have lunch.

The waitress seated us in the window, and with half an eye on the street outside, in case anyone interesting walked passed, we enjoyed our burgers and chips.

Lunch over, we still had plenty of time before the matinee, so the two of us had a wander round a small, but beautifully ornate shopping arcade, and then off to the market, where Jo had a remarkably successful shopping trip. See Jo – it was worth coming to Newcastle afterall.

Then back to the theatre, where we met up with a couple of friends and enjoyed a quick catch up before heading for our seats.

Now Jo couldn't get three good (from a Lippy point of view) seats together, so we had two next to each other at the end of row C, and one more central one in row F. We suspected that the row F one, though further back, would give a better view, so we had a plan for a 'change at the interval' sharing scheme. It was a matter of just sussing out the comparative placing. We walked from the back of the theatre checking rows – M...H...F... Now I'm no maths genius and my ability to recite the alphabet backwards isn't so good since I ceased to be a filing clerk, but even I could see by the time we reached row F there were more letters of the alphabet left than rows of seats.

'Err Jo,' I said as I stood staring at the big friendly 'C' painted on the side of the front row, 'I wanna sit here.'

'Yes, here's good.' She said and we burst into cackles – that must have had the numerous kiddies filling the theatre thinking about scary old ladies with gingerbread houses.

A word about the kids in that matinee audience. We were surrounded by them. After my experience at Nottingham I mentally prepared myself for another bout of inappropriate shouting, sweet-paper rustling, and toilet breaks.

There was no need to worry. These children knew how to behave in the theatre. All of them. They seemed rapt for the entire performance, making noises only that showed their delight – cheering, clapping and the occasional boo. But that was for the Child Catcher – and he LIKES it.

All the way through the show, the Lee's energy astounds me. No wonder he's looking so slender. Oh my, that guy is gorgeous. (Sigh!)

Ah, how we enjoyed those front row seats when Lee bent over and presented us with an in-er-face view of the Rear of the Year. (Oh what?! Come on! Lee's bum is always worth a close-up!)

Every review I have seen talks about Lee's wonderful interaction with the kids. I agree completely. Especially with the little girl. I have seen the same young actor play Jemima every show and she really is excellent. When Lee's not around I find myself watching her facial expressions. That lass might/could have a great career as a comic actor ahead of her.

Other than Lee, I think my favourite performances were from the Vulgarian spies. They were such a funny double act – one rake thin, one – ermm – of a larger frame. Think Butler and Baker from Joseph and you get the picture.

The highlights of the show? I have four.

The first is Hushabye Mountain. Lee was in superb voice all through every one of the three shows I saw in Newcastle – no matter how frenetic the dancing he did. But it was this gentle lullaby that had me spell-bound. And this time I enjoyed it without interruptions and

distractions, so Lee worked his magic completely. His sweet yet powerful notes ebbing and flowing like the sea he sang of. If I hadn't been totally enamoured of Lee already, this song would have made me fall in love with him.

Highlight number 2 – Me Ol' Bamboo.

On my first trip to the show, I could barely see Lee during Me Ol' Bamboo – let alone tell you whether he managed to keep up with the chorus. But in Newcastle...wow! My flower-covered straw-boater off to Lee. He did it! He did it brilliantly. If you can draw your attention away from his comedy gurning to watch his feet, you can see the intricacy of the steps he's performing with apparent ease. OK so we know it's been a lot of hard work for Lee to master those steps but he has done. Surely Lee won't ever be able to say he can't dance again! (Yeah right – of course he will.)

Lee looked truly scrumptious (I know I couldn't help myself) in his long travelling coat and backwards worn flat-cap. It's not a look that would suit many young men but it works for Mr Mead.

Highlight number 3 - 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang', surely one of the catchiest songs in the genre. How the audience adored it! A whole theatre clapping along to Lee's singing as he negotiates the tongue-twister lyrics with aplomb.

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

Highlight number 4 - Caractacus serenades Truly with Truly Scrumptious as she sings 'Doll On a Music Box' again. 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. They had the audience enthralled.

OK – I'm smitten. I love this show!!

We couldn't stage-door after the matinee – we had to check in at our hotel. Once that was sorted, Jo and I reckoned we had just enough time for a light meal before the evening performance. The restaurants close to the theatre were rather crowded but one said we could have a light meal if we sat at the bar-stools around a table in the window.

As we waited for our meal, Lee walked into the Costa over the road. You know it's really difficult trying to attract Jo's attention when you're on the phone to your bank and she's on her tablet :-)) I had to bang the table several times and point at the window. Eventually she got the message. The woman at the bank could hear us laughing and asked if she could come and join us.

I could see Lee through the coffee shop window, all the time we were waiting for dinner. At last he came out. He stopped twice to pose for pictures before disappearing into the theatre. What a sweet guy.

The evening show was, if anything, even better. By chance a small group of familiar faces (if you're reading this – nice to see you ladies) were sat right behind us – which meant we could lift the roof with our applause! And at the very end we gave them a standing ovation which – I think – spread right through the stalls. Richly deserved!

The SD on Saturday night was crowded with fans, many of whom were there for Carrie I'm sure. Lee came out quite early, signed a few programs, had his picture taken, then straightened up and looked around.

He seemed to spot his little gang of fans and came over to us. Jo had a mission. She got his autograph. And so did I. Of course we told him how fantastic the show is and of course he thanked us. Another girl I didn't recognise came over for to get him to sign her programme. A couple of us pressed our silver pens on her (better to show up on the dark blue pages) which I think caused a bit of confusion. Once she'd withdrawn he turned to our little gang. We all had a really nice little chat with him. He said he's enjoying doing CCBB, though it's exhausting; he's very excited about the panto; and (and I found this particularly charming) he updated us on the football :-)

We stayed at the stage door after he left as Jo's mission involved getting more than one autograph.

Carrie is adorable. She stayed and chatted for an age, telling us all about the safety features of flying in Chitty. Scott the spy is a real sweetie (at one point as we were applauding on the Sunday, he spotted me, grinned and pointed at me), and Matt the Child Catcher is a love. Just so you know - he likes it when he gets booed. I asked!

We finished the evening at our hotel where again I tempted Jo to have a bit more to drink than she usually does. Mwah ha ha! Again

Sunday was rather soggy, especially as nowhere opened till 11am. We met up for lunch and had another brief sighting as Lee sauntered passed (no doubt in search of coffee).

We went to the SD after the Sunday matinee. As we knew Lee would be in a rush we were not really expecting to get a chance to chat with him. We just hoped to be able to congratulate him as he walked past. Lee however had other ideas. He came out fairly fast. When he saw us he came straight over and happy chatted about his what his journey home would be like, how he managed to drive all that way so late, looking forward to seeing Betsy... eventually he

remembered the time and said his farewell.

He is looking absolutely gorgeous despite the tiredness. Have I mentioned that I love that guy!!!