

Last Weekend in Newcastle

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.

I'm getting ahead of myself. Back to the show.

One of the things I love about this production is that the action on stage starts during the overture. Lee saunters on (looking incredibly dishy despite being liberally smeared with engine oil) and interacts with various ensemble members in the manner of a silent comedian.

If you can tear your eyes away from the Meadster, above him the back projection gives us some important exposition. In a series of black and white news reports it shows the triumphs, and ultimate wrecking, of a certain British racing car.

Meanwhile the Potts children are brought onto the stage by a woman in a white apron. I think she is supposed to be the ghost of their mum. I have nothing to go on but Lee's bewildered and yearning expression as she leaves the stage.

It's the kids who take centre stage in the opening number, set in a junk-yard. They are playing in the burnt-out wreck of the racing car which will become the eponymous hero...err... heroine...err STAR of the show. Surrounding them, the ensemble is their imagined audience, watching them drive the car to victory over the nasty Vulgarians, while singing a rousing song with the tune of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

Daddy returns to the stage, and joins in their game. There's a lot of family bonding and talk about the Potts family 'sticking together' and 'doing their share' (sounds like a tactful way of encouraging the little Potts to do their chores to me) which leads into the next song.

Now I'm looking at the programme as I'm writing this, and it tells me that there isn't a song between the opening number and 'You Two'. But I am pretty damn certain that Lee and the kids sing 'Team Work' for the first time at this point.

Lee's certainly singing something as he man-handled the car about the stage. I remember admiring the way he sings without any apparent difficulty breathing.

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!)

OK getting on with it...

While the Potts family are playing racing drivers, wicked plots are being hatched. Baron Bombast of Vulgaria and his devious Baroness are planning to... well actually they're planning to salvage the wreckage of the racing car and restore it, so that the Baron can enjoy driving it about... which when I think about it doesn't sound particularly wicked. Mind you they make their plans with so much shouting and maniacal laughter that it's quite clear that wicked plotting is afoot. These are most assuredly the bad guys. (Though I think Jo will agree with me that their taste in colours does at least mark them as people of style and panache. (We like PURPLE!)).

Back at the junk yard, the Potts' games are interrupted by the arrival of a woman on a motorbike. This is of course Truly, our heroine. She needs her bike fixing, just the job for our lovely inventor-hero.

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!)

Truly and Caractacus don't exactly hit it off. Mind you she does make a huge gaff, asking about why Jeremy and Jemima's mother isn't looking after them. Lee's heart-broken expression explains everything. Truly naturally apologises, but completely fails to win friends and influence people by continuing to shove her nose into the Potts' families business.

During this exchange a scrap dealer turns up. He offers to buy Chitty-to-be for 30 schillings, intending to melt her down. Boo! Hiss! The junk-yard owner would rather sell the car to Caractacus – but he can't afford it. On the other hand the Vulgarians can...ooo. Caractacus has till Friday to find the cash.

They part acrimoniously (which doesn't stop the children jumping to the conclusion that daddy likes Truly) and Caractacus consoles himself by singing 'I've Got You Two'. It's a charming song and a perfect way for Lee to melt hearts as the lovelorn, widowed daddy, now living for his kids. Awwwww!!!!

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.

'You Two' gets a reprise as the family gets ready for dinner. (Sausages. Sausages are a recurring theme. I suspect Ian Flemming was partial to the odd banger.) We're introduced to two more characters. Grandpa (Caractacus Senior) and a mechanical dog (which is SO CUTE!!).

Over dinner Caracticus shows off his latest invention – a sweet-making machine. None of them seem that impressed until Grandpa realises that his son has inadvertently invented Whistling Pops, oops sorry, I mean Toot Sweets – a sweet you can use as a whistle.

Off goes Caracticus to sell his invention to the local sweet manufactory – Lord Scrumptious, who turns out to be Truly's father.

Toot Sweets is one big iconic songs from the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang – and it's a BIG number in the stage production too. It's such fun with all the tooting on the sweets, singing and dancing – and Lee looks like he's having the best time of his life up there on the stage.

Of course the sweets had to have a draw-back – all that whistling encouraged the local dogs to turn up. So it's back to the drawing board.

Meanwhile the two Vulgarian spies get there big number – 'Act English'.

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.

On to the funfair and Potts' latest invention – an automatic haircutting machine (which we can all be grateful he didn't try on himself). Of course it all goes wrong, leaving his first customer bald, and the inventor attempting to hide from his angry victim by pretending to be part of a Morris troop.

As excuses for Musical Theatre numbers go it's about as silly as you can get – but oh what a number because of course it's the lead in to...

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.)

Me Ol' Bamboo finished with cheers and applause from the rapturous audience and an exhausted but delighted Lee drinking in the acclaim.

But the show must go on – and so it does with a turkey farmer offering to buy Caratacus' hair-cutting machine to use as an automated turkey plucker.

Now up to this point in the show my eyes have been on Lee's face or at least some part of his anatomy (I am talking about his FEET here! OK yes, bum too) every moment he's in view. However in this scene he's upstaged by a puppet turkey overhearing the farmer's plans. Never was a turkey more expressive!

Our triumphant hero, now flush with cash, buys the old racing car for his children and devotes all his time to its restoration.

This is the only hint within the show that Caratacus Junior might not be the perfectly attentive father he initially seemed to be. The children want to watch daddy work but Grandpa says 'You know what he's like when he's working,' indicating that the children need to stay out of the way. (Yeah kids – I know how that feels. My dad was just the same with his stream-engines. Come to think of it my dad would have got on so well with Caratacus. I digress.)

Grandpa entertains the kiddies with a jaunty song about traveling – 'Posh'. This is probably my favourite non-Lee related number in the show, and gives the two children a real chance to show off their talent.

At last! The car is ready – no longer a racing-car, but a family car. But she's a car with a will of her own, refusing even to light up her headlights until her owner says 'please'. Very sweet.

The Potts family decide to head off to the seaside for a picnic, sans grandpa who prefers the quiet of his... OK well he goes to the outside loo. I get the impression he likes it there. He goes there a lot. It's a plot device you see.

So off go the rest of the family.

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.

It's not a quiet ride – the car is making all sorts of noises. The family agree that she's saying her name (she subtly turns from 'it' to 'she' as she gains more personality) and they christen her Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Cue the BIG SONG!

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.

It’s not just the song itself. The projected back drop, which has been used every effectively throughout, now shows us the scenery trundling by as Chitty twists and turns on the stage, as though they are all really travelling along an English wiggly-white road. I was going to say that it’s magical. But that’ll leave me short of superlatives for later, so I’ll use the word ‘impressive’ for now. Possibly with several ‘verys’ in front of it.

On the way they pass Truly whose motorbike breaks down. Showing about as much resistance to temptation as Jo when asked if she’s going to a Lee show, Truly succumbs to the children’s pleas to leave her bike and join them for the picnic.

And here we go again... ‘Oh you Pretty Chitty Bang Bang...’

Now, our two hapless spies have been spying, as spies do, on the Potts. While the family plus guest enjoys their picnic, the spies alert the Vugarian navy, which, no doubt contravening hundreds of naval conventions, sends a warship over to England to nick the car. (Talk about sledgehammers and nuts!)

Picnic over, it’s time for a game of ball, while the kids sing ‘Truly Scrumptious’ and Truly sings back to them. Caractacus then tucks the little ones up in the back of the car, to get some shut-eye.

This gives the grown-ups chance to get a little coy and tongue-tied with each other. Things are just getting romantic when a storm wakes the sleepers. The tide has come in, Chitty is stranded and now there’s a real danger of all of them drowning. (It’s just as well it’s not Blackpool because the tide at Blackpool has a circular... alright I’m shutting up and getting on with it.)

Between the rumbles of thunder comes a louder crash. The Vulgarian warship has opened fire. Potts susses out what they want immediately, and general panic ensues. Someone screams ‘Save us Chitty, pleeeaaaasee!’ and Chitty suddenly sprouts floats. Chitty-the-motor-boat races away from the back-drop projection of the warship. I’m struggling to express just how good these effects are, but I still can’t use the word ‘magic’; I need it for later.

They escape. Phew! And back home Caractacus Junior introduces Truly to Grandpa. I’m not sure whether it’s the effect of meeting Truly but Grandpa has to take a new moments and heads to the lavvy to visit India.

Having failed to buy the car from the junk man, and failed to steal her, the spies now go to plan C. They decide to abduct Grandpa while he is visiting India. (‘Visiting India’ evidently being a euphemism in the Potts house – but let’s not go there, shall we?). Thinking that Grandpa is the inventor, they hook the outside privy onto air-balloon, and hoist it into the

sky. I suppose their logic is that if the Baron can't have the actual car he wants, a driving/floating facsimile will be next best thing.

Hearing Grandpa's calls for help, the others leap into Chitty and race away following the air-balloon. I'm not certain how they think this is going to help but seeing as the whole audience knows what's going to happen, I don't think that slight flaw in logic matters.

Off they go – but in their mad dash they drive over a cliff....aarrgghhh.... Out pop Chitty's wings, and as the back drop shows us circling sea-birds, Chitty lifts up over stages, wheeling and soaring, in simply the most MAGICAL theatrical moment I have ever seen.

The audience cheered like crazy as Lee's voice rings out for another reprise 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, we love you!'

Wow!!! What a first half. Can the second match it? Well there is less of Lee, but there is still much to enjoy.

The spies get another comedy turn (in wet suits), before Grandpa is brought before the Baron. Grandpa must fit the baron's car with his float/fly feature, or get turned into a sausage.

This leads into The Roses of Success which has always been one of my favourite songs from the film. I managed not to irritate the audience by singing along.

Caractacus, Truly and the children arrive in Vulgaria, and promptly have a row coz Caractacus forgot to hide Chitty. The children take this as a sign that the two are going to get married. I get the impression the late Mrs Potts must have been frequently vexed by her eccentric husband.

The Toymaker hears the noise and hides the family. They 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. They also learn that a Child Catcher 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.

On comes the Child Catcher. Ooo he's scary with his grey face and hunched shoulders. Matt Gillett is obviously relishing the part as the crowd boo him. I hope Lee can persuade him to take to panto – what a panto-villain he'd make!

The toymaker eventually persuades the Child Catcher to b*gger off and agrees to take Caractacus to the castle so he can rescue Grandpa, and the car (which the bad-guys have now found). Caractacus and Truly stop quarrelling. She's all concerned for his safety. Caractacus leaves with the Toymaker and Truly sings 'Lovely Lonely Man' (which could be as much about Lee as Caractacus).

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

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

Who should appear disguised as a sweet-seller? No other than the evil Child Catcher – boo hiss!! And the gullible pair climb into his trap on the promise of free sweets and treats.

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

Inside the castle the Baron is getting all excited coz it's his birthday. The Baroness has planned a party and he's been given loads of pressies. They sing 'Chu-Chi Face' together which, though not one of my favourites, is a total ear-worm. I'm humming to myself now.

Underneath the castle, the Toymaker takes Caractacus to the children that have so far escaped the Child Catcher. They live in the sewers and are more concerned with food than playing about.

Truly finds them and gives Caractacus the terrible news that his own children have been abducted. Caractacus is desperate. He recruits the outcast children to help him defeat the Baron – by means of singing of course. 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'.

Unaware of their imminent over-throw, the Baron and Baroness are partying. This is another chance for the ensemble to shine as they demonstrate the 'Bombie Samba' for the less than enthusiastic Baron.

The Baron is far more interested in the arrival of the Toymaker and two large, colourful boxes. He's less than impressed when the first 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 Toymaker winds up the mechanism and Truly sings Doll on a Music Box, as the turntable twirls her about. She's enchanting. No wonder Baron and audience alike are quite beguiled.

Then just as she finishes the second box bursts open and out jumps Lee dressed as a clown-doll. He dances (oh yes he does) about the stage before winding up the music box again.

And we come to my fourth highlight:

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.

The song ends and the Baron calls for his cake. Caractacus summons the children and mayhem erupts as they over run the stage. For a second it seems that the Child Catcher will

ruin it all but – Hurrah!! In flies Grandpa with Caractacus's kids in Chitty. Chitty has managed to rescue everyone on her own.

Caractacus is reunited with his family. Big hugs all around. Then down he kneels before Truly – awww – the children were right! They do like each other! (Given the length of their kiss, methinks they like each other a lot).

So to the finale and what other song could we end on? Of course Chitty Chitty Bang Bang again – but this time the audience joined in as Lee and Carrie once more fly above the stage.

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 though 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 auto-graph.

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 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!!!