

2018 April 28 - Lytham St Annes

by Jane W

Saturday morning... a bright sunshiny day in Shrewsbury; five tired but hyper excited Lee fans roamed the town searching for “The Ginger Something” – which a friend recommended for breakfast.

One thing I’ll remember about Shrewsbury: the food. And the Ginger Something (Ginger & Co to give it its proper name) turned out to be another excellent find. Yummy bacon butties, friendly service, a really funky loo-roll holder in the ladies... what else do we need?

We need to get to Lytham St Annes – that’s what!

Lytham St Annes is practically my hometown.

Yeah like I wish! I’m a Blackpool lass. Lytham St Awnes (as we used to call it) is way posher than my birthplace. It was first workplace though, so I’m taking the right to get proprietorial about it, and thus give my friends useless facts about the sea-front and 30 year-out-of-date directions.

But we had to get there first.

Our wonderful driver offered to take all of us in her car. That’s five slightly bonkers women on a two and a half-hour trip up the country. The woman deserves a medal – and a large glass of Pinot Grigio.

A lot of thought needs to go into seating arrangements when you are five up you know. After careful checking of comparative leg length and height-while-sitting, we agreed I would be the best one for the middle of the back seat, with the other, daintily proportioned ladies alongside me.

OK then – the three in the back needed to do some complicated manoeuvring to get comfy. Cries of “That’s not the seat-belt that’s my bum!” and other traditional phrases associated with belting up, causing much laughter as we set off.

30 minutes into the journey we were still laughing.

Every subject we covered seemed hilarious. As did the Tangtastic Haribo being shared about.

60 minutes in – still laughing.

The ‘sunshine bus’ trundled through the country side.

“There’s something touching my leg,” my friend beside me.

She leaned down to check what the hard, cold, sweet-tin-like object might be. It was a sweet-tin.

“It’s OK it’s just...” (she glanced out of the window) “a shire horse!”

“You’ve got a shire horse under your leg?!”

Jo's shire-horse became a running gag eventually, even getting named: Graham Norton. Well? What else would you call a shire horse?

90 minutes in – still laughing

Did you know that cuddly dog toys are side-splitting? In more senses than one.

Eventually the naughty kids in back calmed down enough to get on with the serious job of finding somewhere to eat. To aid my friend in her relentless quest to find the best Fish and Chips in the UK, we decided we needed a good chip shop – which also would provide the added bonus being quick to serve (useful considering, we might only have a limited time to eat before the meet and greet).

We narrowed our choices down to four, two near the hotel; two near the theatre.

We arrived in Lytham St Annes with well over an hour before hotel check-in. Ro drove us to the Lowther Pavilion to see the lay of the land and assess the cuppa-getting facilities. Said facilities turned out to be a charming café of the type the Women's Institute used to run near my childhood church.

It being the sort of pretty spring day ideal for people watching in the sun, we sat outside with our tea, coffee, and cake to do some people watching. In the sun.

Lowther Pavilion is set in a large park: to the left of us a bowling-green, to the right a tennis court (both in use) with a long swath of mown grass between.

Just in case we might possibly have become bored with one another's company (we weren't) the good residents of Lytham seemed determined to keep entertained. The dog in a pram was a particular favourite, and we all very much enjoyed watching a marching band prepare themselves (which involved a considerable amount of smoking) while discussing the proper name for big staff-like thing the leader carries (it turns out to be called 'a staff').

When the band ambled away (I assume they were saving the 'marching' part of their job-description for later) we followed; it would be nice to hear them play. We wandered away from the Lowther towards the sea front, taking a slight detour to avoid shadowing a certain curly-haired young man strolling in front of us.

We failed to catch up with the band, (speed amblers them guys) so made our way onto the prom. A square winged light plane flew backwards and forwards; had a debate about the make – sorry breed - of a passing dog; and to finish off six or seven sky divers parachuted down quite close to us. Wow!

What we didn't see was a chip shop.

With check-in time approaching we heading to the hotel.

From having plenty of time we suddenly found ourselves in a bit of a rush. Situation normal, we're used to this. We washed and changed quickly. I scanned the street from the bedroom window – hmmm....a distinct lack of chip-shops. The only café in view was already closing...hmmm....

So we bought a whole load of nibbles and goodies from the M&S near the hotel and retired to the hotel for a carpet picnic.

Not for the last time we toasted the birthday girl, then it was everyone into the taxi – we were en-route to the meet and greet. 😊

One of the lovely things about supporting Lee is meeting all those fans who have become friends over the years. In this case two of the Irish Stage-Loppies (known as the Dublops) joined the happy cluster milling around the foyer waiting for the M&G. It's a shame the café closed up. I'd have liked to sit down while I caught up with them. For those of you who haven't heard me moaning on and on about it, or seen me clutching on to walls, I have a condition that makes me dizzy – and boy was it playing up at that point!

By the time a chap appeared to shepherd us into the meet and greet area all I wanted to do was GET SAT DOWN!!!

This was my second meet and greet of the tour. Talking to other fans it seems they are following the same format: the theatre turns over a seating area (the bar perhaps, or part of the café) to Mr Mead's use for an hour or so. Meet and greeters can settle in, order drinks, and wait for himself in nice, civilised surroundings. (Those of us who remember the Legally Blonde stage-door, loitering among the bins, know just how wonderful that is.)

I entered the theatre bar ahead of most of my friends, but still towards the back of the crowd. Most of the tables had already been taken. The Dublops had ensconced themselves near the bar itself, but the tables surrounding them were clearly occupied.

I made a beeline for some seats at the back of the room, where the five of us could gather round. Phew! I'm sat. The world can wobble as much as it likes now, I ain't about to fall over.

Several minutes later the rest of our gang joined me. They'd been delayed ordering drinks – in particular a bottle of prosecco so we could all toast our birthday girl again . Ooo we're doing this in STYLE!!!

The Meadster entered, no fuss, no announcement, the only recognition of his presence a short pause in conversations and an indrawn breath from many of the ladies in the room.

Have I mentioned how gorgeous that guy is? Oh you know?

He selected the table next to us, seated himself with a 'Hello' and began, with the ease of a young man who completely understands courtesy and good manners, to chat away, without any form of affectation or condescension.

We didn't listen in. The occupants of that table didn't need anyone of photo-duty; they had it covered.

Lee rose and stepped towards us.

He opened his arms wide as if to embrace all of us.

“Ah, My Ladies!” He said.

How I love it when he calls us that. It melts my heart whenever he says it.

(Swoon! No don't swoon Jane – you need to converse in a sensible fashion.)

“Hi Lee!” (That'll do for starters).

He drew up a chair.

“Prosecco!”

“We're celebrating a birthday,”

“Aww happy birthday!”

The chat flowed naturally: how much we enjoyed the Shrewsbury concert; how great we think his new album is (It's his favourite too.)

He asked us about our day - whether we'd seen much of Lytham St Annes. We told him about our trip down the prom and the parachutists. I explained that I come from Blackpool, which can get rowdy in the evenings, so I'd often come Lytham St Annes for a quiet drink, and he compared that to his own home town.

Other than the Birthday Girl who hasn't been to an M&G before, we declined to have another signed pic – well a second one would be superfluous. Eventually he stirred himself.

“Could we – err?” I said patting my camera-phone.

“Of course!” he replied in a tone that suggested he was about to offer to pose. “As a group or individually?”

We'd already discussed this, and divided into two groups.

Lee posed for us happy fans, a huge and very genuine smile suffusing his features.

Oh how we love him!

Lee moved on, pretending to try to steal our Prosecco as he left.

Comfortable as we were, we stayed seated until Lee had done his round of the whole room, and for sometime after he left as the public filled into the bar.

The auditorium of the Lowther Pavilion is basically a wide sweep of stalls, raked steeply at the back, facing a high stage. We had front row centre seats (thank you my dear booker), but they were set back far enough that I didn't fear a crooked neck while gazing adoringly upwards. Our view would be fantastic.

The theatre filled.

Now, it's weird – some shows you just know are going to be a bit special before they even begin.

I had that sense at The Lowther. Perhaps because the day had been so much fun, and we'd come into the auditorium still on a high from the meet and greet – yet there seemed to be a simmering excitement bubbling throughout the stalls.

And it seemed that Lee felt it too. From the moment he walked on to Adam's accompaniment, he sparkled.

Blue and pink lights shone down; a world of 'Pure Imagination' indeed.

He introduced himself, then looking down at front row, and across the theatre. "This stage is high. I feel like Zeus!" He struck an appropriately Greek god like pose. I'd have gone with Apollo myself but hey – close enough.

He explained that he'd been in Shrewsbury the previous night.

"Same show different audience."

This comment set certain members of the audience giggling. Some said "Sort of..."

And Lee looked down at us again and started giggling himself. He said nothing more but I am sure he was sharing a joke with us. At least this audience would be mostly new to his concert. My mind flicked back to the same-faces-every-show Pheasantry residency.

'Dancing Thru Life'... whoever was on the lighting desk knew a thing or two about Musical Theatre because they turned the stage green. More dancing through the number – the crowd approved. LOUDLY.

The crowd approved of everything he did. Over the course of the first half, that simmering excitement started to boil, and Lee responded upping his game with each song. Incredible seeing as he was on damn fine form to start with. Shrewsbury was great – Lytham St Annes was A-MAZ-ING.

It's so hard to pick a highlight from that show. I could just list every song.

'Bring Him Home' must get a mention – Lee's heart-breaking performance augmented again by the lighting which deluged the stage in pools of blue, white and red. Though totally enraptured by Lee himself, I did glance over at John to see him wiping tears from his eyes. You've got to be doing something right when you make your violinist cry!

'Why God Why' – breath taking, utterly breath taking.

But I want to talk to you about a song which I don't think I've mentioned in my reports so far...

10 years on and Mr Mead still surprises me. In the case of the album, the surprise was 'With or Without You.' I can't imagine why, in a retrospective of his career, he's included a song that's not been a big part of his repertoire or marked a Meady milestone. I'm bloody glad he did though!

The phrase "He made it his own" is so hackneyed, but it applies. Bono wrote a classic rock anthem.

Lee's version, while still rocky, tells more of a story than the original. There's more light and shade to it. Those rock-god "screams" of Bono's, become howls of anguish when Lee utters them; then when Lee drops his voice for the verses...ooo my. So sensuous. A surprising choice – but a very, very welcome one.

It's always one of his big numbers, but for Lytham St Annes he put every molecule of his heart and soul into it.

I scribble down notes as soon as I can after each concert. In my spider-scrawl writing for LSA I have written W or W You WOW! Yep. That summed it up.

And so continued the first half 'wow' moment after 'wow' moment until 'Close Every Door' and... well I simply can't think of a time when his CED hasn't been fabulous and so it was at Lytham St Annes. And then some. I wasn't the only one that thought so. The whole audience seemed to be buzzing.

So on to part two – 'Feeling Good'... 'Hushabye Mountain' (that lighting technician still on form).

It might cut down Lee's singing time, but I was very happy that the second half again included a Q&A session.

I noticed that a surprisingly high proportion of the questions came from men; perhaps that's an inverse Meadmush effect. Anyway the first question of the evening came from a bloke and seemed to non-plus the Meadster.

"Are you pleased your team did so well?"

"Sorry? My team?"

"Yeah they were playing today."

I think polite confusion describes Lee's expression.

"Chelsea!" said the questioner, "You're a Chelsea supporter aren't you?"

The light dawned (though I can't credit the lighting engineer with that particular moment).

"Oh yes! But I've not seen the match yet. I don't know what the score is."

The questioner told him.

I did wonder how pleased Lee was about that. (My ex hubby would have gone crazy. Except he doesn't support Chelsea. Or in fact watch football. You know what I mean!)

Others then got their chance to speak and we had the usual array of questions covering his career, his likes, his hopes for the future...

Three stood out for me.

A lady asked him about his career highlight so far. I expected him to say The Concert for Diana or playing Joseph, but he selected Cinderella at the Palladium 2016/17 - which shows how much he loves panto. (The lady who asked was rather hoping he'd say "wearing the loincloth" – she certainly seemed eager to talk about it, but Lee wasn't ☐)

Then someone asked whether he'd explained to Betsy about kissing a man in Holby City. Now this drew a very serious and thoughtful reply from Lee, about the importance of understanding and accepting relationships between all manner of different people. He spoke beautifully and passionately, and the audience gave him a loud but respectful round of applause.

And the final question. "Did you get your curry?" A nice flippant note to end on.

The audience, already, giddy and high on Mead, seemed totally besotted by the time it finished.

And there was still more time to woo them.

Especially when it came to 'Empty Chairs at Empty Tables'...but for reasons that might surprise you.

Standing at the front of the stage, Lee gave the audience his usual intro. This has expanded somewhat over the course of the tour. His explanation of how he auditioned for the role of Marius now comes with a little scene setting action. He walks over to Adam and mimes handing him a score. The familiar story still has me chuckling, as he ruefully tells of the rejection.

Then with a sad shake of the head, he sauntered over to his stool, perching upon it as the stage lights warmed and dimmed till Lee sat in a soft golden glow. The music started, Lee, now Marius indeed, stared upwards at a place beyond the stalls as though he gazed towards heaven.

He adopted his normal pose...

I noticed his leg jerk as foot failed to find the rest on the stool's stand. No matter it his beautiful voice didn't falter. He adjusted his position...

It happened again.

"Hold on! Stop!"

The band petered out.

Lee dropped his Marius act in favour of Norman Wisdom, and for a good few minutes flailed around like a proper slapstick comedian, sliding off, then pulling himself back onto the stool.

The – crowd – HOWLED.

Eventually Lee got of the stool looked at it properly...

"It's back to front!"

He was laughing now as he turned the stool back around.

"Right let's try again."

He was still tittering as his band restarted and then – bam! He's Marius. His anguish, his guilt, palpable and heart breaking.

How? How did he do that?! There are celebrated Oscar winners who need days, weeks even, to “get into the role”. How can Lee manage it in a micro-second?

Do I really need to tell you how much the audience loved him for it?

Of course not, but I’ll tell you anyway. They went crazy!

Had he left anything for ‘Anthem’? Yep plenty. And then ‘Blackbird’ with Tommy’s beautiful accompaniment. And finally of course ‘Any Dream Will Do’.

The lighting technician going for broke, lit the stage in red, blue, yellow, green, orange, so that Lee in his techicolour dream coat sang under a techicolour rainbow.

Fabulous. Completely utterly fabulous. And the whole theatre stood to tell him so.

Seeing as we’d already spoken to Lee, we might have forgone the signing, but some of us at least wanted to tell him just how wonderful this particular concert was.

Along with the rest of the audience it seemed.

It’s no hardship queue when there are so many friends to talk to. The time passed quickly enough.

The Dublops reached the front and it looked like they had a lovely chat...

Then suddenly they moved.

I was facing Lee – on my own.

AAarrgghhh!!!! OK Jane, you can’t get Meadmushed – you’re representing the gang.

“We just wanted to say that was incredible,” I said (well that or something similar). “Last night was wonderful, but tonight...”

“Aw thank you!”

“And Empty Tables – the way you went from fooling about with the stool, then suddenly...”

“It’s just a matter of focusing,” he said, as though it’s the easiest thing in the world.

I couldn’t think of another word to say. Glancing round I saw and saw my friend close by, a big smile on her face. Over to you! I stepped back.

I have now added a new term to my vocabulary “virtuous circle”. Whether Lee used it or my friend I can’t remember but it perfectly describes the cycle of audience excitement, building Lee’s excitement, which built more audience excitement. I hope I live to see many more virtuous circles.

I confess to being rather pleased with myself. I’m getting better at this talking-to-Lee-thing. One day I manage it without feeling the need for a little lie down afterwards.

Out in the pleasant evening air, we said our goodbyes and climbed into the taxi.

It would be a long drive in the morning, and we needed to get some shuteye.

That is if we could sleep after such an evening.

Mr Mead, in case you don't know, is amazing.

To be continued...