

Cinderella – Panto 14th Dec 2016

by Jane W

Several days after my first trip to see Cinderella at the London Palladium, and my mind can barely focus. It's still lost in a swirl of colours (mostly pink) with a soundtrack of laughter and voices raised in song.

Yeah it was **that** good.

That's not helpful in a report though is it?

Let me try to grasp the memory... it starts a few months before the big day, in the middle of summer. And it didn't start with me.

Julie, my then boss, was chatting with her colleagues, Jeanette, Karen and me, about a trip to London she made with a friend of hers.

"We travelled first class – very comfortable, free meals, free drinks. Only cost £80."

We agreed that it sounded like a very civilised way to travel.

"We should do it. The four of us. Perhaps for our Christmas do?"

We agreed that a Christmas do, travelling to London first class would be like fun.

"We can have lunch at the Savoy, or," Julie looked at me with her eyes twinkling, "go to a show."

We agreed that seeing a show would be nice. I had a suggestion in mind.

"Isn't Lee in panto at the Palladium this Christmas, Jane? I'd rather like to see that."

We agreed that we would all like to see the Palladium panto – me rather more enthusiastically than the others.

So that's why, on the 14th December, we four work mates headed down to London to see Cinderella. I think the others were as excited as I, though not for quite the same reason. None of them dislike Lee Mead but they don't understand my obsession with him. However the allure of Paul O'Grady, Julian Clary and Nigel Havers had each of them squealing in anticipation.

The train journey was just as pleasant as we'd hoped; our trip through the underground somewhat less so. By the time we reached the Palladium Julie, despite (wo)manfully asserting otherwise, could hardly walk. We would have simply rested up in the nearest pub were it not for me having arranged to meet some friends including Julie (who is definitely a fan) before the show. (The three of them also wanted to see the panto, and while in normal circumstances I would have just made an extra trip, the Palladium prices meant I couldn't

justify one.) In the end I parted with my work-mates for an hour to join the others. It all worked out well.

Back together we joined the massive queue to get into the theatre. Friends forewarned us about the Palladium's odd policy of not opening up the auditorium till quite close to the performance time, forcing the patrons to squish into corridors. Our gang dealt with the squash with good humour; some of the crowd didn't.

They let us in at last and we found our seats in Rows N and O. Not where I would have chosen to sit given I could have bought enough seats much closer, but for some reason most of my friends prefer not to be (quote) "Looking up the actors' noses." Strange, but true.

I can't grumble though. As soon as the curtain went up I realised my view would be excellent. At least being a bit further back we see the whole stage – and it was still close enough to make out facial expressions and, OK, OK for me to gaze adoringly at Lee.

I had to bide my time though. Lee wasn't on from the start.

That honour went Amanda Holden as fairy godmother, swooping over the stage to welcome us in a speech reminiscent of Linda Lucardi's opening speech in Cardiff. She looked so glamorous in her big floaty skirts, flying about as the audience ooed and ahed.

Then followed the ensemble with a self-congratulatory opening number, celebrating the return of panto to the Palladium.

Though a visual treat, I wasn't that impressed with that first song. It wasn't particularly catchy and was a bit overlong. I'm picky, I know that, but Jeanette had the same reaction. On the upside it was totally relevant and at no point did a giant animatronic King Kong randomly intrude on the dancing. I call that a plus.

Paul Zerdin (Buttons) and his puppet Sam arrived and the panto shifted into gear. Most of his material was familiar, being either taken from his Southampton Jack and the Beanstalk routine or from the Cardiff Cinderella. Hey, it still made me in fits of giggle. Plus there were several surprises...but this is a not-too-spoilerful review, so they can remain surprises.

I can't remember who made the next entrance. It might have been Cinderella herself, the lovely Natasha J Barnes. Natasha had a tricky job to do. She needed to balance on an interpretative tightrope between annoyingly sassy and, well, wet. Natasha is neither. She's sweet, long-suffering, and cheery, without the soggiess of some Cinderellas I can think of.

Scene change: a palace. A palace decorated by a six year old with a Barbie fixation, judging the amount of pink involved. (Though come to think of it, during the Regency period pink wasn't considered a little girl's colour, but the colour of luxury. So the palace is completely in keeping with the Regency style costumes worn by the male-leads. Isn't it amazing what you can learn from a Lucy Worsley BBC4 documentary?).

Ah we know who lives in this palace don't we? Fingers crossed for our hero's entry.

On comes...Nigel Havers. Can I just say how nice it was to see Nigel playing a good guy? I've 'booed' him in two pantos now, so enjoyed getting to cheer him for a change. He has become a favorite with the reviewers, I notice. His minuscule role – nothing more than a glorified MC – turned out to be a little comic gem with his numerous random appearances asking 'Can I be in this scene?' I fell in love with Nigel.

His first appearance has one purpose...to introduce Prince Charming. On comes Lee, swaggering onto the stage, dressed in sparkling white and gold. The reviewers have said much about Julian's extravagant costumes but Lee, with fewer changes, nevertheless wears some gorgeous stuff himself. In the peek back-stage which Natasha and Lee gave us on 'Panto' day we saw his jackets up close. Seldom have stage costumes stood up so well to such scrutiny. Yep. Money has been spent on this.

Lee looked every inch a fairy-tale prince – refined, self-assured, perhaps a hint of pride in his carriage... Oh yes, and handsome. Very handsome. He's back at his pre-Chitty weight which softens his jawline and makes him appear even gentler, the sort of Prince Charming that Cinders can really trust.

He's on stage for only a minute before his equerry Dandini, that scene stealer supreme Julian Clary, makes a far more grandiose entrance. And so we are set up for the now customary Julian/Lee double act, with Lee playing Julian's straight man, setting up his one-liners and goggling at his innuendos. As with Paul Zerdin, we've seen much of Julian's routine before but who can complain? I think I'd be positively livid if Julian hadn't make sarcastic remarks all the way through Lee's first solo, 'Any Dream Will Do'. (Oh, come on. That's hardly a spoiler, surely!).

I was pleased to see that set-piece, usually featuring Julian and the resident villain, this time featured Julian and Lee. This gave Lee a tad more interaction with the audience than normal. Oh no it didn't – oh yes it did.

(Mind you my favourite Lee scene is the *****SPOILER SPOILER***** which had my friends and me howling with uncontrollable laughter.)

For once, Julian isn't the headliner. Paul O'Grady's Baroness Hardup has an equally impressive entrance towards the middle of act one.

OK a digression about pantomime dames. The dames in Cinderella are unusual, perhaps unique (I've never seen Snow White as a pantomime so I don't know if the wicked queen is usually a dame) in that they are the villains. Normally it's the ugly (step) sisters, leering and quarrelling, and generally being human gargoyles. In this production the sisters are relegated to henchpersons and are actual women of the female variety (Wendy Somerville and Suzie Chard). They may have less to do than normal, but they play their roles as spoilt, self-obsessed brats with aplomb, relishing their absurdity.

So the dame role is left for Mr O'Grady, as their mum. Paul isn't a gargoyle. In drag he makes a comely older woman, sneering and dangerous. Not for him a garish wardrobe and hooped skirts. Instead he saunters about be-sequined in slinky black. If Snow White's evil queen is ever played by the dame, I wanna see Paul O'Grady do it!

Next to Paul, Count Arthur Strong's chipper Baron Hardup is... well a bit lost. Of all the main cast, I thought him the weakest. I know he has a lot of fans who find him hilarious, but his humour wasn't to my taste. On the whole the director/ script writer has done well to give a decent amount of centre-stage time to all the leads (though along with several reviewers I'd have liked more of Lee and Natasha) but Count Arthur gets little to do – and to be frank, personally I don't think his character added anything to the show.

The first half ends with the iconic 'you shall go to the ball' scene which is a two hander between Amanda and Natasha.

One of the issues with having so many stars to accommodate is that certain plot points have to be cut, and in this case the meeting-the-old-lady-in-the-woods episode which establishes the relationship between Cinders and her Godmother has been done away with. This means that FGM turns up to save the day (err evening) out of the blue.

That's a minor quibble though. One or two of the reviewers have been critical of the scene. Don't listen to them. It's a genuine piece of theatre magic that had me gazing wide eyed and open mouthed at the stage.

And Lee wasn't even there.

At interval I turned to my companions. No need to ask what Karen or Julie (the fan) thought of the show so far. The guffaws, the boos, the cheers, the cries of 'Button's' coming from beside and behind me told me everything I needed to know. Two others were more reserved but still evidently enjoying themselves. Julie (ex boss) rattled off all the good points of the show, but it was Jeanette who expressed herself most eloquently and succinctly.

"Wow. That was magical."

I'd been bracing myself for less Mead in the second half. I was pleasantly surprised that he did waltz onto the stage a fair amount, this time sporting diamanté sprinkled ice-blue. (ooo pretty. You realise I am not just talking about the costume, don't you?).

He did have some more songs too. Can I remember what he sang? Nope. I was too overawed to remember clearly. I do remember one little vocal slip which prevented him going for a money note - otherwise he sounded wonderful. My companions didn't notice anything amiss.

One slight disappointment: a comic song, which we've seen Lee previously take part in, was in this production Meadless. Mind you, it was still a crowd pleaser and at last gave Count Arthur Strong a chance make the audience laugh.

With hindsight I think this might have been a sensible call by the director as (while robbing us of another chance to see Lee showing off his flair for slapstick) it left Prince Charming's dignity intact, for those oh so romantic moments.

Shame that Fairy Godmother scuppered Cinderella's chances of a passionate embrace by dressing her in a Natasha's ball-gown with skirts the size of a marquee. Seriously. I could have used her crinolines as a tent.

The ensemble had another big number... indeed there were many more songs, including several written for the pantomime. I probably need to hear them a couple more times before I start to hum them.

Paul Zerdin gets plenty of well deserved limelight including a scene interacting with audience members. Julian and Paul O'Grady have a double act... I know I have missed out shedloads but my memory of the second half is really hazy, until we get to the dénouement as our Prince has the ladies of the house try on the glass slipper, and the wicked stepmother and her daughters get their comeuppance.

At last, Cinderella, no longer attired in a bell-tent, gets the kiss she deserves (jealous me? Yes!) and the panto ramps up towards its end.

The last scene before the ubiquitous bringing on kiddies from the audience, being all about Mr O'Grady and...the Salvation Army.

Those of you who read my very first Aladdin report may remember that I felt the cast hadn't quite gelled together in the first week. No sense of that in Cinderella. Natasha/Lee/Paul Z/Nigel/Julian/Paul O'G... the camaraderie between them shone through.

I adored it!

The finale ended with perhaps half of the theatre on its feet, the cheers of a thousand delighted people echoing about the auditorium.

We left the theatre, and checking on the time, realised that the show had been almost three hours long. Knowing Julie couldn't be expected to rush, we didn't bother going to the stage door but said our farewells. We parted, each of us heading off for our various trains and buses.

Our work gang settled again into first class – enjoying sandwiches and wine, and chattering about the show we'd just seen.

This we, agreed, was the best work's Christmas do ever.

“What shall we do next year?” I asked.

“That depends, Jane,” said Julie “what do you think Lee will be in then?”

Ah. We might have started something...