

# Southend

by Jane W

I'm a planner. As a Lippy, I have to be. I don't drive; I don't want to constantly bug friends for lifts; and I don't leave near the train station. My smart phone holds a shed-loads of apps that help me plan my public transport routes and I usually I manage quite nicely thank you very much.

Except this time. My apps insisted I should take quite a complicated route across London to get me to Fenchurch St, which would leave me with only a few minutes to catch the train I needed.

Those that know me appreciate just how stressed that sort of rush makes me.

As it turned out I met a lovely friend in London. She had a much simpler and quicker suggestion, and got us to F St for the train **before** the one I needed. Which just goes to show as good as apps are, nothing beats a native guide.

We weren't the only ones heading to Southend: the Northern ladies were on the same train in force. Nice to see them!

The last leg of the journey passed swiftly in chit-chat, we disembarked at Westcliff and thanks to my friend's superior sense of direction were soon close to the theatre.

As we approached I happened to notice someone in the car park. A curly haired someone in white-shirt and jeans, a suit-bag slung over his shoulder.

The figure had his back to me and was at some distance.

My mind did a quick calculation of likelihood of it being Himself versus likelihood of it being doppelganger and came to a conclusion I liked.

"Ooo look!" I said

"Oh yes," my friend said "we're almost at the theatre already."

"But look!" I said gesturing furiously with my head in that traditional 'I'm-far-too-British-to-do-anything-sensible-like-just-point' way.

"It's a really nice theatre. I've always liked coming here."

"The stage door! The stage door!" I hissed. Lee was fumbling with the door, hampered by the suit bag.

"Ah yes. I suppose we should look for the stage door. It'll save time later."

By this time all ability to form coherent speech had deserted me, and I could do nothing more than issue a series of high-pitched squeaks until, getting his bag properly balanced, Lee managed to open the door and slip inside.

“Are you alright Jane?”

“Lee’s just gone into the theatre.”

“Oh. I missed that. Look there’s Mason.”

Mason, talented as he is, doesn’t have the same effect on my brain-function.

At the theatre my friend and I parted, she to check-in to her hotel, me to meet another friend, Julie (who wasn’t a fan, but is now fooling no one).

Julie (definitely a fan) had found herself a nice seat in the unseasonably warm (this is NOT a complaint) October sun, by the fountain at the main entrance. It’s been a while since I have seen Julie so I was very pleased to have half an hour to ourselves for a proper catch-up, while enjoying some picturesque sea-views. (Technically we were looking at an estuary rather than actual sea. Julie was enlightened on this point by a friend of hers from Scarborough. Sounds like coastal snobbery to me ☺).

At twenty past three the pair of us went back inside to claim our table for afternoon tea.

13 of us were due to meet for dinner. Far from being the last to arrive as I thought, Julie and I were the first, so we ordered drinks while we waited...and waited. This was odd. I’ve never known Loppies to be late en masse for food.

Usually a few of us at least are seated nice and early, unless of course...

Almost everyone arrived together big grins on their faces.

“Sorry we’re a bit late,” said the first to arrive. “It’s just the view in the bar was SO good!”

Ah ha! Yep. Who can blame em!

It was lovely to see so many friends gathered at the table, some of whom I’ve not see in over a year.

The theatre did us proud. I can confidently say that afternoon tea was a great success, very civilised. I felt like Miss Marple at Bertrams Hotel – though as far as I am aware no one got murdered in the course of the afternoon.

We had a long wait after tea and before meet and greet. Where else would we go but the bar?

Lots of familiar faces – regulars milling about, delighted cries of “Hello! How are you doing?” hugs and smiles and laughter – a happy hubbub which must have perplexed the locals.

Or perhaps not. Lee's done concerts here before.

Finally those of use lucky enough to have meet and greet tickets headed to...er well...it all got a bit confusing. The various pieces of information we'd been given contradicted each other, and if it hadn't been for one particularly observant friend, taking us in hand I'm not sure we'd have worked out where we were supposed to be.

Eventually we made it to the check-in desk, and from thence we were escorted to the private room and given a glass of something bubbly. Ooo very nice! Mind you perhaps I should have opted for a nice glass of iced water. That room was rather warm to say the least.

Tables had been set out around the walls, and many of us sat. I opted to stand.

I put down my coat, but refused to take off my jacket (it was my new velvet jacket bought in Rhyl and I was bloomin' well gonna wear it, no matter now warm it got) and tried to think sophisticated thoughts while sipping bubbles. I didn't manage.

He came in wearing tight jeans and a white shirt, long curls tumbling down in corkscrew twists over his forehead and into his eyes... yeah right. Let's forget sophisticated and concentrate on not-turn-into-jelly. The temperature went up by several degrees.

So how does this work? I wondered.

He started with the people close to the door – exchanged a few words, posed for photos, then after a few minutes the woman with him (the theatre manager perhaps) subtly steered him on to the next group.

It was a lovely experience, but also rather surreal – imagine the most genteel Stage Door ever, but indoors, with drinkies, and HOT. A soft murmuring of conversation as Lee spoke to his fans in small groups of twos or threes. An occasional flash as someone took a photograph, then on to the next group.

He spoke to the table where some of my closest friends had gathered...then he came to us.

Eye-contact!! A smile – a nod and a “hello”.

And this was the surreal bit. I didn't get Meadmushed as such but I did find myself stumped for something to say. I think this was because everything seemed so formal, rather than the free-form chaos of a stage door. Plus at the Stage Door I can always default to ‘the show was fabulous’ which wasn't the case BEFORE a show.

Ermm, errmm, there's Lee, looking gorgeous, staring straight at me! WHAT do I say??

He came to the rescue.

“Would you like a photo?”

Thank you Lee, yes, that would be lovely. And breathe!

My friends and I clustered around him.

The lady from the theatre took a few shots. Then he exchanged a few gracious words with us (do not ask me what; I really was Meadmushed by then) and he moved on to the next group. Sigh! I tell you I needed to cool off a bit after that!

Into the concert.

My ticket booker had done a wonderful job getting tickets right in the centre of the second row.

The front row of Cliffs is always reserved for friends of the theatre. The public are only allowed to buy them if the person who 'owns' the seat doesn't want it. I was pleased to see that many of Lee's fans were in the front row seats, and to see a contingent from Mushroom Theatre in the house.

I glanced behind me to see how well the seats had sold.

My estimate: I think the stalls were about two thirds full. The back of the stalls had large gaps but the front had filled-up nicely and people looked down from the circle too.

So with everyone settled the house-lights went down and Mason and Co emerged from the wings. The usual band members were augmented by a small brass section which added a richer, more layered sound to the numbers...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

On came the band – on bounded Lee.

And here we go – 'Where or When'. I sat staring up into his beautiful eyes as he gently built his way through the song, until that confidant final note rang through the auditorium. Oh yes. He was on form.

This is an aside but bear with me. My favourite novel features a very sexy character who is a modern day faery prince. His description always puts me in mind of Lee.

Dressed in his tux and crisp white shirt with stage lights throwing tangled, multi-coloured shadows over his face, Lee might have been playing that very character. That thought kept reoccurring to me right through the concert.

Lee's got the wrong coloured eyes though.

I digress.

On to Lee's welcome, and his first link.

Not surprisingly he talked at some length about being thrilled to be performing in his home town; his new home; the shows he'd seen at the Cliffs as a child; the work experience he'd done there sweeping the floor and operating the lights; and meeting celebrities performing on the stage.

Later he admitted to having been very nervous at this stage – and yes he did ramble, and did giggle, but his audience loved it. You could feel the Meady love, and it wasn't just the fans.

As usual 'Foggy Day in London Town' and 'Some Enchanted Evening' followed. I think the set list was the same as in his other concerts but a little switched about. Mind you I'm sure I'll get the songs in the wrong order anyway!

'I Fall in Love Too Easily' was again precursed (is that a word? Oh it'll do) by his story about snogging Louise, an older girl at school. This was a shorter and more restrained version of the story. Perhaps he thought he'd been getting too carried away with it. Or perhaps he thought Louise might be in the audience. ☺

'Close Every Door' is always a favourite of mine (no Lee you really haven't ever sung it in panto, never mind) this version was particularly dramatic, quickening the tempo over certain lines to heighten the emotion. I have heard him do that before but not so pronounced. I imagined myself back in the Adelphi watching Joseph. (Loincloth? I don't know what you mean.)

Other than the scripted funny moments, (like Lee's Lofty trip-up) there were one or two adlibbed ones. His foot caught the mike stand at one point causing him to stumble ever so slightly. So what does Lee do? Carry on smoothly? Nope. He does it again making a proper Norman Wisdom Style slap-tick routine out of it. That's our boy!

And another when talking about having been single for three years he shaded his eyes to peer out to the audience as if looking for Miss Right.

He does keep mentioning that he'll play the dame when he can't play Prince Charming any more...that was a very 'damesque' move. Though greeted with much more enthusiasm than a dame's advances ever are!

And yet there was one big laugh I expected that didn't come – 'Singing in the Rain'. The comedy dancing didn't happen. Instead, during the instrumental, he treated us to a series of slick, professional, quick-paced dance steps that made my jaw drop. So yes, he did end with pretending to have strained himself and a rub of his thigh, but he kept that very brief. Then he looked out into the audience with a confiding grin as if to say 'OK, I can dance!'

Again no guest singers, but with the brass section as well as the regular band members to entertain us I don't think anyone felt the lack. I'm not sure who the biggest showman was: John on violin or Harry on trombone. And Ricky was giving his all too!

The first half closed with a joyful 'Luck be a Lady' and he bounced off stage to cheers, and whoops so loud I thought he might get a Standing O. But no. Not just yet.

'Ain't that a Kick in the Head' started the second half...then...oh it's no good. I can't even remember which songs came in which half. Blame the Meadmush.

A bit that was new to me. After ‘The Way You Look Tonight’, Lee explained that the song is about going for a roast dinner at a Toby Carvery with a woman dressed up for a night out. There’s something so sweetly ordinary about Lee’s idea of a posh night out, isn’t there?

Oh and he fessed up that the first time he rehearsed the song he caught John’s eye at the most romantic point, and now has trouble getting through it without tittering.

‘All of Me’, ‘Lullabye’, and ‘Hushabye Mountain’ (another mention of hoping to do Chitty in the West End) all sounded beautiful, wherever they came in the running order.

As did ‘Pure Imagination’. He took Betsy to see Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in the West End. I saw it there too, and I genuinely think that Lee sings it far better than the actor I saw playing Willy Wonka. Lee emotes.

‘Anthem’ – what can I say about ‘Anthem’ that isn’t covered nicely by ‘wow’!

And he pulled out all of the stops and depressed a couple of pedals (pushing the organ analogy to breaking point) for Feeling Good, which was just tremendous! Having his home audience there to spurred him on more and more as the concert progressed.

I’m not keen on By Myself, and the addition of the brass section only made it more jazzy and less to my taste, but the crowd surrounding me adored it. Oh the noise they made as they cheered him!

On to the end of the show. Lee sat down by Mason for a few moments to introduce See You In My Dreams, as he was speaking a heckler in the audience shouted something.

“What was that?” He asked.

“Show us your loincloth!”

Lee smiled slowly and with a mocking shake of his head said:

“Not these days, love.”

AWwwwwwwww!!!!

He started ‘See You in My Dreams’. Without any kind of encouragement the audience began clicking their fingers or clapping very gently. There seemed to be a wonderful camaraderie between audience and performers – everyone was there to have a great time, everyone was sorry it was coming to an end.

As he finished, the fans in the front few rows glanced around, mustering each other with brief nods. The centre block of the front rows leapt to their feet as soon as ‘See You In My Dreams’ finished. Lee bowed and grinned and mouthed thank you.

I checked behind. Yes, the rest of the stalls had followed us.

He left the stage to screams for more, and returned a few seconds later. We decided not to sit. This 'Any Dream Will Do' would be one long standing ovation, band and audience singing along with Lee.

What better way to show him how much he is loved!