

Pheasantry, November 2017

And now, the end is near

And so I face, the final...err...pizza.

Where has this year gone?

It seems like only a few days ago my friends and I were settling into our seats for what became the first of Lee's residency on Mother's Day. It's now November and so very much has happened since then. Time really has flown.

And perhaps that's why on the weekend before Lee's final Pheasantry gig my Stage Lopypy friends and I were just a wee bit disorganised...

I'd been raiding my wardrobe trying to find something stylish, light and warm that wouldn't crease too much in my rucksack (I failed) when my email pinged.

One of my Stage Lopypy friends, newly returned from winter sun, wanted to check the 'plan' for next weekend. She asked the most perplexing question. 'Who's coming?'

Oh dear. It seemed that my notes didn't tally with my friends' notes and...crickey did I actually book for November????!!!

Frantic checking of email confirmation and we at last worked out that five of the Stage Loppies intending to go did indeed have seats booked (pew!) However we would all be sitting scattered around on tables for one. ARRRGGHH!!!

A quick phone call to the ever helpful Pheasantry booking line, and we managed to combine our individual bookings into one table.

Sorted!

Great!

On to Sunday. Wrapped up in my winter coat, rucksack on back, I slithered my way to the bus stop, praying that the sleety stuff descending from the heavens wouldn't become thick snowy stuff. Thankfully it didn't and the Sunday bus service ran bang on time (meaning I had just under an hour to wait when I got to the train station. Better that than late!)

At least this time the café was open and, warmed by a nice cup of tea, I eventually stepped onto the train and found my seat. Two stops later my usual traveling companion joined me. A little later two more Northern Ladies boarded. The very amenable (and fanciable – what? I can look!) young man next to me agreed to move to allow the four of us to sit together. The journey passed in chatter and catching-up (aided by a small gin and tonic) – all very civilised.

We reached London, there to meet with the last of Northern Ladies in today's gang. We arrived at the rendezvous.

Where is she? She ought to be here by now? And who is that Eskimo coming towards us? Honestly none of us recognised our friend in her big furry hood. For my part I was quite covetous. Her winter coat looked far more snugly than mine.

Anyway – back into the station. We had a tube to catch.

A short ride later, and we stood at our hotel's reception checking in to our rooms.

“When does the bar shut?” one of us asked. (You've got to get the priorities sorted out.)

“On a Sunday, 11pm.”

“Ah,” said our expert hotel booker “I knew there was a reason I don't normally book this one.”

Other than the early closing bar, I had no complaints about our room. We freshened up quickly and very soon were back on the tube, heading to Meadyland.

I split up from my Northern Lady friends at the door, to join with the Stage Loppies. The five had become six, with a very welcome addition.

The Pizza Express was packed, and as the waiter lead us to a table, mostly with other Meady-Followers. We greeted numerous fans already tucking into their dinners.

“Hello! Fancy seeing you here!”

Our waiter left us with menus, we made our choices and waited for him to take our orders. And waited. Then we waited some more...

Hmmm – it's fun chatting but time's ticking on...

He returned eventually.

“I'm very sorry, but we're having...some difficulties. Your mains will take at least half-an-hour. If you are going to see Lee Mead [how could he tell? Oh yeah coz we know half the other patrons] you might want to eat downstairs. It will be opening soon. I can bring you drinks now if you like...”

Drinks. Yes lovely. Diet cokes – except for the two of us wanting wine. He also served dough-balls to those of us who were starving (oddly enough the wine-drinkers).

I was popping the last of my dough balls into my mouth when our flustered waiter returned.

"Downstairs is about to open. You can leave whatever you think is right on the table and go straight down if you like."

As far as we were concerned 'right' meant the full cost of our drinks and dough balls. We consulted the menu, pulled out our change, and left as near to the proper cost as we could.

In the meantime our waiter returned and filled up our wine glasses! Right to the brim!!!

That's me sorted for the rest of the evening. Hic!

It turned out that the Jazz Club hadn't opened (a subtle ploy mayhaps to clear a table?), but I enjoyed the excited atmosphere on stairs, as the fans queued for their tables.

Now it's no secret that my friends and I hoped to be sitting on our favourite table, the one we had in October. Note use of the word 'hoped'; not 'expected'. Because we'd not booked for this gig quite as quickly as some of the others, I personally expected to be further off with a side, or even a back view of the Meadster.

Well our favourite table had been given to Lee's mates and to his girlfriend. I'm sure none of us begrudged that lovely lady the excellent view.

We were lead toward towards the table behind the staircase. OK, so I'll fess up. I'd been telling myself I didn't mind where we sat...we'd been very lucky so far... we must take a turn at a poorer table.

Oh the day though all I could think was – bugger!

But as it turned out we weren't put quite behind the stairs. With a certain amount of squishing together we reckoned all of us could get a decent view. (My view turned out to be very nice; I hope the same could be said for the rest of the party.)

Our table had another big advantage. Two more of our Stage Lopyy pals got the table on the balcony immediately behind us. I'd not expected to see them. What a happy coincidence! All in all I was "chuffed as owt" (sorry my accent is coming out) with my last Pheasantry seat.

As we waited one of the fans hatched a cunning plan. Let's wave phone torches during Any Dream Will Do, and make like it's a big stadium gig. I liked this plan, and passed it on. It's fun when the fans are plotting.

The nice blonde waitress (the one who has become a Lee fan herself since the start of his residency) served our table with pizza. The Jazz Club buzzed with excited voices. Friends greeted friends, dodging waiting staff, as we moved between tables. I backed into a young man – a waiter? I turned to apologise. Oh. Keith Jack. (I don't think he'd even noticed I'd bumped into him. Probably because I'm so light and delicate. Shut up! I am in my head!)

The band came on. Anticipation mounted. A figure weaved between the tables – here comes....

...a bloke with the music stand.

OK settle down.

OOo – here comes... no same bloke. This time with a bottle of water.

Third time lucky?

Here comes the Meadster! All sunshine smiles broad enough to brighten the dreariest of November days.

He paused to acknowledge his friends as he passed them, then with a delectable spring he mounted the stage and for the last time his dulcet voice caressed the lyrics of 'Everything.' (My, I'm getting all poetic.)

As my ears were enjoying the vocals my eyes were very much appreciating the view.

He'd dressed for the occasion, in his Some Enchanted Evening three piece suit again. I smiled remembering my last Pheasantry experience when our waiter had attempted to give that suit to me. Actually I don't think the smile left my face. May be once or twice. In the emotional songs. But that's a good thing.

So he finished 'Everything' and went into his introduction. As you would expect he made much of this being his final Pheasantry gig (for now), selling out the little jazz club yet again, and his gratitude to the staff, etc. And he made his usual remarks about being nervous (which I will use tomorrow in the Presenting Confidently course that I am running, to demonstrate that nerves are normal and even a seasoned performer, in a small venue he's played numerous times before, still gets nervous . But I won't say it all in one breath).

So far he'd been talking pretty much as he usually does, but then... Ok it's hard to describe, and I might have been imaging this but...

It seemed to me he dropped all his guard, and forgot about being on stage. He just started chatting as he sometimes does at the stage door. Not a celebrity, not a performer going through a routine – just that lovely bloke from Southend, gossiping about life, and telling stories - an ordinary guy.

OK a gorgeous guy. In a very dapper suit. I hope you get what I mean.

He announced that his girlfriend was here, (cue half shy half proud smile) then listed other friends who had joined him for the night - Keith Jack, Marti Webb...

"And you!" He said grinning at us all "You're all my friends!" And with a cheeky little smirk. "Friends who pay to see me. How lucky am I?"

This set the tone of the evening, with Lee evidently enjoying teasing his devoted his fans:

"Did any of you catch me in [insert name of show] ?" (Cheers) "All of you? Of course."

At one point he went even further.

"Did any of you come my Some Enchanted Evening tour?" Cue whoops and applause. He turned to the Northern Ladies' table.

"Now there was a big cheer from that side of the room. Nothing from here. Didn't you come?"

Naturally lots of laughter and "Of course we did!" And that wicked little Meady grin again. As I said, he was really enjoying playing with us!

Meady's banter may have gone noticeably off-piste but the set-list stayed well and truly on the standard track.

'Grow Old With Me' followed. After that Lee introduced his band. Adam on piano (replacing "Mickey Blue") will be MD for the Christmas Concert. Nico has again taken over guitar duties from Tommy, and...

"John on violin"

Hurrah! Whoop whoop!

"John got a bigger cheer than me. That's not fair! It's MY show! MINE!!!"

We collapsed in laughter along with Lee and John himself. He's a fine actor, is our Meadster, but Diva is a role he can't pull off 😊 - though he gave it another go when he noticed that the Pheasantry had hung another performer's photo opposite his own. (How dare they!)

Any pretence of Divaness was undermined anyway by his usual self - effacing link to 'Maria.'

He really needn't worry about that big note. He nails it every time, and with a beautifully controlled vibrato.

A digression on the subject of Lee's vibrato. I'd not noticed really it before, but it so happens a couple of days ago my best friend and I were discussing a programme which mentioned Freddie Mercury's vibrato. This made me listen carefully to Lee's sustained notes more critically. Gosh. Ok. I'm more impressed than ever!

On to 'All of Me', which became one of my favourite Meady songs from his very first rendition, and which pulls my heart strings as I hear him revel in those beautiful lyrics. Ooo and it'll be on his new album.

SQUEEEALL! Oh yes I'm happy.

From 'Maria' to Wham (as the GO always points out). Aww. I hope this isn't the last time I'll see Lee's comedy Strictly Come Dancing audition.

And I REALLY hope I've not heard Lee's mesmerising 'Blackbird' for the last time - or for that matter Nico's stunning intricate guitar solo.

Right. I'm struggling to remember now what else happened in the first half.

Oh of course...the slight embarrassment of being the only one to call out when he asked us where we came from. I gather the Northern Ladies let me fly the flag for (or should that be raise the white rose for) Yorkshire. He thanked us for coming all that distance – and I have to say I was surprised that we seemed to have come furthest. So often someone's journey involves planes!

‘Ain't that a Kick in the Head’... ‘Back for Good’...

Oh yes and he pre-empted the cunning plan by asking us to waive our phone torches as we sang along. Afterwards he thanked us for helping him pretend he's at the 02. So sweet!

‘Close Every Door’.... Gosh yes. ‘Close Every Door.’ Starting with an invitation to imagine him behind bars and semi naked. The quiet but utterly dirty sniggers told me that everyone else had wandered into the same happy visual place.

And I'm sure I heard Lee say "You're there already aren't you?"

To be honest Lee there are some days I never leave.

But his wonderful emotive storytelling banishes all other thoughts from my mind as he sings of The Children of Israel. Good news people. CED will be on the album too!

Interval. Time to...OK let's face it. Most of us are women of a certain age. You KNOW what it was time to do!

Part 2.

If you've been reading my reports regularly you will know I have a very great liking for ‘Feel’. Those opening notes always make me shiver (even when it comes on in the supermarket) and I lifted my face to the Meadster as he intoned "Come and take my hand..."

"Tia Maria? Did you order a Tia Maria?" ARRGHH NO!

"A Tia Maria and a latte?"

The owners of said Tia Maria duly found. I settled down to immerse myself in the remainder of the song. Ahhh. Nice.

The second half of the show brought us one bit of bad news.

It's about the Christmas Concert. I'm very sorry to tell you this; he's not allowed snow inside the theatre.

I know! Outrageous! But he has a cunning plan (we're not the only ones to hatch them) to make it snow outside the theatre. Let's see how that works!

If Lee's banter had gone off piste in the first half of the show in the second it got onto a different blooming mountain. 'Hushabye Mountain' to be exact.

"So I was in a show called Hushabye Mountain. NO! That's the song not the show. The show was Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. You see when you're in a show like that you learn about three or four songs. But in a show this it's more like twenty songs..."

There then followed some Meady maths about the number of words - and the long and the short of it is: he's got a lot to learn so if he makes the occasional slip it's understandable so don't get at him if he calls a show by the name of a song in it or vice versa.

In many ways I think "Oops, slip of the tongue," would have sufficed.

His explanation was much funnier.

'Hushabye Mountain' (which was again beautiful) segued naturally enough into memories of 'Me Ol Bamboo.' "How I hated that stick" he revealed. Then he talked about losing three stone while playing Potts and coming off stage dripping in sweat.

"Ah, " he said no doubt realising refined ladies like what we are don't appreciate seeing men sweating, "I don't do sexy."

But I could hear a lot of appreciative "mmms" and girlish titters from all around me. Oh Lee. You really do do sexy!

There was so much banter in the second half – giggle upon giggle.

A charming anecdote about his daughter for a start. Betsy, bless her, is seven and knows what she wants. Lee's impression of an obstinate seven year old refusing to put on her coat was hysterical.

I can't remember why he started telling us about playing to tiny audiences. Bear with me, it went something like this:

"Smallest audience I've ever played to: about seven people. I was in Brighthelmton..." on to a tale I've heard before about Ken Dodd.

Then "So I was playing a banana." He mimed being in a banana costume. I so can't do justice to it in writing but please try and imagine. OK. Got it?

Have we finally found a role that not even Lee can make sexy?

Another funny Diva moment in the second half.

By this point a tickly cough had started to bother him. He paused to drink some water (which he'd previously placed on one of the tables in the front row). As he drank he asked the band to play some music. Now he did this in October which flummoxed his band until they

eventually managed to improvise something. Methinks this time they were prepared coz they immediately struck up a tune.

Don't ask me what said tune was. I didn't know it but it must have struck a chord (pun intended) with the Meadster who embarked on a tongue in cheek soliloquy about his own brilliance. Oh how we tittered!

What else? More good news for many of us: 'Leave Right Now' will also be on the new album.

Oh and Marti Webb took the guest sport for the second half with her iconic version of 'Tell Me on a Sunday!' Given my emotional state at the moment I'm rather proud that I didn't start blubbering into my wine glass.

Well it was a very nice Pinot Grigio and I would not want to dilute it.

My highlights from the second half:

- A highly emotional 'Bring Him Home' (come the day he's old enough he will make a fabulous Valjean. THEN I'll go and see Les Mis!)
- An exuberant 'Feeling Good' in which he expressed all his joy in life. Even if you're not a particular fan of the song (personally I am) you can't help holding your breath as he ramps up to that final triumphant note.
- Can I count Lee taking his jacket off as a highlight? Well it's my report so it's going on my list. So there.
- And 'Why God Why' which again gives Lee every excuse to show his emotional range as well as his stunning vocal ability.

He again talked about how he missed out on going to Broadway to play Chris because he accepted the Lofty role.

"Oh well perhaps I'll get another chance - when I'm 60."

He then hobbled up and down the stage bent over an imaginary walking stick mumbling the words of WGW. It was a disconcerting good impression of my dad.

He straightened up and looked perplexed.

"Why do I get a northern accent when I'm older?" He asked. Hmmm perchance he has subconscious plans to retire to Yorkshire. Tee hee!

But the best moment really was saved for last. For 'Any Dream Will Do' the phones lit up again. Others lifted candles as everyone sang along. Behind me my Queen from the Stage Loppies raised her voice in a trilling descant. Ooo we filled that place will love!

He left to cheers and applause that would have rivalled the last night of Joseph - well if you extrapolated the noise from 80 voices to 3,000.

And he bounced away saying "See you next week!" Oh yes Lee. You'll see a goodly number of us!

Time for hugs and good byes. Or for the most part au revours. For once I couldn't linger long myself. The Northern ladies all agreed we'd like a night cap and as our hotel bar closed at 11pm we decided not to wait around.

I hurried off to the Ladies room.

Hmmm a queue. Not a big queue - was it worth going up to the top floor?

I decided I may as well and had just started up the staircase when I heard a familiar voice above me.

There he was. His black coat open over tea shirt and jeans, looking relaxed, happy and gorgeous.

"Thank you Lee," I said as I passed him "that was fabulous." (Or words to that effect). He paused and turned to thank me.

"The last Pheasantry gig. I can't believe it." I said. So far so articulate. I was rather pleased with myself.

"I know! It's gone so quickly."

Suddenly I'm conscious that I'm on my own facing Mr Mead and actually involved in an actual conversation. My brain deserted me.

"Will you be coming back to the Pheasantry?" Stupid, stupid question. Yes, of course he will at some point, but not next year.

"Well," he said slowly "there's the tour next year." I could almost hear the subtext: "You do know there's a tour next year? I did mention it..."

(Quick Jane! Say something witty and an intelligent that shows you're fully aware of next year's schedule.)

"Yes if course. We'll be following you around the country."

(Or perhaps shutting up and getting outta there would be a better idea.)

But Lee being the gentleman he is, gave me a sweet smile and turned back towards the jazz club.

I ran off.

And so other than the gathering of coats, rounding up of roommates and the inevitable late night discussions and reviews of the evening, my 2017 Pheasantry experience ended. And a wonderful experience it was.

These Pheasantry gigs feel like Lee's gift to his stalwart fans. As my mate Julie said "It's like he's singing in your living room." That's so true.

Alas, not all of us can take advantage of them, but I hope most of us have managed at least one of these fabulous concerts.

For my part I am hugely grateful that I've been able to go to so many.

I've needed this regular drip feed of Mead. I've needed that a few hours each month, without worries when life is just about a little candlelit jazz club, and a beautiful man with a beautiful voice. And all the wonderful friends I've made following him.

Thank you ladies.

Au revoir xxx