

Billingham, Whitley Bay and Camberley June 2019

by Jane W

Billingham

I stepped onto the little platform at Thornaby, hitched my ruck-sack onto my shoulder and took a deep breath of warm June air. I can't remember being more grateful to get to a station.

Three days before I had been in the throes of the worst and longest attack of MdDS that I have ever had. I'd feared I'd have to write off the entire weekend, but suddenly, almost miraculously, I recovered completely on Wednesday. And my lovely friends made every effort to help me, picking me up at Thornaby so I didn't need to change trains.

Lee's My Story Tour has taken us to some lovely places this year.

Billingham wasn't one of them.

A mundane shopping centre full of mundane shops. Concrete buildings of the 1970's hey-let's-not-bother-making-them-attractive style.

Even the glorious weather failed to brighten the soulless, grey flagged (hmmm the word 'plaza' is too exotic. 'Courtyard'? No too interesting. I'm going to have to go with 'square') square we had to traverse on the quest for somewhere to eat.

It reminded me of Milton Keynes without the ambience.

Our first choice of restaurant being full, (it did seem to be the only restaurant in the place that Trip Advisor was willing to recommend) we selected Weatherspoon's.

Billingham lifted a tad in my estimation. It's Weatherspoon's is very good: clean, airy, not too noisy and with some of the best scampi I've eaten.

My southern friends were really happy with the prices too.

"A bottle of Pinot Grigio for less than £10!!! Let's splash out on expensive stuff!"

So we shared a £13 bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Big rollers us!

Tummies fed over we headed to The Forum theatre to feed our ears and eyes as well.

The Forum is one of those modern theatres that tend to get mixed up in my mind, unless there's something particularly notable about them.

Actually, there was something notable about The Forum: an odd positioning of two sets of steps leading up to the stage meant that those of us in the centre of the front row had to clamber a little to get to our seats. Inconvenient when you're trying not to disturb other audience members, and potentially dangerous in an evacuation.

At least the stage wasn't too high, so no craning of necks necessary.

Unfortunately, this particular venue hadn't sold well. I think we were the only regular fans to make it there. This is the problem with a provincial venue on a work-day evening. The auditorium was far from full.

Lee himself commented as soon as he arrived on stage:

“It’s a small audience,” he said with a tad of disappointment in his face. Then he ramped his winning smile right up to 11 and added “but a lovely audience!”

Chuckles and awwws all round, and Lee launched into “Some of us Belong to the Stars.”

I’ll say this for the residents of Billingham – they might not have turned out in huge numbers to see Lee, but those that did come made their enthusiasm very plain. One young lady stood for every one of his big theatre numbers and...hold on...correction... she stood for every one of his songs.

Oh sorry, just to make clear - I mean she gave him a solo standing ovation every time. Had she been standing *during* his songs I am pretty sure someone would have asked her to cease and desist.

Though there were a couple who needed a bit of a hard stare. From time to time, while Beverley and Lee were talking, I could hear a conversation going on.

So could Lee. He dealt with it quite masterfully.

“I’m sorry,” he said when he failed to answer one of Beverley’s questions, “I’m a bit distracted because there seems to be a discussion going on down there.”

I wonder if these people know there’s a special place in hell for people who paint over screws or talk in the theatre?

Despite this distraction Lee was on great form that evening, vocally and with his stories.

To explain the format of the show succinctly it’s a sort of modern ‘This is your Life’ with videos rather than live guests, Beverly Humphreys in the Eamon Andrews role, and the red book replaced by a glittery folder. And songs, of course, performed to the deft accompaniment of Adam on the piano.

At the end of the first half, as Lee finished “Anthem”, we saw no reason not to join the enthusiastic lady by leaping along with her to our feet (in a slightly more subdued (OK creaky) way) and many of the locals joined us. At any rate he left the stage at interval with a decent standing ovation.

Part 2 started as always with the video clip of Graham Norton announcing Lee’s Any Dream Will Do win, going on to Lee singing a short Joseph medley – “Pharaoh’s Dream” followed by “Close Every Door”. “Close Every Door” is the last power-house song he does in the show. The rest of part two he concentrates on ballads – and beautiful they are too.

Beverley also sings. This time she’s changed her song to “People Who Need People” which I prefer to her choice the previous, “Our Love is Here to Stay”. She’s also changed her tasselled and embroidered red frock to an elegant silky red sheath, just keeping the wrap that went with the other.

In part 2 Beverley always asks Lee questions from the audience, usually given to her during the meet and greet. Billingham was remarkable for the sheer number of questions. I can’t

remember many but am pretty sure we had ‘Will you marry me’ 😊. I do recall that at some point during the show (it may have been in this section or earlier when they showed the video of Brian McCann) Lee mentioned how much he would like to go back to Ireland. Good news methinks for several fans I know.

The show ended with an exquisite rendition of “Make You Feel My Love” and again (partly helped by the oh so enthusiastic lady) he was given a standing O – which is rare at this point because it’s not a big build song which would normally get people onto their feet.

Naturally we knew what would come next.

“Do you want one more?”

What would he say if the audience replied ‘no thanks’!

We didn’t, of course. We screamed out – I mean raised our voices in a ladylike fashion – ‘Yes’.

“I closed my eyes...”

Now, there’s something about this particular tour which interferes with our swaying in time to ADWD. In every other tour we’ve managed it without effort, almost subconsciously but this tour we keep getting out of time.

After much thought we have come up with three reasons:

1. Adam plays it just a tad slower than we expect.
2. There is no drums or rhythm section to help us keep the beat.
3. I’ve normally been the one to take the lead and I really struggle when there isn’t a beat. (Or to put it more succinctly – I have zero rhythm.)

Our plan was to allow...OK let’s face it, anyone who wasn’t me to set the pace – and oh joy it worked! We were swaying along and ‘aha ahing’, though we did think perhaps Lee wondered why we were all looking at each other rather than at him during the first verse!

It’s always nice to have a little chat with Lee and Beverley after a show and we managed to see both that night. As there were just a few locals for autographs and no other regulars, they spent several minutes with us.

I chatted quite a while to Beverley, complimenting her on her new frock and new song. But I listened to the discussion with Lee over people talking in the theatre and why it happens. It’s something none of us understand yet I recall my lovely mum-in-law, who I respect in so many ways, trying to start a conversation when we were watching Lee play Joseph -
– during “Close Every Door” for heaven’s sake!

Whitley Bay (via Yarm)

Next morning, after a nice long lie in, we set off on the hunt for breakfast.

None of us felt inclined to linger in Billingham, and we knew we were quite close to a lovely little market town we really did want to see more of.

Lee played a concert in Yarm a couple of years previously. We'd gone (no surprise there) but had arrived only a couple of hours before kick-off with just enough time to eat but no time to explore. What we had seen on the way to the restaurant had charmed us, so even though it meant doubling back on ourselves we decided to return.

Yarm didn't disappoint. It's a miserable town that disappoints when the sunshine is beating down (stand forward Billingham), but Yarm fairly shone.

We spent much of the time wandering by the river at a pace somewhere between 'bimble' and 'womble', taking photos and admiring the scenic beauties and the flood defences.

Exploration of Yarm finished we headed to Whitley Bay.

I'd never been to Whitley Bay before. I've been to Tynemouth on many occasions, and to other places on the North East coast.

I was happy to find it a pleasant seaside resort, not so overrun with tourists as to be crowded; not so quiet as to feel flat.

We parked in the theatre carpark quite close to the stage door (to help with a speedy get away after the concert), then spent 20 minutes trying to figure where to pay and how much, before it dawned on us that this was (fanfare) free parking!

With very favourable first impressions we headed towards the sea, scaling the speed up from 'womble' to stroll.

There's a green headland of the sort chirpy Victorian youngsters might go to fly kites, overlooking a wide promenade which in turn looks over a sandy beach.

Our wanderings brought us eventually to a splendid edifice in the style of Brighton Pavilion which (I understand from a quick check of Google) is the Whitley Bay Spanish City.

Here we met some of our friends who had arrived some while before us and had booked afternoon tea in the be-domed building.

This struck us as a nice way to spend an hour and we decided a cup of tea or coffee would be just the thing.

So we took seats at a table set up on the prom, in front of the Spanish City and sipped our hot beverages while we gloried in the sunshine, and listened to the delicate strains of that most traditional of English seaside entertainments – a didgeridoo player.

Here we whiled away a pleasant hour, reminiscing about our Meady Tour experiences, discussing our options for dinner, and proposing various ways to sabotage a didgeridoo using nothing more than a teaspoon and a sugar bowl.

Fortified with tea and coffee we managed a vigorous amble back to the car to search out our evening finery.

The foyer of the Playhouse buzzed with excitement. I spotted many familiar faces in the crowd: our friends from earlier of course, and the Northern Ladies there in force and one of

my good friends from the Stage Loppies who lives near London but unbeknown to us had chosen to make a short holiday up North taking in Lee's concert on the way. I don't blame her. The North East coast is quite beautiful and there are the glories of Durham nearby.

It was a delightful surprise to have a chance to catch up with her.

We went into the auditorium and found our seats in the centre of the row F. Though further back than Lee fans normally choose, the rake of the seats meant that we had an excellent view looking over the heads of the people in front, and pretty much on eye level with Lee.

On with the show, pre-cursed as always with a montage of photos cataloguing Lee's life and career accompanied by medley of songs he's recorded.

Then Beverley Humphries, swept onto the stage in her new red frock, and introduced Lee as "The man who really does belong to the stars."

Lee sauntered out from the wings, looking so very debonair.

After his first song he asked whether we liked his northern accent. We laughed and applauded as I wondered whether the good people of Whitley Bay – and Scotland (it transpired some members of the audience had travelled from Dundee) thought the soft Greater Manchester accent Lee adopts was decidedly southern.

With Lee seated in his wonderful purple chair, Beverley started her 'interview'.

The format for these shows is always the same.

In the first half Beverley asks Lee about his childhood, his early forays onto the stage and the start of his career. She encourages Lee to tell his stories, which he does with his usual comedic flair, and self-deprecation.

Having seen these concerts several times I am very impressed with the way the pair of them make the questions and answers feels so conversational. I've heard Lee tell the same anecdotes over and over yet he always makes them seem fresh, as though this is the first time he's shared them.

Occasionally he goes off-piste, usually as a reaction to something that's happened in the theatre, or a recent occurrence. In Whitley Bay his Ken Dodd impression lasted much longer than normal, renewing every time the laughter died away to illicit another round of hilarity.

The conversation is backed by relevant photos and punctuated by video messages from important people in Lee's life. And, of course, by songs, each cued by Beverley, sometimes more than once coz Mr Mead can be a tad forgetful.

"It was your headmaster that awoke your imagination."

"Yes, he's a great guy."

"So he encouraged your imagination..."

"Um yes."

"That pure imagination..."

“You say that like it’s a cue for a song, Beverley!”

From then on the songs in the first half are milestones in the career of Mead.

His first experience on the stage, playing Danny In Grease in the school musical, is marked by a gigglesome version of “Sandy”, with jacket collar pulled up, and a cool swagger to accompany it.

Then “Seventeen” which he sang in his first semi-professional musical, ‘A Slice of Saturday Night’. It’s a delight. Shy Rick’s efforts to lose his virginity is wickedly funny to begin with. Coming from a handsome man in his thirties makes it hysterical.

“This is the Moment” is the audition song which secured him a job for a summer season in Bridlington. It’s a pivotal moment in his career too as, he assured us, the audition was his last throw of the dice (following a long string of unsuccessful attempts to get work) before giving up on show business. Thank goodness they gave him the gig!

“Music of the Night” marks his time in Phantom. He’d make such a seductive Phantom. The intensity he puts into those lyrics, oh my, his Christine wouldn’t stand a chance.

Though the spell was somewhat diminished by a walky-talky being audible in the final line. Lee kept his concentration intent (difficult enough as he’s already had to shorten the big note to stifle a cough) to finish with the usual soft, sensual note – but immediately started laughing once he’d done.

“What was that? ‘Breaker breaker...’ “ he kept making walky talky style announcements for several minutes, to the great amusement of all.

Finally, the song that more than any other we associate with Lee securing his place on Any Dream Will Do – “Anthem”. It’s still always one of my highlights even when he has no backing except Adam on the piano. In this case Lee dedicated it to a gentleman he’d meet at the meet and greet, Vic. At 97 Vic is Lee’s oldest fan. Anthem is always the perfect conclusion to the first act, but at Whitley Bay the dedication made it very special indeed.

The second act feels more free-form in terms of song choices. The mile-stones have largely been ditched. His time as Joseph is represented by a verse of “Close Every Door” and a short snatch of “Joseph’s Coat”, where Lee sings the 29 colours (or thereabouts).

Whereas his time in the Ben Kenright production is remembered in a verse of “Pharaoh’s Dream” which, had we still been taking each song in chronological order, ought to have come in the first half. As it is, it forms a short medley with “Close Every Door” to open the second half. I have no doubt this was a conscious decision to ensure that we come back after interval to something fun and boppy.

The only other song associated with any of Lee’s shows that makes an appearance in the second half is “Hushabye Mountain” from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

The others are “Let Her Down Easy”, “Beginning to Breathe Again” and “Make You Feel My Love”, all of which are beautiful, lilting ballads. This means that musically at least, part two is not as varied as part one.

On the other hand there is a lot of variety in the types of stories he tells, from the rather serious account of meeting one of his school bullies as a grown man, to this heart-warming description of nursing his new born baby girl while attempting to learn his lines for Wicked.

Then of course there is the segment where Beverley asks Lee questions gathered from audience members before the show. These of course can range from serious enquiries which often receive insightful answers, to playful “what’s your favourite...”, to some silly request usually along with lines of “Will you go out with my daughter?”

This is an appropriate point to add that at 37 Mr Mead is still one utterly gorgeous guy, more so, in my opinion than as the 25 year old youth who won Any Dream Will Do. At this concert he looked particularly hot, in both senses of the word, and had his shirt unbuttoned right down to where it met his waistcoat. (What?! I’m just an observant person THAT’S ALL _ OK??!!). He made mention of the heat on stage, pretending to doze off with much exaggerated snoring.

Lee never allows any of his concerts to become carbon copies of each other. No matter how much Beverley attempts to keep him on track there’s always something to divert him.

At Whitley Bay there were at least two diversions.

One a text from Tim Rice which Lee received in the interval. This gave him an excuse to talk more about his respect for Tim, and to tell us that Tim had intended to film a VT for Lee’s show but work commitments prevented it.

Then Keith Jack’s dad was in the audience, so this led him to talk about his friendship with Keith. He drifted off into a private reverie for a few seconds, then wondered aloud how often rivals for a life-changing a prize remain close friends more than 10 years on?

Very few I suspect Mr Mead.

I always love hearing Lee talking about the friendships he formed during Any Dream Will Do. It reminds me of the friendships I made at the same time, and I feel hugely blessed to share these Meady memories with so many of them still.

And so we came to Any Dream Will Do, the last song of the evening and Lee’s signature piece. We sort of managed to get our swaying in time after a couple of attempts and belted out the ‘aha-ah’s’ much to the amusement of the row in front.

With a goodly number of fans in the audience it wasn’t surprising to have a full and enthusiastic standing ovation and Lee, Adam and Beverley left the stage to rapturous applause and calls for yet more.

For this particular evening we didn’t have a hotel room booked as we intended to head back down south (how seldom I can say that!) to my house. I was looking forward to showing my little house off!

Mind you, with so many friends to chat to, and with the hope of seeing Lee to congratulate him we weren’t about to embark on our journey straight away.

A large group of us lurked by the stage door.

It was a fine summer evening, and so pleasant to stand in the lingering daylight inhaling fresh air after the heat inside the theatre, yet be warm enough without cumbersome coats.

A number of locals also hung around hopefully, and within ten minutes Lee rewarded their patience by emerging from the stage door, signing their memorabilia and posing for photos.

Once the last of these ladies left, he turned to us with a big smile.

“Hya! Did you enjoy it?”

Everyone spoke at once ‘yes’, ‘of course’, ‘it was brilliant’.

Now I still suffer from Meadmush on a regular basis. There are occasions where I simply can’t say anything beyond ‘It was fantastic’ . That night, however, I managed to speak.

Glancing down at his cut-off cargo pants I commented:

“You’re looking a bit more casual now.”

“Yes,” he said “It’s too hot for trousers!” He wasn’t wrong.

After lovely, long relaxed chat, Lee said his goodbyes. His fans drifted away and off we went back to my little house, laughing, joking and singing all the way.

Camberley

Of the three towns we saw all the towns we visited over the course of the weekend, Camberley made the least impression on me, probably because I saw nothing more of it than the Weatherspoons, the theatre and a multi-storey carpark. Those three buildings were as good as any examples of their kind, so my overall impression of the place was positive, if limited.

I’d been yawning when we arrived, but a decent meal seemed to sort me out, and I headed to the meet and greet with high hopes of staying awake through it, and the following concert.

Meady-tours meet and greets come in many varied guises, from the awkward sitting in the auditorium as the GO stands next to you, to The Concorde Club’s pressed, white linen covered tables and complimentary sparkly stuff.

The Camberley Theatre definitely ranked in the top end of nice places for a meet and greet, with its large round tables, and immaculate table clothes. No prosecco though. We had contemplated buying a glass for the occasion but decided against it.

We chose a table and made ourselves comfy. Before many minutes had passed Lee and Beverley both arrived. Lee came straight to us.

“Hello! How are you all?” he said.

“Very well.”

“Fine, thanks.”

“We’re good.”

“Tired!”

We talked about the long journey south, complimented him on “Someone to Watch Over Me”, and after a few minutes chat he said his ta-tas and moved on to the next table.

A few minutes later Beverley joined us. We chatted with her again about the journey down from up north, her new song – general pleasantries. Then Beverley offered to take any questions to ask Lee. I had quite a commonplace question, but one I was interested in hearing the answer to.

I had been discussing our favourite pantomimes with some fans and discovered we had different opinions. Top of my list is 2017/18 Jack and the Beanstalk in Southend with Bobby Davro.

I wanted to know Lee’s favourite.

Following the meet and greet we returned to the foyer, already filling with fans and locals.

It was great to see so many familiar faces, but as show time approached the excited crowd became too much for me. I headed to the box-office area which wasn’t as packed, and very kindly my friends waited with me until the doors to the auditorium entered and we were able to take our seats.

Just like the night before, the arrangement of stage and the rake of the stalls meant that the best seats were a little further back than I’d normally choose. Once I settled in, I agreed with my friends’ choice. They’d already been twice to see Mr Mead at this theatre so of course they knew what they were doing!

I’m always a little concerned about the final concert in a three venue weekend, especially when long journeys are involved. If I’m tired, how must Lee feel? He must be exhausted! And how will his vocal cords stand up to the challenge?

From the first verse of “Some of Us Belong to the Stars” I knew I needn’t worry. He was sparkling! His eyes gleamed as his Billy Liar boasted about his future, so unlike Lee himself.

As the song ended, the auditorium burst into enthusiastic applause. I noticed a couple of latecomers trying to get to their seats. I say ‘noticed’ as though they were difficult to spot, but as they were heading for the centre of the front row, and as a number of people needed to stand to let them pass, they were pretty unmissable – even though they’d been polite enough to wait till the first song ended before trying to take their seats.

Lee laughed when he saw them.

“So, the bus was late then?”

I thought I heard a good-humoured male voice reply but I couldn’t hear what was said.

The incident took me back to seeing Billy Connelly on stage. Lee had been very tame with his mickey-taking compared to the Glaswegian comic, and I thought to myself Lee’s late arrivals are lucky he’s not acerbic.

Ah, but then a second group came in.

I'm pretty sure Lee was singing "Pure Imagination". It was one of the earlier numbers and something quite balladic, else we might not have been so badly disturbed.

I was admiring the stage lights as they made an aurora of his hair, when I became conscious of a noise from somewhere at the back of the auditorium - a muffled thump, and a metallic rattle. I glanced over my shoulder thinking that perhaps something had fallen, but seeing nothing untoward turned my attention back to Lee.

"If you want to view magic lands..."

Thump, rattle.

What was that?

This time I noticed other people looking around.

"...and view it. Anything you want to..."

Thump, rattle.

What IS that?!

"You want to change the world? There's nothing..."

Thump rattle.

This time I could see a group of figures descending stairs from the door at the back of the auditorium.

Thump rattle.

"There is no life I know..."

Thump rattle.

It was getting louder.

"...with pure imagination So..."

Thump rattle.

"...to be free..."

Thump rattle.

"...truly..."

Thump rattle.

"..to..."

Thump rattle.

"be-eeee...."

Thump rattle

Thump rattle

Clump rattle thump clang.

“...eee.”

Applause while further rattling, clumping and thumping continued as various patrons had to get out of their seats to let the late arrivals passed.

I only hoped their passage through the theatre hadn't disturbed Lee as much as it had me.

“What was that about?” said Lee from the stage.

He began to march on the spot.

“Stomp, stomp, stomp!”

The crowd, no doubt many as irritated as I was laughed, with some gusto.

Lee turned to walk to his chair beside Beverley. As he did so he sang...

“Nellie the elephant packed her trunk...”

You know I think Billy Connelly's audience got away quite lightly!

Whether it was interruptions giving Lee a chance to go off script early in the show, or the fact he had friends in (Penny Bubb and Bobby Davro), or the excitable audience, or just his way of fighting fatigue, we had an exceptionally giddy Lee, and a naughty Beverley, that night.

At one point Lee, evidently too warm under the stage lights asked us to excuse him – he wanted to undo his top button. Cheeky Beverley said exactly what I was thinking:

“You can keep going if you like!”

Causing guffaws of laughter from the audience and Lee's comedy ‘I'm shocked!’ expression.

But that was nothing to an incident in the second half.

Looking down at his jacket Lee realised Beverley's folder had managed to cover him in glitter again.

“I look like a drag queen!” he said, “I should audition for ‘Priscilla Queen of the Desert.’ ”

“Don't worry,” said Beverley in a sultry voice “I'll give you a rub down later.”

Mock horror: “Beverley!!!!”

We. Roared!

I've observed that Lee's giddy moods often coincide with evenings when his voice is not at the top of its form, as though he's making up with humour what he might be lacking in vocal strength.

This wasn't such an occasion.

He was superb in every way: strong and powerful in “This is the Moment” and “Anthem”, dangerously seductive in “Music of the Night”, and in the second half the beauty and tenderness of “Hushabye Mountain” and “Beginning to Breathe Again” held me mesmerised.

But the highlight moment of the evening – perhaps of all the weekend concerts - for me, wasn't a song.

It was the Q & A section.

Beverly again had a long list of enquiries from those at the meet and greet.

“Now Jane would like to know, of all the pantomimes you have done, what is your favourite?”

He didn't hesitate.

“Oh definitely ‘Cinderella’ at the Palladium.”

“Oh thanks a lot mate!!” came a call from the audience.

Lee burst into giggles, composed himself and said with an air of seriousness...

“Apart of course from any panto I've done with Bobby Davro.”

“Give us James Blunt!” shouted Bobby.

More giggles from Lee, and a shake of his head.

“Give us James Blunt!”

Lee turned to Beverley.

“When Bobby and I were in Robin Hood together, he found out I could do a James Blunt impression...”

“Give us James Blunt!”

“...and kept nagging me to do it every show.”

There was a pause.

“Give us James Blunt!”

“Do you really want me to do James Blunt?” Lee asked the audience.

Well what do you think we said?

“YES!!!!”

So Lee sang a line or two of “Beautiful”. (In case you didn't know he does a rather good James Blunt impression.)

Another roar of laughter and approval from the audience.

Then as we started to quieten down.

“Now give us James Blunt!”

Thanks Bobby.

One of Lee's lesser known skills is his ability to do impressions.

We see his excellent Ken Dodd every My Story show, but we were treated to another one in Camberley.

I forget what got him onto the subject (a question in the Q&A I think) but he started talking about having been asked to play Norman Wisdom in a film. He's mentioned this before, some while ago, but I had assumed this was one of those opportunities that never came to fruition. I was pleased to learn that night that it's still a possibility – and delighted to see a very brief demonstration from Lee. He would be fabulous in it! Please producers! Make it happen!

So the evening passed by joyfully in fun and silliness and fantastic music.

And if it's still taking us a while to get into the rhythm of "Any Dream Will Do" these days, at least the theatre was full of other fans waving along, more or less in tempo.

Thus we came to the end of another wonderful Meady Tour, packed full of laughter and friendship.

I truly hope every fan is able to see this show at least once. Mead is a tonic we should all be able to enjoy.