

My First Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Experience

By JaneW

Confession time: I can't remember much about the film.

"What?" You say, "... but surely you've seen it every Christmas for the three decades at least!"

"Erm. No."

You see although I enjoyed the film as a wee kiddy-winky when I got into my early teens I started to get really irritated with Dick Van Dyke to such an extent that Chitty (and for that matter Mary Poppins) disappeared from my seasonal viewing list. Not having kiddie-winkies of my own, they never made it back on.

So the news that Lee would be playing Caractacus Potts on stage (I couldn't even remember the character's name) filled me with double joy: Lee on stage again in a prestigious musical theatre production; and me being able to reclaim a childhood pleasure without my inner-stroppy-teenager sneering at me. It was all good.

So, the day came at last. My first time at CCBB.

It was a last minute decision to go based on my erroneous assumption that my hubby would be away watching rugby that day. It occurred to me that I could easily return home via my friend's house (we'd arranged to see Book of Mormon together the day before) via Nottingham and get in a sneaky extra CCBB visit.

Now I have to say I am very conscious that I am exceedingly lucky to be able to go gallivanting around the country to see Lee – and I am very much aware that so many of my friends are not in this situation, due to health, finances, living overseas... I hope my reports don't come over as boasting.

Anyway, my review of Book of Mormon...

...is entirely irrelevant. Let's spin on.

On reflection sneaking in this extra visit on the way home was a REALLY DAFT idea. The Sunday train schedule was such that only one set of trains could get me to Nottingham in time for the show and I had only 30 mins between arriving at Nottingham station and curtain-up. That's tight! Plus I'd forgotten to factor in lunch and my ruck sack. As I ran around Nottingham station looking for taxis and watching the minutes slip by I was chastising myself for my lack of forethought. Why are you doing this Jane?

Oh yeah to see Lee.

I made it to my seat with 10 minutes to spare; my rucksack safely stowed in the cloak room, and a bag of peanuts for my lunch.

But I'd made it!

And as I settled into my row H seat I chuckled with delight. Though sitting mid stalls, the stage was so close I knew I'd be able to see every expression on Lee's gorgeous face. Squeal!

However... when I selected my seat the website failed to mention it had a restricted view. I could see that immediately. The design of the theatre blocked my view of the far right of the stage. I would have been miffed if this was my only time seeing the show, but as it wasn't I didn't mind and even offered to swap seats with the mother and child next to me, who had an even more limited view. Mummy declined. I wish she hadn't!

So in comes the orchestra and they start to warm up with a medley of tunes from The Sound of Music (don't ask me, perhaps they were auditioning for their next gig or something). Then the overture started and on Lee sauntered.

Be still my heart!

He looked adorable in his waistcoat (I've always loved Lee in a waistcoat) with oil artistically smeared over his cheek and forehead – Caractacus is a hard-working man don't ya know!

Various members of the chorus flitted past before Jeremy and Jemima rush on for a big hug with their on stage daddy. Many fans have said that Lee has a wonderful affinity with the children; he really has. No. Nothing sexy about a handsome man who's good with kids. Nothing at all. Moving on...

Given that just six months ago Lee, as Aladdin, managed to portray a character of about 19 without raising any sarcastic eyebrows, I did wonder whether he'd suit a character nearer to, or even older than, his own years. He did. Though Caractacus must have married quite young 😊.

I'm not going to attempt to describe the whole story in this report. Partly because it always takes me a couple of shows to remember everything in the correct order, and partly because we're still near the beginning of the run and there might well be fans waiting to see it who, like me, remember little of the film. Plus as my view was quite badly restricted and I missed a lot of action on the right side of the stage.

I'd been told Lee hardly leaves the stage for the first half. That's not strictly true. He was absent for two or three scenes – but he's on A LOT! There is no doubt who the lead performer is.

That said Carrie also makes her mark. The chemistry between the two leads is lovely to watch. They are quite brilliant together – and not just in the big icon set pieces like Toot Sweets (which is indeed exceedingly sweet) but in smaller touching ways too.

****SPOILER****

There is a moment early in the first half where Truly asks the children where their mother is and they reply 'In the church yard'. The look that passes over Lee's face is heart-breaking,

beautifully soulful and understated. Truly has her back to Caractacus and fails to see it, so digs herself into a deep hole, lecturing the family about absent mummy. Carrie's reaction when she realises her family-sized faux pas is perfection. It's a tiny exchange but it demonstrates how good the two lead actors are together.

I have to give a mention to the sets.

The sets were extremely clever. I particularly liked the Pott's house – and the back projection. Oh yeah, how cool was that idea?

Hush-a-bye Mountain. Oh my! What a fabulous song for Lee. It was sublime! Almost. The Nottingham audience were conspiring against it. The little darling boy sat next to me chose to announce 'I'm bored!' as soon as Lee started to sing.

Now the boy was about four. I can sort of forgive him for that. (Sort of). I was still intending to feed him to the Child Catcher.) But the girl on the other side of me seemed to be in her late teens. She decided the gentle lullaby was exactly the right time to start having a conversation with her friend. Grrrr – and just as she finished a family two rows in front felt that no one would mind if they went to the loo. SERIOUSLY! Couldn't you wait till the song had finished?

Sigh. Anyway, despite the interruptions Lee had me spell-bound. Just brilliant.

At least the audience managed to behave themselves for the more up tempo numbers. Especially when the two Vulgarian spies sang their duet. They were a very funny pair and got a great reception from the crowd.

You want me to tell you how great Lee did with The Old Bamboo don't you? Errmm well I can't. No, no, no I don't mean because he wasn't great; I mean because I could barely see him! The chorus packed the small stage and sitting, as I was, at the side, I always had at least two blokes obscuring my view of Lee. I got glimpses of him. And what I saw looked good. And he did look cute in the Morris Dancer's outfit.

No doubt Lee was ready for a rest and a scene where he had nothing to do other than walk across the stage a few times. Actually this was one of my favourite numbers. I don't remember it in the film (not that that's surprisingly). It gave grandpa Potts and the Pottlets a chance to take centre stage – or deck. Well it was the one about Port Out Starboard Home.

As I keep mentioning, I remember little of the film. I was struck by how long we had to wait for the appearance of the titular automobile in all it's, sorry her, glory.

Oh it was worth the wait.

Again back projection and clever mechanisms made the car seem alive. Oooh and Lee in a long white coat with a flat cap worn backwards... bless him. He looked just as he does in those pictures of him in the pre Joseph days.

The Potts family climbed into the car and...here we go! The whole theatre clapping along with the title song! A pause to allow Truly to join the family and here we go again! 'Pretty

Chitty Bang Bang we love you!' Hurrah! Even the diminutive theatre critic sat next to me, at last, started to enjoy himself.

OK it was probably too much to expect him not to get bored again during Truly Scrumptious but at least he confined himself to wriggling on his mummy's lap rather than announcing the fact. I was able to enjoy Carrie and the kids with their touching number.

Thus the show ramps up towards interval and oh gosh the car flies! (Oh come on. Everyone knows Chitty flies) Lee, Carrie and the kids are lifted up above the stage in a really magical musical theatre way. What a way to end the first half!

Interval moment. Mummy of my little friend next to me asked him what he liked most about the show. 'The Child Catcher.' He replied. Hmm. OK. Explains a lot.

****SPOILERS to end - Read no further****

Lee isn't on stage as much during the second half (I hope he uses his off stage time to put his feet up) but the fun doesn't let up. I loved The Ashes of Disaster – which was one of my favourite songs in the film. Probably because it didn't involve Dick van Dyke.

Truly gets a lovely song about having fallen for Caractacus. Awww. Which Carrie sings beautifully.

On the other hand Chucky Face between the Vulgarian Barron and Baroness was a bit meh – and the chorus number which introduces the big birthday party is fun but goes on too long.

Ah and of course the Child Catcher. Oh what spooky character! Beside me, little Mr Annoying was beside himself. Literally. He was practically trying to climb on my knee, whenever the action moved to the far right. Oh well. At least he wasn't bored.

But what of Lee? Had he just disappeared? Not at all. He'd merely gone off with the toymaker to reccy the Baron's Castle and lead a chorus of children in a jaunty little song about team work. It put me in mind of the Joseph days. Lee bonds so nicely with children.

And thus, we move towards the finale and what is my absolute favourite part of the show. Doll on a Music Box and Caractacus' reprise of Truly Scrumptious. Carrie is delightful as the Music Box Doll, and Lee...even dressed as a Clown Doll... is still gorgeous.

And it is this point where the chemistry between our two leads fizzes like fireworks. No not fireworks ... it's more subtle and controlled. Lee had his back to me but just as in the facing Pharaoh scene in Joseph (pauses to remember the stage lights forming coloured pools on Lee's naked back...ok I'm back in the room) I sat transfixed watching his incredibly expressive shoulders articulating his newly discovered love. Meanwhile Carrie, her face almost motionless nevertheless shows her affection with a flash of her eyes.

It is ridiculously romantic. How the pair of them manage it while dressed so ludicrously I do not know. So we reach the denouement. Good triumphs. Bad guys banished. Everyone is ready for their happily every after – cue reprise of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, clapping and cheering.

Curtain calls, more singing, rapturous applause, boos for the child catcher and whoops and cheers for the two kids, Carrie and our lovely Lee! Chitty Chitty Bang Bang we love you!