

Cinderella – In detail

by JaneW

And so panto season has drawn to an end. At least, for Lee fans.

Outrageous costumes have been packed away; magic wands put into hibernation.

It's time for me to write my spoiler laden report for any who didn't manage to see the show – or those that want a reminder.

I have been extraordinarily lucky to have seen Cinderella at the Palladium several times, and to have been in Row A for the very last performance, surrounded by lovely friends. I hope this report can convey a bit of the thrill I had seeing this fabulous pantomime...

You've braved the entrance queue, you've had your bag checked, you've settled in.

The pink, velvet curtain (made from the skins of a thousand muppets) folds back to reveal a twinkling image of the Fairy Godmother projected at 10 times life-size onto the backdrop. Amanda Holden speaks the prologue (not quite 'Two households both alike in dignity' but it does rhyme) as the image slowly shrinks. Once it reaches Amanda Holden-size she steps through it, still reciting her poem, to welcome us to the theatre.

It's a gentle piece of theatrical conjuring to begin the show, quickly surpassed by a more impressive flying sequence. As she moves forward she rises gently into the air in the first of many 'oh wow' moments which turn this pantomime into such a magical delight.

I warmed to Amanda over the course of the five weeks. On my first visit I found myself comparing her unfavourably to Linda Lucardi, who proved such an appealing Fairy Godmother in Cardiff. Amanda looked very glamorous floating about in her sparkling white frocks, but her singing and comic delivery were mediocre.

She improved on both counts. By the end she sang confidently without any tuning issues, and delivered her lines smoothly, with a knowing self-mockery.

Her opening number is one that Lee sang in Aladdin, which I believe Marti Pellow wrote especially. It's one of three songs that keep getting repeated throughout the show, which helps nicely with continuity and gives the tunes a chance to stick in your mind.

I also enjoyed the ensemble's 'Argyll Street', more and more each time I heard it. Familiarity doesn't always breed contempt.

Much has been said about the costumes in this production. In so many shows the costumes don't look great close-up. Not the case here. All of them stood close-scrutiny, even the ensemble's. For 'Argyll Street' they look like illustrations from a particularly classy nursery rhyme book.

In my last report I had mixed up the entrances of several major characters. I shall correct myself. Natasha J Barnes's perky Cinderella is introduced during the opening number, along with Wicked Step-Sisters Wendy Somerville and Suzie Chard – the squabbling bullies!

They've been shopping on Oxford Street and are using little step-sis as a two-legged pack horse. The meanies!

I feel a bit sorry for Wendy and Suzie. Usually the Wicked Sisters are major characters, but they've been side-lined for this production. That said they're normally played by men. Credit to the two girls for pulling off the dame-like gargoyles.

Paul Zerdin as Buttons and his puppet Sam arrive after the chorus leaves. On a Segway. (I mean Paul and Sam. The chorus isn't on a Segway. That would just be silly.)

Paul's act is mostly the same as his Southampton Jack and the Beanstalk routine, but with bits of Matt Slack's act from Aladdin and Andy Jones from the Cardiff Cinderella thrown in.

He starts with the old faithful – 'When I say "Hi Gang" you have to shout "Hi Buttons", then has all the audience cheering. He pretends someone wasn't cheering loudly enough and whittles the problem down to one unfortunate man in the front row. Over the last weekend we had Paul, Tony and Dick. Well, sort of Dick.

The very last performance Paul picked a right one.

"What's your name?" he asked

"Donald Trump!"

Delighted laughter from the stalls.

"What's your real name?"

"I've forgotten".

"2,000 people in the theatre, I pick on the comedian."

Paul renamed him 'Dick'.

I wonder if 'Dick' had seen the show before. I wonder if he knew what was coming.

Answer – Paul's puppet, Sam. Oh Sam has a whale of a time with Paul's poor victim. For the rest of the show he gets referred to as Ugly Paul/Tony/Dick, usually when we've forgotten all about the gag.

After disposing of Sam in the wings Paul places big present for Cinders at the front of the stage. He tells us to shout if anyone goes near it. This device was used in the Cardiff Cinderella and became a running joke. At the Palladium it was only used once or twice, probably because they had so much other funny stuff to fit in. A pity really as I rather enjoy screaming 'Buttons!'

Now again, my last report is wrong. I said there was a scene change. Technically there wasn't – not then at least. The Barbie pink palace appears later.

Instead Lord Chamberlain Noble Nigel enters from the back of the same set (the backdrop includes the exterior of the palace), and with a smile and a swagger introduces himself. It really is lovely to see him in a more comedic role, rather than being the bad guy.

Noble Nigel always gets greeted with a cheer, but on the last night the front two or three rows were dominated by Lee fans. I have learnt something about Lee fans; we like Nigel Havers.

The look of delighted surprise on his face when we let out a huge cheer was adorable.

Nigel's main function is to announce other members of the cast, notably, our Prince Charming. At last Lee is due to make his appearance.

Hurrah! With a fanfare Prince Charming strides onto the stage.

The roar that greeted him! We were pretty damn loud at the matinee, but with the mass ranks of fandom on the last performance we were deafening.

Yet Lee didn't seem surprised. He smiled down at the front few rows, as he waited for the cheering to die down, with an expression that seemed to say 'I see my ladies made it!'

Oh my, he looks well. That translates as utterly swoon-worthy. He makes such a regal Prince, his hands behind him in the classic Duke of Edinburgh pose. The wardrobe people have dressed him exquisitely; his costumes are opulent but not outrageous, in a Regency style, which really suits Lee.

He addressed the audience briefly, then tells Noble Nigel to announce his equerry, Dandini.

Here comes Julian Clary. In a chariot! Now his costumes **are** outrageous. But then Julian's costumes always are. These raise the bar though.

Julian always gets a rapturous welcome. I was glad for the last performance that his own fans seemed to be there in big numbers too, coz I was starting to get a sore throat with all the whooping!

Cue another big set piece. To the tune of 'Downtown' Julian, backed by the ensemble, sings about the delights of Soho. I'm sure the choreography was fabulous, I don't know. Lee was on stage, and much as I enjoy Julian's camp, I had a Meadster to gaze at. Actually it was worth keeping an eye on Lee at that point for more reasons than his gorgeousness. Throughout the song he and Nigel muck about in a manner that speaks to me of a real friendship.

On finishing, the usual Julian and Lee double act begins. Oh how I love watching this. Lee is a great straight-man, and Julian's one-liners and innuendos are hysterical. Yes, yes, we've seen much of it before in Aladdin but it still has me laughing aloud. On New Year's Eve we

had a slight departure from the script. I think Nigel came in too early and after a hesitation Lee said something like ‘I think it’s my line now.’ That just shows how Lee has relaxed into pantomime. Time was he wouldn’t have acknowledged a goof.

With Nigel despatched on some errand or other, Julian gets to mess about with the audience. One routine he always does is to compliment a woman in the front row on the prettiness of her top, before getting snide about it. On the last Sunday matinee I was right behind a familiar Lee fan, who caught Julian’s eye.

In the evening he spotted Julie (who is definitely a fan).

“That’s a nice blouse, all black and white! Where are you from?”

“Ipswich!”

“What day’s market day in Ipswich?”

“Wednesday!”

“What a pity the stall didn’t have your size.”

Julie was in doubled up she laughed so hard. But she looked up in time to see Lee mouthing ‘I’m sorry!’ at her.

An added bonus, a standard Clary set piece which I have seen twice before (once Nigel and once with Marty Pellow) featured Lee. It works like this:

Lee makes a remark about being dignified to which Julian replies, ‘Oh no you’re not!’

Then Lee again: ‘Oh yes I am!’

Julian: ‘Oh no you’re not!’

Lee: ‘Oh yes I am!’

It’s set up cleverly because the audience are taken unaware. Naturally we know we’re supposed to join in, but the exchange surprises us (even when you know it’s coming).

So now Julian can get very sarcastic with the audience. ‘Haven’t you been to panto before? Every now and again a couple of us will come on stage and for no reason go into this ‘Oh know he isn’t – oh yes he is whoops matron he’s behind you’ routine. You have to join in or we look ridiculous!’

Love it!

I also loved Julian saying of Lee, ‘He gets a walk on part in Casualty and he thinks he’s Benedict Cumberbatch’. Which somehow manages to segue into Lee’s first solo, ‘Any Dream Will Do’.

Lee just has to sing 'Any Dream Will Do'; I'm starting to think it's become a legal requirement. The audience would be very disappointed if he didn't. And I would be equally disappointed if Julian didn't complain through it. I wasn't disappointed. Julian made his usual remarks, 'Don't you know any other songs?' causing Lee to shake his head as he sings.

I've often heard occasional 'ahh ahh ahs' from the audience. For the last day we had some proper singing along coming from the front stalls – and hand waving. Big Lee grins! That's what we like.

With the end of 'Any Dream Will Do' a curtain falls on the Prince and Dandini, as the Wicked Step Sisters return. They have a bit of a squabble, but run off when they see mum on her way.

The big entrance is for course for Paul O'Grady who, as Baroness Hardup, headlines the show. It's not every character gets driven onto stage by a chauffeur. In a real car, no less.

Paul is not traditional panto dame. He's too... to be frank is too good a female impersonator. His Baroness slinks onto the stage in an elegant be-sequined black evening dress, a Madam Pompadour style wig, and a fur wrap made from a litter of pugs. (It's Wendy and Suzie that wear the garish panto-dame bloomers and hoop-skirts costume.) Every costume Paul wears is stylish.

Paul's humour is extremely acerbic. His sneering and dangerous dame bullies and threatens the audience. I mean it. He's horribly nasty. "Calpol, that brat!" he shouts to a poor child's parents. (Err when there is a poor child in the audience. There were precious few in for the last performance, causing Paul to do some quick thinking on his feet.) It's adult humour, not like Julian's, there's no innuendo in his dialogue, but I can't imagine kiddies liking it. However I loved it!

I expected Paul to be funny; I didn't expect him to sing well. He has a strong, gravelly singing voice, and can hold a stage beautifully, as demonstrated with his first solo, 'Because I'm Evil', Elvis style. The Palladium done good getting him on board.

On comes Baron Hardup, Steve Delaney in Count Arthur Strong persona. Hmmm... as I have said I'm sure he has lots of fans who think he's great, but he leaves me cold. I genuinely don't understand why the Palladium brought him on board. With the two Pauls and Julian providing laughs by the bucketful and Lee, Nigel and Amanda adding to the giggles, I don't see that an extra comic was needed.

Many versions of Cinderella don't even bother with Baron Hardup. He's an awkward character, either utterly stupid or completely neglectful of his natural daughter. In this version he's played as being besotted with his Baroness, while she's just excessively nasty to him. It's more pathetic than funny.

Perhaps they thought Count Arthur's buffoonish antics would be more child friendly than the other comedian's routines. Maybe that's the case. I could have done without him.

Anyway – on with the show.

The Wicked Step-Sisters make a reappearance during this scene, mugging at the audience and sucking up to mumsy, whose beauty regime advice to her darlings is almost as malicious as her taunts to the audience. Wendy and Suzie may not have as much time on stage as Ugly Sisters generally do, but they make the most of it, evidently relishing their monstrosity.

Cinderella gets called on, mostly so that her sisters and step-mum can be really, really mean to her and ban her from talking to her friend, Buttons.

Poor Cinders. Natasha plays her so well, with a sweetness that never becomes too saccharine. Hers is a bewildered Cinderella, constantly surprised by how nasty her step-family are to her, but always looking on the bright side.

Odd that she had so few scenes with her daddy.

Buttons appears (well he had to, the audience call for him as the horrible sisters approach the big pressy), and of course friend gets into more trouble when he speaks to her. Boo boo boo!

Back to the Pink Palace and some plot development (as Julian says we've got to get on with it, it goes on and on – you have no idea).

Our handsome prince is frustrated. He wants to meet an ordinary girl but never has the opportunity. Dandini suggests they swap places. The Prince is dubious – will that really work? Dandini (who is wearing another scene stealing confection) assures him that all he needs is the prince's sash, then everyone will assume he's the prince and the prince can become Dandini.

Lee is no stranger to playing cute-but-dim (Lord Arthur Saville anyone?) and is delighted that his equerry thought of such a clever ruse. He takes off his sash and wraps it around Dandini, almost corpsing as Julian shies away from being touched. Lee goes down on one knee to Julian 'How can I ever thank you?' he asks.

There's a snigger from the audience. Some of us have dirty minds. When Julian raises an eyebrow and says 'I'll think of something' the sniggers become guffaws. Try explaining that to your six year old!

Change of scene...a forest.

Amanda has a song about being the Fabulous Fairy, with the chorus joining her in the woods as various pantomime characters – and ooo look - women as Principle Boys, shades of pantos past. The first time I saw Cinderella I had my doubts about this number; I didn't think it added anything. Later I really enjoyed it, partly because Amanda was more settled into her role, but also because the ensemble are so impressive – especially the acrobatic Genie!

The Lord Chamberlain, Dandini and the Prince head into the woods. Now, we've mentioned Julian's outrageous costumes but this one is the most bizarre. He's dressed as a pheasant. Honestly! What was the wardrobe mistress on?!

They have come to the wood so that the Prince can meet ordinary girls (demonstrating the Prince's naiveté; he'd have been better taking Dandini's suggestion and go hunting girls at Spearmint Rhino). Mind you Noble Nigel has brought a picnic with him in case they want 'something hot inside them.' I'll leave you to imagine what Julian does with that line.

Nigel gets sent off, and after a couple of innuendos, Dandini leaves. The Prince freezes.

Ah that's the Fairy Godmother's doing. She is rewarding Cinderella for her goodness (the traditional 'Cinders helps an Old Lady' scene got cut from the production) by setting her up with a date.

Cinders comes to the woods in search of firewood (skiving) and there meets the man of her (and our) dreams.

It's good to see that Natasha and Lee have chemistry together. Not the fizzing 'magnesium in water' chemistry that Lee has with Rachel Tucker or Louise Dearman (probably just as well, the kiddies in the audience are already asking too many awkward questions), it's more like a putting lemon juice in Universal Indicator and watching it turn pink – aww isn't that nice?, kind of thing.

They sing a verse each of a duet 'What Are the Chances...' I think it must be one especially written for the panto. It's a sweet but rather innocuous song that doesn't allow either Lee or Natasha to show-off – but it gets the message across. It's love at first sight.

It's cut quite short and the curtain comes down on them, leaving a half-stage ready for the entrance of Wicked Step Mummy (boo boo boo!).

I'm getting jealous of Paul O'Grady's wardrobe. The hunting pink jacket worn over a black satin dress looks oh so chic.

Here we are given some of the character's back story. He, sorry, she was once a circus performer. She's so bitter because she had her heart broken by her one true love – Juliano Dandini.

Who should arrive on stage? None other than Dandini – dressed in dazzling white with a huge fur muff which leads to all sorts of jokes that I'm far too innocent to understand.

Did we need this added complication of a romantic backstory for the second principle boy and the dame? Probably not, but it gives the director an excuse to get PO'G and JC on stage together being smutty, so that's a good excuse.

The wood is getting a bit crowded now. Buttons is here too, also looking for Cinders. Buttons wants to declare his 'lurve'. The trouble is that Buttons is getting tongue tied so

can't tell the girl he ardorw how he feels. He's just practicing what he intends to say when on rushes his lady love in the company of the handsome 'Dandini'.

'I think I'm in love!' declares the Prince. Aww Buttons! You're too late! He skulks off.

Ah my favourite scene! Lee and Natasha's big romantic duet. It starts with the two of them getting lovey-dovey, Cinderella still being under the impression she's being courted by Dandini, the Prince's manservant.

Mind you, aided by Sam, Buttons can still try to kibosh the romance.

Oh look there's a wall. After Aladdin last year we know what's coming. The lovers sit themselves upon it, the music begins – Ooo 'Love Changes Everything'! A proper, serious, MT song. Lee's voice swells – he sounds fabulous. Natasha matches him.

This would have been a great duet if they'd been allowed to perform it properly, but we all know that's not going to happen.

And I for one, after having seen the same routine in Birmingham last year, would have been disappointed had they been allowed to simply sing.

The two leads sit on the wall. Lee, puffing his chest out in a heroic fashion, flicks back his hair causing a ripple of giggles from the ladies in the audience.

As Lee sings the first verse Sam's head, unseen by Cinders, pops up between them. Lee notices, does an exaggerated double-take, and pushes Sam back down behind the wall.

A moment later Sam reappears, this time with his head through a hole in the wall, between Cinders' legs.

That's just the start. Buttons pulls his rival of the wall and takes his place – Lee pulls him off, Buttons then pulls Cinders off the wall and replaces her so that Lee nearly kisses him. This carries on and escalates as the song continues, to the point where Buttons hits Lee (who by this time is standing up on the wall) in the knee with a baseball bat, causing a beautifully executed slap-slick fall, where Lee end up straddling the wall, to sympathetic groans from the audience.

I'm impressed that with all the mayhem going on the three leads manage to take turns to sing (Paul has a decent voice), without any apparent difficulty. And the three of them ramp up nicely in the last verse with Lee and Natasha hitting and sustaining the final note almost triumphantly.

That's the last of Lee for the first half but there's still plenty to enjoy.

Dandini minces on wearing... dear me I can't even describe it, but he's now being Postman Pat delivering invites to the Prince's ball. Buttons is on hand and calls on Baron Hardup to

collect his invitation. The baron then calls on his 'lovely' wife, who calls on... you get the picture.

Eventually The Baroness and her daughters have the stage to themselves and, in anticipation of finding husbands at the ball, start to sing 'I Will Survive' or rather an alternative version 'They Won't Survive.' It's a fun, piece of daftness and gives the girls one of their few chances to really show off their comedic ability.

Back at the Hardup Hall, Cinderella is scrubbing the floor again, and feeling despondent because everyone else in the house is getting ready for the ball, which she ain't. Buttons comes to cheer her up, but gets interrupted by Nigel – "Please can I be in this scene?", "Sorry Nigel..." Awwww.

Anyway back on with the plot and once Natasha remembers her line (one of those 'accidental cock-ups' that happens every show) Buttons gives her the invitation. She's delighted and Buttons leaves, happy to have brought a smile to her face.

But it doesn't last long. On come the Wicked Step sisters and their mum, who after initially saying she can go to the ball force her to rip up the invitation. They sweep off leaving our poor heroine in tears.

Buttons tries to cheer her up by making some jokes and giving her the pressy, which contains a miniature Sam.

She's so grateful that Buttons plucks up the courage to her how he feels. She misunderstands until he explains that he wants to marry her.

Oh dear Cinders is in love with Dandini – well she thinks the Prince is Dandini still. Buttons leaves in a sulk, to a chorus of 'aawwwss'.

(On the last performance one of his fans shouted 'I love you!' causing Paul to corpse. Then he shouted back 'Thanks mum!')

I must just mention that there is a slight problem with Paul Zerdin in this role. Namely Paul is young and attractive, as well as funny and kind-hearted. It's almost a shame he doesn't get the girl.

If they'd cast anyone less handsome, warm and charismatic than Lee as Prince Charming I'd have been shouting 'Run off with Buttons you silly girl!'

Fortunately Cinders has another, unknown friend, her fairy Godmother. She appears with a flash and magically restores the invitation. Ah but then there's transport and the all-important frock to think about.

No problem. Buttons' pet mice (cute puppets in one of the boxes) can be pressed into service as horses, and there's a handy pumpkin on the kitchen table ready to be coachified. With a wave of her wand, the fairy transforms the pumpkin into – err a tap-dancing pumpkin

person. He's joined by a whole chorus-line of pumpkin people who do a big number with the fairy-Godmother.

Amanda sang well but looked a bit uncomfortable with the dancing. Personally I could have done without this particular number but it seemed to be really popular.

Once the pumpkin people disappear more of the ensemble enter, this time as fairy dressmakers. They sing about the joys of shopping as they hold various fabrics against Cinderella's frame.

No dress fittings needed though. The wonderful creation simply appears. I have watched Cinders' patched pink frock turn into her ball-gown several times and still couldn't figure exactly how it's done. And it happens right in front of us too.

Finally on comes the coach, along with some dancing unicorns (who I suspect are on stage to give us something to watch while Natasha straps herself in).

The animatronic horses at the front of the coach start to trot. That's pretty special to begin with, but when the whole contraption, horses coach and all lifts off the ground...wow! I mean WOW!

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.

First time I saw the panto 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?).

The second act starts, as did the first with Amanda's fairy godmother, being something of a continuity announcer. Her job is really to set up a rather gratuitous special effect; Dandini on a flying motorbike. I say it gratuitous and it is, but just because it adds nothing to the plot, that doesn't mean it's not huge fun. Seeing him fly upwards then slowly turn upside down is pretty damn impressive even when you're sat in the Upper Circle. From the front of the stalls it's extraordinary. I could have reached out and plucked one of the long feathers from his helmet (it's a Dandini thing. He's not going to wear a proper helmet, is he!).

Despite being inverted Julian continues his joking and mocking the audience. In the last show he spotted Julie again, making another comment about Ipswich which had the two of us howling.

As the flying bike drifts back down towards the stage Julian makes one final crack at about a rival show (you don't get that in Aladdin at the Prince Edward) before the curtain descends to leave the stage for Buttons and more hysterical laughter.

The conceit of this next scene is that the Fairy Godmother has put Buttons in charge of the entertainment for the ball. I'm not sure whether the Fairy Godmother is on the palace's entertainment committee but no one is quibbling with such a talented performer as Paul Zer...Sorry I mean Buttons, on the stage.

He's not the only one on stage. He cajoles a couple from the audience to join him. They must know they are going to be the butt of the joke for the next few minutes so it's not surprising that every couple I've seen climbed on to the stage with noticeable trepidation.

Those that have seen Paul's regular act know about this routine. I didn't.

Paul puts masks on his two 'volunteers' which cover the lower portions of their faces. He has a remote control which moves the mouths on the masks effectively turning his stooges into ventriloquist dummies.

It's always funny, but just how funny depends on the couple from the audience.

The first time I saw the routine I watched with a certain degree of embarrassment. Though the couple seemed to enjoy themselves they didn't really engage play along. Others I saw later in the run really played up, dancing along to 'I've Had the Time of My Life' and in one case attempting a lift. The cheers they got!

Ah...time for a song methinks, and who better to deliver it than our charming prince, Lee?

This is Lee's big number 'The Party of the Year' a song that I suspect was written for the show.

It starts with the Prince preparing for the ball with the help of the ensemble. They help him into his jacket, buff his shoes and spray perfume on his neck as he sings about his excitement at the thought of meeting 'the girl he loves and adores'. Lucky, lucky girl! Lee looks delectable in icy blue, curls framing his face – particularly from the second row then front row seat I had on the last night. Mmmm, a couple of moments of Meady eyecontact too. Excuse me for taking a moment...

OK. So fully ready, the servants depart, and more of the ensemble, dressed in brilliant blue finery swish onto the stage and begin some very sedate dancing. Lee moves among them, still singing, bowing and kissing hands even as he waits for his true love.

It's a good long number, though it does little to challenge a singer of Lee's calibre. Plus it's not a particularly memorable tune. I'm humming it now after several hearings, but I couldn't have done that to start with.

I wonder if he would have been better with some well-known catchy pop song. Mind you the audience didn't ever seem to mind and showed their appreciation properly every time. Except on the last night with a concentrated block of Lee fans demonstrating what REAL appreciation sounds like!

More guests are arriving and at last Notable Nigel has something to do. He announces Baron Hardup.

I'm sorry. I have tried to warm to Count Arthur Strong but I'm just bemused. Ha ha! He's confused Nigel Havers with Michael Caine. That sort of humour doesn't appeal to me, and from the reaction of the audience it fell flat in general. I was actually quite pleased for him that he had some fans in on the last night. It was the first time I'd heard enthusiastic laughter for him.

Their conversation is interrupted by another entrance – Princess Starlight. She descends the grand staircase as Lee sidles on from the wings. Her Prince Charming immediately recognises the girl from the woods despite her enormous, posh frock (which scuppered Cinders' chances of a passionate embrace) and fancy hairdo.

She of course recognises 'Dandini', though Lord Chamber-Havers soon lets the cat out of the bag by addressing her handsome hero as the Prince. He takes her off to the garden to 'explain'. Oh you lucky, lucky girl!

Next to arrive is the real Dandini, in the most extravagant creation of lilac and silver. One advantage of being in the Upper Circle was seeing his peacock-eye train in its full glory. (Julian tells off the chorus-boy who removes it, for obstructing the public's view. Poor lad.)

Then Baroness Hardup has her entrance which leads to a nice two hander between Paul O'G and Julian, insulting each others' costumes (her dress makes her look like a toilet roll cover in mourning), and describing her fetish for car-wash attendants. They leave to get a drink from the bar – Brasso and lime.

Back on come our leads, and at last the full version of the duet 'What Are the Chances' which we heard a snippet of in the first half. It's a sweet tune, again, not taxing for either Lee or Natasha but perfect for them to waltz, gently about the stage to.

I love watching Lee doing the romantic thing. His expression of adoration lights his face, and his eyes sparkle. From the front of the stall you can see every nuance pass over his face – the joy, the wonder... oops sorry there I go again.

Of course the chimes of midnight interrupt the couple (though why Lee starts charging around the palace apparently searching for his princess, BEFORE she runs off I know not). He's very perspicacious. He's figured out Princess Starlight is an alias (perhaps she fessed-up while they were 'walking' in the garden) and asks her real name, which she fails to tell him.

What to do? Chase after her? No that would be undignified. He orders Dandini to go, but his aide-de-camp has changed into another ridiculous costume and can manage not more than a brisk mince. At least he manages to retrieve the all important crystal (crystal notice – none of your common or garden glass here) slipper. Hurrah! The Prince will marry whoever the slipper fits. We didn't see that one coming, did we?

Lee reprises 'What Are the Chances', this time ending with a big money note. I am pleased to say that on each of the last three performances he hit the note surely and strongly, earning himself a loud show of appreciation from the public.

Cinders is back in her rags, which must be something of a relief after the bell-tent ball-gown. She is of course mortified by having stayed too long at the ball, but fairy Amanda is on hand to reassure her – and plug her book.

Then Buttons and Sam return to the stage. Buttons thinks he dreamt the whole ball, but Cinders puts him straight. She also tells him that she's not in love with Dandini but with the Prince. This isn't news that cheers Buttons up, but he's resigned to the fact he can't match a Prince. Cinders reassures him that he'll always be her best friend, then leaves.

Sam attempts to jolly Buttons along with a game of hide-and-seek. Not surprisingly it's a very short game. Buttons leaves Sam alone on a convenient bench and slopes off for some me time.

There's a long pause while the audience watch a motionless puppet. After a short while nervous tittering begins.

Sam raises his head 'Shut up!' he shouts (or if the tittering isn't audible enough 'Has he gone?'), then he tells us Ugly Paul/Tony/Dick has pooped himself. Cinderella returns so that Sam can explain the depth of Buttons' affection (if she were on Facebook he'd give her a good poking) and sing 'You're His Everything'.

They leave, just as Dandini, in a rather less eccentric gold number, comes back. He's not happy that he's having to spend the evening hunting for a girl with one shoe, which causes him to reflect on all the other things he might be doing. Yes it's time for that old panto favourite 'If I were not Upon the Stage...', or rather 'If I Were Not in Panto Now'.

We've seen this before, in Cardiff, when Lee took part. In this production it was sadly Meadless, but on the upside Count Arthur Strong got a chance to show off his considerable slapstick skills and at last made the whole audience laugh. CAS gets the 'ballerina' verse, naturally with a tutu and blond wig.

Not surprisingly Buttons and the Fairy Godmother also get involved (Buttons has the pancake chef verse so wallops CAS several times with his frying pan; FMG gets the cleaner with her naughty feather duster) more surprising Nigel also gets a go. He's not got quite the same flair for slapstick as the comedians (or Lee for that matter) but it was a delight to see

him involved, waving around his cricket bat (he was a cricketer) and banging himself in the face.

Each one of the team got a second verse with another occupation. FMG had the doctor (same role Lee had in Cardiff but his was nurse) and Buttons window cleaner. Much squealing as Buttons sprayed the audience with water; even more when Amanda pulled his trousers down to reveal Superman undies. Mind you on the last performance she tried to get those down too. You could see by the look on Paul's face that he wasn't expecting it.

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

'If I Were Not in Panto Now' is the last of the big comedy moments before the dénouement.

Cinders is in a reflective mood. She's singing the duet as she sweeps the kitchen floor, when the Wicked Step Sisters stagger on, horribly hung over.

'If you think we're bad you should see our mum' one says.

Cue Paul O'Grady no longer glamorous, with scraggy hair and rollers. The three 'ladies' analyse the evening. The expected visit of the Prince for shoe-fitting purposes is discussed. The wicked sisters are confident. They're sure they would have been in with the Prince were it not for the mysterious Princess Starlight. Who could she be?

Step mum hears Cinder's song and immediately puts two and two together. Playing the 'I'm really nice' card, she seems to be pleased that Cinders will get a chance to try on the slipper – but she can't be seen in rags, now can she?

The Baroness suggests she borrow her new dress, which just happened to be stored in a sound-proof room in the cellar.

So begins another audience participation 'Should I go into the cellar?' 'NNNOOOOO!!!!'

For once the heroine listens to the audience and doesn't do something stupid to advance the plot. However her sisters manhandle her through the cellar door. Mummy dearest locks it.

Just in time for the Prince, the Chamberlain, and of course Dandini to appear. Dandini explains to anyone who hasn't got the plot that the Prince will marry whoever the slipper fits. He's rather sarcastic about this method of bride-finding.

The Prince takes one look at the sisters and starts to sing 'I'm afraid, I am petrified...' and the Uglies caress him. The 'ladies' take up the song, so we have a quartet of 'I Will Survive', sort of. By the end of which the sisters have both tried and failed to win the Prince's hand and he bids them goodbye.

Baron Hardup stops him. The Baron doesn't go into the full-blown Count Arthurs Strong routine with Lee, thanks goodness, but merely points out that the Prince hasn't seen his daughter.

But where is Cinders? The Baroness says she's shopping, but she's reckoned without Buttons who runs on to ask his gang where Cinders is.

'The cellar!' comes the cry.

The Prince demands the key, but our evil dame swallows it. No problem. Here's the Fairy Godmother to the rescue.

Out of the cellar comes Cinderella, and her Prince immediately recognises her.

All that's needed is the slipper. Once again the WSM interferes, smashing the fragile shoe.

No problem! Slippers come in pairs and Cinders has the other. Not leaving this important moment to Dandini, the Prince kneels before his true love. Hurrah! The slipper fits (shocker that one!). At last, Cinders gets the kiss she deserves (jealous me? Yes!) Though there is so much going on at that point that even I missed seeing it once.

The Prince asks the Baron for his daughter's hand in marriage; Nigel goes off with the step-sisters, for a private viewing of Chariots of Fire; Wicked Step Mother begs for mercy; Buttons reconciles himself to the thought that he'll only ever be a friend to the woman he loves – it's hard to keep track of the entrances and exits.

The Baroness and her daughters, having briefly departed, return again in Salvation Army costumes, to sing the final big number with the chorus 'I'm Saved'.

There's no doubt they do a great job, and it's fun, but I for one would have cut it in favour of a brief duet for Cinderella and her Prince. Instead of having a big firework moment themselves, the two leads melt quietly away unnoticed by any of the audience that aren't Lippy types.

The curtain falls.

Just one part of the panto left. The ubiquitous bringing on of children for a little sing-a-long. Or as I think of it – Buttons entertains the punters while the rest of the cast get their finale costumes on.

The patter is the same each time. Paul asks each kiddie questions, names, who they are with, where they live. How funny it all is depends on how precocious the children are – or how cute. The last one doesn't get a chance to speak himself. Oh no. Paul throws his voice to answer himself. Again depending on the kid this can be hysterical or slightly embarrassing.

And then the finale – the wedding. A wedding in pink. The cast look fabulous in various shades of pinkiness.

The audience are always ever appreciative – everyone gets there share but some get more than others. Considering how small a role Nigel had the audience we're always extremely enthusiastic towards him.

Julian, and the two Pauls always got a great reaction with cheers and whoops.

I'm pleased to say so did Lee and Natasha, and on the last night I think we Lee fans managed to make more noise than anyone else!

Well – we have had practice 😊