

Mother's Day at the Pheasantry

by Jane W

I have to start with a bit of a preamble.

As some of you know it's been a bad time for me personally. Don't worry it's not a health issue – and it might all get resolved nicely in a few months. But just for now, I'm not in a great place. Even my Meady squeal deserted me.

But as I didn't think moping about at home was going to do any good, I plucked up my courage and set off as planned for the, somewhat delayed, opening of Lee's Pheasantry residency 2017, "Up Front and Centre".

It was a LLLOOOONNGGGG journey. I kept thinking of the lovely time ahead with my friends, watching Lee...but would it be the same? Would the excitement come? Would I be able to revel in the pleasure of seeing and hearing Lee as I always had? I wasn't sure.

Now as you know I do enjoy queuing on the stairs (no that isn't sarcasm – I DO mean it) but I must admit it was very pleasant to enjoy a civilised drink in the March sun as familiar faces came to join us.

At the appointed time we went to the stairwell. A queue had in fact formed, but it wasn't the traditional 'squash in there and chat for three hours' queue. It was just a few early birds waiting for the doors to open. When they finally did it became very clear that the staff had a seating plan (just as they'd said they would) and were showing their customers to their tables with relaxed efficiency and smiles that suggested some of us were recognised.

A mother and daughter sat next to us. Daughter had booked the seats and not told mum who they were going to see. She asked us not to spoil the surprise. I couldn't help myself.

"So you like Shane MacGowan?" I think mum knew I was joking.

So pizza – yum – a glass of white...various band members flitted through the room doing no doubt essential bandy, set-up things. I had a quick chat with John the Violinist.

Then as Micky, John and Tommy mounted the stage I began to feel that heightened anticipation that's the mark of waiting for Lee. It seemed my Meady squeal was shyly creeping back.

Someone announced him, and the man himself ran on.

The crowd cheered and applauded. My heart did a little samba. Ahhh – he's a beautiful bloke (like I'm telling you something you don't know), but his appeal is far more than his physical good looks. Those nebulous words 'charm' and 'charisma' come to mind, but there's more still. Perhaps it's because from his first moment on stage he conveys his delight in being in front of his audience, and his audience, in turn, can't help being delighted with him. Does that make sense?

He's very trim at the moment; slim and lithe with tidy curls clustering thickly over his forehead. When he smiles his eyes sparkle - and he smiled a lot throughout the concert, although he wasn't as giddy as I've often seen him.

He launched straight into...I've no idea. It was a song I didn't know. Actually I didn't know the first three songs and even after two listens I can only tell you they were pleasant and suited his voice. No doubt they'll become familiar favourites by the end of the year.

Anyway he welcomed us as usual and talked a little about the Pheasantry, his excitement about this new set (songs he always wanted to sing), and the nervousness that he always experiences when the audience are so close. He introduced his band: Micky, Tommy and John on violin. John always gets a big cheer from us fans; Lee's always surprised by it. Or maybe he's pretending to be surprised, as he must know that we've gotten to like John a lot over the past year or so.

After three songs, at last, one I knew - 'Maria' from 'West Side Story'. Oooo what a treat! He pulled out all the stops, and it sounded fab!

That said, you could tell he'd been ill. The coughing between numbers was a big clue. No wonder he'd had to cancel the February gig. Indeed I wonder whether he thought twice about these Mother's Day shows, but he soldiered on. You'd hardly notice any weakness in his voice. Even the big notes resounded beautifully. Only his falsetto, which was perhaps a little less confidence than normal, betrayed the difficulty he was no doubt having.

No sooner had the rapturous cheering from 'Maria' died down, Lee started talking about John Legend. An audible sigh ran through the room. We knew what was coming - 'All of Me', a favourite of mine and apparently a lot of other fans. Mmmm I love that song. I'm still humming it now.

By now I'd started to notice just what an excellent table we'd been given. Though not right at the front or particularly central, it was in Lee's eye-line and more than once his gorgeous eyes turned right onto us. Oh my samba-ing heart just speeded up!

On to a Wham song in honour of George Michael. Wham? Seriously? Lee had a good giggle about choosing Wham, but it's a song his mum likes. As he explained, I tried to imagine...Lee singing 'Club Tropicana'? Err no...'Wake me up before You Go Go'? Can't see it myself. 'Young Guns'? I nearly sprayed the table with wine when I thought about that. It turned out an inoffensive little poppy ditty I'd never heard before. He looked like he was having fun singing it.

'Want you Back for Good' was more fun though! With Lee trying to sing all the parts himself and the audience helping out. They were in really good form for the matinee and sang enthusiastically, some of them waving their phone lights, as though we were in a massive stadium rather than the tiny jazz club.

We expect chit chat at a Lee concert, and we got plenty. Silly stories or candid explanations introduced most of the numbers, laced as always with the self-deprecating humour that is now Lee's trade-mark.

New songs mean more new anecdotes. More about the booze cruises on the Bay of Biscay and singing in a cage; (leading to 'Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You', alas sans brass section) and one about an ex-girlfriend who...no you might get to hear it yourself and I'd only spoil it. I really liked the song this story lead onto to, but can I tell you what it was? Nope!

At one point Lee asked where everyone had come from and as usual we had a lot of calling out from dwellers in the more remote parts of the UK (OK Yorkshire) and beyond.

What concert would be complete without a Meady memory lapse. "I was in panto with Marty Pellow. He played Great King Rat." (He played Abenazar, Lee) "I can't remember what panto it was now..." About twenty voices shouted "Aladdin!" He sniggered. This led to a tack 'Wet Wet Wet' recorded in Marty's honour. At least he knew it wasn't a Marti Pellow composition, though he couldn't remember that The Troggs were the original recording artists.

Let's get to the 'news gleaned' section of this report:

He's still waiting to hear what panto he's in this year, but would love to be at the Palladium again. He'd wants to play Dick. (Insert your own smutty remark here. I am far to refined to stoop that low.)

He talked about celebrating ten years since ADWD with a West End concert – though they haven't got a theatre yet – and mentioned the possibility of touring with his anniversary show next year. OOooooo!!!!

A West End run for 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang' is still being mooted, and Lee has 'put his card in for that one' (a phrase he keeps using).

The first half finished with a triumphant CED just to remind us just how bloody good he was in that role. No loincloth though. You can't have everything!

The second half followed the same format as the first. The GO tried out new songs, by Gary Barlow, George Micheal, Micheal Buble. (Actually two by Buble, because Lee said we needed two boobs. Naughty Meadster!). Most of those were new to me, and after this delay in writing I can't remember them – sorry!

He also brought back songs we've not heard him sing in a while, the most stunning of these being 'Why God Why'. That was the point my heart stopped dancing and just stood around gaping.

Interspersed with the less familiar numbers, he treated us to some favourites: 'Hushabye Mountain', 'Lullabye', 'Bring Him Home', 'Ain't that a Kick in the Head'.

In fact he sang so many, that the Pheasantry staff had to remind him that he had another concert to do that evening, and they really did have to turn the tables in between.

No guests either for the matinee. Just over two hours of Lee on stage, singing, chatting, and looking utterly gorgeous.

He finished with a good ole sing-a-long ADWD. And breathe. All is right with the world.

He'd over run. I'm certainly not complaining but the waiters had their work cut out to collect the money for our bills and organise themselves for the next show. Anyone who did both the shows on Mother's Day last year, will picture the crowd leaving only to join the developing queue on the stairs gathering for part deux. That didn't happen this time. We emerged into the afternoon sunlight, commenting as we always do after matinees, on the strangeness of leaving a show in daylight. Some went outside to partake in a beverage.

It wasn't long before we headed back for the stairs, and again the well-organised Pheasantry staff directed us to – the same table. Perfect! I had exactly the same seat, and once again basked in the joy Lee's eyes...shut me up before I start writing poetry about him.

If anything Lee seemed more relaxed in the second show, and his voice, despite the butt end of the lingering lurgy, held up right through. All those big songs, all those "money notes", hit with superb confidence and passion.

There were changes from the afternoon's show: principally guests. The first, Lee introduced as "Someone he's always admired, and always wanted the chance to perform with, and it was so exciting to be performing with him this evening...Stephen Rahmin-Hughes." Much laughter at this little deceit.

Stephen is a great, engaging performer. But I tell you now, it's really difficult to concentrate on him when the Meadster has elected to watch his friend from just behind your table. I'm proud of myself. I didn't turn around.

At interval I, along with numerous others, headed to the ladies.

There I got chatting to one of Lee's dedicated overseas fans. She'd bought Lee some confectionary he'd asked for on twitter, and we discussed the best way of getting to him, in case he didn't hang around after the show.

As it turned out, Lee gave her the perfect opportunity. He mentioned fancying a desert, and being near enough to reach to him, she handed him her gift. He was thrilled to receive it. He knew where she'd come from, and told everyone about her.

"I'm lucky to have...", slight pause as he thought about this "I'm lucky to have a fan base **at all**, but you come from so far to see me." Then he pointed out a few of his most ardent followers and named their home towns. Just going to prove he really does recognise some of most regular fans.

The second half of the concert also brought Lee's second guest. No jokey introductions this time. No introduction at all in fact. Lee started to sing 'Bring Him Home', and Rhydian Roberts joined him on stage. Rhydian has an incredible voice. He's rather too operatic for my taste, but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate how good he is. Their duet was very special; I'm glad I had the opportunity to hear it.

The addition of two guests meant the set list was changed. One or two of the numbers from the matinee got dropped, others swapped places.

Steve returned for a quirky duet of 'Ain't that a Kick in the Head' (much in the style of the pair's 'Luck be a Lady'), and we learned that they are trying to get a new show together sorted out. When the two of them will have time I don't know, but I'll look forward to seeing it.

So the concert drew to a close. It 'ended' with 'Being Alive' from 'Company', a song I hadn't heard in full before (Other than at the matinee I mean). Lee doesn't stick to safe numbers does he? It's difficult. The tune takes all sorts of twists and turns. Lee negotiated them with ease, finishing to a swell of applause.

"Do you want another?" Oh let's think about it. Go on then.

I was expecting him to finish either with 'Any Dream Will Do' or 'I'll See You In My Dreams', and I was a little disappointed that he chose 'Fix You' instead. Not that I dislike the song (and Lee's interpretation is perfect) but it's hardly the sing-along encore I'd been expecting.

But the tinker had tricked us again. It wasn't the encore, and we all joined in with another round of ADWD.

And so the Measter left the stage, and I began to wind down. My friend and I had a train to catch, so we couldn't stay too long. It was a pity. I like to hang around with the fans after the show, comparing our favourite moments and playing 'guess what Lee will be up to next'. If possible I like to have a chance to congratulate Lee, and maybe ask a few questions. But we needed to get gone. I said my farewells, and headed to the ladies room – again, joining my friend in the stairwell. Above us, I could hear a woman talking about Joseph. Then I heard the voice that replied. ☺

We turned the corner, as Lee (with Rhydian) walked back down stairs.

As Lee passed by I congratulated him on another fabulous show. He paused to thank me, and...coughed. I wished him better. Nothing earth shattering. No big revelation, but it completed my evening.

I passed onwards (thanking Rhydian as I went) and into the surprisingly mild March air.

My heart's still dancing. It's settled into a gentle American Smooth. To the tune of 'Ain't That a Kick in the Head.'

Thanks Mr Mead and all my Lee-fan friends. Sometimes I do think 'my life is going to be beaut-if-ful.'