

Proms in the Park – Colwyn Bay 2018

by Jane W

I positioned my foot flat on the bed.

“It’s not bruised,” I said “or red or anything. It’s just sore.”

The radiologist in her little booth spoke with reassuring jauntiness.

“No. It’s broken. Come and have a look.”

I squinted at the xray. There, across my second smallest toe, a faint shadow marked the path of the break.

“But it can’t be broken! I’m going to Colwyn Bay at the weekend –You don’t understand – this is a disaster! NNNOOOOOO!!! I NEED TO SEE LEE!!!!”

Actually, I think what I really said was “Oh bugger!”

I limped off to the bus stop dithering over whether to tell my travelling companions that I can’t come.

OK so let’s think about this...

I’ve been hobbling around with a broken toe for nearly three weeks. It hurts, yes, but I have only been taking over-the-counter ibuprofen, and that not all the time. I’m not laid up.

On the other hand, I can only wear my Sketchers Go Walks (aka my little old lady shoes) which won’t protect my toe either from accidental knocks, or from the soggy wet grass.

On the other hand, I have a pair of sturdy walking boots which are fairly comfy and which will give me some protection.

On the other hand, we have standing tickets; I can’t stand for long.

On the other hand, we’ll have deck chairs.

Oh sod it.

Don’t be a wimp Jane – just do it.

So the following Friday I found myself sat on a train, rucksack under my seat, posh jacket hiding under my coat, heading towards fun and jollification, but glaring at anyone who approached close enough to bash my foot.

Fortunately I arrived at my destination without any further ouches to find my friend and host for the evening waiting for me.

Saturday morning’s weather didn’t fill me with joy. A light but persistent drizzle drifted down on us. We’d just finished loading the car as the third of our intrepid travellers drew up.

The three of us headed off towards Wales, through the diverse British weather: drizzle, light-rain, heavy-rain, ooo-it’s-brightening-up-ah-no-it-isn’t, dizzle again, and, as we followed the road into Colwyn Bay, a really heavy downpour.

Picturesque views of rocky hills, the beach, even the sea, were all drained by the unremitting wet. We started listing the wet-weather gear we’d brought with us. It was sort of game of waterproofs Top Trumps. I didn’t win.

As we drew into the venue’s car park, the weather gave an extra flourish sending stair-rods down upon us.

“Hmmm...” I said as I stared out of the window. I like to think I’m hardened to bad weather, being rufty-tuftu re-enactor and all, but I was certainly feeling a bit soft and squishy.

My friends seemed a bit unsure too.

“Errrrmm...”

“This is set in,”

We looked about us, the car-park didn’t offer a lot of shelter – well not outside the car.

“I don’t want to be queuing in this,” one of my friends eventually admitted.

“Me neither,” both of us said together.

We love you Mr Mead, we’ll happily sit in the rain to watch you – but getting sodden while queueing...that’s above and beyond that is.

With our tickets collected and no sign of the weather letting up, we decided to embark on the most British of wet-day activities – we went for a drive.

Even in the in the grey light, peering though the mist, this coast looked lovely. We passed from Colwyn Bay, into Llandudno (which I am pretty sure I mispronounced for the whole weekend) prompting happy reminiscences from the others, while I admired the grandeur of the seafront.

Our driver spotted a café, and we stopped for another great British pastime, tea and cake (or variants thereof).

As we chatted away I watched the passers-by scurrying along the prom, hooded heads bent, umbrellas raised. Half an hour went by. Fewer umbrellas, I noticed; some hardy souls even wandered about bareheaded.

By the time we left the café a timid sun was playing peek-a-boo behind the clouds.

“Hmmm...” I said

“Errrrmm...”

“If it stays like this...”

We headed for our hotel. Time to check in.

We’d selected the hotel for being conveniently close to the venue rather than for rave reviews. Trip-Advisor’s assessment had been mixed, and I think we all approached the door with low expectations.

Inside we found – a pub. A traditional pub, no pretensions, no ostentation – just a normal pub, not yet ready for business, chairs still turned up on tables, smelling faintly of bleach.

The landlord (or possibly barman, or possibly chef) met us, asked whether we had come for the Prom, and pronounced that the weather would be fine.

The landlady showed us to our room.

“It’s not an en-suite,” she pointed out.

No problem. We booked knowing we’d be sharing a toilet and a bathroom – and room 16 was ideally placed for the night-time loo run.

We thanked the lady and quickly got ourselves ready. Usually that entails changing into our finery. That day, it was more about working out which coat to wear, and how to keep our extra layers dry until we needed them.

Funny that, though none of us actually said “Let’s go and queue after all”, we all just got ourselves ready to go. The incredible telepathy of Lee fans 😊.

With a camping chair over one arm and a picnic bag in the other, we all set off on our next mission – finding the right gate. We must have made a comical sight, walking, limping and hobbling up the road, loaded down and swathed in heavy coats. I couldn’t help laughing.

Eventually we arrived at the gate to the car park we had visited earlier. A queue had already formed. A woman dressed much as we were, huddled in a blue raincoat, camp chair in tow, stood right at the front. Behind her a group of men, braving the weather in identical white T-Shirts.

A chirpy bloke in a high vis, told us we were in the right place, so we settled in to wait. Our gates were due to open in a little over an hour. Ha! Nothing to the old three-hour Pheasantry queues. That said, the staircase in the Pheasantry was enclosed, and you could go to the loo or get a drink while waiting. At least the weather stayed reasonable – damp hung in the air, but it wasn’t falling on our heads.

After about ten minutes, another man, also wearing a high vis vest escorted the blokes in T-Shirts into the stadium. Ah ha – something to do with the event then. We moved ourselves up next to the woman in the blue raincoat. Behind us, the slip road had already filled with camp-chair-toting Proms goers, all eager to bag a decent view.

A strong, rich soprano voice wafted from somewhere beyond the grandstand, which blocked our view of the stage. Lee had mentioned a soundcheck, and this had to be Kathrine Jenkins, the event’s headliner. I am not normally a fan of operatic voices, but hers impressed me. None of the stridency, or vocal gymnastics that too often spoils their performances in my opinion.

“That sounds lovely.” I said.

“She’s very good,” said one of my friends “Not at all screechy like...that other woman. Blonde. English. About 65...”

“Oh I know who you mean, very screechy,” said the other “Errr – what’s her name?”

I’d not a clue.

The woman in blue turned towards us.

“Who are you talking about?”

I recognised the expression on her face. It’s the sort of expression I get when I catch a snatch of conversation along the lines of “I saw him in Joseph, he wasn’t very good.”

“Not Katherine Jenkins,” I assured her, “she sounds beautiful.”

“English woman. Blonde. Screeches.”

“About 65...”

“Oh I know who you mean! I don’t like her. Errr – what’s her name?”

Thank goodness for google and smart phones. We got the name. We all, including me, said “oh yes of course”.

Ice broken (without even having to go in the cool bag) we started chatting.

Our new friend's name turned out to be Chantale or Chantelle (I didn't ask the spelling), (ah sorry Chantal!) and she's a great fan of Katherine Jenkins. She'd sussed that we had turned up for Lee, and had a lot of questions about how far we'd come etc.

As we nattered another tune started up. Oh I recognise that! Lee's voice – 'Feeling Good'.

"Is that your man?" Chantal asked.

"Oh yes."

We all listened.

Over to the left of car-park, overlooking the stadium, a small crowd had gathered. They were watching the stage.

"Can we go over there to watch the soundcheck?" I asked the security guy.

"No, they shouldn't be there," he said, "But don't you worry. 10 minutes and we'll let you through."

10 minutes? Yeah right. I've been involved in a few big events in my time. 10 minutes usually means 30. The sound check – or at least the part of it we wanted to see – would be over by then.

OK, I'll give the security guards this. They weren't too far off with their timing. Lee was still singing as we scurried down a long, flight of concrete stairs towards the bag check area. I paused for the moment and looked towards the stage. I could make out someone on it, moving about in front of the orchestra. Hmm, yes, the figure does seem to have curly hair... no point in hanging around though. Best just listen to that fabulous voice as he repeated 'Feeling Good'.

The bag checkers were in jokey moods as they searched through my share of the picnic and my spare layers. Once satisfied that I carried no contraband (mini scotch eggs and cheesy rolls were allowed), they pointed me towards a sort of holding area.

Here's where it gets complicated. You'll have to use your imagination.

So, picture a wide concreted area, separated from the stadium by a wire mesh fence.

Just behind the grandstand are two gates, both closed.

Two of us had been pointed towards the closer of the two. There's a queue forming there and we're at the front.

But the others are standing at the other gate, along with a few blokes.

They caught sight of us and gave the international signal for "get your arses over here." My companion went to join them.

I glanced at the crowd gathering around "my" gate.

OK, well, we were among the first...I suppose I can leave my place for a minute to talk to my friends.

I scuttled over.

"Apparently this gate is going to open first."

More and more people headed towards the first gate, no one joined the small crew at the other one.

"Oh, um, really...?"

One of the men, a chap with one of those accents that sounds Scouse to people not from around Liverpool, but that is vastly different to anyone from that area, nodded vigorously.

“Oh yes. They told me. This gate is going to open first.”

We stood together for a few minutes. I don't think any of us were quite certain what to do.

“Let's split up.” I said. If the other gate opened first I'd run to get a good place.

I returned to my spot at the front of the other gate. No one glared. I assume they understood the predicament. I noticed many quizzical glances towards the second entrance.

Right, so this is a responsibility. If we get let in first I need to leg it to...hold on I have a broken toe. Legging it is out of the question. The best I can manage is a sort of double-time limp, which makes me look like Quasimodo on speed.

Fortunately one of my friends realised at about the same time that a decent picnic spot rested in the hands – ermm on the feet of Hopalong Jane, and she returned to swap places.

I went back to gate 2. [Is anyone following this? It's not over yet you know!]

By now others had joined the small group at the second gate. You couldn't call it queue as such. Queues don't mill about. A security guard appeared.

“Is this gate going to open first?” The not-a-Scouser said.

“Erm yeah. At least I think...” He got on to his radio.

I heard enough of the conversation to convince me that no one had a clear idea of what was going on, and re-joined the crowd at gate 1. [With me so far?]

The others followed me.

The security guard at the second gate announced that it wouldn't be opening after all, and the small troop that had remained now hurried over to us.

OK so now we are all at one gate.

Any semblance of an orderly queue has gone out the window though.

One line of people (I say “line” - it was more like a column) stretched right back to the bag checking area.

Another shorter, narrower line stood at an angle to the first.

The knot of people right by the gate formed a sort of apex to a wonky triangle. We were pretty much at the apex.

We got a very good view of a small camera crew positioning themselves where they could trip the unwary up.

So now there's a lots of confusion – but no one's being pushy or rude – just – bewildered.

Into this mass of people one solitary ticket inspector strode. Now how on earth he kept tabs of whose tickets he had seen I know not, but he wandered calmly among us with collecting tickets, tearing off strips.

Those audience members who had chosen to sit packed away their chairs. Expectation mounted. And then...

Hang on – a group of security guards are taking a whole bunch of people from the back of the big queue and leading them to the second entrance!

OK so now there's muttering from those of us near the front. They'd better not get in before we do. My heart was thumping like a mad, military drummer, that wasn't keeping his rhythm well. It had all turned so tense.

I stood back and nudged Chantal in front of us.

"You go ahead," I said "you'll be faster than us."

"OK!" She looked determined.

Both of us non-runners loaded ourselves up and dropped back. I found myself next to the chap-who-wasn't-a-Scouser. Slightly out of the press surrounding the door my heart calmed from military drummer beat, to something more of a dance number – a Viennese Waltz perhaps.

The high vis brigade had split up between both gates now. Hands rested on locks. They watched each other, wanting for a signal – then...

Our gate opened.

I'd expected a stampede. It wasn't.

The crowd, kept a moderate pace till we negotiated the camera man crouching on the floor; a path made of loose scree-like stones; and another flight of concrete stairs. I watched our vanguard successfully surmount these obstacles then turned my attention to not falling foul of them myself.

Camera man swerved passed. Check. Cautious walk over the shale. Check. Slow, steady descent of stairs. Check. Now all that remained between me and the stage was a large sweep of grass (I believe it might be called a 'pitch') ringed by a running track.

Everyone sped up as soon as they reached the flat bit, but that was a mistake. I saw two women fall on their faces – one right in front of me. I stopped to check on her, but she was up and off – she too had a mission.

My mission fortunately allowed me to limp along quite slowly, hugging a chair, and bags slung over shoulder, until I saw the others. I speeded up (really rapid limp) and squealed. They had done is proud. They stood either side of a travel rug, on guard. Oh yes RIGHT in the centre at the VERY front. Thank you, thank you ladies.

The last of our gang, with the rest of the baggage, arrived a couple of minutes later. We set to arranging the chairs, wrapping ourselves in coats, and arranging spare waterpooofs over knees (as veterans of Cliff Richard's Harewood House concert know all about keeping denims dry). Then at last we could all relax and break out the food.

"Sausage roll anyone?"

"Oh hello!"

The non-Scouser (let's call him John – seeing as that's his name) sat next to Chantal. We had a little gang together!

The sound check continued as we divvied out the food, and poured the wine.

The kids were particularly impressive – both their singing and their simple but effective choreography. We applauded appreciatively, as we stuffed scotch-eggs and salad down our necks.

"Here's the falafel."

"Yummy – where're the cheese rolls?"

“In here somewhere...”

“Jane...”

“I’m sure they’re in this one...”

“Jane!”

“Or maybe they’re in the big cool bag...”

“JANE! STAGE!”

Oh good grief, Lee’s there! Right in front of us.

Looking, rather nice in a pinkish-purple shirt, he stood side on to us, talking to – well I assume the MD.

Chantal leaned towards me.

“He’s gorgeous!”

We’re not going to disagree with that assessment, are we?

He sang ‘Dancing Thru Life’ (helping to answer the important question “What is he going to sing?”) mostly facing the orchestra, but occasionally sweeping round to take in the crowd. He sounded splendid!

He disappeared once he’d finished, leaving us to eat, giggle, and discuss his fabulousness. Chantal agreed. Fortunately we could reciprocate and honestly compliment her heroine – who was sounding pretty damn fantastic as well.

Lee returned to the stage for two more sound checks.

The very-much-hoped-for ‘From Now On’ was utterly, utterly marvellous – even with his singing mostly with his back to us. Chantal declared herself a Lee-fan.

And, of course, Any Dream Will Do’. Yes, naturally we sang along and waved our little flags (kindly distributed by Chantal). He acknowledged us with a smile. I like to think he was pleased to know for certain he had some of his ladies in the crowd – and I believe there were more of us in the grandstand.

Having heard Lee’s four songs, we could move around a bit...loo breaks...collecting song sheets-cum-programmes...

More chatting, more food, more wine. The sound checks continued sporadically, then suddenly:

We have the two finalists for – errr some singing competition err – they were to perform in turn, and I was under the impression we would be voting for the winner.

Apologies to both acts – I can’t remember their names. The first was a young woman with a really lovely voice, who we listened to for three songs with great pleasure. By song number four though I was...OK let’s just say, eager to hear the next competitor. For that matter I was eager for another toilet break too.

“This doesn’t count as the concert does it?” I asked my companions, “It is the warm up?”

They nodded, and I left my seat to scurry as quickly as possible passed the front of the stage. I wasn’t the only person doing this you understand – several audience members were in the same predicament. The security guards couldn’t have a word with everyone.

At least on the way back (song number 5 by the way) we waited for the applause and found an alternative route through the crowd. Good. I’m sorted. I shouldn’t be disturbing anyone’s view again.

The second competing act was a band. I thought they were excellent, but I think they only managed two numbers before they were hustled off stage.

It's time for the Proms to start.

A short announcement from our two compares, Josie D'Arby and Tim Rhys Evans, and the orchestra struck up – first a classical piece then a medley of Mary Poppins' songs. Out with our little flags and we waved them along to 'A Spoonful of Sugar' and the like.

The out came Tim to announce the first guest – Lee Mead.

Ah what a nice big cheer the crowd gave!

He sauntered onto stage, now dressed in a smart black suit, looking very cool and confident – the James Bond of the Proms.

"Birds in the sky, you know how I feel..." Mmm, that slow, controlled start, and that frisson of excitement as he approaches the end of the verse. I'm used to holding my breath waiting for the band to come in and Lee to ramp it up, but when a FULL orchestra comes in... Oh my heart! Believe me I would have been staring in open-mouthed wonder – but for the inescapable presence of TV cameras. I did so not want them to catch me agog!

Our position right at the front gave us an amazing view, but there was a downside. Those TV cameras doing an all-important job of relaying that Meady magic to the world out side the park, did sometimes block our view completely. This is not a complaint; a series of persistent photographers, some of which didn't even have the decency to dress in discreet black, hanging around in front of the stage and getting in the way – THAT'S a complaint.

But at least they moved away after a minute or two leaving me to enjoy the view, as well as the music.

Later I heard commentators saying the Lee Mead had really captured the spirit of the occasion with his 'Feeling Good' – oh yes he did. He really, really did, and the crowd loved him for it!

Now, I'm writing this report using the free program we were given and I am not 100% sure the running order on the night was as described, but let's pretend it was shall we?

So next up, the young musician of the year – Lauren Zhang. Sometimes I can admire a performance without enjoying it. That was the case here. Lauren is an extremely talented and passionate pianist, and her performance of Tchaikovsky and Chopin piano concertos that evening was (as Jane Austin would say) capital. However, much to my father's annoyance, (he was once a concert pianist), piano concertos don't do anything for me. (So sorry dad!)

What followed was a piece of classical music I do adore. From The Planets by Holtz, the tune for the hymn 'I Vow to Thee My Country', now reworded as 'The World in Union'. And to sing it, Chantal's heroine, Kathrine Jenkins.

Katherine has the perfect voice for an anthem like this. Her voice soars (with no suggestion of screeching), operatic without pretention. And while my ears enjoyed her voice my eyes admired her gorgeous red evening dress. Later, watching on TV, I realised the frock had the most amazing train. Even more impressive!

Next she sang 'Never Enough', one of the songs from 'The Greatest Showman', which was something of a theme for the event. She did a bloody good job with that too. Can I daydream about Lee and her in the leads of a West End version? Please let me!

Lee returned to the stage with 'Dancing Thru Life'. I rather missed his usual intro story, and I very much missed his comical dance moves, but otherwise I loved it. His voice sounded beautiful, his eyes sparkled and he cast cheeky smiles towards the audience – so very sweet, so very Lee.

Before he left the stage, our two MCs grabbed Lee for a quick interview. I'm afraid I can't remember much of what he said except he did manage to plug his current tour. Nice one, Mr Mead!

On then to what was one of my non-Meady highlights – Only Kids Aloud singing their Greatest Showman medley. I thoroughly enjoyed it at the sound-check; I loved the full performance.

More Katherine next. My programme tells me she sang 'Finlandia (Be Still My Soul)'. It's not a piece that I'm familiar with...and I wasn't particularly keen on it. But another amazing-balls frock. It matched my flag, with an enormous Cadwaladr Dragon stretching out over her skirt.

To finish off the first half, the orchestra entertained us without help from a guest. Synchronised flag-wagging to tunes from 'Oliver' from our little clique at the front caught on camera.

Interval: time to visit the portaloos and the bar. Time too for lots of happy chatter – and off we go again!
Part 2.

The orchestra started us off again, and in between classical instrumental pieces, a truly joyous version of 'Happy' sung by a choir who, standing at the back of the stage, were pretty much invisible to me.

Several members of the audience chose to come to the front to dance, which was lovely – though we were thinking "don't dance in front of us when Lee's on!"

Fortunately most of them scuttled back to their seats as soon as the song ended, but one lady seemed determined to keep on dancing in her flamboyant style – which didn't fit too well with the orchestra playing 'Firebird'. At first I laughed at her antics. I've been there myself, roaring crocodillopig, out to have fun...but she did start to get irritating and wasn't happy when security had a word. Thank goodness for John. He took one for the team, talked her down and helped keep her quiet during the next few performances – which was really important to us as one of those performances was Lee.

How eagerly we awaited 'From Now On'!

After his stunning sound check, would his actual performance disappoint?

Nah. That gorgeous young man gave his all once again. How I love that song – and his rendition, so emotional, so charged – he really gives us the sense of a man in the midst of an epiphany. It is a perfect song for him – and how I would love to see him performing it in a Greatest Showman West End show! Excuse me. I'm daydreaming again.

My little programme tells me that Lee sang 'Any Dream Will Do' immediately after 'From Now On'. Funnily in my memory there was a bit of a gap between the two, but perhaps my memory is at fault. [Apparent yes it was. My friends tell me it did follow on 😊]

I was in my element. Lee right in front of me, singing his heart out; good mates either side of me swaying and flag-waving; a wonderful crowd singing along with the choir; and a full orchestra – it was nothing less than magical. If only we'd had our full compliment with us, the evening would have been perfect.

Lee finished with that mighty "give me my coloured coat" ending to rapturous cheering from a delighted crowd, smiling out at us all, and looking like the cat who'd got the double whipped cream with vanilla sauce. What an evening for the Meadster!

Though he'd performed his last number we still much to look forward to: Katherine Jenkin's return with another beautiful dress and an equally beautiful rendition of 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', which brought a little tear to my eye. (I get very emotional when I hear songs from 'Oh What a Lovely War'!)

Then the orchestra struck up 'The Hornpipe'.

Now this was where I got ridiculously emotional.

As a little girl I use to watch The Last Night of the Proms every year on telly with my family, sitting on the sofa, bouncing up and down, pretending to wave a Union Flag. ("It's a Union *Flag*, Jane, not a Union Jack. It's not flying from the jack-mast of a ship, so it can't be a *jack*." My dad was a naval officer, as well as a concert pianist. He knew.)

Year after year, the family tradition continued: the last night of the Proms, singing along with 'Rule Britannia'... I so wanted to be in that crowd. We didn't use the words "bucket list" in those days, but if I'd had a bucket list, celebrating the Last Night live would have been on it.

My first fiancé tried to get us both there, but we just couldn't afford it in those days.

Then when I eventually married, my husband wasn't into the Proms, and to be honest I forgot our family tradition.

Until, that Saturday night – when the orchestra struck up the hornpipe. And I realised something...

I WAS THERE!!!!

OK so not the Albert Hall, and the flag I was waving was a Cadwaladr Dragon rather than the Union Flag-Not-Jack. But it didn't matter. Bucket list item ticked off.

I will leave it to you to imagine just how loud I sang to 'Rule Britannia'. And though I don't know the Welsh National Anthem, my friends will vouch for me – I gave my rock-all for 'Guide Me Oh Thou Great Redeemer'. Alright I sang both verses in English, but at least I sang LOUD!

It finished all too soon.

With Lee back on stage for the final bows, and barely visible (from our seats) fireworks exploding over head, I'd gone through happiness and delight and right into euphoria. I'd thought about being at the Last Night of the Proms, but the experience, sharing with friends, and in the presence of the Meadster, vastly outstripped those childhood daydreams.

The sound of fireworks faded. The performers left the stage.

We gathered up our chairs, our largely unneeded wet-weather gear, and the remains of our picnic. We said our goodbyes to Chantal and John.

Off we went into the night, hoping to stumble over the other fans or even catch a glimpse of Lee before we left the park. It wasn't to be.

We didn't mind. We'd had an evening – in fact a day – full of joy. Oh and we had an untouched bottle of fizz in the cool box.

Even my broken toe, which by now was really moaning about having spent so long in walking boots, couldn't dampen my spirits. The slight drizzle definitely didn't manage to.

Back in our hotel room, we popped the cork and toasted the wonderful man who gives us so much pleasure – and the absent friends so badly missed.