

# CCBB in detail

by Jane W

I'm writing this for all those who'll not get to see CCBB – and for those that have done and want a reminder of one of the best musical theatre experiences a Lee Mead fan could ever have.

To say it contains spoilers is ridiculous. It is one giant spoiler – so if you don't want to know exactly what happens read no further.

---

You're reading on?

OK – you were warned...



## The Overture

As you settle into your theatre seat the first thing you notice is that there is a windmill on stage.

Sort of.

The curtain – if you can call it that – is a slatted, grey wall with a small window near the top. If you are lucky enough to see the show on one of the more spacious stages a pair of windmill sails gently circle as you wait for the orchestra to tune up.

This wall becomes a screen, and as the overture starts a 'Pathe News' style black and white image of a racing car is projected on to it. The captions tell you it's the 1910, 1911 and 1912 Grand Prix and that this famous car won all three. So the scene is neatly set – pre-war England.

Those that have read my reports before know that I remember little of the film, but I am told it used the same device to set the scene. Clever of the theatre producers to use it as well.

One of the things I love about this production is that the action on stage starts during the overture. A young man, in the period dress of the lower-middle class, saunters on and takes note of various formulae now appearing on the slatted screen-cum-curtain. Even if you know

nothing about the story it's evident that this is our star. Of course for the performances I've seen it's Lee Mead.

Lee looks incredibly dishy in his white shirt and tweed trousers, with a cravat loosely tied around his throat, despite his face being liberally smeared with engine oil. He interacts with various by-passers, in the manner of a silent comedian.

He teases school kids as the march passes in file; and watches a pair of lovers as they stroll by. Take note of Lee's face. His wistful expression tells us just a little more about his character. It isn't quite so happy go lucky as he first appears.

Lee gives us many such subtle, touching, moments as the show progresses.

Two children are brought onto the stage by a woman in a white apron. Our leading man gives them a huge hug. There's something a little desperate about that hug. The way Lee plays it, you know immediately that he's living for this little girl and boy. Meanwhile the aproned woman quietly leaves. It's easy to miss but she seems to be the ghost of their mum. I have nothing to go on but Lee's bewildered and yearning expression as she disappears.

A door opens in the centre of the screen and the family pass through it.

As it closes a woman in a (OK I'm going to say it) really, unbecoming pink outfit rides across the stage on a motorcycle.

Above her a projection shows an image of the racing car, crashing and burning.



## The Opening

The curtain-screen partially lifts to reveal the stage proper, and the show starts in earnest.

It's the kids, Jemima and Jeremy, who take centre stage in the opening number, which is set in a junk-yard. They are playing in the burnt-out wreck of the racing car which will become the eponymous hero...err... heroine...err STAR of the show.

I'm always a little wary of child actors. You can never be certain whether they will be up to the job in hand. In this case we have a girl of nine or ten and a boy of about the same age (though I think his character is supposed to be a little younger.) I've seen two Jemimas and I think three Jeremys playing these important parts, and all of them impressed me with their professionalism and talent. I have a favourite: checking the programme, I think she is Lucy

Sherman. I find myself watching her even when Lee is on the stage. Yes she is that good! Keep an eye on her. This lass has a great future ahead of her.

Anyway, Lee isn't in the opening number, so the children can have your full attention as they re-enact one of the wreck's triumphs.

Surrounding them, the ensemble is their imagined audience, cheering them on by singing a rousing a song to the tune of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang.

'Oh there never was a car, there never was a car like this race car!' they sing as they wave union flags, and mime watching the racers speed passed.

Daddy returns to the stage, as the ensemble melts away. The kids tell him that they have beaten those nasty Vulgarians. (Have you got that? Vulgarians = nasty. Check.)

The junk-yard owner enters and explains (for anyone who was too busy unwrapping their sweeties during the overture to watch the projection) that this wreck won the 1911 Grand Prix.

Ewen Cummins plays two roles in this production, as do several of the lead actors. Mr Coggins, the junk yard owner, is the less important of the two, but he imbues the character with a sweetness that makes him memorable.

He gives his blessing to the children's game, even encouraging them to start another race while he bustles off to find a bushel (I have no idea what a bushel is in this context; certainly not an ancient measure for corn methinks. (Correction from my proof-reader: it's a bushING not a bushel and, disappointingly has nothing to do with ancient measures, for cereal crops.)) to fit on one of their father's contraptions.

Daddy joins in. He mimes winding a starting handle, but the kids insist that the car won't start unless he says 'please'. Take note. This becomes a theme later.

Lee turns to the audience. 'Of course, where are my manners?' he says, which raises a titter. There's a lot of family bonding and talk about the Potts family (ah ha so that's their name. Okay, okay I know most of you knew that already but let's pretend this is all new to us shall we?) 'sticking together' and 'pitching in' (sounds like a tactful way of encouraging the little Potts to do their chores to me) which leads into the next song.

Yippee! Lee's first song! Not one of the really well known ones (I'm not even sure it's in the film) but it's a corker – 'Teamwork'. It makes a dream work don't cha know. It's a chirpy little ditty, which gives us a nice flavour of the family's dynamics while letting Lee warm up his voice. I don't think it's a challenge for him somehow!

As he sings, the three Potts race one more (you must assume against nasty Vulgarians again) and you get more of that charming interaction that's a hallmark of Lee's performances with

youngsters. The family's affection just shines out, even making a cynical old curmudgeon like me go all gooey.

The song ends. Potts tells his children that everyone wants their car. This appears to be nothing more than a playful father augmenting his son and daughter's game. Ah, but that's not the case!

Potts drags the wreck to the back of the stage and crouches behind it. If you are sat at the extreme left of the theatre you'll get glimpses of Lee while he hides. Not that you would want to miss a moment of the action at the front of the stage just so you can play spot-the-curly-headed-dude-behind-the-car. Would you? ☺

Down come the sides of the screen, leaving an unilluminated tableau of the kids in the car centre stage. A bed is pushed on to the right; a phone box to the left. Above the projection on the upper part of the screen tells you, by means of a map, that the right of the stage is in Vulgaria and the left England. The map is a bit vague about where Vulgaria actually is. Let's leave it at Europe shall we?

Two characters in purple pyjamas climb on to the Vulgarian bed. They quickly establish that they are the Baron and Baroness of Vulgaria, and that the Baron is about to have a birthday. The Baron has taken the suggestion to 'channel his inner child' a bit too far. He talks and behaves like he's five.

Shaun Williamson and Michelle Collins played the Baron and Baroness for all the performances I have seen to date. I love Shaun. His sulky toddler Baron is great fun. As far as I know I'm alone in thinking this, but his voice and facial expressions remind me of a young, beardless, Brian Blessed.

Michelle has I think the harder job. Her character is not innately funny. In fact in many ways her collusion with her husband's childishness is slightly sinister. Just slightly. She's good in the role. The moments of humour she does get she milks for all they're worth. I have a mild criticism. Her Vulgarian accent is very pronounced and some of her words aren't completely clear.

Any road up – the Baron has decided that he wants the racing car that won the Grand Prix in the previous years as his birthday present. The Baroness is eager to please him, hands him a telephone and tells him to call the spies. The phone in the call-box rings.

Enter the two scene stealers Scott Paige and Sam Harrison, alias Goran and Boris, the spies.

Even if you're sat on the extreme left of the theatre it's worthwhile giving up your game of trying to spot Meady to watch these two. They are hysterical. Think the Butler and Baker from Joseph (if you were lucky enough to see it). They have the same camaraderie but their double act is given far more stage time.

As with many double acts their physical juxtaposition is part of the joke. Goran is tubby, while Boris is tall and thin. They appear first in purple Vulgarian uniforms – and those are the most sensible costumes they get.



There's a long gag about answering the phone, with 'Is that you?' – "Yes it's me, who is that?" before the Baroness takes over and they get down to the business of some plot development. Wicked schemes get hatched.

Actually they're only planning to salvage the wreckage of the racing car and restore it, so that the Baron can enjoy driving it about... when I think about it, the plot doesn't sound

particularly wicked.

Mind you they make their plans with so much shouting and maniacal laughter, that it's quite clear that these are nasty Vulgarians and most assuredly the bad guys.

The car is in England; the spies are in England. They should have no trouble finding it. In the absence of the internet I wonder just how they do manage to find it, still...

Bed and telephone box trundle off, the screen side panels rise again, and Lee bobs back up, pushing the car forward as he gives a reprise of Teamwork.

As he's singing, he's manhandling the car around the stage. It seems quite heavy, so I am very impressed he can hold his notes as effortlessly as he does.

The Potts' games are interrupted by the arrival of the woman on the motorbike, who almost runs into the car. Potts stops her.

Is she grateful? Nope.

She needs her bike fixing but she is absolutely not listening to Potts' advice on the subject. Nor is she too chuffed when Mr Coggins (who has turned up with the part Potts needed) backs him up.

Still the kids volunteer their daddy's services (daddy is less than impressed) telling the rider that's he's an inventor – which evidently qualifies him as a motorbike repair man.



The woman introduces herself as Truly, who is of course our heroine.

I like that Truly is, in this production, a nicely rounded character. I like that she rides a motorbike, and that she has her own opinions about what's wrong with it. OK so she turns

out to be less mechanically minded than the men, but I think that's fair enough in this context.

Carrie Hope Fletcher plays her beautifully, with all her complexities. She's not a very sympathetic character in the scene. She comes across as a prim busybody, but Carrie has charm enough to prevent her being unpleasant.

Truly and Potts don't exactly hit it off. (It's in this exchange we learn that our hero is called Caractacus. Some mums are just mean aren't they? Mind you we discover later that the name Caractacus has been passed down at least two generations of Potts boys so Jeremy got off lightly.)

Mind you she does make a huge gaff, asking why Jeremy and Jemima's mother isn't looking after them. Lee's heart-broken expression explains everything. Truly naturally apologises, but completely fails to win friends and influence people by continuing to shove her nose into the Potts' family's business. So why aren't Jemima and Jeremy at school? Well durr – coz it's Eastmas; oh and because Caractacus can't feed them breakfast while his breakfast-making-machine is broken.

This is a funny piece and it's nice that Lee gets the comedic lines while Carrie is his straight man – seeing as in panto it's usually Lee being the straight man.

During this exchange a scrap dealer turns up, played by Matt Gillett. He and Mr Coggins go off in search of scrap leaving Caractacus and Truly to finish of their...erm...conversation.

Truly pretty much calls Potts' idea of breakfast making eccentric and he takes the humph.

They part acrimoniously, which doesn't stop the children jumping to the conclusion that daddy likes Truly.

Potts appears to be a little churlish at this point. I mean, come on, creating a machine to make your bacon and eggs IS eccentric. And she said it pleasantly...

The thing is Caractacus is struggling to bring up his two children alone, and doubting whether he's doing a decent job. He simply can't take criticism.

Thus, with a slightly tenuous link, Caratacus launches into 'You Two'.

I like this song. It's perky, but listen to the lyrics – 'someone to strive for, stay alive for, I've got you two.' Perhaps he's keeping his kids off school because he can't bear to be without them. Certainly Lee's interpretation gives that impression.

It's a perfect way for Lee to melt hearts as the lovelorn, widowed father, now living for his offspring. Awwwww!!!!

Coggins returns with the scrap metal dealer, who offers to buy Chitty-to-be for 30 schillings, (ah no. He's not a German scrap dealer so he wants shillings not schillings. Thank you my proof-reader) intending to melt her down (Boo! Hiss!).

The scrap dealer details the horrors in wait for the poor car.

'Excuse me, you're scaring my children,' says Potts, then as the wreck's fenders collapse, '...and the car.'

Which always gets Lee a giggle from the audience. The dealer sweeps off smugly.

The kids are mortified. They ask their daddy to buy the car for them. The junk-yard owner would rather sell the car to Caractacus – but would-be inventor can't afford it. Coggins tells Potts he has till Friday to find the cash, and leaves. The family start inspecting the wreck.

Here come the Vulgarians! ...oh yes, the spies are back - disguised as petrol pumps – causing much merriment in the audience.



They plan to find 'thirty bob' not knowing what a 'bob' is. (I bet they know what a schilling is though!)

At one point Carcatacus looks around and they freeze. Lee pulls one of his trade mark, 'do what?' faces, which again always seems to get him a laugh.

The petrol pumps sidle off, leaving Caractacus to consider how on earth he can find the

money to buy the car.

He tries to manage Jemima and Jeremy's expectations (as we say in work), but he's their dad and can do anything. He's now honour bound to raise the cash somehow.

Carcatacus consoles himself with a reprise of 'You Two' during which the slatted screen must come down – but you know, I've never noticed. I am always too entranced by Lee and his diminutive co-stars.

Almost every review I have seen talks about Lee's wonderful interaction with the kids. I agree completely. You might have sussed that!

So the three of them dance their way along the stage-front.

All the way through the show, the Lee's energy astounds me. No wonder he's looking so slender. Oh my, that guy is gorgeous. (Sigh!)

OK getting on with it...

They must be approaching home because they are met by Edison the dog. I understand that in the film Edison is a sheep-dog. In this he's a robot. He's SO CUTE with his little dustbin body, cheese grater nose and hearth-brush tail!

I suspect the producers thought this Edison would be easier to train than a live version, but he can be a bit of a trickster. For instance he doesn't always wag his hearth-brush. It's SO CUTE when he does!

With Edison here the screen raises. The set has been transformed into the Potts's home – the inside of the windmill. The same grey slats form walls around the stage area to create a cosy, cluttered space.

There's a table in the centre but that's about the only recognisable feature. The rest of the 'room' is filled with Heath-Robinson contraptions, one of which is the aforementioned Breakfast-Making-Machine. It involves a toy train.

'You Two' continues as the family gets ready for supper, the kids setting the table, daddy feeding the dog (nuts probably).

The song ends on a ta-dah moment as the toy train brings a pan towards Caractacus. Supper is served.

## Supertime

The next scene starts with another main character, Grandpa Potts (Andy Hockley), descending a steep staircase at the back of the stage.

'Attention!' he shouts and the family snaps into smart salutes. He asks about supper and his son holds up a sausage.

(Sausages are a recurring theme. I suspect Ian Fleming was partial to the odd banger.)

So now we've met the whole Potts family – and what a lovely family they are. Grandpa is the beneficent patriarch, and though his son and grandchildren occasionally mock his old jokes and oft repeated stories, their mockery is affectionate and gentle.



Andy comes across as a total sweetie. His Grandpa is the sort of Grandpa I would have wished for myself. Caring, compassionate, funny... (Excuse me. I'm having a moment. That's just reminded me of my own much missed father. Sniff. OK, pulling myself together.)

Over dinner Caractacus shows off his latest invention – a sweet-making machine. None of them seem that impressed with the results. It has produced something that looks more like a penny-whistle than a penny-chew.

And the kids are not about to be distracted by sweeties. They have nagging to do. They want that wrecked racing car. Caractacus sends them upstairs to finish their supper so he can discuss the matter with Grandpa.

In the course of their discussion Grandpa says that the children miss their mother.

Awww – a heart-tearing moment from Mr Mead. He has his back almost turned to the audience, but that has never stopped Lee. Those square shoulders are unspeakably expressive. ‘I know,’ he replies and there’s a world of grief in those two words.

Short of cash and still mourning, Caractacus takes himself to bed, climbing up the stair with the weight of the world – or at least the windmill – on his shoulders.

Grandpa addresses the audience. He’s the only character to do so. He tells you a bit about his son (nothing you’ve not sussed for yourself) and revisits ‘You Two’, this time as ‘Them Three’. He’s clearing the table as he’s singing and the last thing left is the defective sweet. Grandpa pops it in his mouth and blows. It toots.

Yes! Grandpa realises that his son has inadvertently invented ‘Whistling Pops’, oops sorry, I mean ‘Toot Sweets’ – a sweet you can use as a whistle.

He tear-arses (what? It’s a word) up the stairs to tell him.

The screen descends.

## Toot Sweets

Thanks to the projector, the curtain-screen becomes a factory wall. A logo appears: ‘Scrumptious Sweets’. Under it the door opens again, and through it walks one of the ensemble. His name, given in the programme, is Christopher D Hunt, but I will always think of him as Turkey-Man, for reasons that will become clear in a scene or two. A very smartly dressed Michelle Collins follows on, with her nose in the air. She’s not in Baroness mode now. The Baroness wouldn’t be wearing a colour as insipid as lilac.

A woman in a striped, purple and white dress rushes towards the door.

‘Late!’ calls Michelle’s character.

Then a man follows.

‘Late!’

Then Caractacus, Jemima and Jeremy.

‘Late!’

Mrs Officious then mistakes Potts for a job applicant. He is in his Sunday best, face and arms free of oil and a tweed jacket matching his trousers. He explains he wants to show Lord Scrumptious his new sweets.

This leads to a comical moment of bureaucracy as Potts is told he needs to schedule an appointment to schedule an appointment. (This is like my work-place.)

Fortunately Truly arrives (her dapper blue dress-suit is far more flattering than the pink riding get-up). The children are thrilled, but when Mrs Officious greets her as Lord

Scrumptious' daughter, ('You're Truly Scrumptious!' says Caractacus 'So I'm told,' says Truly) Caractacus is shocked.

He attempts to hurry away but Truly is curious to know what he wants. He shows her the Toot Sweets.

She's bemused until Caractacus demonstrates them; then she's delighted.

The Baron – oops sorry, Shaun as Lord Scrumptious – enters. At his daughter's request he gives Caractacus 20 seconds to pitch his new sweets.

Caractacus may be hard-working, he may be imaginative; salesman he ain't. As Lord Scrumptious puts it, he muffed it.

A horn blows just as Potts finally thinks to actually toot on the toot sweet, drowning out the note and effectively ending his chance to impress the boss.

Does this deter him?

Err, yes.

Not Truly though, she urges Mr Potts to follow her old man. Follow him they do through the factory door, as swirling dancers carry trays of sweets across the stage – and the screen lifts.

Inside the factory all is hectic bustle. The various men and women in their purple-striped uniforms, bring Lord Scrumptious trays or trolley-loads of sweets.

The lead characters form a sort of island amid a swirling purple sea of dancers. Potts is still desperately trying to sell his Toot Sweets, but does so by stammering increasingly dull facts from cue cards.

When Lord Scrumptious moves, Potts shuffles about after him.

I'm using the word 'shuffles' because Lee adopts a curious shuffling gait during this part of the scene. I don't know whether that was a conscious decision on his part (or the director's) or whether the frenetic activity around him forced him to take tiny mincing steps.

Whichever, the effect is to make Potts appear excruciatingly nervous – exacerbated by Lee's stutter, and his panicked features.

And his sweating. OK, not at every performance, but when the theatre is warm you start to see Lee sweat. And of course none of us like that, do we? (Oh come on – yes we do!!)

Back to the plot. Potts is failing to make an impression on the obvious Lord so Truly intervenes.

For the first time her daddykin notices them both, and is furious.

Potts faces him, over a trolley, waving his sweetie-whistle and launches into something akin to a jingle. Ah but then the music swells, and here we go – 'Toot Sweets'.

'Toot Sweets' is one of the big, iconic songs from the film Chitty Chitty Bang Bang – and it's a BIG number in the stage production too. It's such fun with all the tooting on the

sweets, singing and dancing – and Lee looks like he's having the best time of his life up there on the stage.

My Chitty Chitty Bang Bang film expert tells me that Dick Van Dyke is up front and at the centre of the number – full-on dancing right the way through.

It would be foolish to imagine that Lee could do the same. After all he has another big routine coming up, and, as this isn't a film, no real time to rest in between. Plus while Lee can dance (no matter what he himself thinks) he's no Dick van Dyke. (On the other hand he's a better singer and something else too...what am I thinking of... oh yes – HE'S HOT!!)

So 'Toot Sweets' is the ensemble's first big moment to shine. I'd like to explain to you exactly what they do but, eerrrr I was kinda watching Lee. I can tell you what he does...



There's some initial business with the trolley, then Lee, Carrie and Shaun move to the front. Lee follows Shaun, and Carrie follows Lee, her hand on his back as though she is pushing him. Lee steps in

time to the music: Carrie seems to be auditioning for a job in the Ministry of Silly Walks.

Then they reverse back, this time it's Carrie leading and it's Lee's turn to try to get the job in the ministry.

More shenanigans with trolleys and with various trays as Truly and the family seek to sneak the Toot Sweets in among those candies being tested.

This doesn't sound like much, but remember the ensemble are twirling and whirling around the stage as Caractacus and the kids dart among them, still singing.

Eventually they move to the side so the trained dancers can really show off. I'm sure their routine is fabulous. I can tell you nothing about it. I can however tell you the average number of times Lee wipes his brow while he gets this short breather (2. I just know you're more interested in that anyway).

Scurrying back into the action the children climb onto one of the trolleys and Caractacus pushes it towards Lord Scrumptious. The hectic activity pauses as the two little ones hold out the sweeties, and in their best, don't-ignore-me- I'm -adorable, whine 'Plleeeeaaaassseeee!!'

In the face of such an attack Lord Scrumptious caves in and tries one.

I hope it tastes better than it sounds.

Oh – evidently it does! Hurrah! More dancing about and running around, then the factory workers arrange themselves into lines from centre back to front right of the stage. Caractacus stands before them as a conductor.

One after another they toot on the sweeties creating a steam organ fairground sound.

Lee turns a couple of times checking for the Lord's approval. Does he approve? Yes.

When the song starts up again, the Lord hands Caractacus a contract.

The family celebrate by dancing with one another: Caractacus with Jemima and Truly with Jeremy. Then the kids extricate themselves and push the grown-ups together. They seem a bit surprised. They seem more surprised when they end up very close. The look on Carrie's face is priceless – it's a OMG-he's-gorgeous! moment. No. I have no idea what that feels like!

One final chorus with everyone on stage in lines dancing in sync, slowly at first but speeding up as the music reaches its crescendo.

Do you remember how Lee nodded on ADWD at the end of 'Mack the Knife' as if to say 'Yep, nailed that one!?' He does the same after 'Toot Sweets'.

Cue applause.

Get in quick with those whoops and cheers though because of course the sweets have a draw-back – all that whistling encouraged the local dogs to turn-up!

I'm informed the West End version of 2002 (?) used real dogs on the stage, but they were a bit unpredictable. This production avoids those canine problems by the simple expedient of bringing on some of the kids with roller dog puppets to chase the adults away.

The last pooch to appear is Edison. How a cheese grater can look expectant, I don't know, then so despondent, as the frustrated family march off without him. Have I mentioned that Edison is SO CUTE!!!?

## Act English

Edison has a little trundle around the stage and the two side panels of the screen descend. On mince the two Vulgarian spies, in their purple Vulgarian uniforms, carrying a large purple Vulgarian box labeled 'English Disguises'.

Other than Lee, my favourite performances are from Sam and Scott, the Vulgarian spies.

And this is their big scene.

They start by...actually they start by discussing Edison who passes them on his way off stage. They make the old, old, shih tzu joke (which I am not going to repeat lest my poor laptop groans to death) then Boris starts counting out the shillings they have obtained.

30! Enough to buy the racing car! But there's a problem. Mr Coggin's wants to sell the car to 'that nice Englishman', not to two Vulgarians.

Goran thinks that if they don't mention that they're from Vulgaria maybe Mr Coggins won't realise – which leads to a guaranteed crowd pleaser.

So with apologies to Lin, Grace and any other of you lovely ladies across the pond...

Goran: yes, I have a Vulgar heart! Yes, I have a Vulgar mind! Can't I speak English and still be Vulgar?

Boris: No Goran, that would make you American.

(Note from Lin: Ha. Ha.)

There's only one thing they can do. Pretend to be English.

Boris renames Goran, Gordon (much to his delight. He preens as though Boris has just asked him to marry him).

Goran renames Boris, Doris (which Boris is very pleased about).



Then they get to sign their BIG number – 'Act English'.

'Act English' isn't in the film, I'm told. If you love the film you will, I'm sure, adore this addition.

The screen becomes a musical hall style proscenium arch, which fits the tone as, with help from the contents of the disguise-box, the two spies practice their English phrases to music.

In the second verse they don typical English clothing:

hunting pink for Goran, sorry Gordon, and a boating blazer for Doris. There's a subtle joke even in their costumes because Gordon puts on the straw boater that goes with Doris' costume and Doris puts on the top hat that would have gone better with Gordon's.

It's a pacey patter-song, and the last verse, with each of the spies singing different words, is a real challenge. It's interspersed with little reminders that these guys are in danger ('Get this right or we'll get shot!') and it ramps up to a very vaudeville ending – with them belting out '...and the firing squad is gonna be lined up, and we'll die, we'll die, we'll DIE!!!

As they head for the wings the audience cheers. So they pop back for a quick encore. More cheers, Gordon mouths, 'thank you' at the front row.

Then as they leave for real the costume box gets turned around, and we see the reverse, on which, written large are the words 'applause please.' Talk about milking it! But the audience love it.

## Hushabye Mountain

With the exit of the spies, a calm flows over the stage.

The screen lifts on a darkened room. A bed with a lantern above it (in Wimbledon Lee pushed the bed on himself though in other theatres a stage hand had the job) stands at its centre.

The two Potts children kneel together beside a box, they see father and immediately ask if he's been working late. Then they tell him their plan.

The box contains their treasures: a paper crown, an old nail, a stone. Each, in their eyes, are precious historical artefacts. They offer them to their daddy so that he can sell them to buy the car, and fund his inventions.

It's so touching.

Lee seems about to cry as he gently explains that other people won't see these wonderful objects as they do. They're mollified, and climb into bed.

They ask daddy to sing the lullaby mummy used to sing.

Oh my, Lee's face as he realises which song they want. It's soul-crushing. You can see the conflict in his eyes. Should he refuse his son and daughter and turn aside from his painful memories?

No. Of course not. He opens a music box - and sings.

How on earth can I describe this? It's such a transformation from the Lee of 'Toot Sweets'. Such a beautiful, rich, honeyed voice, crooning this gentle lullaby.

I'm used to seeing Lee switch from mood to mood in his concerts, but this – well this is just a reminder of what a wonderful, versatile performer he is.

If you can tear your eyes away from his face as he sings (why would you) look up to the walls of the windmill. There the images from the verses are drawn in lovely glowing shapes.

All the while Lee's sweet yet powerful notes ebb and flow like the sea he sings of. If I hadn't been totally enamoured of Lee all ready, this scene would have made me fall in love with him.

As the song progresses the woman in the apron reappears at the back of the stage. She takes up the refrain. Lee falls silent as if he is listening to a voice in his head – then he joins in, a sorrowful duet.

As the last notes fade he closes the music-box lid. Only then does he turn to look for his wife's ghost. Too late. She has gone.

Utterly spell-binding.

No cheering follows Hushabye Mountain, no whoops of delight. The audience give Lee respectful applause, not wanting to destroy the moment too soon.

It's left to Lee to do that as, in putting the music box away, he finds an old gramophone horn that inspires his next invention.

## Me Ol' Bamboo

Look! It's a fairground! Thanks to the projection the stage is surrounded by brightly, striped pavilions.

Various characters wander through sampling the delights on offer.

We're on the edge of the fair here – no merry-go-round or other rides. This is where the side shows are...

Ooo look!! A strong man!!

Oh wait no it isn't – it's that devious spy Goran and his barker is Boris. What are they up to?

But you'll forget them in second, because our hero is cycling around on his latest contraption – an automatic hair-cutting device.

Oh no! You know what's going to happen now.

Caractacus drums up custom and – freezes. The spotlight moves to the two spies. I know this because Lee is suddenly in darkness. At least you can listen to what the spies say even if your eyes are on other things.

They are bemoaning the fact that Mr Coggins saw through their English disguises (Goran's wicket was too sticky – and as for his spotted dick...) and worrying that Potts' new invention will earn him the money to buy the car himself.

Unfreeze! Caractacus has a customer! A man with suspiciously luxurious hair settles himself into the barber's chair as his girlfriend eggs him on. Potts starts peddling....

Freeze!

The spies are plotting. If Potts buys the car they will steal it off him. Wicked, evil spies.

The action continues. Smoke starts to waft from the machine.

Oh no – it's obvious where this is going. My embarrassment levels are rising and I can't watch. But this is Lee - I HAVE to watch! Oh the dilemma!

Caractacus refuses to listen to the worried girlfriend and completes the haircut.

The customer stands to reveal his new look. It's novel – a fringe of thick hair, with a tonsure but also a top knot.

Of course both the customer and the girlfriend are horrified, and when Potts offers them 'something for the weekend' (I wonder how many modern theatre goers realise what's just been offered) they go ballistic.

They chase the hapless Potts through the fairground. All that's missing is Benny Hill's theme music.

Ignoring this mayhem a troop of Morris men (when I say men, I mean they must be coz at that time they couldn't be anything other than male – but some of them are suspiciously curvy) set up to entertain the crowds.

They sport traditional costumes, white shirts and breaches with waistcoats heavy with coloured ribbons, and flower-covered boaters.

The carry long thick sticks – or rather...ol' bamboos!

And they launch in to the well beloved song.



Hmm... thinking about the lyrics this song is as wholesome and family friendly as George Formby's 'Little Stick of Blackpool Rock'. But perhaps when they talk about the things they do with 'Me Ol' Bamboo' they do just mean dancing.

And dance they do, even as Caractacus hares across the stage. It's a furious whirl of ribbons, and only a dedicated Lee fan will turn away from watching their incredible footwork. (I bet you do though.) Our hero is disguising himself as a Morris man (definitely a MAN).

A moment later though he's centre stage again, in the midst of the action.

Let me take a moment to talk about seating. No honest this is important. Where you sit kinda matters in Chitty.

There's no bad place to sit – seats to the right at the left of the theatre give you better views for certain scenes. But if you want the best view for 'Me Ol' Bamboo' you want to be somewhere near the middle of the row.

Caractacus joins the Morris men (of both sexes) and is immediately surrounded by them.

Given that Lee has repeatedly claimed that he can't dance, I think all his fans, watching this scene for the first time must do so with a little trepidation. It's another of the great Dick Van Dyke dancing highlights in the film, and Lee himself must have wondered initially whether he'd pull it off.

At first his role is to merely to adopt a baffled expression (gotta love Lee's comedy gurning); hop around with his leg apparently caught on a bamboo; and loose his hat. Oh yes, and finish

off each line the chorus start. Very funny, very physical, but not too taxing.

Then someone throws him a bamboo of his own – and mercy me, the Meadster starts to dance. I mean REALLY dance. Proper complicated foot work and all.

He still pulls his 'arrgh-what's happening!' face for a while, but by the last verse he's taken the lead in the song, and he's shining with confidence.



My flower-covered straw-boater off to him. He does it brilliantly. If you can bear to look away from his face, watch his feet so you can see the intricacy of the steps he's performing with apparent ease. OK so we know it's been a lot of hard work for Lee to master those steps but he has done. Surely Lee won't ever be able to say he can't dance again! (Yeah right – of course he will.)

‘Me Ol’ Bamboo’ always finishes with cheers and applause from the rapturous audience and an exhausted but delighted Lee drinking in the acclaim. And breathing very heavily.

Lee is allowed only a moment to catch his breath because it’s on with the plot, and a nice little exchange that always sets me chuckling.

A man in a bowler, carrying a turkey searches out Potts. Yes – it’s Christopher The Turkey Man, one of the most entertaining and recognisable of the ensemble performers.

Potts initially denies all knowledge of his hair-cutting machine until Turkey Man offers to buy it. Caractacus eagerly accepts 30 shillings for his invention but admits that it’s very much in the experimental stages. That’s fine. Turkey Man is a turkey farmer who wants to use the machine as an automated plucking device.

Up to this point in the show my eyes have been on Lee’s face or at least some part of his anatomy (I am talking about his FEET here! OK yes bum too) every moment he’s in view. However in this scene he’s upstaged by a puppet turkey, overhearing the farmer’s plans. Never was a turkey more expressive!

## The Posh, Posh Travelling Life – Here comes Chitty!

Back to the family home. No need for a set change, the fairground pavilions simply fade. There is just one addition: a crooked outside privy. This is where Grandpa goes for ermm serenity, or as he refers to it ‘going to India’. Otherwise the stage is bare.

Jemima and Jeremy are delighted to see our triumphant hero bringing home the old racing car.

Grandpa is not quite so impressed with his son’s purchase, especially when he confesses that the engine doesn’t even work. Still, he has faith in junior’s abilities. Caractacus pushes the wreck off stage through doors that open (and in some performances shut too early) at the very back, so he can devote his time to its restoration.

Grandpa is quite aware of the more negative aspects of his son’s obsession with machinery.

This is the only hint within the show that Caractacus the Younger might not be the perfectly attentive father he initially seemed to be. The children want to watch daddy restoring the car but Grandpa says ‘You know what he’s like when he’s working,’ indicating that the children need to stay out of the way. (Yeah kids – I know how that feels. My dad was just the same with his stream-engines. Come to think of it my dad would have got on so well with Caractacus. I digress.)

Grandpa entertains the kiddies with a jaunty song about travelling – ‘Posh’.

With the aid of union flags and simple choreography, grand-daddy and grand-kids explain the importance of choosing your cabin well on the trip to India. This is probably my

favourite non-Lee related number in the show, and gives the two children a real chance to show off their considerable talent.

Every now and then Caratacus appears with a new gizmo, smiles at the others and hurries off through those doors at the back of the stage.

My favourite diminutive leading lady always regards his retreating back with a disappointed pout. Don't worry little lady! Daddy will be back with you soon!

At last! Lee's back! Oh I mean Caractacus is back and ready to reveal the car. He pushes it out – it's under a... I'm going with tarpaulin. I have no idea if they had tarpaulins, in those days, but if they didn't they'd have wanted one. (For those interested in tarpaulins (and who wouldn't be) my trusty proof-reader tells me that tarpaulins were available and the word derives from the term 'tarred canvas. See?! This is educational stuff this is!)

Mind you, I was somewhat less interested in what the car was wearing than what Lee was wearing. It's a costume you'll not see in the promo shots – a long shapeless overcoat and a flat cap, worn backwards.

So what's so great about that? Honest answer – I couldn't tell you. That is not until another reviewer hit the nail on the head. Much as we love Lee's curls, the backwards cap showed off more of his gorgeous face.

So – off comes the definitely-a-tarpaulin. The car is ready. No longer a racing-car, but a family car, she's all shiny and reupholstered, and looks lovely. (I'm going to get all sentimental about vintage automobiles if I'm not careful.) But she's a car with a will of her own. Remember how the kids told their dad to say 'please' to the car? They had her sussed. She refuses even to light up her headlights until her owner says 'please'. Very sweet.

There's a fair amount of business with the family inspecting the car, and some high-jinx surprising Grandpa.

Here's the important bit though. During this sequence, on sneak the spies disguised as bushes. They over hear Grandpa naming himself as Caractacus Potts, regimental genius, and jump to the conclusion that it's him, not 'the younger one' who has restored the car.

Oh if you're my age you will love that Doris says to his colleague 'Gordon, you are a moron!'

The Potts family decide to head off to the seaside for a picnic sans Grandpa who prefers the quiet of his... OK outside loo. I get the impression he likes it there. He goes there a lot. It's a plot device you see.

But the car is making all sorts of noises. The family agree that she's saying her name (she subtly turns from 'it' to 'she' as she gains more personality) and they christen her Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Cue the BIG SONG!



## Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Part 1 – Driving

‘Chitty Chitty Bang Bang’: surely one of the catchiest songs in the genre. How the audience adored it! A whole theatre clapping along to Lee’s singing as he negotiates the tong-twister lyrics with aplomb.

It’s not just the song itself. The projected back drop, which has been used every effectively throughout, now comes into its own. Chitty twists and turns along an English wiggly-white road. I was going to say that it’s magical. But that’ll leave me short of superlatives for later, so I’ll use the word ‘impressive’ for now. Possibly with several ‘verys’ in front of it.

On the way they pass Truly whose unreliable motorbike breaks down again. In a nod to the author, Caractacus greets her with ‘So Miss Scrumptious we meet again.’ He’s not stroking a fluffy white cat though.

Showing about as much resistance to temptation as Jo when asked if she’s going to a Lee show, Truly succumbs to the children’s pleas to leave her bike and join them for the picnic.

Here we go again...’Oh you, Pretty Chitty Bang Bang...’

And just in case you thought they’d given up, the two spies, still disguised as bushes, are peddling furiously on a tandem, trying to catch up with the car.

## The Beach & Truly Scrumptious

The family reach the beach and park up.

It's a nice beach. The back projection shows the seagulls swooping over tranquil waves. Two beach huts appear one on the left and one on the right of the stage. Usually. Sometimes one or both don't show up. Not that most of the audience would notice.

Anyway our two luckless spies, now in fetching stripy bathing suits are upsetting the ladies using the left hand beach hut. The girls run off.

The family are totally unaware of the turmoil on the other side of the beach. Caractacus lays out the picnic blanket, while Truly passes out the plates (no sign of any food I notice).

More surprisingly the spies have a shell-phone (I really don't have to describe what that looks like, do I?) and alert the Vulgarian navy which (no doubt contravening hundreds of naval conventions) sends a warship over to England to nick the car. (Talk about sledgehammers and nuts!)

Picnic over (which doesn't take long seeing as there's no food) Caractacus starts to clear up. There are a few jokes about Truly's name.

She tells the kids she has sisters called Madly and Deeply.

'Seriously?' says Caratacus.

'No that's my brother.'

I think she's having a laugh.

This exchange leads to perhaps the second best known song in the show – 'Truly Scrumptious'.

Caractacus bundles the picnic things away as his children...

Well, to me it looks like his children are on mission: get-themselves-a-stepmother.

They list all sorts of confectionary that sounds like what they are, (though I am not convinced myself that gingerbread men have a gingerbread sound), their point being that Truly Scrumptious is both a name and a description of the woman herself.

Awww it's as sugary as candy-floss, and Truly is bemused, but charmed, by their flattery.

Caractacus exits with the picnic things, usually through the left-hand beach hut. It's funny when the stage hands don't wheel it on because Lee then has to find his way off stage and an exit isn't apparent. In one performance he literally had to feel his way long the set until he found a door to open. Of course it doesn't matter at all because you're watching Truly and the kiddies. Aren't you?

With daddy gone the youngsters get a bit too giddy. They start using Truly as a rope in a tug of war between them. Carrie's face is priceless as they make a spirited attempt to pull her arms out of their sockets. They let her go eventually as they reach the line '...because we love you truly.' (or '...because we love you, Truly.' Either works for me).

Not put off by a little agony, Truly takes-up the song.

‘Truly scrumptious! You too (or you two) are truly scrumptious’.

Caractacus returns to the picnic site in time to see Lord Scrumptious’ daughter playing nice with his son and daughter. Looks like she’s on for the step-mothering gig to me – and by Lee’s delighted face as he watches, she’s passed the audition.

An aside. I can remember my first time in a show (amateur dramatics don’t cha know) being told to always remember that no matter what is happening elsewhere on the stage, KEEP ACTING; someone in the audience will be watching you. For Lee that advice should probably be tweaked ‘at least half the audience will be watching you.’ I’m sure he sussed that long ago because he never lets up, unlike certain of his Any Dream Will Do counterparts.

Digression over.

Truly, still singing to kids, helps Caractacus put away the picnic blanket. As they fold it, they come within an inch of each other. There’s another brief, but endearing, moment of confusion, before they pull themselves together and get on with the job-in-hand. It all adds nicely to the building romance between the leads.

While the others continue singing Caractacus packs the blanket away and fetches a ball. It’s another example of Lee’s heart-warming interaction with the child-actors. Truly and Caractacus throw the ball to one another as Jemima and Jeremy try to snatch it from them. This could be the perfect family.

At one point Lee picks up the little lad and turns him upside down. It seems such a natural fatherly thing to do, that I can’t help but think Lee’s done the same hundred times with his own daughter.

Daddy runs off with the ball and Truly and the kids hide behind the car, jumping out to surprise him.

Game over Caractacus tucks the little ones up in the back of the car. With one final affirmation that Truly loves them truly, they settle down to get some shut-eye.

This gives the grown-ups a chance to get coy and tongue-tied with each other. It’s Carrie’s turn to be all sweet and charming as Truly tries to apologise for implying that Caractacus is a poor daddy. Things start getting romantic...they’re just about to kiss. Crash – thunder clap! Lighting stabs onto the backdrop.

The sleepers wake. ‘Why didn’t you notice the storm! What were you doing?’

## Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Part 2 - Floating

Fog rolls over the stage.

Actually in some venues it envelopes the orchestra and the first three rows of the audience too.

The tide has come in, Chitty is stranded and now there's a real danger of all of them drowning. (It's just as well it's not Blackpool because the tide at Blackpool has a circular...alright I'm shutting up and getting on with it.)

Between the rumbles of thunder comes a louder crash. The Vulgarian warship has opened fire. Potts susses out what they want immediately and general panic ensues. Someone screams 'Save us Chitty, pleeeaaaassee!' and Chitty suddenly sprouts floats.

Another rousing chorus – 'And our Chitty Chitty Bang Bang loves us too!' More clapping along – and more powerful vocals from the Meadster and Chitty's passengers.



The warship appears behind the car.

I'm struggling to express just how good these effects are, but I still can't use the word 'magic'; I need it for later.

Chitty-the-motor-boat races away from the warship, and the back-projection shows the spray flying up behind it (oops sorry Chitty, her).

They escape. Phew!

The curtain-screen descends.

Don't make my mistake. The first time I saw the show I thought this indicated the end of act one. It's not. You're going to have to wait a little longer to join the loo queue.

Instead we are back with the teddy-carrying Baron, the Baroness and some flunkies in their 'Top Secret War Room'.

The spies are reporting in by telephone but the connection is really bad.

The Baron doesn't seem to mind that Chitty got away as much as you'd expect. He's too busy getting all elated because the car can float.

But his mood quickly changes when he hears who is in the car – 'Potts, a woman and too chi...'.

He tells the Baroness (who is wigging in) that the spies say there are two chickens in the car. She ain't falling for that old trick and takes the phone from her husband.

When she finds out there are two children in the car, she throws a fit. (I'm going to get critical again. I'm not keen on how Michelle plays this fit; it's way too over the top for my taste. Perhaps it's supposed to be.) It seems that the Baroness HATES children, so much so she has a phobia of them. Fortunately Vulgaria along with its policemen, postmen and other officials, has an official Childcatcher to deal with these minor offences (see what I did there? Oh never mind).

While his wife is going off on one, the Baron delivers a rousing speech about the benefits of bringing Chitty Chitty Bang Bang to Vulgaria. It seems that he thinks the car will solve all sorts of problems from street cleanliness to foreign policy. Full marks for optimism.

But what about those nasty children? Two sinister shadows of giant hands creep across the backdrop. They peel back part of the scenery to disclose the sneering Childcatcher in all his grey-faced repulsiveness. He's so creepy even his employers flee the stage leaving him to gloat and smirk at the audience.

Booo!

## Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Part 3 - Flying

Back home Caractacus Junior introduces Truly to Grandpa. I'm not sure whether it's the effect of meeting Truly but Grandpa has to take a few moments and heads to the lavvy cum laboratory to visit India.

Having failed to buy the car from the junk man, and failed to steal her, the spies now go to plan C. They decide to abduct Grandpa while he is visiting India. ('Visiting India' evidently being a euphemism in the Potts house – but let's not go there shall we?). Thinking that Grandpa is the inventor, they hook the outside privy onto air-balloon, and hoist it into the sky. (Mostly. I have seen two occasions where the hook isn't in position and the spies have manhandled the lavvy off instead.) I suppose their logic is that if the Baron can't have the actual car he wants, a driving/floating facsimile will be next best thing.

Hearing Grandpa's calls for help, the others rush back onto stage, leap into Chitty and race away following the air-balloon. I'm not certain how they think this is going to help seeing as they are following an air-balloon but as the whole audience knows what's going to happen, I don't think that slight flaw in logic matters.

Off they go, and again the clever back-projection brings the scene to life, the Potts plus Truly really seem to be hurtling through the countryside intent on catching up with the air-balloon.

Only Jemima seems to be concentrating on what's happening around them 'What's Beachy Head?' she says 'Is it a beach?'

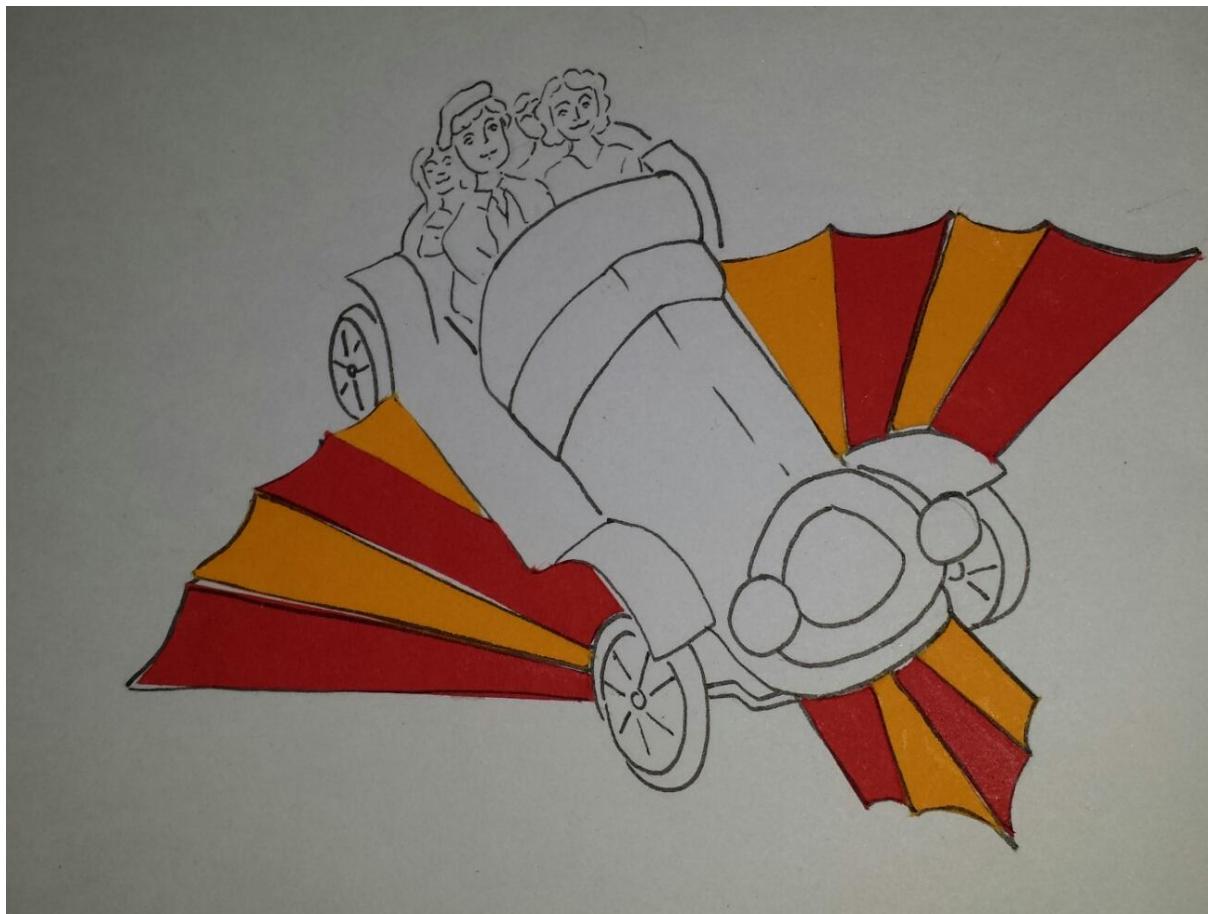
'No it's a head!' says Truly – and in their mad dash they drive right over the cliff....aarrggghh....

Two things really sell this moment: First the back-projection which shows the car falling (even though this is the point where the gantry lifts the car up from the stage); second Lee's face. He opens his mouth so wide as he screams. He reminds me of Doctor Teeth from the Muppets. It's a moment of pure comedy – then suddenly...

Out pop Chitty's wings!

Chitty rises up over stage, soaring passed circling sea-birds, in simply the most MAGICAL theatrical moment I have ever seen.

The audience cheered like crazy as Lee's voice rings out for a triumphant reprise 'Chitty Chitty Bang Bang we love you!'



## Interval

And breathe!

Wow!!! What a first half.

I guarantee you will have a big grin all over your face.

Can the second match it?

There is less of Lee on stage after the interval, but there is still much to enjoy.

Get your ice-cream quick and get back to your seat. You don't want to miss a moment...