

Adam Sweeting finds the rich fare of Luther Vandross a mixed blessing at Wembley Arena

A night with the fat controller

IN the panoply of portly soul-men, Luther Vandross is king. Poor Luther is much given to public agonising over his apparently uncontrollable figure, upon which rebellious potnids accrue like a cacophony of little doubts, though he could perhaps do worse than carry a picture of Barry White around with him for on-the-spot reassurance.

Anyhow, Luther sings better than Alexander O'Neal and Freddie Jackson, he has better material, and by and large he comes over as a more endearing character. In fact, Luther's sense of humour is his saving grace. Among the tinsel and tack of his voluptuously-appointed stage show, the star is quite happy to prance and waddle about the circular stage in well-deserved parody of the praple preening of his so-called rivals. And, while the stage breaks up into f*cking wedges of

multi-coloured light and occasionally whirs into action to propel Luther into the air, the star mercifully does not stoop to such ego-massaging ploys as bringing enormous beds on stage on which to seduce compliant women. This is just as well, since his majestic pair of lady accomplices suggest they're more than capable of responding with a right hook.

Look no further than She Won't Talk To Me, where Vandross laments his lack of luck with the ladies as his show clicks up a gear and moves towards its slightly up-tempo climax. By this time, his girls have slipped out of their figure-hugging floor-length gowns into dazzling turquoise-and-glitter mini-dresses, and, together with singer/dancer Kevin Owens, weave a serpentine ballet around the frustrated singer. It's among the sharpest moments in a performance which sags badly in the middle.

On disc, Vandross hits a comfortable balance between balladry and quicker stuff with a funk edge. Pristine recording quality has been integral to his appeal, suspending Vandross in a crisp, airtight ambience in which the melodic shape of his songs gains additional lustre from the thrilling clarity of the performances, technological or human. His recordings sound like the sophistication his fans want to emulate.

If it were possible to reproduce this quasi-perfection in live performance, Luther's band could do it, with Nat Adderley Jr leading a gallery of distinguished performers from the keyboards. Even the guitarist, Doc Powell, is a Grammy nominee. But on this first night at Wembley they were bedevilled with gremlins, with loud explosive noises sending panicky sound engineers scuttling among the banks of equipment during Come Back. Vandross ploughed on, trouser-like.

This seemed symptomatic of a partial breakdown in the Vandross illusion, where foreign bodies or, worse, cock-ups simply don't exist. Sweat is permitted, though only on Luther and only as a signifier of Emotion and Suffering rather than as a bodily waste-product.

During an over-long chunk of love ballads in which the idea of tempo seemed to have been frozen for all time (including Love Won't Let Me Wait, and a flashback to 1982's A House Is Not A Home), Luther spun out his

gauzy chord-elisions at such length and so breathlessly that the hall itself seemed to be tapping its feet with impatience. As hovering note-followed gossamer chord, one gradually became aware of the sound of whispered conversations around the auditorium. Deprived of the rarefied air of compact disc, the songs began to drop apart into pointless fragments of beautifully upholstered noise.

It was with tremendous relief, then, that one greeted Luther's speeded-up finale. Earlier, he'd introduced the urgently throbbing Give Me The Reason as his favourite song, and Stop To Love and See Me similarly gave the band a bit of width. As so often with artists as con-

trolled and choreographed as Vandross — every step of this show is numbered — you wondered what would happen if everyone threw restraint to the winds and let it fly.

But I am, of course, missing the point, which I'm told is to do with all that sociological stuff about aspirations and lifestyle. Yet Luther has joined Wacko and Whitney in that place where 'performance' has been redesigned to exclude human error. Apart from the fact that it gives him a chance to deliver a few witty asides, perhaps about sex ("I know what y'all are gonna do when y'all leave here"), you sometimes wonder why Luther thinks it's necessary to get on a stage at all.



Endearing: Luther Vandross

PHOTOGRAPH: DEREK RIDGERS

Yesterday's weather

Around the world

Lunch-time reports

| | C | F | | C | F |
|--------------|------|----|-------------|------|----|
| Algiers | S 23 | 86 | London | S 17 | 63 |
| Amsterdam | S 16 | 61 | Los Angeles | S 19 | 66 |
| Athens | S 19 | 66 | Luxembourg | S 19 | 66 |
| Bahwa | S 19 | 66 | Madrid | F 13 | 55 |
| Barcelona | R 25 | 77 | Manila | F 16 | 61 |
| Berlin | F 16 | 61 | Moscow | S 19 | 66 |
| Bombay | S 29 | 79 | Mumbai | S 20 | 68 |
| Buenos Aires | F 11 | 53 | New York | C 11 | 52 |
| Calcutta | S 23 | 73 | Osaka | R 16 | 61 |
| Cairo | S 22 | 72 | Paris | C 2 | 36 |
| Cardiff | S 11 | 52 | Seoul | S 21 | 70 |
| Chennai | F 16 | 61 | Singapore | S 25 | 77 |
| Copenhagen | S 13 | 55 | Sydney | C 27 | 81 |
| Dublin | S 13 | 55 | Tokyo | C 10 | 50 |
| Helsinki | S 16 | 61 | Washington | C 10 | 50 |
| Hong Kong | S 23 | 73 | Wellington | C 10 | 50 |
| London | S 13 | 55 | | | |
| Lyons | S 13 | 55 | | | |
| Manila | S 29 | 79 | | | |
| Moscow | S 19 | 66 | | | |
| Mumbai | S 20 | 68 | | | |
| New York | C 11 | 52 | | | |
| Osaka | R 16 | 61 | | | |
| Paris | C 2 | 36 | | | |
| Seoul | S 21 | 70 | | | |
| Singapore | S 25 | 77 | | | |
| Sydney | C 27 | 81 | | | |
| Tokyo | C 10 | 50 | | | |
| Washington | C 10 | 50 | | | |
| Wellington | C 10 | 50 | | | |

Around Britain

Report for the 24 hours ended 6 pm yesterday

| | Sun. chine hrs | Rain m | Temp L | Temp H | Weather (day) |
|--------------------|----------------|--------|--------|--------|---------------|
| ENGLAND | 0.3 | — | 7 | 11 | Dull |
| Abingdon | — | — | — | — | — |
| Birmingham | 4.7 | — | 1 | 14 | Sunny pm |
| Bristol | 7.3 | — | 0 | 17 | Sunny |
| Buxton | 3.0 | — | 6 | 14 | Bright |
| Leeds | 0.2 | 01 | 10 | 15 | Cloudy |
| London | 10.2 | — | 10 | 20 | Sunny |
| Manchester | 1.5 | — | 6 | 13 | Bright pm |
| Newcastle | 0.3 | — | 7 | 11 | Cloudy |
| Norwich | — | — | 6 | 17 | Bright |
| Nottingham | 2.9 | — | 6 | 15 | Bright pm |
| Plymouth | 8.8 | — | 7 | 12 | Sunny |
| Ross-on-wye | 8.2 | — | 2 | 15 | Sunny |
| EAST COAST | | | | | |
| Scarborough | — | 02 | 7 | 9 | Dull |
| Stratford | — | 01 | 8 | 10 | Cloudy |
| Skegness | 0.2 | 01 | 10 | 12 | Cloudy |
| Widemouth | 5.5 | — | 5 | 14 | Bright |
| Cromer | 2.3 | — | 8 | 13 | Bright |
| Lowestoft | — | — | 6 | 15 | Sunny |
| Clacton | 9.8 | — | 5 | 13 | Sunny |
| Sudbrooke | 4.8 | — | 4 | 16 | Sunny |
| Margate | 5.8 | — | 6 | 15 | Sunny |
| Hornsea Bay | 10.3 | — | 6 | 16 | Sunny |
| SOUTH COAST | | | | | |
| Eastleigh | 8.2 | — | 4 | 14 | Cloudy |

Sweeting On Vandross 1989

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Fri, Jan 1, 2021