

DAY 1 – 6.30 p.m.

Leidseplein Theatre, AMSTERDAM

‘Thank you, Amsterdam, and good night!’

Charley Parker bounded off stage with a grin from ear to ear. While most twelve-year-olds dreamed of being rockstars, Charley was living it. She had just performed to around three hundred fans (and some of their parents) in a beautiful Dutch theatre and, as she flopped on to a couch backstage, she could still hear the cheers bouncing down the hallway. ‘That went well.’

Charley smiled at her best friend, George, who was half hidden behind his camera. ‘Are you gonna follow me everywhere with that thing?’ she asked, pretending not to enjoy the attention. ‘How about a message for your Dutch fans?’ prompted George as he started filming.

Charley tried to remember how to pronounce the Dutch for thank you. ‘*Dank je wel*,’ she said carefully, blowing a kiss for good measure.

‘Great,’ replied George. ‘Now let’s go and meet them.’

‘At least let me have a drink first,’ cried Charley in mock exasperation, she picked up a bottle of sparkling water that was waiting for her on the table next to the couch with a bowl of trail mix and some bananas.

She twisted the cap, and a torrent of fizzing water spurted, sprayed and spouted all over her, the couch and the floor. The bottle may have been perched calmly on the table, but it had apparently been transported to the theatre by a donkey trotting on cobblestones.

Charley stared down at the bottle and her hands, then up at the droplets of water now falling from her fringe.

‘Actually,’ she said softly to the camera, ‘I might have to dry myself off before I do anything.’

Charley and George burst into a gale of laughter, in much the same way as the bottle had just exploded with an outpouring of bubbles.

When they managed to catch their breath again, George stopped filming and lowered the camera. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘if that doesn’t go viral, I don’t understand the internet.’

He posted the video online while Charley looked around the dressing room for a towel, strands of her jetblack hair (with a purple streak) now plastered to her forehead. Unable to find one, Charley wiped her face on the only thing that was handy – the jacket belonging to her manager and promoter, Sam Mullane.

'That's my best jacket!' exclaimed Sam, walking in at exactly that moment. He grabbed it and put it on, grimacing at the wet patch Charley had left on the sleeve.

'I wish I'd filmed that,' said George.

'I'm glad you didn't.' Sam frowned.

A small bleeping noise came from the camera, signalling that the video had uploaded.

'Done,' said George. 'I titled it, "Charley's Bubble Trouble".'

Sam glanced at George, then Charley, then the puddle on the floor, and for a second he looked as though it all may have been his fault. As if maybe, just maybe, he had forgotten to buy snacks and drinks for Charley before the show and had run to a nearby shop and back while Charley was on stage, shaking the bottle and causing it to erupt the moment it was opened.

At least that's what it looked like to Charley.

'Come on then,' said Sam. 'There's a foyer full of fans to meet.'

Charley, George and Sam made their way along the corridor and through the door to the foyer, where they were met by a throng of excited young fans.

It was an orderly throng, though. A throng in a neat straight line. Charley had been warned that Dutch audiences were particularly polite. During the show, she'd noticed that they were quiet through each song – no interrupting whoops or whistles – but would burst into rapturous applause when each song ended.

Maybe that's what the sparkling water was doing, Charley thought. Bottling it all up until the end of the show, then exploding.

One by one, the fans came forward, introduced themselves and asked for a selfie. Charley obliged and made sure to say something positive to everyone who approached, like 'I like your earrings, Kimo' or 'Thank you for your Instagram post, Marlou.' She knew how much a kind word from your favourite star could mean.

Of course, wherever Charley went, George was sure to follow, usually with his camera in hand. He perched in the corner of the foyer, filming at just the right distance to capture everything without making Charley's fans feel intimidated.

As the queue came to an end, Sam appeared at Charley's shoulder. 'Don't forget we've got that interview with Radio K-CAC for the US tour,' he said. 'We can do it backstage.'

'Oh yes,' exclaimed Charley. 'I nearly forgot!'

Although she had already posed with everyone who wanted a photo, there were still a few fans lingering in the foyer to catch one last glimpse of her: Charley Parker, the girl who had recently rocketed to stardom.

‘Thanks, everyone.’ Charley smiled. ‘I hope to see you all again.’

As the group smiled and waved, one lone voice cut through: ‘Thank you for coming to Amsterdam. It looks like you made quite a *splash!*’

There were laughs all round.

‘That was quick,’ Charley said to George with a grin. ‘Turns out you *do* understand the internet.’

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George Carling focused his camera on his best friend and zoomed in a little.

Charley had returned to the backstage couch and was perched over Sam’s battered old phone, which was wedged between the bananas and the trail mix.

Sam always insisted Charley’s phone interviews be conducted on speakerphone, so he could hear everything that was said.

‘You’re listenin’ to Ronnie Dee on Radio K-CAC,’ said a very excited American woman, ‘and I’m joined live from Amsterdam by the one and only Charley P.’

‘Hello!’ said Charley.

‘So, for our listeners who don’t know how did you become *so* famous *so* quickly, Charley?’

Charley flashed her eyes to George. Not only did he know the answer, he *was* the answer.

‘Well,’ she began, ‘it all started when my friend George filmed me singing in our classroom one day, and posted the video online.’

George had first spotted Charley Parker across the schoolyard of Rokesbourne High School.

One of the advantages of being in a wheelchair was that sometimes he saw the world on a different level to everyone else. (This was also one of the reasons George thought he’d make a good comedian one day.)

While all other heads were turned towards the football rocketing across the concrete, or the tennis ball flying through the air, George saw Charley. She was the new girl, dark-haired (already with a purple streak) and wearing Doc Martens, sitting on her own and singing to herself. She didn’t seem to realize anyone was watching her, and probably thought that no one cared anyway.

George cared. And he saw. And he listened. And, one day, George had an idea.

‘Oh my *godddd*,’ crowed Ronnie Dee from K-CAC.

‘You guys sing in the classroom? English schools sound like so much fun. Do you know Harry Potter?’

‘Um . . . no. I think he goes to a different school,’ answered Charley, catching George’s eye and grinning.

‘And I wasn’t actually singing during a lesson,’ she explained. ‘I just happened to be eating lunch in the classroom that day.’

George could still picture the whole scene in his mind. The day had been particularly blustery and the wind had whipped up the students’ energy like a mini tornado. Which was why George had decided to have lunch in Miss Fairburn’s classroom. (Being susceptible to other people’s energy was another asset he thought would make him a good comedian.)

When Charley had walked into the classroom, belting out a song George had never heard before, he hadn’t been sure if she’d even noticed him – but he’d started filming anyway.

‘*Heart thief*,’ Charley had sung. ‘*You’re nothin’ but a heart thief.*’

George had been entranced by Charley’s voice and presence. She seemed to become a totally different person when she sang. He’d wondered who’d inspired the lyrics, and made a mental note to never get on this girl’s bad side.

‘Did you know he was filming you?’ asked Ronnie Dee.

‘I had a feeling he might be.’ Charley grinned, remembering the moment she’d caught George’s reflection in the cracked window of Miss Fairburn’s classroom.

‘Did you get all that?’ she’d asked, half smirking, half frowning.

‘I’m sorry,’ George had blurped.

‘Are you sorry for filming me or sorry for not getting it all?’ quizzed Charley, as she spun round to face him.

‘Both. No! The first one.’

‘What are you gonna do with the video?’ asked Charley.

‘I dunno, maybe send it to the person who wrote the song and tell them you’ve stolen their tune’ George joked

‘I wrote the song!’ boomed Charley. ‘So, if you send it anywhere, *you’re* technically stealing *my* tune.’

She strode over until she towered over George, her hands on her hips.

Most people were too scared to even approach the kid in the wheelchair, let alone threaten him with physical violence. George was strangely impressed.

Charley was treating him like she would any other person she’d just caught filming her without her consent would be treated.

‘I - I - I -’ stammered George.

‘Either start rapping or explain yourself.’ Charley teetered between a frown and a smirk.

‘I really like your song . . .’ George gulped. ‘And I thought maybe you should enter it in the Too Cool for School competition.’

Charley was aware of the national schools online talent competition, and was pretty sure it had been named by an adult who had no idea how to talk to kids. *'Too Cool for School'? They may as well have called it 'Gettin' Groovy with the Whippersnappers'*, she thought.

Despite the clunky name, the whole school was busy filming entries. The current favourite was Dexter Keaton, who was convinced he was the world's first hip-hop magician.

Charley hadn't been planning to enter. It wasn't that she didn't want to, exactly – she just didn't want to be rejected. She didn't admit that to George, though.

Instead, she brushed it off as a stupid competition.

Which was why George then suggested they upload the clip to YouTube, just to 'see what happens'.

Charley was snapped out of her memories by Ronnie Dee asking, 'So what happened next?'

'Well, we uploaded the video on a Friday, and by the time we got back to school on Monday it had five thousand views. By the end of the week it had reached over two million and a dance routine to the song had gone viral on TikTok.'

George grinned as Charley said all this, remembering some of the very first comments:

'OMG this girl is more talented than half the "singers" out there. I'd pay to see her perform live.'

'I want to be her.'

'Do you have an album? Are you on Spotify?'

'Please do a show in Brussels!'

'So why do you think the video was such a hit?' asked Ronnie Dee.

Once again, Charley smiled at George. The truth was that her best friend had spent his entire summer watching online tutorials with titles like 'How to Maximize Your Social Media Reach' and 'Famous on Facebook' in the hope they'd help boost his future comedy career. George wasn't yet confident enough in his own material to post it online, but he was more than happy to use his knowledge for Charley's benefit.

'I guess people really wanted to see someone just sing for the sake of it, without competing for anyone's attention or using fancy gimmicks,' said Charley, repeating the words George had said to her at the time.

Sometimes it's easier to believe in someone else than to believe in yourself, Charley thought.

And George really *did* believe in her. She was trying to be more confident, while also hoping that one of these days she'd manage to convince George to believe in himself too. After all, he did have a talent for comedy.

'What's does a hip-hop magician do anyway?'

George had quipped that day in the classroom. ‘Pull a rapper out of a hat?’ Then, turning to Charley, he’d become serious. ‘You sing from the heart,’ he’d said. ‘And, when you do, everything stops. You’re right, you don’t need to enter a stupid competition, but your music should be out there for people to find. Cos there are plenty of kids that wish they could do what you do, and as soon as they see you they’re gonna love you.’

Even now, sitting backstage in Amsterdam, doing an interview to announce her upcoming US tour, Charley still wasn’t sure whether she was talented or not.

‘I don’t really know why people like my music,’ she admitted. ‘It’s not my job to judge what I do. It’s my job to put it out there.’

From behind the camera, George raised his eyebrows at Charley and gave her a thumbs up. It was their sign to remind her to be positive. She took his cue and tried to end the interview on a high note.

‘I’m really looking forward to coming to America though!’ ‘And to the rest of the European tour – I’m especially excited about the final show, back in London.’

‘Why is the London show so exciting for you?’ asked Ronnie Dee.

‘It’s my home town.’ Charley beamed, back on track. ‘It’s where all my friends and family are. All this has happened so suddenly that it feels like a dream. To end the European tour and the year with a show in London will make it all seem real.’

George nodded and smiled. He could already imagine the look on Charley’s face as she sang to a home crowd. That’s when they’d know for sure that she had made it.

‘OK! Well, it was so great to talk to you, Charley,’ said Ronnie Dee. ‘If you wanna see Charley in concert, you can get your tickets at CharleyP.com. Right now, though, this is her song “Heart Thief”.’

As the opening bars of ‘Heart Thief’ began to play and the call ended, Charley and George smiled.

‘Great job, Charley. I think we should celebrate,’ said Sam, rescuing his phone from the table of snacks. ‘And I know just the place – Freddy Fryday!’

‘What’s Freddy Fryday?’ asked Charley, intrigued.

‘It’s a cafe serving nothing but fries. Fries with pulled-pork toppings, fries with chicken-and-chilli toppings, fries with nacho toppings . . .’

Charley and George looked at each other with glee and said in unison, ‘Best. Tour. Ever!’