

Mary Poppins @ The Muny

Music and Lyrics by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman

Book by Julian Fellowes

Additional Music and Lyrics by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe

Conceived by Cameron Mackintosh

Based on the stories of P.L. Travers and the Walt Disney film

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As an adult, *Mary Poppins* has become my all-time favorite Disney movie. I watched it all the time when I was a kid, and I basically know it inside and out. You may think this would leave me biased towards loving the Muny's current production of the stage musical. However, there was a time when I thought I had outgrown *Mary Poppins*. In 2013, I saw the Muny's first production of the musical (featuring the always-fantastic Rob McClure as Bert), forcing me to watch the movie again. I am going to have to say that even now, years later, *Mary Poppins* is still a pretty damned impressive movie: the story, the writing, the characters, the atmosphere, the acting, the visuals – literally everything about it is “practically perfect in every way.” But we're talking about the stage show here, which is a mostly faithful adaptation that also adds several elements from the original P.L. Travers stories. Sometimes, those additions work really well, but they can also slow the production down other times.

Let's talk about the plot as if you don't know this story. It's 1910 in Edwardian England. The narrator of the show is Bert, a Cockney jack of all trades who takes on various odd jobs to get by on the streets of London. Bert tells us the story of two siblings named Jane and Michael Banks. They're a couple of little hellions who are terrible at listening to authority because their parents, George and Winnifred, are workaholics who constantly hire incompetent nannies to look after them. Jane and Michael decide to write their own advertisement requesting a nanny that will sing them songs, give them treats, play games, and all sorts of fun stuff. But George hates the idea, and he wants a nanny that's stern and strict, like his own childhood nanny. So he rips up the letter and throws it away, but then a freak wind suddenly whisks it away up into the clouds where the magical nanny Mary Poppins is waiting. When she first arrives, you would think that Mary Poppins is going to be exactly like the nanny Jane and Michael dreamed of – and she is, but she also balances it out with being fairly strict as well. She takes the children on various outings that reveal London's hidden magical world, but anytime something magical does happen, Mary Poppins will flat-out deny it, using reverse psychology to teach the Banks family valuable life lessons to coincide with the fun and fancy.

British actor Jeanna de Waal plays Mary Poppins in this production, and she hits the role right out of the park. Not only does she have a great voice, but she totally nails the character's *je ne sais quoi*, injecting her with a youthful sassiness and an edge that sheds the common stereotype that Mary Poppins is always this prim and proper figure. Nehal Joshi is also a perfect bullseye as George, portraying him as someone who is legitimately excited about his work, but

his difficulty in communicating that passion due to a stunted childhood forces him to lash out at the people he loves; he makes the scene in the first act where he threatens to fire Mary Poppins particularly heartbreaking. Just like anything that he's in, Corbin Bleu as Bert is absolutely fantastic. Bert is the kind of person who is just happy to have air in his lungs, and that passion, energy, and zest for life are captured beautifully in Bleu's performance. His enthusiasm is contagious, and Bleu performs the intense physicality of the role with the same ease of foot as the greatest classic showmen of the 20th century – including Bert's original actor, Dick Van Dyke.

Erin Davie gives the role of Winnifred a surprising amount of depth, playing her as the kind of parent who feels she's not providing enough for her children, but has no idea what more to give other than what she can; that's some deep stuff for a Disney property. Laila Fanroy and Gabe Cytron as Jane and Michael, respectively, played the transition from being annoying little brats to being more kindhearted in a way that felt seamless; that takes a lot of work from a child actor to pull off without being corny. Darlesia Cearcy as the Bird Woman harmonizes with de Waal's Mary Poppins to deliver a haunting rendition of "Feed the Birds," which is probably my favorite Disney song ever. This song was also the personal favorite of Walt Disney himself, and you can definitely hear why; "Feed the Birds" gets me misty-eyed every single time I hear it, and this version, especially sung by Cearcy and de Waal, was no exception.

There's an excellent comic duo in the form of the Banks' servants – Zoe Vonder Haar as the no-nonsense maid Mrs. Brill and Barrett Riggins as the bumbling butler Robertson Ay, a character from the original stories. In fact, quite a few characters from the P.L. Travers books make appearances here. Jade Jones plays the little ball of energy that is Mrs. Corry, a sweets shop owner who uses her confections to create new words, which is the show's explanation for the existence of "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." Debby Lennon plays George's childhood nanny, Miss Andrew, as imposing and intimidating as anyone can be; you believe that she earned her sobriquet "the Holy Terror."

Rounding out the company are Lynn Humphrey as Miss Lark, the neighborhood gossip; Devin Neilson as Neleus, a statue that Mary Poppins gives life to; Rich Pisarkiewicz as the constable that chases down the Banks children whenever they run away; Whit Reichert plays the dual roles of Admiral Boom, the Banks' next-door neighbor, and the chairman of the bank where George works; Wesley Slade as Mr. Northbrook, George's business partner; and Jerry Vogel plays the dual roles of the groundskeeper of the neighborhood park and Mr. Von Hussler, an important investor who causes George to consider taking a very dangerous risk. All of the actors have excellent voices thanks to musical director Brad Haak (who also conducts the marvelous Munny Orchestra), and they handily perform Patrick O'Neill's fluid choreography.

The directing by John Tartaglia is very imaginative and very insightful in a way I haven't seen in other productions of *Mary Poppins*. It's clear that Tartaglia really wanted to create a unique version of this story that makes all of the iconic scenes and remarkable visuals feel earned and feel real, rather than just tacked on because the movie did it. Contributing to the production's visual splendor are Paige Hathaway's sets, Robin L. McGee's costumes, Kelley Jordan's hair

and makeup, Rob Denton's lights, John Shivers and David Patridge's sound, Alex Basco Koch's video, puppets designed by Eric Wright's Puppet Kitchen, and flying effects by ZFX.

The show retains the classic Sherman Brothers songs, but also has quite a few new songs written by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe. Unfortunately, some of those new songs sound kind of generic; they don't quite match the level of sophistication or craft of the Sherman Brothers, and I found that they really slowed down the show for me. I was quite bored by the new songs, which is a sizeable chunk of the show's score.

Even though I was more interested in the moments where it was more faithful to the film, I will emphasize that the Muny presented those moments of magic in a way that was very unique and very special. The Muny's *Mary Poppins* is energetic, heartfelt, dazzling, and even a little rebellious; the perfect words to describe the nanny herself, and everything you need to make a great story for all ages.