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## Magic Mary: Another Poppin' Musical at Merry-Go-Round

By Bryan VanCampen Jun 11, 2014



*Mary Poppins, music and lyrics by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman; new songs and additional music and lyrics by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe; book by Julian Fellowes; directed by Ed Sayles; at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse through July 2.*

There were a lot of emotions flitting about at the Merry-Go-Round Playhouse, and that was before Saturday night's performance of *Mary Poppins*. MGR director Ed Sayles confirmed what had been posted that day on the web: after 35 years, he plans to step down as director when his production of *Mary Poppins* closes on July 2. There were flowers and prolonged, grateful applause breaks and even a message of thanks from the sound system.

I spoke to him before the curtain, and told him, "I don't think they'll be able to find someone who believes like you do."

At their best—and I think I've seen some of their best—Merry Go Round's musicals have a certain moxie and a certain level of stage craft that feels like magic. It's clear that *Mary Poppins* needed nothing less than the best from all technical departments, and while I can't begin to imagine how much hard work and sweat went into what we see on stage, the cast tosses off the most extravagant effects with aplomb.

Like most of us, I am only familiar with the Walt Disney film: magical nanny meets dysfunctional family and saves the day. I had the soundtrack album when I was a kid, and while I had no memory of seeing the film, I knew all the songs back-to-front, to the point where certain Sherman Brothers' melodies will automatically bring me to tears. I didn't really appreciate the film until I bought the DVD.

The musical version certainly relies on most of the Sherman songs we know and love; you can't do *Mary Poppins* without "Chim-Chim-Cher-ee" and "A Spoonful of Sugar." You might be surprised by how much the stage version differs from the film, but that would involve spoiling spoilers I don't want to spoil. The fine book by Julien Fellowes (*Gosford Park*, *Downton Abbey*) and additional music and lyrics by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe stay in the Sherman Brothers' bombastic, music hall style. Like the recent *Maleficent*, there are new touches that almost turn the P.L. Travers tales into feminist manifestos. Elizabeth Earley marches right onstage, and her take on Poppins is almost alien in nature. I also liked the ways in which Mrs. Banks (Lucy Horton) has changed from a ditzy suffragette to a woman who gave up a career in the theater, and pines for it.

The family dynamic is set in a very crisp opening; Shannon Beel and Seamus Finnian Gailor are an effective and energetic team as the Banks children, and chimneysweep Bert (Eric Coles) is our Greek chorus/narrator/tour guide through the story. The costumes, make-up and sets are right at

the edge of cartoon, and I especially liked one constable's crazy moustache. From top to bottom *Mary Poppins* is loaded with magic and surprises, particularly in a kitchen scene where Mary Poppins "rights" a roomful of broken furniture and props—following a very well executed wall-to-wall pratfall.

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" is a terrific example of the show's uptempo style, with its own encore built in to top its own climax, and yet the show makes room for quieter moments. When Audrey Federici started singing "Feed the Birds," I got chills and the usual tears: a wonderful moment in the theater.

MGR's production of *Mary Poppins* has no bad moments. •