



'Mary Poppins' at Millburn's Paper Mill lifts the heart

'Mary Poppins'

The Broadway Musical

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

Music and lyrics by Richard M.

Sherman and Robert B. Sherman

Book by Julian Fellowes

New songs and additional

music by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe

Co-created by Cameron Mackintosh

Through June 25

Paper Mill Playhouse,

22 Brookside Drive, Millburn

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By GWEN OREL

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Bert (Mark Evans) has tricks up his sleeve. Watching, from left, are Mary Poppins (Elena Shaddow), Michael Banks (John Michael Pitera) and Jane Banks (Abbie Grace Levi). Courtesy Matthew Murphy.

Just try not to clap (and maybe sing) when "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" comes round for its third or fourth chorus in the gorgeous and satisfying production of "Mary Poppins" at the Paper Mill Playhouse.

Children can't help themselves. Their parents, who likely grew up with the 1964 Disney movie starring Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke, tremble with excitement — director Mark Hoebee wisely begins the song softly so by the time it gets to its thumping “um diddle iddle iddle um diddle aye” there are (I am not making this up) whoops.

On top of that, the choreography uses letter cards that the chorus puts up like some weirdly happy North Korean crowd, spelling other words (“gross!”) (to comment on a scatological joke) before spelling the main word, “supercali...” again. Denis Jones choreographed and Mark Hoebee directed; credit goes to them both. Because it's brilliant. It's one of the most inventive pieces of fun you'll ever see onstage.

It would be a great family show if it were all like that — but the musical, with a script by Downton Abbey's Julian Fellowes, some music from the movie and some original songs, has more heart.

In fairness, the movie addresses the ideas of heart and connection too. But in the musical and in this production these themes emerge as solid grounding for the fluffy colorful coating that includes a magical nanny, statues that come to life inside of sidewalk paintings, singing chimney sweeps and cordial that tastes like rum punch.

When Mary Poppins (Elena Shaddow) sings “Feed the Birds” to her charges, in the presence of a raggedy birdseed seller (Liz McCartney), in her clear, pure soprano, it's sweet, and pretty. When George Banks (Adam Monley), the uptight paterfamilias, meets the bird woman late in the play, having been humbled and yet strengthened, people grabbed tissues. In this day and age, the lines about choosing value over return, about worth being more than money, hit home.

The musical adapts P.L. Travers' story of a mysterious nanny who stays for a while with the Banks family. The children, Jane (Abbie Grace Levi, alternating with Madi Shaer) and Michael (John Michael Pitera, alternating with Maddox Padgett) have driven off lesser nannies. Their mother, Winifred (Jill Paice), is a former actress who would prefer to take care of the children herself (in the movie, she's a suffragette) while husband George is an up-and-coming banker who wants everything shipshape. Sidewalk artist, chimney sweep and jack-of-all-trades Bert (Mark Evans) somehow knows Mary, and has a few tricks of his own.



Mary Poppins (Elena Shaddow) flies off, watched by, from left, Jane Banks (Abbie Grace Levi), (Jane Banks), Winifred Banks (Jill Paice), George Banks (Adam Monley) and Michael Banks (John Michael Pitera). Courtesy Matthew Murphy.

All of the 34-strong cast are wonderful, but Evans steals the show, with his deadpan Cockney commentary and confident yet sweet, charm. He is a terrific dancer (his pirouettes early on give him away) and singer, but it's his charisma that draws you in and keeps you. Paice's Winifred is sweet, with a lovely soprano, but believably not too meek, and Monley's George has a sweet child inside. We even get to see glimpses of the child that was when horrible nanny Miss Andrew (also played by Liz McCartney) comes for a spell.

The movie used animation for some numbers; the stage uses the chorus instead to show us a magical world,

and bright and clever set design by Timothy R. Mackabee.

As the gingerbread seller Mrs. Corry, who leads “super,” Danielle K. Thomas, with a Jamaican accent and a hearty laugh, shows us the character’s warmth. “Let’s Go Fly a Kite,” the catchy song that closes the film and shows us young Michael’s hunger for connection with his father, is a sweet number. Other standouts include the tapline of “Step in Time” and the wistfulness of “Chim Chim Cher-ee” led by Bert in chimney sweep mode. (For some reason I had never realized that ‘chim chim-in-ee’ was ‘chimney,’ and I’ll credit Hoebee with that too.) The new-to-the-stage version songs, including “Being Mrs. Banks” and “Anything Can Happen,” are less catchy, but the actors make them involving nonetheless.

As Poppins, Shaddow is indeed, as she sings, “practically perfect”: dainty, pretty, firm and still kind. When at one point Mary Poppins tells the children, “When will you learn to look past what you can see with your eyes?” she might be speaking of the production itself.