

Theatre Review: 'Mary Poppins' at Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia PA

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Lindsey Bliven, David Elder and Company. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Nothing says family entertainment like a title from the Disney catalogue so it's only fitting that this holiday season Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, PA is presenting the stage version of *Mary Poppins*. The show features all the big numbers from the movie that you remember by the Sherman Brothers such as "Spoonful of Sugar" and "Chim Chim Cher-ee" and then adds additional material by George Stiles and Anthony Drewe to flesh out the movie score.

This version, while based on the film is closer to the original stories by P.L. Travers and is considerably darker in tone. If you want to know more check out a film called *Saving Mr. Banks* which gives us a glimpse into what Walt Disney had to go through to get the film made.

...Mary Poppins at Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, PA is a jolly holiday trip that you and your whole family can enjoy.

Julian Fellowes's book for the stage tells the story of the Banks family. There's the father George (Jeffrey Coon) who is a banker and is very intense when it comes to his job. In fact, he hardly pays attention to his family. Next is his wife Winifred (Rebecca Robbins) who is a former actress. She is supportive of her husband but has a hard time living up to what he thinks a wife is supposed to be. It doesn't help that the two Banks children Jane and Michael (Grace Matwijec and Nicky Torchia at my performance) go through nannies like water. They make their nannies' lives a living

nightmare which forces them to bolt after just a short time. Once Mary Poppins (Lindsey Bliven) receives Jane and Michael's advertisement in the wind for a new nanny she magically appears at the Banks's residence. Housekeeper Mrs. Brill (Mary Martello) is skeptical but even with not seeing eye to eye with Mr. Banks on a lot of things, she teaches Jane and Michael many lessons such as compassion and not just thinking about yourself.

Walnut Street Theatre presents the show with high energy production numbers choreographed by Linda Goodrich giving the audience reason to cheer. "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" is a prime example of a crowd pleasing production number with ASL incorporated into the choreography. The dancers spell the title out within the dance. Another show stopper is "Step in Time," which is a dance feature for the chimney sweeps. Here George Stiles's dance arrangement as orchestrated by William David Brohn raise the energy level tenfold and match Goodrich's inventive choreography.

While we are on the subject of orchestration, Musical/Vocal Director Douglass G. Lutz's eleven piece orchestra sounds as glorious as always and actually makes Brohn's sometimes underwhelming orchestrations sound bigger than what I remembered hearing on Broadway.

Director Wayne Bryan directs the show with a darker edge, which is what P.L. Travers wanted over the puppies and rainbows Disney approach. You get inside the head of George Banks and learn why he is the way he is ,which the film does not do as much.

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Performance wise there is plenty of talent to behold. Lindsey Bliven as the no-nonsense nanny Mary Poppins is, as the song goes, "Practically Perfect." Her "Spoonful of Sugar" almost makes you forget Julie Andrew's performance. It's that good.

Another standout is David Elder as our chimney sweep/painter/overseer Bert. Elder is light on his feet, has a great singing voice and has perfect chemistry with Bliven. You can't help but wonder if the characters of Mary and Bert are sweet on each other when watching Bliven and Elder perform.

As Jane and Michael Banks Grace Matwijec and Nicky Torchia light up the stage and hold their own against their adult counterparts.

Mary Martello is wonderful as Mrs. Brill, the housekeeper, as she tries to hold things together even with her inane assistant Robertson Ay (Owen Pelish) being more of a hindrance than a help.

I very much enjoyed Deborah Jean Templin's not over the top of Miss Andrew who was George's nanny as a child. She is sometimes referred to as the Holy Terror. This character if done wrong can become a screech fest but Templin reigns in the loudness. Templin also plays the bird woman and with Bliven, they perform my favorite song from the score called "Feed the Birds."

Rebecca Robbins as Winifred Banks gives a strong performance as the wife wanting to get back onstage even though her husband disapproves.

Jeffrey Coon as George Banks took a little while for me to warm up to because I thought he was all one level when the show started. In the second act he started to show a gentler and vulnerable side which made me enjoy his performance more than I did earlier on.

It is almost impossible to do this kind of show in a regional theatre because you need a Disney sized budget. No one is going to top what Bob Crowley designed in London and NY. He had a storybook house that folded out before your eyes onstage. While set designer J Branson can't do that on a regional theatre budget, I was hoping for a few less drops and a little more invention than what he had for the Banks home. It did what it needed to do but I wanted a little more out of it visually. Branson does however find a clever way to create a rooftop above Jane and Michael's

bedroom.

George T. Mitchell's costumes serve the show well and give Bert a splash of color for a change from his usual chimney sweep garb throughout. Paul Black's is perfect for both the dark and lighter tones that this version takes towards the material. Ed Chapman's sound design is audibly perfect.

Overall *Mary Poppins* at Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, PA is a jolly holiday trip that you and your whole family can enjoy.

Running Time: Two Hours and 25 minutes with one intermission.

Advisory: A few things might be too scary for really small children.

Mary Poppins runs through January 4th 2015 at Walnut Street Theatre, which is located at 825 Walnut Street in Philadelphia, PA. For tickets, click [here](#).