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mary poppins'

jolly new york holiday



A West End musical is
rethought for Broadway

By: David Barbour

Sometimes, it seems, musicals should be stamped with the warning, "Contents may shift during handling." Otherwise, how does one explain the way some of them lose their appeal en route from the West End to Broadway (or vice versa)? For every global success (think *Mamma Mia!* or *Phantom of the Opera*), there are many others that wilt during the transfer: *Bombay Dreams* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* were greeted with indifference in New York, while *Movin' Out* and *Contact* failed to replicate their New York triumphs in London.

For a while, it looked like *Mary Poppins* might be potential victim of this transatlantic phenomenon. When the stage version of the beloved children's stories (and Disney film) opened in at the Prince Edward Theatre in London, it was most assuredly a success, yet some reviewers warned of trouble ahead. It was best summed up by Ben Brantley in *The New York Times*, who wrote, "Sentimental yet sinister, the show is steeped in Jungian shadows, where an unhappy family festers and vengeful toys arise at night to attack the children who mishandle them. There is definitely enchantment afoot, but it is not always of a benevolent order."

How to explain, then, the sunny, rainbow-colored entertainment that arrived on Broadway in November to good reviews and bountiful box office? In this case, *Mary Poppins*

has been cannily reworked for American audiences; nowhere is this more apparent than in the production's scenery and lighting. The show's creative personnel are candid about the changes: "The first production of a new musical is like a runaway train; it's a miracle if it gets there at all," says set designer Bob Crowley; "this time, we made it better." Lighting designer Howard Harrison adds, "We all feel much happier about it in New York."

The many faces of *Mary Poppins*

It's not surprising that *Mary Poppins* should present such different faces in London and New York. In fact, *Mary Poppins* is a property that means different things to different people—it depends on your age, your nationality, and your ideas about children's literature. The character was conceived in a series

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of books—really, collections of short stories—by P. L. Travers. An actress-turned-poet with a steely, unconventional point of view, she was a devotee of the Armenian mystic G. I. Gurdjieff and Sufi mysticism. Some literary critics have written that *Mary Poppins*, a mysterious figure who appears and disappears at will, causing profound changes in the lives of those around her, is an embodiment of ideas drawn by Travers from

these arcane sources.

In the words of critic Michael Feingold, "Travers' Mary is sharp-edged, plain, and often downright impudent, a maternal disciplinarian who is also, paradoxically, a giddy escapist child. [She] sets the topsyturvy Banks household in order, not by showering its four undisciplined children with the affection they've been lacking, but by endowing them, through her magic, with a sense of awe at the mystery of life."

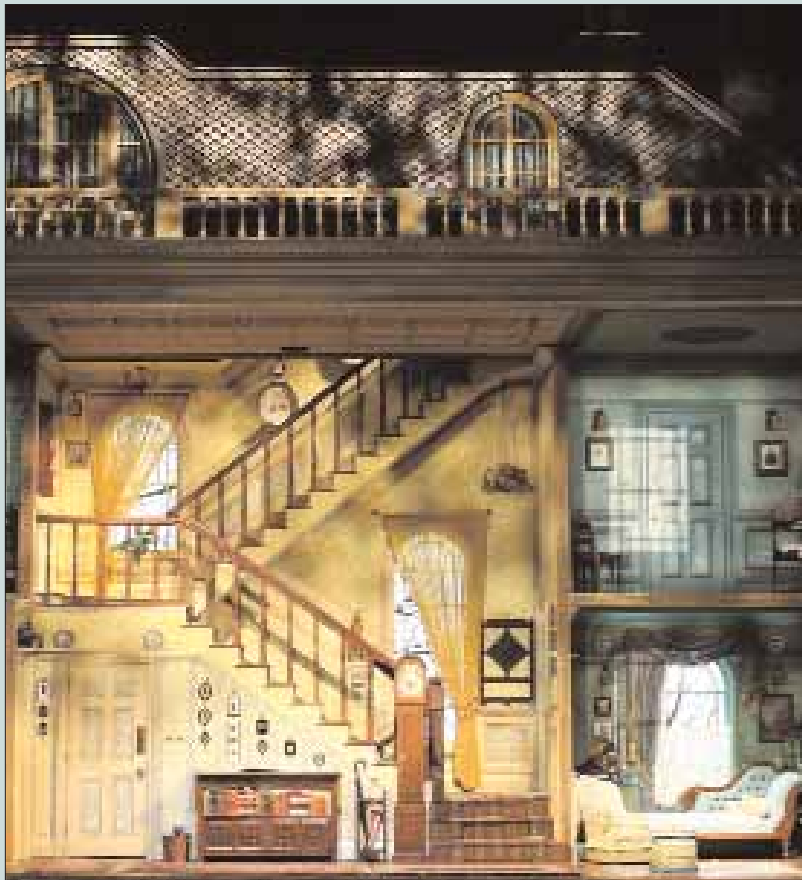
The Walt Disney film drawn from the *Poppins* books made fundamental changes to Travers' work. The time frame was moved back from the '30s to 1910. The number of Banks children was cut to two. A more sentimental narrative was imposed, in which Mary transforms the scattered, unhappy Banks family into a loving family unit. As impersonated by Julie Andrews, Mary was no longer the vain and supercilious character envisioned by Travers; instead, she became a warm, benevolent presence. The addition of the Sherman Brothers' classic score—

no other Disney film has ever produced so many standards—added an extra touch of cozy comfort. Many Disney classics have been castigated for their disturbing elements; *Mary Poppins* is not one of them. Given this history, a musical version of *Mary Poppins* could turn out very differently depending on which direction you went.

Reportedly, Travers hated the film (although, surprisingly, she liked Andrews' performance); when, near the end of her life, she sold the theatrical rights, it was to Cameron Mackintosh, apparently with the understanding that a stage musical would hew more closely to her conception. Mackintosh, however, was well aware of the power of the film and its score, and struck a co-production deal with Disney. When *Mary Poppins* opened in the West End in 2004, it was something of a hybrid. It retained most of the Shermans' songs, with new contributions from George Stiles and Anthony Drewe. Julian Fellowes' book followed the general outline of Bill Walsh and Don Da Gradi's screenplay, but made significant alterations that tilted the material definitively towards Travers.

For example, the musical delves far more deeply into the troubled marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Banks; the latter, a dizzily self-involved suffragette in the film, is now a retired actress who finds herself totally at sea in the domestic sphere. New characters are introduced from Travers' books, including the bizarre shopkeeper Mrs. Corry; Neleus, a talking statue; and Miss Andrew, the terrifying, abusive nanny who haunted Mr. Banks' childhood. The children, Jane and Michael Banks, are a rude and disorderly pair; in a new number, "Temper, Temper," they are menaced by a set of murderous, life-sized toys.

These changes were made in the spirit of grounding a whimsical family musical in a solid emotional reality, and to reintroduce some of Travers' astringency. (Clearly, the feeling was a spoonful of lemon would help the sugar go down.) The result, to American eyes, had a distinct note of grimness. The color palette seemed dominated by wintry grays and a feeling of menace lurked in the atmosphere. The number "Jolly Holiday" (which cues the film's



Opposite: The "Jolly Holiday" number has gained vibrant color on Broadway. This page, left: The Banks' house interior is the most elaborate set in Crowley's design.



Above: With its skewed perspective, the setting for the bank where Mr. Banks works is the most typical of Crowley's designs in the show.

extended animation sequence) had a sinister overtone, especially in a sequence featuring a chorus of dancing Greco-Roman statues. One might reasonably wonder what American audiences, raised on the film, might make of it all.

In New York, the production has a markedly different tone, largely due to changes in the design and staging. Ashley Brown gives Mary Poppins a mocking self-awareness that makes her more likable, and she has a definite chemistry with Gavin Lee, who plays Bert, her cockney consort. The more sinister sequences now have a more tongue-in-cheek tone. And the design is generally more colorful, with additional visual surprises. In this production, Travers' vision is very much present, but there's also a more distinct note of the Disney sensibility. Interestingly enough, the result is singular; *Mary Poppins* now evokes the pleasures of the pre-Andrew Lloyd Webber British book musical (think *Oliver!* or *Half a Sixpence*) and it is all the better for it.

An Edwardian dollhouse

Bob Crowley is known for set designs that dramatically alter the

audience's point of view; sitting in an orchestra seat, one finds oneself staring downward from a great height, gazing up at towering constructions, or staring at vistas that stretch into infinity. Here, his work is of a different order—more conventional perhaps, but lushly illustrative and full of alluring period details. Given the designer's unconventional sensibility, it may surprise some that he was given the *Poppins* assignment—then again, his work with the musicals *Aida* and *Tarzan* (he also directed the latter) have made him a valuable member of the Disney Theatricals team.

Nevertheless, Crowley says, the project had “an anxious start. I knew I had a very well-loved property to take care of. I love the illustrations of Mary Shepard [who did the *Poppins* books].” Out of this anxiety, however, came the beginnings of an approach: “I said to Richard Eyre [the director], ‘It might be nice to illustrate the show in my own style. I’ve never put my own drawings onstage before.’ That proved to be the way in; the entire show is drawn by me.” He adds that he studied the work of Edwardian illustrators like Arthur Rackham for general stylistic inspiration, but then largely relied on his own ideas as the design evolved.

“Of course,” he adds, “the biggest challenge was cracking the house.”

The domicile in question is 17 Cherry Tree Lane, home to the Banks family. The libretto requires scenes set in Mrs. Banks' study, as well as the entrance hall, parlor, nursery, kitchen, and a practical staircase—a lot of scenery to depict separate locations. In addition, many scenes, including the beginning of the dance number “Step in Time,” are set on the roof. Also, says Crowley, “The house had to be to be real or there would be no contrast with the story's fantasy elements. The house represents the Banks family unit and what they will lose if Mr. Banks can't pay the mortgage.”

The solution proved to be one of Crowley's more remarkable creations—a triple-decker Edwardian dollhouse filled with naturalistic decorative details. The first floor features Mr. Banks' study at stage right and the parlor at stage left. On the second floor are two additional rooms (without floors). A two-story staircase with a landing takes up the center. On top is the roof, which moves to reveal the nursery where Jane and Michael spend much of their time.

This kind of naturalism is something new for Crowley: “I've never put wallpaper on a set before,” he says. “I don't get out the moldings catalog. But I knew I had to force myself to do it this time, because

there was no other way.” He adds, laughing, “Now, I’m completely obsessed with wallpaper—there’s nothing I don’t know about William Morris! But this is a very traditionally designed show; I felt its charm would lie in it feeling like an Edwardian piece.”

As you might imagine, the house is a fairly complex piece of engineering: “My dreams become other people’s nightmares,” says Crowley, laughing. As he explains, “The first two floors make up a discrete unit that rolls down from the upstage area. The nursery flies in and sits on top of it; the roof sits on top of the nursery, like a hat.” In addition, when the basic house unit is upstage, the nursery can be lowered to the deck level. The kitchen rises from below on a lift.

In London, the roof, says Crowley, “took a while to work out. I wanted it to appear to float in the air. That’s where I brought in Mike Barnett, a brilliant retired engineer; he worked with [set designer] John Napier on the *Miss Saigon* helicopter, for example. He’s a genius. Cameron said, ‘This is pure Mike Barnett territory.’ He figured out how to float the nursery.”

According to Corky Boyd, of

Hudson Scenic, the Broadway production’s automation provider, “The stage floor from the New Amsterdam Theatre was removed; the show rests on a steel substructure. The theatre has a 21’ 9” high trap room, with a mezzanine level, all of which was constructed for *The Lion King* [the previous tenant].” That much space is necessary he adds, because “the kitchen set is 15’ tall and rests on a 6’ tall scissor lift.” (Another piece, a giant umbrella, seen near the end—a new addition to the design for New York—also rises from below on a lift.) Boyd adds that the main house set piece rolls downstage via a large friction drive system. “The roof,” he says, “is really three pieces—a floor, a wall, and a roof. We move the floor and wall with one winch and a hydraulic purchase system allows us to move the two against one another.”

The rest of the design, Crowley says, “literally had to fit around Cherry Tree Lane. The house is the major character, and almost everything else is a series of drops.” Those drops come very much into play in the number “Jolly Holiday.” It begins in a park in winter, and features the chorus of dancing

statues; in New York, however, the number ultimately explodes into Technicolor, as a series of leafy spring vistas replace the wintry grey drops, the chorus gets a colorful new set of costumes, and Queen Victoria herself flees her memorial to take part in the fun. “It’s an old-fashioned English pantomime transformation scene,” says Crowley. “I had no idea if I could pull it off. I had no room to do it in the theatre in London.” The drops here have an Impressionist quality that is meant to recall Bert’s chalk paintings. “The idea of the number is, Bert paints everything—the people, the park, the policemen,” says the designer.

The kitchen, a far more realized set in New York, is the location where “A Spoonful of Sugar” now takes place. The Banks children have wrecked the place in an effort to learn cooking. Mary brings the place back into perfect running order during the number. “Everyone came up with a shopping list of events,” says Crowley, “which included shelves righting themselves and a split table instantly repairing itself.”

Below: The number “Step in Time.” Harrison’s moving light rig includes a substantial number of Vari-Lite and Martin fixtures.





Steve McEntee, of Proof Productions, says the kitchen transformation is realized by wireless control; “The table [which splits in two and returns to a single piece] is controlled by its own DC motors with commutators; the rest of the kitchen effects are pneumatic; they’re run through a programmable control, through a PCL, linked to the Hudson system. The same automation guy runs everything.”

The drop depicting the bank where Mr. Banks works is, the designer says, “my kind of set.” First seen when Jane and Michael visit their father at work for the first time, it’s a looming structure that seems to rise into the stratosphere and is dominated by a giant dome and several vertiginously towering pillars, each of which is stenciled with the silhouettes of clerks hard at work totting up sums. “It’s drawn from a child’s point of view,” says Crowley. “I remember being taken into a huge marble hall bank in Ireland as a kid. I remember the impossibly high counters and the echoes.”

One imagines Crowley relished the “Temper, Temper” sequence, in which the nursery turns into a nightmare of combative toys. As it begins, the back wall expands, yet remains connected to the floor by a ream of tattered wallpaper. “It was all Richard Eyre’s idea,” the designer says. “He said, ‘It would be really cool if we could float the roof off the nursery, so

Jane and Michael’s sense of protection is gone.” According to Boyd, the wall flies out, via a hydraulic ram.

Perhaps the show’s biggest talking point is the number “Step in Time,” which begins on the roof of 17 Cherry Tree Lane, moves to the rooftops of London, and ends in the Banks’ living room. In a moment of true astonishment, Bert tap-dances his way up, across, and down the proscenium. “I had this completely mad idea,” says Crowley. “I hired a performer in London and we set to work in the Piccadilly Theatre.” In the number, Gavin Lee gets in a harness and taps his way up the stage left proscenium. At the top, he steps onto a rolling platform, which carries him, dancing across the top; at stage right, he dismounts from the proscenium and taps his way down to the deck. (This sequence, and the finale, in which Mary flies from the stage up to the ceiling of the auditorium were implemented by Foy.)

With a set design this wide-ranging and complex, it was necessary to farm out the work to a number of scenic houses. According to associate set designer Bryan Johnson, the house, including the roof and nursery, the chimneys, and Mrs. Corry’s shop (a drop with several counters) were built by Adirondack Scenic Studios. (Tom Lloyd of Adirondack adds that his

Above: “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious” is set in the shop owned by Mrs. Corry, one of the P. L. Travers characters added to the show.

company also created certain special effects pieces, like the lifts built into the chimneys and the banister lift, which allows Mary to ride upstairs, as well as the fiber-optic shooting star seen in the finale.) The kitchen, a series of illuminated portals (more about them later), a ground row of London rooftops, the gates of the “Jolly Holiday” park, and a number of props, including the Queen Victoria memorial, were built by Proof Productions. In addition to providing automation, Hudson built the deck and the giant umbrella. Scenic Technologies built legs for the park scenes, including “Jolly Holiday,” hangers for the kitchen, bank, and St. Paul’s scenes (the latter the setting for “Feed the Birds”); and plinths for the park (including the statues of Neleus and Poseidon and pop-up flowers). The drops were painted by Scenic Art Studios, run by Joe Forbes.

“Scenic Art Studios has worked with Bob Crowley on many productions including *Aida* and *The Capeman*, but this was the first time that Bob’s personal style of drawing was a key element in the design,” says Forbes. “Our job was to translate that look of charcoal and pastels on paper onto 50’ drops, hangers, and hard scenery, while

keeping it consistent. Some of the most challenging work we did on the show was in collaboration with PRG, Scenic Technologies. The 'Jolly Holiday' and park sliders were apparently not as successful in the London production as Bob would have wished, due to the material used. In collaboration with Scenic Tech, the sliders were made of Lexan panels, with carefully placed framing hidden in the structure of the trees that were painted on them. They needed to be as translucent as the backdrops that they played in front of; the use of paint with acrylink, a roofing adhesive mixed in, ultimately solved this, as it gave the paint the luminescent quality it needed."

Forbes adds that two fabric suppliers were involved as well. "Rose Brand built the show scrim, the park tree drop, the nursery backing, the upstage RP, and the 'Jolly Holiday' hanger for Scenic Art. I. Weiss built the Cherry Tree Lane scrim, the kitchen hanger, the bank hanger, the blinder, and the Saint Paul's hanger."

All in all, it's a lot scenery. "Normally," muses Crowley, "I sculpt and create spaces. This was another way of working." Based on the evidence onstage, it must have been a congenial one.

A broader palette

Just as Crowley details the many changes he made to *Mary Poppins* for New York, so too lighting designer Howard Harrison says that his work underwent a similar transformation. Lighting programmer Rob Halliday estimates that the design is 40% different in New York, plus additional refinements to everything that remained.

"Some of the differences were dictated by the fact that Bob Crowley made his changes," says Harrison. "Also, there was a list of things that didn't work out very well in London, because of the lack of space; our positions there were extremely limited. In New York, things were much more possible and I could revisit certain bits. In London, 'Jolly Holiday' never quite landed—we threw color at it, but it didn't really work. Now, we've made a huge improvement on it. 'Feed the Birds' has been completely reconceived." While the New York design is

fundamentally based on his work in the West End, he adds, "We added much more color and made it brighter."

The Cherry Tree Lane house set poses certain challenges to the lighting designer. Because of it, he says, "I don't have an overhead electric bar, except for one located 20' upstage. The structure of the house and the roof wipe out a good 10' of real estate in terms of the overhead and wing and fly space. In New York, the sides have been freed up, which has been hugely helpful." Halliday notes that a bridge built into the middle of the auditorium to facilitate Mary's flying exit at the end of the show also provides a new and welcome lighting position.

Unsurprisingly, Harrison's rig has a substantial moving light component. "The [Vari*Lite] VL3000Q and VL3500Q, which we also used in London, are the workhorses," he says. "The big difference in New York was dictated by the fact that we had a problem with noise in London; we have a director who is quite rightly vigilant on the issue of fan noise. Therefore, we now have [Martin] MAC 700s, replacing VL2000s; [the Macs] are great fixtures and unbelievably quiet. We also changed over our ETC Revolutions to VL1000s in New York; they're fine lights and completely silent. We also have Clay Paky CP Color 400s lighting the cyc. In London, we had only 700mm of space for lighting it, which we did with a bank of LDDE SpectraConnect5. I wanted to pitch it differently on Broadway, so we went with Clay Paky. It's an HMI cyc unit; it's incredibly bright and has fantastic color capabilities. We transform the cyc a lot, and the unit gets the colors one associates with discharge units." Adds Halliday, "One reason 'Jolly Holiday' works is the new cloth at the back, which you can make more vivid, using the CP Colors. It's a great way of lighting a cyc."

Many of the gear choices were rooted in practical matters, notes Halliday. "The Revolution was chosen in London, because it's a tungsten spotlight with shutters. Richard Eyre is the biggest noise fanatic, however—and, on an old-fashioned show like this, you shouldn't have a hurricane of noise. In New York, we

chose the VL1000s because they're better in terms of control; the Revolutions can be so slow to point and focus, it's almost quicker to send somebody up a ladder. Howard wanted to do more color-mixing in New York, so we could shift from a monochrome to a color world. The VL1000s and the Mac 700s have color-mixing; the VL1000s are very quiet and the Mac 700s have a studio mode, which, if you use it, halves the noise.

"In New York," Halliday continues, "the theatre helps absorb the noise. In London, you hear the whir of VL fans. Fundamentally, we got away with it using 170 moving lights—and the director is happy. But I keep going on about it to the moving light manufacturers: the units are quiet when you turn one of them on; add in many of them, plus scrollers, and you can't be subtle about it."

Many of the above units—as well as the rig's substantial number of conventional lights—are dedicated to side lighting. Given the large scenic complement, "it's the only way to light the show," says Harrison. Anyway, he adds, "the big dance numbers all require that approach." Given the extra space in the New Amsterdam, the designer has two extra light ladders per side.

One of the show's more striking effects is a series of portals that are illuminated from within, creating a chasing rainbow effect. The portals, which were built by Proof Productions, are made of polycarbonate, says Steve McEntee. Harrison adds, "Inside them are Pulsar ChromaBatten color-mixing LED striplights. The effect was achieved in a much more primitive way in London; now, we have the flexibility to mix sections of color in each length of leg."

Harrison's rig, supplied by Hudson Sound and Light, includes seven DHA Digital Light Curtains, 24 Vari*Lite VL2000 Wash units, 45 MAC 700s, 62 VL1000TS Spots, nine VL3000Q Spots, four VL3500Q Spots, 38 Clay Paky CP Color 400s, one High End Systems TechnoBeam, 12 Martin Atomic strobes, four Lycian 1293 followspots, and approximately 250 ETC Source Four units in different degrees—Halliday is fond of the new ETC 14 ° lens tube. There are eight PAR 64s, one Strand

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Quartet Fresnel, four Strand Toccatas with White Light VSFX cloud discs, 40 MR 16 birdies, 25 L&E mini-strips, 84 Pulsar ChromaBattens, seven 6" Fresnels, 150 Wybron Coloram scrollers, seven Jem AF-1 fans, four MDG hazers, five Look Solutions Tiny Foggers, five Look Solutions Viper foggers, two LeMaitre PFI-9D foggers and two LeMaitre LSG MKII chillers, four TPR fiber-optic emitters, two Lite Pro illuminators, a City Theatrical Wireless DMX system, one Fleenor Design DMX relay, and six ETC Sensor 96-way dimmer racks.

FocusTrack moving light software was used to document how each moving light was used in the London production; this provided a solid informational basis with which to begin work in New York. FocusTrack allows one to keep searchable, sortable records documenting how lights are used, with written descriptions, a focus-grid, or using digital photography to provide a permanent record of moving light focuses in a show. This information can be created manually; if you use

consoles from Strand Lighting, FocusTrack can automatically figure out when each light is used in the show. Halliday also used the paperwork software Lightwright; FocusTrack can import rig information from Lightwright as well as from the console.

Lighting is run off a Strand 520 console, which was Halliday's choice. Of the many programming challenges in the show, he cites the rainbow chase effect involving the Pulsar ChromaBattens as the greatest one. "They're a handful," he says. "We spent a lot of time figuring out how to sit them in the Plexiglas, and to get the frosting and the angle right. If you get the angle wrong, they're very dim."

The show also contains a small projection element—including the images of birds flying around St. Paul's in "Feed the Birds." Also in this number, says Halliday, "the video projectors are used to light the sky on the St. Paul's frontcloth, with a mask image made to keep the light off the buildings at the bottom; it's done

much more accurately than would ever be possible using lighting equipment, since the mask follows the complex roof outlines of the buildings. The birds are actually 'black'—silhouettes masked out of the sky—rather than attempting to project bright birds onto a brightly lit sky. This was something we stumbled on during the tech period and it worked really well." The system for includes two Barco RLM6+ Performer projectors control by a Dataton Watchout system, triggered via DMX by Rosco Keystroke. Also used is an Extron interface device and two Wybron Eclipse II dowsers for the projectors. Projection gear was supplied by Sound Associates.

Now that the New York production is up, many changes to the show are being implemented in London, creating a standardized version of *Mary Poppins*. The next challenge will be to create a touring version. "It's going to be tricky to make that house work," says Crowley. With Disney willpower backing them up, it's hard to imagine he won't succeed. 📸

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Bert leads the chorus in "Step in Time."

