

“Practically Perfect” Marriage of Songwriting Teams for *Mary Poppins*

By Lynne Heffley



L TO R: Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman. ©DISNEY

NAME A WALT DISNEY CLASSIC. Chances are that a song springs to mind ... and sticks. Think *Mary Poppins*. Is that tuneful earworm “A Spoonful of Sugar?” or “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious?”

Memorably sung by Julie Andrews, those iconic songs, like so many in the Disney vault, were written by Richard M. Sherman and Robert B. Sherman, the songwriting brothers whose Oscar-winning *Mary Poppins* score is indelibly linked with the magical nanny’s adventures.

In bringing *Mary Poppins* to the stage, theatre impresario Cameron Mackintosh has said that simply re-creating Disney’s 1964 big-screen triumph (five Academy Awards, enormous financial return) was never part of his vision. The Sherman Brothers songs, however, were essential to it.

Yet, when *Mary Poppins* author P.L. Travers ceded the stage rights to Mackintosh a few years before her death in 1996, she stipulated that he use only British writers on the production. Even if the Shermans’ songs were included, the brothers themselves, as Americans, could not be directly involved in the stage adaptation.

Never an admirer of the film, Travers was critical of the cinematic storyline that had evolved from her work through the efforts of collaborators Walt Disney, the Shermans, writer Bill Walsh, writer-artist Don Da Gradi, and in the screenplay’s early phase, writer Lowell S. Hawley.

So, after an agreement to use the Shermans’ songs was facilitated by the president of Disney Theatrical Group Thomas Schumacher, who would join Mackintosh in producing the musical, two well-regarded Brits were drafted as the show’s musical architects: composer George Stiles and lyricist Anthony Drewe.

Creative partners since 1983 and Olivier Award-winners for their own Hans Christian Andersen-based musical, *Honk!*, the pair were also unabashed fans of Disney films and Sherman Brothers music from childhood.

At age six, Stiles taught himself the title theme from the MGM film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* on the piano. "It was the first thing I worked out how to play," he says.

Stiles and Drewe heard rumors in the mid-1990s about a possible *Mary Poppins* musical and "off our own bat," Stiles says, immediately wrote on spec their first song for the production, "Practically Perfect," inspired by the scene in the film where Mary measures the Banks children's shortcomings and her own many virtues. When *Mary Poppins* finally made it to the stage nearly a decade later, so did "Practically Perfect," "perhaps the most 'Shermanesque' of all the songs that we ended up writing," Drewe says.

"It's a way of approaching a number, and the repetition of a title and moving it forward," Richard Sherman explains. "It's a certain technique that Bob and I like to use." He gives Drewe and Stiles high marks for decoding that technique and seamlessly blending their own material with the brothers' original work.

"It sounds like a single intelligence wrote it. It's a wonderful thing that they did." Sherman is delighted, too, that "the chief numbers we wrote are all there intact."

"We viewed it as an enormous treat and an honor to work with that material," Stiles says. "And it raises your game. If anything, we felt that we had to do even better work than perhaps we had done previously, to try to be as memorable and as funny and as charming as these songs were from the film."

It was no small challenge that faced the new creative team, whose notable members also include book writer Julian Fellowes, director Richard Eyre, set and costume designer Bob Crowley, co-director and choreographer Matthew Bourne and co-choreographer Stephen Mear. The stage production had to be familiar enough to fulfill the expectations of audiences who loved the film, yet different enough to stand on its own artistic merit.

The team went back to the original source — Travers' books — to expand the story of *Mary Poppins* and the Banks family under her magical tutelage, taking the latter on a deeper journey toward growth and transformation. Complex new musical arrangements would be needed for spectacular dance numbers that were planned as the equivalent of the film's animated sequences. New songs would have to be crafted from scratch and new lyrics and vocal and instrumental arrangements would be required to supplement and adapt the Sherman Brothers' material.

"We said to each other, with this job, that if we did it well, no one should notice," Stiles recalls. "And if we screwed it up, we'd get the blame. That wasn't being self-deprecating, it was just that you know those iconic songs are the reason that people are coming to see the show. Because of that great movie."

In "Jolly Holiday," for example, with dancing statuary not cartoon penguins, Stiles came up with a counterpoint melody for additional color and bounce, while Drewe's lyrics underscore the fact that



L TO R: George Stiles, Richard M. Sherman and Anthony Drewe. PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS.

these two Banks children, unlike their sweet film counterparts, are a bit of a handful.

"Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," set in a shop "that sells letters and conversation" is now a song about the invention of language. This gave Drewe free rein to make such gleeful contributions to the Sherman Brothers' witty "docious" rhymes as "halitocious" and "rocococious." It's a show-stopper as the cast in unison uses faux-sign language to spell out the hyper-syllabic tongue-twisting word in unison, set to Stiles' ingenious musical construction.

The Sherman's soulful "Feed the Birds," said to be Walt Disney's favorite and the song he felt epitomized the meaning of his film — that small acts of kindness can make a profound difference in the lives of others — was also a must for the show.

"It is a truly great song," says Stiles. "It's quite complex and yet it gives an enormous feeling of simplicity, and it really is beautiful. How could you touch something as extraordinary as that? And you didn't need to. It's a complete little play in itself, really."

"There was no way we were going to cut that one," Drewe agrees.

"Step in Time," the dance extravaganza with a gravity-defying surprise performed by chimney sweep Bert (fearless Gavin Lee), required another major new arrangement from Stiles. While among the songs that Stiles and Drewe created whole cloth, "Brimstone and Treacle" features a reprise that becomes a Wagnerian showdown between *Mary Poppins* and a nasty fellow nanny.

Stiles and Drewe are pleased that in Ashley Brown — reprising her title role in the Broadway production for the American tour — "we've got that extraordinary instrument which has that same purity and clarity that Julie had [in the film]," Stiles says. "It's lovely to be able to cast a true mezzo soprano in theatre these days."

"We were lucky to have these two wonderful young men who understood our stuff," says Sherman. "It's a blessing."

Stiles and Drewe are deeply moved by such an enthusiastic endorsement. "He just didn't realize what huge fans we were of the Sherman Brothers," Drewe says.

The pair won't be taking a breather any time soon. They are making changes to *Poppins* with each new incarnation of the production and they are also working on *A Private Function*, a World War II-era musical based on the screenplay by Alan Bennett; a stage version of Robert Harling's film spoof *Soapdish*; and their own gender-bending twist on *Cinderella*, *Soho Cinders*.

"We've never been busier, actually," Stiles said. "We've probably written more in the last nine months than in the last nine years. We're having a high old time." ●

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