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THE NANNY DIARIES

The Shedd's musical Mary Poppins captures hearts

The enthusiastic reaction of the Friday, Sept. 25, audience to *Mary Poppins*, currently playing at the Shedd, indicated the musical was "practically perfect" in every way. Children and adults — mesmerized by the spectacle of flight, animated props, song-and-dance numbers as well as period-invoking sets and costumes — seemed to thoroughly enjoy themselves.

Mary Poppins the musical arrived some 40 years after the wildly successful 1964 Disney film version, based upon the book series by P.L. Travers. Tough shoes to fill, but Shedd director Peg Majors provides an experience that parallels the Broadway production. With the support of a strong production team — including music director Robert Ashens, choreographer Caitlin Christopher and costume designer Jamie Parker — this Shedd production recreates England circa 1910, bringing a beloved classic to life.

The performers embody familiar characters that we meet once again like old friends. As *Mary Poppins*, Shirley Andress is all spit, polish and magic. What will come out of her carpetbag next? Tom Wilson as Bert, languid and engaging, is a joy to watch. Janet Whitlow as Winifred Banks is perfectly harried.

The very experienced Matthew Leach plays George Banks, and Rebekah Hope shines in the dual role of Mrs. Brill and the Bird Woman. The cast is rounded out with the delightful Kenady Conforth and Rogan deCalesta as Jane and Michael Banks. And, of course, let's not forget the ensemble, dancing and singing their way into our hearts.

An old farmer I once knew said of musicals: "Everything is going along just fine, and in the middle of it they start singing and dancing." What proves consternating to some is the hope of yet others. And the Shedd's enthusiastic presentation was a joy for just about everyone in the crowd. A young audience member, barely three, was in awe throughout.

I did, however, hear one grown son tell his elderly mother that he always thought *Mary Poppins*, as a character, was a bit creepy. Not so here, but be forewarned: The role of Miss Andrew, thanks to actor Tracy Williams, is fully creepy, in a scary-good way. ■

Mary Poppins plays through Oct. 4 at the Shedd; \$16.50-\$38, tickets at theshedd.org or 434-7000.

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