Mary Poppins

Starring Julie Andrews (Mary Poppins), Dick Van Dyke (Bert and Mr. Dawes, Sr.), David Tomlinson (Mr. Banks), Glynis Johns (Mrs. Banks), Ed Wynn (Uncle Albert), Hermione Baddeley (Ellen), Karen Dotrice (Jane Banks), Matthew Garber (Michael Banks), Elsa Lanchester (Katie Nannette), Arthur Treacher (Constable Jones), Reginald Owen (Admiral Boom), Reta Shaw (Mrs. Brill), Arthur Malet (Mr. Dawes, Jr.), Jane Darwell (the Bird Woman), Cyril Delevanti (Mr. Grubbs), Lester Matthews (Mr. Tomes), Clive Halliday (Mr. Mousley), Don Barclay (Mr. Binnacle), Marjorie Bennett (Miss Lark), Alma Lawton (Mrs. Corry), Marjorie Eaton (Miss Persimmon).


SYNOPSIS

Musical/fantasy/comedy. In answer to an advertisment from two children, Mary Poppins (the practically perfect nanny) descends upon the Banks’ household in London and starts to bring the family back together again.

REVIEW

Excellent music, super cast, witty script.
WALT Disney first came across the Mary Poppins stories during the 1940s, after his daughter had been reading them. But it wasn’t until 1960 that he finally acquired approval from Pamela Travers, the stories’ author, to begin developing them for the silver screen.

Once Travers’ preliminary approval had been secured, Walt acted quickly. In September of 1960, he called in staff composers Richard and Robert Sherman for a meeting. He pulled out a copy of Mary Poppins from his desk and handed it to them. “My daughter Diane thinks this is very funny,” he said quietly. “My wife thinks it’s funny. And I think it’s very good. Read it and tell me what you think.”

“We had been with Walt enough times now to know by his very tone that this was very important to him,” recalls Richard Sherman. “What do we think of this book? That was one of the times where his understatement was everything. Well, we went away and we closeted ourselves in a little cubbyhole office in Hollywood.” And they brainstormed.

“There was no storyline to the book,” remembers Robert, “just a bunch of individual stories. But there were seven really good chapters that were quite visual and colorful, and they had good stuff to them. So these seven chapters got us excited. We knew that if we could take those seven chapters and weave them into a story we would have something good.”

Almost from the start, the brothers recognized that the focal point of the story should be the father and how he was so consumed with his work that he didn’t have time to be a parent. Turning his heart back toward his family would be Mary Poppins’ paramount task—the story’s core.

The brothers also decided early on that the time period for the stories had to change. The stories were originally set back during the Great Depression, but the Shermans quickly realized that this period would be far too dreary a setting for a musical comedy. They toyed with the idea of moving the story back to 1917 and World War I, but ultimately decided that the colorful Edwardian era would be even better.

“We had all of these wonderful exciting thoughts,” explains Richard, “and we actually sketched five songs. I don’t mean that we wrote out complete songs. We had partial choruses for songs like ‘Feed the Birds,’ ‘I Love to Laugh,’ and ‘Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.’ We wanted to show Walt the color and style of the turn-of-the-century English Music Hall sound. Plus, we wanted to show him how those ideas from the book could inspire us to write these songs.”

After two weeks of frantic activity, the Shermans finally called Tommie Wilck, Walt’s secretary, and requested a half-hour appointment.

The half-hour appointment turned into a one-and-a-half hour marathon, as Walt cancelled his lunch and sent out for sandwiches. After the songwriters gave their presentation, Walt looked at their notes, and then they showed him their copy of the book, pointing out the seven chapters that they thought could form the basis a film.

Walt flashed a wisp of a smile. He turned around to the book case behind his work table and took out his own copy of Mary Poppins. Opening the volume, he let the Shermans inspect its table of contents. The brothers were startled to see underlined the same seven chapters they had talked to Disney about!
“We felt we were really on the right track after that,” says Robert. “It was like a miracle.”

At the end of the session, Walt signed the brothers to a renewable six-month contract as staff composers—with instructions to work on *Poppins* anytime they didn’t have other assignments. Walt gave the two an office at the studio and told them to work on *Poppins* with veteran studio sketch artist and storyman Don DaGradi.

Walking out from the meeting, the Shermans exhilarated. “We were excited about *Poppins* and what it could be,” says Richard. “We felt that there had never been a rival to *The Wizard of Oz*… but *this* could be it.”

The official account of what happened next is that Walt brought in producer/writer Bill Walsh to write the screenplay for *Poppins* and then the Shermans wrote their score to accompany Walsh’s script.

Like many official accounts, however, this one is more fiction than fact.

What actually happened was almost the reverse. Walsh wasn’t brought aboard until most of the storyline had been set and the score nearly completed. Then he wrote a screenplay that fit the story and score previously developed. None of this is to slight Walsh’s contribution to the project; he contributed a great deal (the critical sequences at the Bank, for example, were his idea). But all initial work on *Poppins* was done by the Shermans and Don DaGradi in conjunction with Walt.

DaGradi, in particular, was pivotal in the early years of the project. He did everything from map camera angles to develop characters and plot. But most of all, he planned what would happen on screen. Originally trained as an animator, DaGradi was in top form when inventing seemingly impossible visual sequences. He was the idea man behind much of the visual magic in Disney live action films—from the leprechaun scenes in *Darby O’Gill* to the basketball game fought on air in *The Absent-Minded Professor*.

His contribution to *Poppins* was incalculable.

“Eighty-five to 90 percent of the dialogue in the picture was Bill Walsh,” acknowledges Richard. “But what you *saw* on screen, those wonderful *things* that happened—the floating through the air, the flying down the chimney. That was Don DaGradi. Everything that happened in the ‘Jolly Holliday’ sequence too. This man worked literally for years developing those sequences. And he was so wonderful. My praise for him is endless, and we feel very bad that nobody knows who Don DaGradi is.”

DaGradi’s visually oriented approach mirrored that of Disney himself. “The main thing with Walt,” explains Robert, “was ‘What’s on the screen? I don’t care what it sounds like—what’s *happening*?’ He’d constantly make us think of things to do, so that the song wouldn’t be static—you know, Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy looking at each other, two singing heads. He didn’t want that, and you never see a song like that in a Disney picture. The singers are either moving or dancing or *something* is happening.”

The first song the Shermans finished for *Poppins* was “Feed the Birds,” a lullaby about an old woman who sells bread crumbs to passersby so that they can feed the pigeons that flock around St. Paul’s Cathedral. According to the brothers, this piece became Walt’s all-time favorite. “The point of the song—that it doesn’t take much to give a little kindness—was what really registered with Walt,” says Robert. At one point, Disney even suggested the
piece would someday replace Brahms’s Lullaby.

Other songs composed early on included “Jolly Holliday” and “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.” Both were to be used during a sequence where Mary Poppins and the children jump inside the world of a chalk pavement picture. Richard Sherman recalls that Walt was fascinated by the word “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious,” and he demanded to know where it came from. It turns out that it sprang from something they remembered from their own childhood.

“When we were little boys in the late thirties,” says Richard, “we went to summer camp in the Adirondack mountains. There we heard a very long word. Not the exact word, but a word very similar to supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. It was supposed to be bigger than antidisestablishmentarianism. And if you could say those two, you were really an intellectual… and we felt very great about that. Now jump ahead 25 years when we’re adults working in a motion picture studio, and our minds fortunately remember all this….”

Sometimes the inspiration for a song came from a much more recent event. “A Spoonful of Sugar” found its initial spark in an incident involving Robert Sherman’s young son, Jeff. At the time, the Shermans were trying to develop a song for the sequence where Mary Poppins and the children clean-up the nursery; they knew that the key to the number was a healthy attitude about work, but they couldn’t hit on exactly what they wanted. Then one day Jeff came home from school and announced that he had had his polio vaccination that day. His father asked him whether it had hurt, and he replied, “Oh, no! They put the medicine on a little piece of sugar.” That was it. The next day Robert suggested to his brother that the song be called “a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down.”

AS the songs for Poppins evolved, so did the major story sequences, as the Shermans, DaGradi and Walt sought to expand and revise their original ideas. The “Jolly Holliday” sequence provides a prime example of the editing process. The original concept for this part of the film was that all the characters appearing in it would be played by live actors and only the backgrounds would be drawn (simulating the chalk pictures drawn by Bert). One day as they were discussing a scene where Bert and Mary Poppins have tea, however, the whole idea changed.

The scene as originally conceived required four waiters who would be played by live actors. Suddenly Walt had an inspiration.

“You know, waiters have always reminded me of penguins,” he told the others matter-of-factly. “Why don’t we have penguins as the waiters?”

The Shermans were floored, thinking their boss had really jumped off the deep end this time. What could he possibly be talking about? Somehow training live penguins to act like waiters?

They kept their thoughts to themselves, however, and Walt continued: “Yeah, we’ll animate the penguins—in fact, we’ll animate everything except the principal characters!” Thus was born what must be one of the most famous dance routines in cinematic history—Dick Van Dyke’s amazing soft-shoe routine with four animated Penguins as Julie Andrews sits nearby and watches on.
MOST of the songs in *Poppins* grew out of the demands of particular sequences and the need to make specific story points. But that was not the case with perhaps the single most famous song in the production—the Academy Award-winning “Chim Chim Cher-ee.” The idea for that lovely piece came from one of the hundreds of mood sketches drawn for the project by DaGradi.

One day in 1962, the Shermans stopped by DaGradi’s office, and there they saw a sketch of a chimney sweep. He had his arm draped around his broom handle, and he was walking through the fog of Cherry Tree Lane, whistling. The Shermans were completely captivated.

Sensing the possibility for a song, Robert quickly asked DaGradi who the man in the picture was.

DaGradi replied that there was a chapter in one of the *Poppins* books about a chimney sweep and how it was lucky if you touched one.

“So we read the chapter and did some research,” says Richard, “and we discovered a legend that if you touch a sweep, you get lucky; if you get a little soot on you, that’s wonderful; if he blows you a kiss, it’s fantastic. When we learned all these things, we were jumping up and down. It was like giving us a million dollars each just to go out and spend it. We were absolutely in heaven; we were inspired by this thing. So we came up with ‘Chim Chim Cher-ee.’”

Once the Shermans had the the idea for the song in mind, Walt suggested a way it could be used to strengthen the overall story.

At this point in the development of the characters and plot, Mary Poppins had no clear male counterpart. There was a handyman, Robertson Eye; the chalk artist, Bert; and now the Shermans had suggested a chimney sweep. But the focus was too diffuse, and so Walt suggested collapsing the handyman and the chimney sweep into Bert, who would now become a jack-of-all-trades.

“Talk about ‘plussing’ things,” says Robert. “That was one of the explosions that took place during story development because of Walt. When Walt said, ‘Let’s put the three characters together,’ then Bert had a musical theme [i.e., the tune for ‘Chim Chim Cher-ee’] that could be used throughout the picture. We used it in the beginning of the film when he says, ‘Winds in the East, there’s a mist comin in’; and then again, later on, when he’s a pavement artist and he sings, ‘It’s all me own work from me own memory.’”

If “Chim Chim Cher-ee” was one of the easier songs in the film to compose because of DaGradi’s inspirational sketch, the toughest piece to come up with was undoubtedly the finale, “Let’s Go Fly a Kite.” The problem there was finding a way to top Mary Poppins. At the end of the story, she leaves the Banks family and to go on to help others. Given this as the wrap up, how could one fashion a satisfactory finale that wouldn’t leave the audience devastated?

Again, the brothers’ childhood memories came to the rescue. Explains Robert: “We asked ourselves, ‘What did we enjoy about our parents? What do we remember? And we both remembered that our Dad used to make kites for us when we were kids and take us to fly them at Roxbury Park in Beverly Hills.”

Out of this connection with the past sprang the recurrent kite metaphor used in the film.
Near the start of the picture, Jane and Michael lose their nanny in the park across the lane because the kite they made flies away from them in a gust of wind. After being brought home by a constable, the children ask their father whether he might help them repair their kite; but he doesn’t have time for such silly things and stores the kite in the basement. By the end of the film, however, after the father has lost his lucrative job and recognizes his true priorities, he spends the night repairing his children’s broken kite. The next morning, he offers to take Jane and Michael to the park to fly it.

“Walt played a tremendous part in the writing of this song,” notes Richard, “because though we had a concept and the words were pretty much there, we had a different kind of feel for the melody line than the final one we chose—the simple waltz that goes floating up into the air.”

SOME sequences and songs had to be cut as Poppins developed, of course. Perhaps the most intriguing of these was a trip around the world guided by a magic compass. The children would spin the compass and end up in another land. Among other places, the children and Mary Poppins were to visit Arabia and China during this sequence. In addition, each land was to have its own musical number. The piece for China was the “Chinese Festival Song,” and the song for Arabia was known as “The Land of Sand.” (It was later redeveloped by the Shermans as “Trust in Me” for Jungle Book.) In retrospect, the around-the-world sequence sounds delightful. But Walt was undoubtedly correct that it was too extraneous to the plot of the rest of the picture. So it was dropped.

By the latter half of 1961, many of the songs and most of the basic storyline for Poppins had been fleshed out. But then two obstacles arose that threatened to kill the project. The first was Babes in Toyland, the studio’s upcoming Christmas release.

A lavish recreation of the old Victor Herbert musical, Toyland had been been a disaster-in-the-making from the start. The first director Walt wanted for the assignment, the talented David Swift, turned it down. The staff composer appointed to arrange the music for the production supplied a completely pedestrian score. And the storymen from the animation department assigned to develop the plot and dialogue created such a mess that Zorro story editor Lowell Hawley had to be called in at the last minute to patch together a coherent screenplay.

Now a rough cut had finally been spliced together, and Walt was calling together his key people to preview the result. The men sat in silence in the studio screening room as the opening scenes flashed across the screen. After the film ended, they still sat there in silence. No one stood up; no one spoke. Everyone in the room knew the film was a turkey.

Finally, Walt stood up and said: “Well, I guess Disney just doesn’t know how to do musicals.” Then he walked out.

Sitting in the audience, Richard and Robert Sherman felt their hearts sink. Walt had been staring straight at them when he spoke. They now feared that Walt might not be let them finish Poppins. He might simply scrap the project after his debacle with Toyland. Fortunately, Walt never mentioned Toyland to the Shermans after the fateful preview screening—and more importantly, he never said anything negative about Poppins.
That did not mean that the road to the production of *Poppins* was now smooth and clear, however. But the remaining obstacle to *Poppins* seeing the light of day was not Walt Disney.

It was Pamela Travers, author of the Mary Poppins stories.

CRUSTY and demanding, Mrs. Travers gave studio personnel headaches. Looking back at things now, it remains a mystery that she allowed *Mary Poppins* to be made at all. For years she had balked at letting anyone turn her books into a motion picture, lest Hollywood ruin her beloved character in the process. Travers retained approval over the screenplay, and it was far from clear that she would approve what Disney wanted to do.

So for the first years of the development of *Poppins*, the Shermans and DaGradi did not even know whether they would be able to produce the project they had been pouring their heart and soul into. Finally, Mrs. Travers came over for her grand inspection tour to see for herself what Disney wanted to do with her stories. The Shermans still remember the trip with dismay. It was as if Travers was doing her best to find reasons not to let Disney do the film.

“She complained that we chose her worst chapters to use in the film,” recalls Robert. “Then she started suggesting chapters she thought we should use—and they were the ones we thought were abominable!”

Adds Richard: “The head of the story department, Bill Dover, was waltzing Mrs. Travers around and trying to appease her, and she was very very difficult… She was one of these English snobs who thought she knew more than everyone else.”

At one point, after quoting Winston Churchill repeatedly, Travers demanded to know if the Shermans and DaGradi could recite the complete Gettysburg Address—from memory. After the three successfully struggled through it, Mrs. Travers finally quieted down.

The day Travers left, Walt came to the Shermans office and acknowledged that she was proving difficult to work with. “But if she says no,” Disney told them, “I have another book we could use most of the songs in.” The book was *The Magic Bedknob* by Mary Norton, and it was in fact later produced by the studio (as *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* in 1971) using at least one song originally developed for *Poppins*. (“The Beautiful Briny Sea.”)

But the sudden announcement that they might have to shift to a completely different storyline provided small consolation at the time. The Shermans and DaGradi were devastated.

Misgivings notwithstanding, Mrs. Travers finally gave her assent to the Disney approach to the story, and the film went into production in earnest. Bill Walsh was assigned to coproduce the film and develop a screenplay with DaGradi within the confines of the story and score that had already been developed, and thoughts turned to assembling a first-rate cast and crew to make the film a reality.

CASTING the role of Mary Poppins, of course, was the chief challenge. The studio considered everyone from Bette Davis to Mary Martin for the part before Walt settled on Julie Andrews.

How he came to settle on Miss Andrews for the part is a story in itself.
One evening, the Shermans and DaGradi all happened to be watching the *Ed Sullivan Show* independently of each other. Featured that night were Julie Andrews and Richard Burton, stars of Broadway’s *Camelot*, performing a song from their show. The song was “What Do the Simple Folk Do?,” and part of it required Julie to showcase her ability to whistle.

It so happened that the Shermans were then working on the song “A Spoonful of Sugar,” part of which required Mary Poppins to whistle along with a Robin. That started the Shermans and DaGradi thinking.

The next day, it turned out that DaGradi and the Shermans had reached the same conclusion. All three thought Julie would be perfect for the role of Mary Poppins. So they hurried off to see Tommie Wilck, Walt’s secretary, about scheduling an appointment to discuss the matter with Walt.

Virtually the first words out of Wilck’s mouth when they came into Walt’s office were: “Did you see *Ed Sullivan* last night? Julie Andrews is Mary Poppins!”

The only problem was figuring out how to broach the subject with Walt. Using a hard-sell approach on him rarely worked; in fact, it was best way to get your proposal rejected by Walt. What was needed was a way to bring up the subject circumspectly.

As it happens, the Shermans and DaGradi were supplied with the perfect opening: Walt was already scheduled to visit New York the next week with his wife. So the Shermans and DaGradi mildly suggested to their boss that perhaps he might want to see Julie Andrews in *Camelot* while in New York, because—just possibly—she could be the person they wanted for the role of Mary Poppins.

Walt agreed, went to see Julie in *Camelot*, and was sold on her at once. Among other things, he was enchanted by her ability to whistle! He met Julie backstage after the performance and asked her to come out to Burbank to consider the role.

Although today Andrews might seem the only actress for the part, she was far from the obvious choice at the time. All her previous experience had been on the stage, and some in Hollywood seriously doubted whether she could make the transition into film. Rumors swirled around about her failure to get cast for the film version of *My Fair Lady* at Warner Brothers. After receiving wide acclaim as Eliza Doolittle in the Broadway version of the musical, Julie had hoped to snatch the same role in the film version along with her Broadway co-star Rex Harrison. But after an apparently disastrous screen test, studio chief Jack Warner decided he didn’t want her and chose Audrey Hepburn instead.

The snub by Warner opened up the way for Andrews to accept the role of Poppins, which she did forthwith. Actually, she had come out to the Disney studio several months before the decision had been reached about *My Fair Lady* and heard the score for *Poppins* and liked it. (“She only objected to one song,” recalls Robert Sherman, “and that was ‘Through the Eyes of Love,’ a big ballad for Mary. She said, ‘That isn’t Mary Poppinsish.’ It was too sugary for her.” So the song was dropped.) Andrews agreed at the time of her initial visit that she would take the role if she didn’t get the part in *My Fair Lady*. She kept her word.

If Andrews turned out to be the perfect person for the part, however, she was not the only one who was well cast in *Poppins*. Disney assembled an extraordinary ensemble of
actors and actresses for the production.

Dick Van Dyke, the versatile American comic, turned in a stellar performance as Bert, Mary Poppins’ male counterpart. Matthew Garber and Karen Dotrice were simultaneously mischievous and innocent as the children Jane and Michael. Both had been seen previously in the studio’s Three Lives of Thomasina—and both appeared afterwards (billed as “the Mary Poppins kids”) in The Gnome Mobile. British actor David Tomlinson played the children’s father with suitable stiffness. Rounding out the troupe was a collection of some of the finest character actors and actresses then living, including Elsa Lanchester, Hermoine Baddeley, Arthur Treacher, Ed Wynn—and even silent film star Jane Darwell (in a cameo as the Bird Woman in “Feed the Birds”).

The last of the major roles cast was that of Mrs. Banks, the children’s mother. Once again, the choice was just right.

“We needed a perfect mother . . . someone who was a little dithery and yet just marvelous,” recalls Richard Sherman. “Walt said, ‘I know who! Glynis Johns.’ And we said, ‘Absolutely!’”

Johns had previously starred in two of Disney’s swashbucklers shot in England during the 1950s, and a meeting with her at the studio in Burbank was quickly arranged.

Everything went well until they started discussing the film.

“We were talking on a different track,” says Robert. “Walt was talking about the picture, and she was talking about Mary Poppins.”

It gradually dawned on the Shermans that Glynis Johns had always wanted to play Mary Poppins herself. Needless to say, she was simply thrilled to discuss the project, because she thought Walt wanted her for the role. The Shermans broke out into a sweat as they wondered how Walt would handle the delicate situation.

He tried to be diplomatic.

“Now you know Glynis,” Walt started to say, “this is a musical picture—”

But Glynis wasn’t having any of it. “Oh yes, Walt, I can sing—”

Walt finally just had to blurt out: “Glynis, the lead character is going to be played by a musical comedy star. We’ve already selected Julie Andrews.”

For a moment, Glynis just sat there, stunned. Finally she said in a flat voice: “Oh . . . Julie is very talented.” Her interest in the project evaporated.

But Walt wasn’t about to give up so easily.

“There’s another role we want you for,” he continued vigorously, “and there’s a wonderful song that the boys’ have just about finished which is just for you. A wonderful song. We just have to dot some i’s on it. Right boys?”

He turned to the Sherman brothers, who were horrified. They had no song for Glynis. Why, they weren’t even working on Poppins anymore! The final song had been finished months ago.

They nodded anyway.

“We’ll show it to you early next week,” Walt promised. “Then you can decide.”

After the meeting, Disney told the Shermans to “find a spot and give her a song.” He wanted Glynis Johns for the picture and nothing was going to stop him from getting her—even if he had to add a whole extra number to sign her. After all, the song could always be
cut later.

The Shermans were shell-shocked by the request.

“We were going crazy,” says Richard. “We had already written *Poppins*. It was put out of our minds. We were working on other things now. We were writing songs for a western and *Winnie the Pooh*—totally different pictures. And all of the sudden to try to get back to the *Poppins* style—wow, were we under the gun.”

They finally came up with the idea of the mother singing about her suffragette activities as a counterpoint to Mr. Banks’ ode to 1910 as “the Age of Men.” They holed up at the studio over the weekend and frantically turned out their final song for the film, the delightfully satirical “Sister Suffragette.” They got the tune for the piece from a previously discarded number for *Poppins* called “Practically Perfect,” and they played the completed song for Glynis on Tuesday—a mere four days since their original luncheon meeting. She loved it and agreed to take the part.

Complementing the first-rate cast on *Poppins* was an equally exceptional group of people behind the scenes. Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the production staff was that almost all of them were from in-house. The Disney studio remained one of the last glorious vestiges of the old studio system, and Walt had assembled a permanent core staff of directors, cameramen, art directors, set decorators, producers and other personnel who made virtually every film he put out. *Mary Poppins* showed what these people could do.

The film was directed by Robert Stevenson, whose previous Disney credits had included *Darby O’Gill* and *The Absent-Minded Professor*. Prior to coming to Disney in 1957, Stevenson had worked with such producers as David O. Selznik and Howard Hughes. The choice of Stevenson was a disappointment to another director, Ken Annakin. Annakin had directed several of the Disney studio’s films during the 1950s, and he had come across the Poppins stories himself and thought them perfect Disney material. Unaware that the studio was already pursuing the property, Annakin sometime after 1959 supplied Disney with a treatment of the stories, because he was interested in directing a film version. He was never asked to become involved in the project, however.

Art direction and set decoration on the film were supplied by William Tuntke and Emile Kuri. Tuntke had been the art director for most of Disney’s previous fantasies, including *Darby O’Gill*, *The Absent Minded Professor* and *Son of Flubber*. Kuri, meanwhile, had been tapped to head the studio’s set decorating department after his Oscar-winning work on *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Providing some of the wonderful London backgrounds seen in the film was brilliant matte artist Peter Ellenshaw, whose work on *Treasure Island*, *Darby O’Gill* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues* still looks flawless.

Special effects for the film were provided by Ellenshaw, Eustace Lycett and Robert A. Mattey (Mattey went on to create the mechanical shark used in *Jaws* in the 1970s). Flying sequences were handled by second unit director Arthur J. Vitarelli, who had previously staged the flying basketball and football sequences in *Absent-Minded Professor* and *Son of Flubber*.

Only three major members of the production staff had not worked previously for Disney, and they were brought in because of the special requirements of mounting a large-scale musical. The three were arranger Irwin Kostal and choreographers Marc Breaux and
LIKE most Hollywood musicals through the 1950s, all of *Mary Poppins* was shot indoors, necessitating some fairly massive sets. The exteriors for Cherry Tree Lane and the park across the street were all housed in soundstage number three on the Disney lot, which had been built originally for *Darby O’Gill and the Little People*. The stage was the studio’s largest, but it was still a tight fit trying to pack in everything that was needed.

“I had to design the Banks’ house as well the entire street it was on,” explains art director William Tuntke. “Mary Poppins was supposed to come flying down and land in the foreground of the Banks’ house, where the gate was, and in the back you see the street going and curving around. Where Mary Poppins made her entrance and all the way up to the Banks’ house I built the set full-scale. The Banks’ house itself was 7/8ths scale. The next house was 3/4ths scale. The next house was half-scale. And the next one was 1/4 scale. And you would see these houses all receding. I got real cherry trees to line the street, and I had all the greensmen to put twigs on it and paper cherry blossoms; there were eighteen trees in all, and they were built to decreasing scale as well. Now because of the proportions of the set our main actors could never go past much of Mary Poppins’ entrance, otherwise they would look too small and out of scale. So in the background, we used a couple of miniature people that could walk from one house to another. They could walk out of the scene without making it look phony. They were walking in the background.”

A painted backing finished off the set. “There was a mist over the whole thing,” adds Tuntke, “and you could put a little smoke in front of it and it blended together with the mist on the backing. It worked out very well.”

Interiors for *Mary Poppins* proved to be a a bit of a sticking point. Peter Ellenshaw, who was born and raised in Britain (by a nanny no less) didn’t think the interiors looked right and apparently told Walt so.

“Peter thought they didn’t look English enough,” recalls set decorator Emile Kuri. Kuri, who had won two Oscars by this time and was one of the industry’s premier decorators, wasn’t about to be second-guessed. “Well, Walt came down and looked at the set, and he said, ‘If Emile did it, it looks fine to me.’ And Peter was so damn mad at me. He could’ve killed me.”

ONCE rehearsals and filming began, working on *Poppins* became extremely demanding. “There were weeks and weeks and weeks of rehearsals,” recalls Tom Leetch, who was assistant director on the picture. “Everything had to be done down to the smallest detail, you know, ‘move an inch to the left or to the right.’ It was pleasant, but slow-moving. Walt was there on set on a daily basis when in town. We would work for a week or ten days and then give a ‘dress rehearsal’ (though not in costume) for Walt. It was such a collaborative movie—with dance and animation and music and live action and special effects. The logistics were considerable; Walt would be surrounded by art director, director, special effects and technical and wardrobe personnel.”

“I don’t think anyone was wise enough at the time to realize we were working on a classic,” adds Leetch, “though we all thought it would be successful.”
Walt continued to pay attention to the details of *Poppins* as the film went into production. Second unit director Arthur Vitarelli remembers Walt’s interest in the sequence where Admiral Boom fires his cannon and causes a miniature earthquake inside the Banks’ house. “Walt came down and talked to me about what he wanted in that scene,” says Vitarelli. “He picked every little gag that he wanted to happen. It wasn’t written in.”

Since *Poppins* was a full-blown musical, much of the preparation focused around the music and dances. Choreographer Dee Dee Wood had art director William Tuntke make a model of the rooftop set so she and husband Marc Breaux could plan the final dance sequence more effectively. Wood and Breaux also had a duplicate rooftop set built on the backlot in order to stage rehearsals with the dancers.

As with most Disney productions, *Poppins* was largely a pleasant experience for the cast. That was partly by design. Walt knew that this was a very special production and that it wouldn’t do to have actors and actresses at each others’ throats. He particularly went out of his way to make sure Julie Andrews was free of distractions so she could keep her mind focused on her performance.

“I want Julie to be happy while she’s making this picture,” Disney told set decorator Emile Kuri. “I want her to look happy and be happy.” So she would feel at home, Walt had Kuri redecorate the home he had rented for Andrews with English antiques. Andrews subsequently fell in love with a group of 200-year-old Yorkshire chairs Kuri had found for the house and offered to buy them. But Kuri told her that he planned to save them for his children. (After filming was over, Andrews had Kuri design the interiors for her home in England.)

Despite generally pleasant conditions on the set, there were a few problems, however. One involved Dick Van Dyke and director Robert Stevenson. Stevenson “was difficult,” says second unit director Vitarelli. “He had it all planned ahead of time; everything was going to be that way, and he wasn’t going to change it.” His rigid approach clashed early on with Van Dyke’s more freewheeling style. “When Dick was playing the one-man band sequence early in the picture, he wanted to go all through it in order to get the feeling of it. But Stevenson in his professionalism would shoot twenty seconds here and five seconds there. So when they first started to shoot the scene and Stevenson yelled ‘cut!’, Dick wanted to know what the matter was. And Stevenson said, ‘Oh it’s all right.’ But Dick was frustrated because he wanted to get into the thing; he wanted to act.”

Vitarelli had a difficulty of his own with Van Dyke. “In the chimney sweeps’ dance, he could not jump over the broom in rehearsal. So I told him, ‘What are we going to do about that?’ He said, ‘When the camera is rolling, I’ll do it.’ I said, ‘But we’ve got to have some kind of a back-up in case you can’t do it.’ He replied, ‘If you just turn that camera and it’s a take, I’ll do it.’ I didn’t have any way out. I didn’t know how we’d do it. I just figured we’d have to leave him out.” But when Vitarelli tried it with cameras rolling, Van Dyke delivered as promised. “He really enjoyed playing to an audience, and he never missed a step. But we also made sure that nobody else made a mistake so we wouldn’t have to do it over!”

The special effects sequences for *Poppins* were particularly challenging. Extensive use
was made of piano wires and the sodium process technology that had already been put to
good use in films like *Absent-Minded Professor*. But here the various processes were further
perfected. Some of the technical innovations were extremely simple, but that didn’t detract
from their utility. Take the use of teeter-totters. “We used teeter-totters a lot,” says Vitarelli.
“Like when Mary Poppins would start to go someplace, she’d be on a teeter-totter and just
go up and go half-way out and then double would be on the line and go the rest of the
way.”

In at least one instance, Vitarelli shot a sequence with piano-wires that was originally
supposed to be animated. The scene early in the film where the rejected nannies are being
blown down Cherry Tree lane was planned for animation, but in one of the production
meetings, Vitarelli objected that it would look phony. When Walt asked him if he could
shoot the scene live, Vitarelli said yes and Walt gave his O.K. Vitarelli set up a large wind
machine in the background and had each woman connected to two wires and separate
counterweights. A man with a winch then pulled the women up and away. (One of the
nannies blown away, by the way, was Julie Andrew’s double in the film.)

Poles and bungee cords were employed for the merry-go-round sequence. Each wooden
horse was hung from an overhead track by a pole attached to a bungee cord; and over each
horse there was a platform with a man on it, who moved the pole up and down as the horse
moved along the track.

One of the most complicated sequences to put together was “Step in Time,” the lavish
production number in the final segment of the film. It required the extensive use of piano-
wires and lots of stunts by the dancers, several of whom had worked previously on Disney’s
*Absent-Minded Professor*. “We took care of the dancers,” says Vitarelli, “and we didn’t hurt
anybody.” That’s not to say that they couldn’t have been hurt. One particularly demanding
scene had four dancers straddling along two buildings, with a foot on each building. “At one
point they dove down head first and caught on with their toes and then came back up
again. That was all one scene. We did it on wires and just stopped them at the right time. It
took all morning to get that shot after rehearsal.”

All the hard work on the big production number paid off in the end. When the
animation and mattes were added, it was truly spectacular. Even so, Walt suggested that it
be cut because it was so lengthy. He was afraid it would drag the film. “I kept saying let’s
cut it,” he told journalist Arthur Millier in 1964. “But the people around here said no. You
know you have to watch this cutting thing. It’s like a painting—you do it and then you start
changing this and that and first thing you know the life’s gone from it. And it’s an old rule of
the theater: if you hit on something good, milk it. Sophisticates may get bored but the
people in the seats like it that way.”

THE world premiere of *Poppins* took place on August 27, 1964 at Grauman’s Chinese
Theater in Hollywood. The film quickly garnered spectacular reviews from entranced critics
and accumulated an equally staggering box office record. Soon it was the most popular film
in America. Critics who usually sneered at Disney films sung the praises of this one, and
*Mary Poppins* became the only Walt Disney picture to be considered for the major Oscars for
Best Picture and Best Acting. In all, the film received 13 Academy Award nominations, and
it ultimately won in six categories (including Best Actress).

Unfortunately, *Poppins* triumph at the Oscars did not cause many film critics to revise their overall estimation of Walt’s live action record. The majority continued to think that it was the one pearl amidst the mediocrity. If *Poppins* had little long-term effect on the viewpoint most critics took of Disney, however, it had a much greater impact on the kind of films Walt was to produce in the last years of his life.

The debacle of *Babes in Toyland* soundly behind him, Walt decided to vigorously pursue the production of major musicals. In this choice, he was like many Hollywood producers at the time. Flushed by the success of *Poppins, My Fair Lady* and other musicals, most studios were now rushing into the production of similar projects.

There was a fundamental difference, though, between how Disney and the other studios made their musicals. Most of the screen musicals to come out of Hollywood during the 1960s were film versions of Broadway musicals that had already proved themselves. Most producers, in other words, were trying to hedge their bets and play it safe with already successful productions that would have built-in audiences. Not Walt. Every musical he commissioned after *Poppins* was to have an original score written by the Sherman brothers. And there were several he commissioned.

Before his death in 1966, Disney had near completion or in the works at least four new full-length musicals—*The Happiest Millionaire*, based on a stage comedy about the eccentric life of millionaire Anthony Drexel Biddle; *The Family Band*, the story of a family which moves West to the Dakota territory in search of a better life in the 1880s; *The Magic Bedknob* (mentioned earlier) about an English witch who helps fight the Nazis during World War II; and *Eightball Express*, based on an original screen comedy by Maurice Tombragel spoofing the Army.

In addition to these full-length musicals, Disney in late 1965 decided to launch a series of mini-musicals that could be staged live at Disneyland, shot for TV, or released to the theatres as featurettes. The first of these short musicals was to be *Hansel and Gretel*, based on an original screenplay by A.J. Carothers. Walt appointed Bill Anderson (*Swiss Family Robinson, The Happiest Millionaire*) to coproduce and Norman Tokar (*Big Red, Follow Me, Boys!, The Happiest Millionaire*) to direct. By September 1967, Carothers had finished the first complete draft of the screenplay, and the Sherman brothers had composed six songs.

These different projects had varying fates. *The Happiest Millionaire* had finished filming before Disney’s death. It was edited after his death, however, and some prints had so much footage hacked off that they made very little sense. The film was subsequently excoriated by most critics who found it a severe disappointment after *Poppins*. *The Family Band* had a completed script and score and even a major star (Bing Crosby) before Walt died. After some fierce inter-company wrangling, it went into production without the major star (Crosby’s agent called and hiked his salary demands shortly after Walt’s death). When it finally reached the screen, it also had been edited heavily, leaving the Shermans disillusioned about the prospect of further musicals at the studio. Walt himself had cancelled *Eightball Express* because he thought that making a spoof about the Army during the Vietnam War might not be the best thing to do.

*The Magic Bedknob*, meanwhile, was cancelled by the studio after Walt died, but then
resurrected a few years later by Bill Walsh and released as Bedknobs and Broomsticks in 1971. The studio also chopped Hansel and Gretel after Walt’s demise, the script and score of which were not completed until the fall of 1967. Unlike The Magic Bedknob, Hansel and Gretel was never resurrected and has since fallen into complete obscurity.

None of the post-Poppins musicals that were actually produced captured anything near the commercial or critical success of their illustrious parent. If Walt had stayed alive, perhaps things would have been different. Or perhaps not. One reason classics are classic, after all, is precisely because they are few and far between and take such strenuous efforts to achieve. So it would be truly senseless to expect a Mary Poppins every year—or even every few years, for that matter. That fact, however, merely helps us appreciate the ageless worth of Poppins all the more.