

That Disney Magic

“Anything can happen if you let it!” It’s a famous Mary Poppins quip, and a maxim fully embraced by set and costume designer Bob Crowley when he was handed the challenge of bringing the enchanted – and enchanting – story to the stage. By Sarah Illingworth.

A five-time Tony Award-winning set designer whose humble persona is refreshingly at odds with his level of professional success, Bob has authored the set design of numerous stage shows, including *Aida*, *The History Boys* and *Tarzan*, along with many a Royal Shakespeare Company performance.

The Irishman decided to diverge from his typically minimalist aesthetic when asked to work on the theatre version of *MARY POPPINS*, although the process did start simply. Taking his cue from the pen and ink illustrations in Poppins author P.L. Travers’ original books, Bob started drafting the set by sketching his own interpretation of the tales, and that storybook feel is central to the look of the finished design.

“I started by drawing the park, and the house and Cherry Tree Lane,” he recounts, adding that “you still see everything drawn; all that was drawn by my hand. It became a very personal version of the film.”

It’s a connection that actually goes way back. Bob recalls being so enamoured by Disney’s classic film version of *MARY POPPINS* when it was first released that he saw it three times in one week.

“I was very nervous taking on an iconic show like that, because [the film] was so groundbreaking in its time. It had a huge effect on me watching it – in fact, it may well have influenced me in my chosen career, because I found it so inspiring visually.”

That said, he’s quick to add that “the stage show isn’t the film. It honours the film, but it’s not a reproduction of the film. There’s new material, new storylines, new characters, new songs even – but it’s still recognisably *MARY POPPINS*.”

It certainly is *MARY POPPINS* from head to toe, and it rivals the much-loved Julie Andrews version in its telling. Drawing inspiration from the original books and his childhood enthusiasm for the film, Bob hand-drew every character, costume and set piece before they were brought to life. No small task, but to him drawing is a time-saver, a way to communicate, which leaves little room for confusion.

“Until you show a person a drawing of something it doesn’t exist,” he says. “Sometimes it’s much easier to draw it than talk about it. We drew cave drawings before we wrote notes to each other as cavemen – it’s very basic; it’s very, very human.”

However, ensuring the show captured the magical whimsy of Bob’s original drawings, and the story itself, was no walk in the park.

“Days, hours, weeks went into all that stuff. To make it seem easy, an immense amount

of work goes into it. And then you’ve got to make it look like it’s really simple; that’s the whole art of it. If it looks difficult, it isn’t working.

“Everybody has to be on the same page, otherwise it’s total chaos. You all have to be aiming at the same target, trying to achieve the same results.”

Saying the house proved his biggest design challenge, Bob describes it as “another character in the whole show. It’s the house that they’re going to lose if [Mr Banks] can’t pay the mortgage, when he loses his job. In order to feel that they’ve got something to lose, you’ve got to see physically what they could lose.”

When the show’s runaway success begged the creation of a touring version, and the need for a set that could be set up, packed down and shipped with minimal fuss – but retain all the magic of the original version – Bob and his crew returned to the drawing board.

“We went back to basics and we looked at everything for the tour. The show [that’s coming to New Zealand], it’s exactly true to the spirit of the original show, moment for moment. It’s just more light on its feet. And actually, I love what we did. The lighter it got, the less real it got, I loved it.”

The touring version may be stripped back, but it certainly doesn’t appear to be missing anything. Without giving too much away, highlights include *Step in Time*, in which the affable Bert (played by acclaimed Australian choreographer and performer Matt Lee) leads his fellow chimney sweeps in a Stomp-tastic jaunt across the rooftops of London, *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* – which will leave you breathless – and the perfectly executed slapstick of *A Spoonful of Sugar*.

“The songs, for God’s sake, are amazing,” confirms Bob. “One after another keeps coming and pressing your buttons... My favourite song in the whole show is *Let’s Go Fly a Kite*; I think that’s a really, really gorgeous song. I love that moment.”

“It’s just gorgeous to see the reaction in the audience,” he concludes, remarking on the huge numbers that have embraced the show worldwide. “Wherever it goes, it just has the same effect. They’re enchanted by it, you know.”

**MARY POPPINS
THE SUPERCALIFRAGILISTIC
MUSICAL**
From 13 October | The Civic

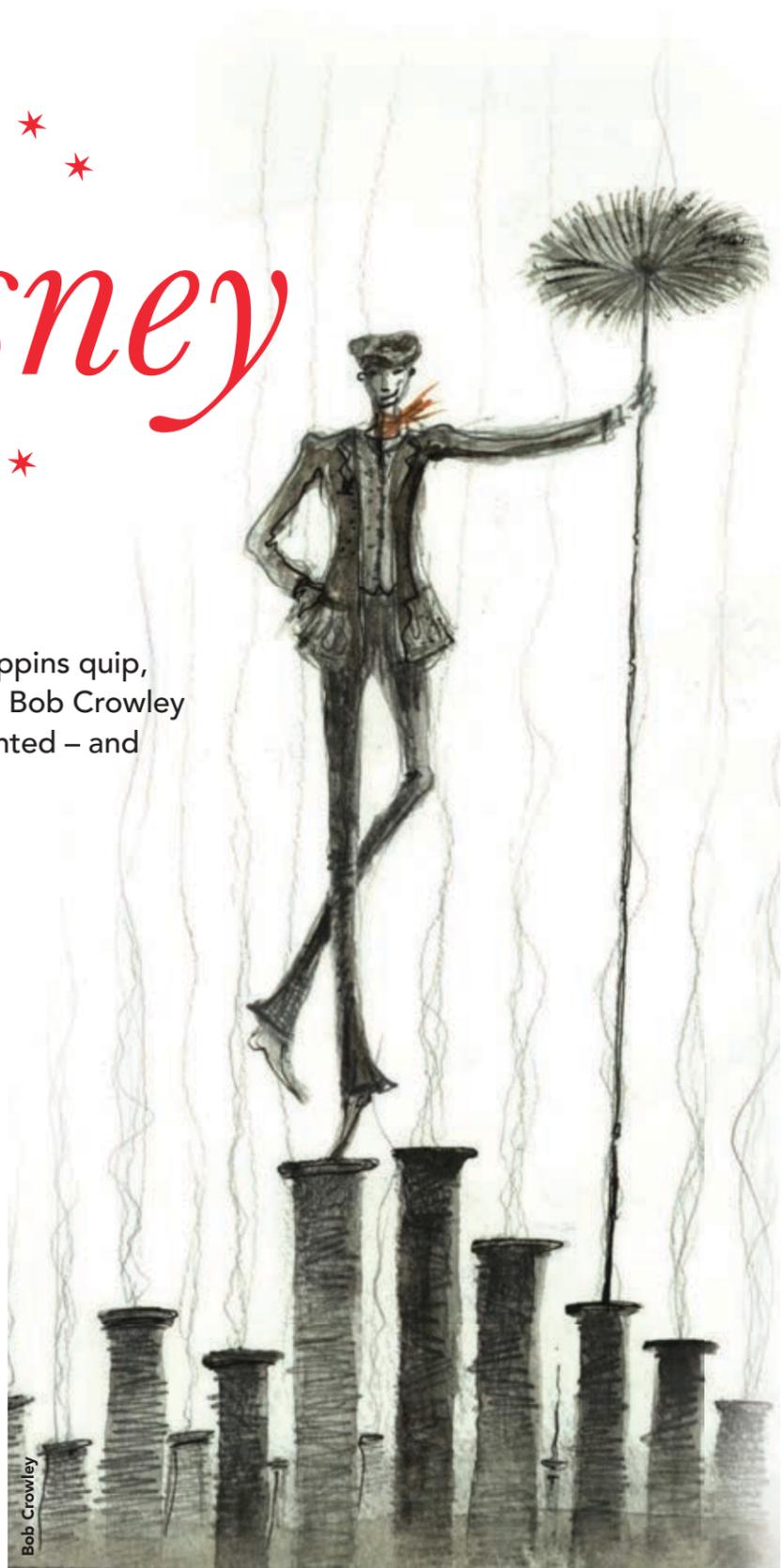


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