

Meet Mr and Mrs Banks of Cherry Tree Lane

Come October, New Zealand audiences will finally have the chance to see the practically perfect theatrical adaptation of *MARY POPPINS*. Sarah Illingworth caught the show as it wound down in Perth, ready to make its way across the Tasman.

Practically perfect, in every way. It's a big call, but the runaway success of the stage-show spectacular that is *MARY POPPINS* has been living up to the hype. From the set to the costumes, to the perfectly-turned-out toes of Mary Poppins' perfectly polished boots, the production really is a delight to behold.

Attracting audiences that range from wee to silver fox, the curtain first rose on the stage version of Pamela Travers' timeless classic in London's West End eight years ago. Since, it's been seen by almost 10 million people and grossed more than US\$679 million (\$875 million) worldwide – and won 44 major theatre awards.

Adapted for the stage by Academy Award-winning screenwriter Julian Fellowes (*Downton Abbey*, *Gosford Park*) and acclaimed producers Cameron Mackintosh (*Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Miss Saigon*) and Thomas Schumacher (*The Lion King*, *Beauty and The Beast*), the show tells the tale of the not-so-perfect Banks family and their no-nonsense yet magical conundrum of a nanny Mary Poppins.

The New Zealand lead is yet to be announced (although rumour has it the actress will be a very special surprise), but the other key cast members will travel with the show when it arrives in October. Australian dance personality Matt Lee is impeccable as the toe-tapping, chimney-sweeping, unrequited Bert, while Simon Burke and Pippa Grandison are equally brilliant in the roles of Mr and Mrs Banks.

Having most recently starred as Captain von Trapp in the West End version of *The Sound of Music*, Simon captures

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another quintessential 'father' role as the ever-perturbed George Banks. While Mary is obviously the show's central character, the story really follows George's journey from uptight father who never has time for his family to a man reborn when he almost loses his career – only to rediscover the sweetness of the simpler things in life.

"From Winifred's perspective, it's a great relief," says Pippa, who plays the Winifred Banks to Simon's George, "because the man who she fell in love with, and the man that she knows is still in there, is finally coming out. I think it's a great joy for her when he finally starts seeing the children and communicating with them. Not only for them, but for the happiness that it brings to him as well."

Winifred has her own complexities. A "modern-thinking woman who's stuck in an old-fashioned world," as Pippa describes her, she abandoned her career as an

actress to be a mother and a wife, only to be constrained in both roles by a husband who prefers her to hand over the reins to a nanny and a housekeeper, in the interests of keeping up with the 'best' people.

"It's great that Mary Poppins does come along," elaborates Pippa, "because they're a dysfunctional family, and they need help, they need guidance, but Winifred doesn't want to do all that stuffy stuff – having to be seen to be the 'best' person, and have tea parties with people [she doesn't] know. She just wants to be a mum, and love her family and have a good time, and nurture her children's imaginative games."

The children themselves are jaw-dropping in their ability to tap, twirl, sing and act. True triple threats, it's impressive that the Australian run of the show found eight child actors in every centre capable of handling the demanding roles of Jane and Michael.

"I suppose the great thing about the kids is, because we have such a great creative team, it's a default position that they've been very well cast," offers Simon. "Every single one of our kids has a vulnerability and a truth to them, which is really nice. But they're all hilarious. They're all in pairs, and you do end up having different jokes with different pairs, and of course there's a bit of rivalry between them, which is hilarious to watch. It's like a battle of the midgets sometimes."

"*The Sound of Music* was even worse," he continues, "because we had seven von Trapp kids, and we had a lot of changeovers; so in one year I worked with 96 kids, and it's just such a special thing for them. They're so excited, but when they leave they're so sad. It really kills ya."

The cast also boasts renowned cabaret singer Natalie Gamsu as the formidable Miss Andrews, and New Zealander Delia Hannah (*Les Misérables*, *Cats*, *Chicago*) in the role of bird woman.

When a cast this good join with Disney's unmistakable flair and pop to tell a vintage tale it's fair to expect there will be magic. *MARY POPPINS* doesn't disappoint.



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MARY POPPINS
From 18 October | The Civic