

REVIEW: 'Mary Poppins' at the Paramount Theatre



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Matt Crowle is Bert and Emily Rohm plays the title role of Mary Poppins at the Paramount Theatre in downtown Aurora.

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Director Rachel Rockwell's new production of Disney's "Mary Poppins" is, without question, the biggest show at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora since the start of the remarkable initiative at that theater to nix those second-rate, nonunion, bus-and-truck tours and replace them with homegrown productions of family fare, anchored by first-rank Chicago talent. Indeed, this "Mary Poppins" is one of the biggest shows I've ever seen produced by a nonprofit

theater in Chicago. To say she flies through the air with the greatest of ease does not fully convey what's on offer here to help your kids' eyes pop right out of their sockets.

The Paramount has spent dearly on apparatus designed to send the famous nanny on a flight all the way to the back of the balcony — and this in a historic venue that makes that feat especially challenging, not least because that journey to the back of the house covers way, way more horizontal distance than any mere Broadway theater. To fly Mary Poppins at the Paramount means you have to send her halfway to DeKalb. And that crucial climatic moment is by no means the only time Mary Poppins takes to the air in Rockwell's epic production — Emily Rohm's Poppins enters from the sky, glides magically up a staircase, disappears into the rafters. Bert, the dancing chimney sweep played by Matt Crowle, also takes to the skies whenever he can't help himself. Which, given his love of rooftop views, is a frequent occurrence.

Scale is not an indicator of quality in the theater, of course. But if you are a family from Naperville or Elgin, venturing out for a big holiday night out, and you would rather not drop \$500 on four tickets, plus downtown parking, then this production, fully the equal of anything, anywhere when it comes to delivering a Technicolor show for your money, is tough to beat. It is a spectacle for the family, with heart.

Rockwell has cast exceptionally well. Rohm, one of this director's frequent muses, is as cool to the touch as "Mary Poppins" must be. As her creator, P.L. Travers, well understood, the relationship between children and their nannies is, by necessity, complicated. And if you're up for a deep dive on "Mary Poppins," that's the fundamental complexity in the piece, as shrewdly adapted for the stages by Julian Fellowes. Shortly afterward, Fellowes wrote a TV show called "Downton Abbey." Poppins can't get too close without defeating her own purpose. But Rohm also softens at the right moment — which is when the wind changes and the family she has come to save has realigned its values and needs only itself. Rohm shows us just the hint of a tear, just a tiny crack in the fortress that is Poppins, before she flies off to her next project. It's a lovely moment, better played here than I've seen before. And, aside from that, Rohm also has the kind of rich lower register that sounds great on such numbers as "Feed the Birds," which she sings along with Marilynn Bogetich's resonant Bird Woman.

The show also hints at a complex relationship between Mary and her chimney-sweep pal. What exactly is their deal anyway? Can Mary Poppins ever love? Your kids may not be thinking about that (one hopes), but you might. And Crowle, who is this show's other major asset, fully catches the darkness of a role that should not be played as overly cheery. His Bert is a lonely and thus vulnerable fellow, pining for an ideal, forever looking down a chimney on someone else's easier life. You really feel for the guy. Anyone who can sing "Chim Chim Cher-ee" with the requisite gravitas must have a wound in his soul. Something to cover up.

The Banks family — Michael Aaron Lindner and Cory Goodrich are the parents — feel like a regular old struggling little clan, which is always what this show needs. This stage version, more than any other, is about a family who must learn to put one another first and Lindner, especially, has that male-in-crisis thing down. And they both are first-rate vocalists.

Kevin Depinet's set is really a sight to see. Taken altogether, it makes the kind of colossal canvas on which Chicago actors all too rarely get to work. Rockwell and Depinet (with the help of Mike Tutaj's projections) don't copy the original production at all, using instead a series of elaborate picture frames combined with a digital backdrop upon which Tutaj can work some magic without overwhelming the humans. It is a design that captures the full sweep of this spectacular show.

If you saw the national tour of "Poppins" when it was last in Chicago, you might want to note that this is by far the bigger show (the tour was much smaller than the production in New York and London). The performances are every bit as strong, and there are more musicians in the pit (these are the full, original orchestrations), which really matters when you want "Let's Go Fly a Kite" (one of my very favorite numbers) to soar with the rush of aspiration, anticipation and release. Often, even decent local productions of big-spectacle musicals feel like shadows of the London or New York originals. Not here. This feels like a fresh approach.

"Mary Poppins" is a very difficult show to stage. Few musicals require dancing on rooftops (check), big magic tricks in the kitchen (check again), flying birds (check three) and enough kites for a competition (you get the idea). There are some moments (there were a couple of late cast changes) when you sense that everyone is a tad overstretched and rushing to get to the next big thing; a few of the gentler sections of the show could use more attention and, although Rockwell's choreography is hugely exciting to watch in places, you can sometimes see the stress in the performers' eyes. It is a show that stretches everything and everyone to the limits, without the benefit of Broadway-style previews.

Good for Paramount and Rockwell. It's all in service of a big family night out, a show at which a young girl can dress up (as many did Sunday night) and feel like the show has respected her effort. This production, which has a big heart, delivers all of that to the good people of the western suburbs and, frankly, my favorite moment of the night was the warmth of the applause that came from the balcony as Mary made her l-o-n-g flight, all the way to the cheap seats at the back of the house. The best moments in theater always are delivered in person, ideally right in the laps of the paying customers.

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3.5 STARS

When: Through Jan. 4

Where: 23 E. Galena Blvd.

Running time: 2 hours, 35 minutes

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