

# INTRODUCTION

*Come feed the little birds,  
Show them you care,  
And you'll be glad if you do.  
Their young ones are hungry,  
Their nests are so bare.  
All it takes is tuppence from you.  
Feed the birds, tuppence a bag,  
Tuppence, tuppence, tuppence a bag.*

— “Feed the Birds” by Richard and Robert Sherman

“‘Tuppence a bag’ has nothing to do with tuppence or bread crumbs. It’s about the fact that it doesn’t take much to give love, that it costs very little to make a difference to other people’s lives.”

— Richard Sherman, songwriter



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The Broadway musical of *Mary Poppins* contains numerous examples of ingenious imagining and reimagining. One of the greatest occurs with “Feed the Birds.” Following a scene at George’s office – a bank of intimidating proportions – in which Jane asks a single, pointed question of her father about recognizing value, Mary takes Jane and Michael past St. Paul’s Cathedral. On its steps they meet the Bird Woman. Jane is ready to dismiss this old lady in rags, but Mary makes sure the children stop and listen to her. The Bird Woman sings the Sherman Brothers’ classic, “Feed the Birds,” which was first heard in the movie, though in a different context. The words resonate deeply, personally, and in new ways in the stage version, following the interactions – and transactions – that have just occurred at the bank. The song, now more clearly than ever, articulates something essential to this story and to us, the audience: Small gestures of kindness, rather than monetary

transactions, fill our lives with joy, satisfaction, and meaning.

With “Feed the Birds,” as in so many other songs and moments in the show, the writers have placed the Banks family in a world not just of magic, but also of real people, real challenges, and real history. The Bankses are in need of Mary Poppins’s care and attention, but there is an entire world of people (and other living

“We were all working under the directive that we would not do onstage anything we could not do as well or better than it had been done in the film.”

– Julian Fellowes, book writer





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creatures) around them in need of equal care and attention.

The message of “Feed the Birds” applies to the act of theater-making as well. Theater does not require large budgets or high-tech wizardry to tell stories. Care and attention, along with imagination, teamwork, and commitment, will bring the show to life. The spectacular moments that likely stand out in your memory from viewing the stage show or the movie, and that have delighted people around the world, are about surprise, which can be manufactured with old-fashioned stagecraft and little else.

The stage adaptation is not a replica of the film, but an original musical that honors some of its greatest achievements and most beloved moments. The screenwriters gave P.L. Travers’s fantastic (in all senses) stories a plot: The Bankses need Mary Poppins to nanny their children because they need to learn how to be a family. The stage adaptation builds upon this, giving Winifred Banks a fuller storyline, George Banks a backstory, the children a bit more room to grow from spoiled and bratty to kind and thoughtful, and the diversity of London’s economic classes fuller due. The stage musical clarifies the passage of time (fall

to winter of a single year), so the audience can better chart their change. Over multiple productions, the musical’s team explored which aspects of the books, film, and their own imaginations were most stage-worthy. Ultimately, the goal was not to put any one version of Mary Poppins onstage, but to bring her magic to something that is both familiar and new.

“Which is the real Mary Poppins? The one from the books, the one from the movie, or the one from the show? Well, that’s the point. They are *all* Mary Poppins, and they are – *together* – Mary Poppins. ... Like many of the myths of antiquity, they are different tellings of the same essential story as understood by unique individuals, so that each telling has its own meaning.”

– Brian Sibley and Michael Lassell,  
*Anything Can Happen If You Let It: The Story Behind the Journey from Books to Broadway*

There is no doubt that you’ll enjoy your visit with Mary Poppins, and that she will bring your theatrical family closer together. This handbook is a toolkit for creating a vision that is all your own. It highlights what’s in store for your cast and creative team based on experience gathered over the course of many productions worldwide: the challenges discovered, the secrets unlocked, and the games played. The goal is to provide resources that you can draw from as

needed, including general and specific ways to approach the staging, background on the original concepts of the London and Broadway productions, historical information, design ideas, and more. This handbook should inspire you to make choices that serve the text in ways unique to your company and your creativity, because there are many ways of making magic. In essence, where Mary Poppins goes, magic goes too.





# SYNOPSIS

## ACT 1

Bert, a man of many trades, informs us that something big is about to happen to the Banks family. At No. 17 Cherry Tree Lane, Jane and Michael Banks are constantly misbehaving, and Katie Nanna – the latest in a long line of nannies – has had enough (**Cherry Tree Lane**). She leaves, and George Banks asks his wife, Winifred, to place an advertisement in the newspaper for a new nanny, but the children decide to write their own ad (**The Perfect Nanny**). Mary Poppins arrives, and she fits the children's requirements exactly (**Practically Perfect**).

Mary Poppins takes the children to the park, where they meet Bert, who is creating his latest works of art. Bored with the park and wary of Bert's scrappy appearance, the children try to escape, but Mary urges them to see the magic in everyday life. Then, the park bursts into brilliant colors and the statues come to life to dance with them (**Jolly Holiday**).

As Mary Poppins begins to win over the children, George informs Winifred that they must maintain order and convention. Winifred feels that she is disappointing both her husband and her children, and she struggles to understand her role within the family – and within in the world (**Let's Hope She Will Stay**). The household prepares for Winifred's party (**A Spoonful of Sugar**), but even with Mary Poppins's magic, the event is a disaster, as no one shows up. Winifred is left feeling more lost than ever.

Mary Poppins takes Jane and Michael on a trip to visit their father at his workplace, the bank (**Precision and Order**). There, George has a

choice: to give a loan to Herr Von Hussler, a businessman with a dubious money-making scheme, or to John Northbrook, who presents a solid plan for a factory that would help many but offers little collateral. An innocent question from Jane prompts George to remember the ideals and values he once held (**A Man Has Dreams**). He decides to take a chance on Mr. Northbrook and gives him the loan.

On the way home from the bank, the children and Mary Poppins run into the Bird Woman, who is feeding the birds in front of St. Paul's Cathedral. Jane is still worried about outward appearances and shuns her, but Michael offers to give the Bird Woman money (**Feed the Birds**).

Mary Poppins, Jane, Michael, and Bert meet Mrs. Corry, the mysterious owner of the unusual "talking shop," where people purchase words along with gingerbread. The children are surprised to hear that when their father was a boy, he came to this shop to enjoy its magic and spirit of invention (**Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious**).

Things begin to go very wrong for George. Von Hussler has gone to another bank for his loan and is making millions, and George is blamed for passing on the deal and is suspended without pay. In his stress, George yells at the children. In turn, an angry Jane and Michael fight over their toys, which magically come to life to teach them a lesson (**Playing the Game**). Recognizing that the children are not yet ready for the lessons she has to teach them, Mary says goodbye to Bert (**Chim Chim Cher-ee**), leaving a note saying *au revoir*, or "till we meet again."



# SYNOPSIS

## ACT 2

The fall has turned to winter. The house is bustling again, because a nanny is returning to No. 17 Cherry Tree Lane. However, it's not the much-missed Mary Poppins, but Miss Andrew, who raised George. Miss Andrew is a harsh woman who believes that children should be punished on a regular basis with a horrible-tasting medicine (**Brimstone and Treacle**). In a panic, the children escape the house and run to the park where they meet Bert, who explains that the cure for every ill can be found at the end of a kite string (**Let's Go Fly a Kite**). Their kite flies up into the London sky and when it comes back down, Mary Poppins is with it. George has also been hiding from Miss Andrew (**Good for Nothing**). With her entire family missing, Winifred worries that she's to blame but resolves to assert herself and fight harder for the people she loves (**Being Mrs. Banks**).

Mary returns home with the children and defeats Miss Andrew in an epic battle of wits and will. George returns, relieved to find that Miss Andrew has left, but still anxious about supporting his family. Winifred reminds him he can count on her and the children to stick by him.

Whisked up to the rooftops, Mary Poppins, Jane, and Michael meet Bert and his fellow chimney sweeps (**Step in Time**). The sweeps dance across the rooftops of London and into the Bankses' house, wishing good luck to George and shaking his hand as they go.

The Bank Chairman asks to see George immediately. George fears the worst, but Bert reminds him that his family is more important than his ambitions (**A Man Has Dreams – Reprise/A Spoonful of Sugar – Reprise**). George leaves for the bank. Winifred wishes she could go with him. Mary Poppins and the children encourage her to do what she believes is right (**Anything Can Happen**).

In front of the bank's board of directors, George launches into a defense of his actions before they can tell him that he was right all along: Von Hussler's scheme has fallen through and the competing bank that approved his loan has been ruined. Northbrook's business, on the other hand, is thriving and earning a healthy profit. Winifred shows up, ready to defend her husband, but when she finds the board is promoting him, she negotiates his raise for him. George announces that from now on his family comes first. As George and Winifred walk along the streets of London, Mary Poppins takes Jane and Michael on one more magical adventure – this time through the heavens.

Her job done, Mary Poppins says her goodbyes and flies off to her next task. Although the Banks family is sad to see her go, they are glad that they have finally found one another.

