

An Interview with Julie Andrews and Emma Walton Hamilton

QUESTION: How did you come up with the idea for the story behind THE GREAT AMERICAN MOUSICAL?

JULIE: When I was performing in VICTOR/VICTORIA on Broadway, a mouse was discovered in our wardrobe department. I suggested a humane trap and asked if someone kind might release the creature in the suburbs or countryside. Something was said about there being a number of mice beneath Broadway theaters, and suddenly a light-bulb went off in my head.

I spoke to my daughter Emma – herself a former actress turned theater producer, director, educator and writer - and we agreed it would be fun to collaborate on a project about Broadway mice since we could both write from such a basis of knowledge. We also hoped to provide young readers with some incidental arts appreciation.

After the novel was underway, I was taping for the PBS documentary “The History of the Broadway Musical” in a grand old Broadway theatre. I was in the dressing room and, brazen as you please, a little mouse popped out, wandered around and, finally, ambled out the door heading for the stage. I hoped it was a good luck omen for the book... (but was rather glad I wasn't moving into that dressing room for any length of time!)

QUESTION: You must have had fun working together on this book – did you pull from a lot of your own experiences? Are the mouse characters modeled after people you've worked with?

EMMA: We had a ball! As we began to write, we hit upon the notion of naming all the mice after well-known characters from musical theatre history, thinking it might be fun for any theatre-savvy parents who read with their children to guess whom we were referencing. And we definitely had certain friends and colleagues in mind when we were creating the characters... though we'll never say whom!

JULIE: Tony Walton, our illustrator (and Emma's dad), also modeled many of his character drawings after real-life theatre folk we know and love. Another area where we had a lot of fun was hinting at particular famous shows from Broadway musical history – we purposely chose not to use real titles of songs or shows, so that readers might have fun with the spoof and figure it out on their own.

QUESTION: What advice do you have for a young person who is thinking about becoming an actor?

JULIE: Be ready! Opportunities can come up out of the blue - and they will - but what makes the difference is being ready to meet the opportunity when it arises. While you're waiting, take acting, voice and dance classes, read plays, hone every skill you can...you never know when you might get 'that call'!

QUESTION: Henry admits to Adelaide "To be able to sing, to dance, to act...to touch so many. I envy you. I confess I'm often tongue-tied in front of even a small class". Do you ever suffer from stage fright, and if so, how do you handle it?

JULIE: I don't think I've met an actor or director - or anyone in the arts - who doesn't feel nervous or insecure as opening night approaches. It's very normal and you wouldn't be human if you didn't feel nerves. It takes a lot of courage to get up in front of an audience and give of yourself and be willing to fail.

There are techniques that can help a little, though. Adrenalin kicks in with nerves and excitement, and can leave one feeling shaky. I find that being sure to have a small meal that includes lots of protein at a sensible hour before the show helps me deal with the physical shakes. Try to sort out what is really nerves and what is simply anticipation and excitement about the joy of offering something to the public that is hopefully going to give them a good time. Single out some faces in the audience that appear friendly, someone either side of the auditorium and someone in the middle, perhaps, and do the show for them. What character are you playing? Prepare early, ahead of curtain time, so that you are 'wearing the role' as you walk onstage. Above all, try not to watch your own performance as you proceed. Think as your character would think, do as your character would do, and stay in the 'giving mode... send your character out across the footlights. Finally, try to pretend that this is a lovely party - 'your' party - and that everyone has come to visit you, at your home. Feel the joy.

QUESTION: What are some important 'theater etiquette' tips?

EMMA: Good question - and this applies to ALL audiences, young and old alike! Of course, the most important thing is to be quiet - no talking during the performance. This can distract fellow audience members as well as the actors. It's also very disruptive to hear the rustling and crinkling of candy wrappers or lozenges! Try to open anything like that before the show starts. These days theatergoers are always reminded to turn off their cell phones, beepers and car alarms before the show - but it's important to remember to turn them off again after intermission! Finally, try to stay seated until the show is officially over and the cast has finished their bows. And if 'nature

calls' during the performance, try to leave as discreetly as possible, during a scene change or applause - or better yet, wait until intermission!

QUESTION: Adelaide shares her passion for theater with Henry, describing "...the intangible magic of the theater, the giving, the receiving, the intimate communion between artist and audience." Why do you think live theater is still so important, especially today?

JULIE: Actually, these days it seems more important than ever... I think in our media-driven world of television, the internet, Blackberrys, iPods, electronic games and the like, we run the risk of becoming very isolated, ironic as that may seem. And with all the sound bites, lightning-fast imagery, and "reality" TV that our kids are exposed to, I worry that we are spoon-feeding them a steady diet of "manufactured" slices of life, so that all they have to do is receive rather than participate in any way. The magic of theater is that it asks us to connect, to engage our imaginations, to suspend our disbelief, to open our minds to new ideas... and above all, to unite - and be fully present - with other 'live' human beings.

EMMA: The exchange between audience and actor is so powerful... unlike film or TV, no two live performances are ever the same, since each audience affects the performance differently and vice versa. Every performance is unique in a hundred subtle ways... for example, is it raining or snowing outside? Is it too hot or too cold? Are members of the audience dealing with coughs or colds or fanning themselves with their programs? Has there been some major event on the news that day that everyone is aware of? What about your fellow workers? Does your leading man have a headache? Has someone in the company sustained an injury?? How long has the show been running? What has been happening in your daily life? At its best, live theater is really a kind of 'communion', a way in which people can collectively share an experience that makes them think, feel, laugh, cry - and about which they can later engage in dialogue or debate. As Enoch, our stage manager in the book, says, "...it's the one thing that binds us together, the one thing that tells us who we are."