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Mary Poppins Does Not Come Back



By Marty Kaplan

This is a cross-post of my column in The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles.

I knew better than to expect P.L. Travers to write something sweet in my copy of *Mary Poppins*, but I didn't think it would be quite so medicinal.

It was 1988, and I'd been a vice president at Disney for two years. From the time I got there, studio president Jeffrey Katzenberg had wanted to make a sequel to *Mary Poppins*, and I was assigned to develop a script. The story we wanted: Jane and Michael Banks, the children in the first film, now have children of their own. A problem comes up, and the one person who can solve it is Mary Poppins, played again by Julie Andrews, who arrives, sets things right, and departs as mysteriously as she came. We called it the title of the second book in the series: *Mary Poppins Comes Back*.

But as the new movie, *Saving Mr. Banks*, does not depict, Mrs. Travers intensely disliked Walt Disney's 1964 version. And since she still controlled the rights to her Poppins books, my efforts at getting a sequel off the ground were entirely theoretical. But in 1987, when Mrs. Travers was 87, Walt's nephew Roy had been approached by writer Brian Sibley, an acquaintance of his and a longtime friend of hers. Sibley told Disney she was open to doing a second movie at the studio, and within a few months their agent closed a deal, but she extracted a steep creative price: Unlike every other features deal at the studio, this one gave away control of the story, settings, and characters to the author of the underlying material. To her.

And so, because the studio needed her approval of our Banks-children's-children approach, Katzenberg and I went to London bearing porcelain Disney figurines, plus a bottle of Jack Daniels, which Sibley told me she liked, and paid a call on Mrs. Travers at her Chelsea row house. Her sitting room looked like it hadn't changed for 30 years.

We pitched our next-gen sequel. She coolly blew us off.

Then she and Sibley told us what the story would actually be. It would take place a year after the first film, not a generation. Things are going badly for Mr. Banks at work because some documents have gone missing, leading to financial disaster for the family and requiring them to put Number 17 Cherry Tree Lane up for sale. The only point of agreement with our scenario was that she wished Julie Andrews to play Mary Poppins.

She also unloaded her grievances about what Walt Disney did in his version, and her edicts about this one. Mary Poppins must never wear red. We must never see her undergarments; even if she's upside down, her skirt must cling to her ankles. There must be absolutely no intimation that she and Bert have a romantic relationship, as they seem to do in the 1964 film's "Jolly Holiday" sequence (whose mix of live action and animation, by the way, was a terrible decision), nor may Bert, a character who is not in the books, have as prominent a part in the sequel, nor may he do any magic on his own, nor may Dick Van Dyke play the role again. In fact, no American may play any role in the movie.

It went on like that. We tried in vain to persuade her to reconsider her veto of our pitch, so hers was the direction we took. Five months later, Sibley's treatment of the movie came in. I returned to her sitting room, again bearing whiskey, for the second of what would be five visits, for me to hear her notes on Sibley's approach, and for them to hear the studio's notes. I was sure she would dislike our notes — they were all requests for changes — and indeed she did.

But I felt the mood shift when some combat over a scene drew her into talking about the deeper mysticism of the Mary Poppins story. We are all One, she said, that's the core of it. I learned that she had been a follower of the spiritual teacher, or charlatan, George Gurdjieff, and an intimate of the poet William Butler Yeats. As it happened, I was pretty familiar with Yeats's mystical work, *A Vision*, and I got really into it with her. I was sure she was charmed by this conversation about an esoteric volume with a studio executive. I was fairly sure she'd come round on most of the changes we wanted. I thought she might even have come to like me.

At the end of the afternoon, I asked if she'd be willing to inscribe my copy of *Mary Poppins*. As she wrote, I wasn't expecting a spoonful of sugar, just something to proudly show my future children. I waited until I was outside to read it. "To Marty Kaplan, hoping that your association with Mary Poppins will have a happy outcome. P.L. Travers"

Talk about vinegar. I took her words as a warning. A note to the studio, not to my hypothetical kids. Don't get on my wrong side, or else.

Seven years, and many treatments, scripts, notes, and a couple of writers after my association with Mary Poppins had begun, the studio abandoned the project — it was just too hard to work within her constraints — and she sold the rights to a stage version instead. But that wasn't my only unhappy outcome.

To prepare Katzenberg for our visit to Chelsea, I had briefed him on everything I could find out about her. Stupidly — especially stupidly, since I'd worked in the White House and had reason to know better — I put this information in a memo. "She has fixed views, which were formed during the Edwardian era," I wrote. "She loathes women; she's a sucker for male flattery." Describing Walt's 16 years of courting her, I wrote that "what couldn't have attracted him [to the books] was the story — because there wasn't one... Once Walt got Mrs. Travers to agree to the film, he set himself two tasks. One was creating a Mary Poppins movie character substantially more charming and affectionate than the one in the books, where she's somewhat too fastidious and vain (a bit like her creator). The other challenge was to invent a story."

A couple of years later, someone at Disney who wanted to burn me leaked that memo to a magazine. When the reporter who obtained it called to ask how I thought Mrs. Travers would react to it, I said that none of that mattered because my relationship with Mrs. Travers had evolved since then. "We've become very fond of each other," I said, defrosting her inscription and denying the rest of my unsentimental education. "The experience has been the most extraordinary aspect of my life at Disney. She is a legend."

A friend of hers sent her the article a few months later. She was unmoved by my tribute. Eventually I managed to patch things up enough so that the project lasted three more years, but never enough to get anywhere near what I hopelessly wanted from the creator of Mary Poppins: "Fondly, P.L. Travers."

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