

Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Volume 164, No. 250

Serving Chicago's legal community for 164 years

We won't remember this soundtrack 54 years from now

There's a reason every one of us can pronounce "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious."

It's no mere happenstance that we know the words to the musical numbers from "Mary Poppins" — "A Spoonful of Sugar," "Chim Chim Cher-ee," "Let's Go Fly a Kite" — as well as we know "The Star-Spangled Banner."

The score of the 1964 supernanny classic is unforgettable. The movie's star, Julie Andrews, had a big Broadway voice and each of its songs was musically distinct.

Yet it is the music of "Mary Poppins Returns" that is the greatest disappointment of this sequel, delivered 54 years after the original.

Director Rob Marshall, the multi-Tony Award-nominated choreographer, directed 2003's Best Picture Oscar-winner "Chicago" and 2014's film adaptation of Stephen Sondheim's stage musical "Into the Woods."

The dark matter of these previous productions seems to have seeped into "Mary Poppins Returns," which was apparently made without children or families in mind, or any women leading those aspects of development that determine a movie's shape and content.

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, composer Marc Shaiman dissed "Frozen" composers Kristen and Robert Lopez,

comparing their hit "Let it Go" unfavorably to his output for "Mary Poppins Returns."

"You should be so lucky," I thought to myself, recalling Shaiman's stream of similarly sounding songs in the new movie.

He wasn't lucky at all.

Set during the depression of the 1930s — the "Great Slump" to the British — "Mary Poppins Returns" picks up the story of Jane and Michael Banks as adults. Jane (Emily Mortimer) is now a labor activist and a frequent visitor to the Banks' family home at 17 Cherry Tree Lane, which is inhabited by the recently widowed Michael (Ben Whishaw) and his three young children.

Michael's been in a depression of his own since his wife's death a year earlier. He's behind on his home equity payments and, unless he can find the stock certificates for the Banks' bank shares, the dastardly Fidelity Fiduciary Bank president, Mr. Wilkins (Colin Firth), will foreclose and evict.

The family is in crisis. If only Mary Poppins were here to set things right.

Emily Blunt's prickly Poppins is edgier than Julie Andrews' sweetly uptight caregiver, and Blunt is closer to the tart titular P.L. Travers novels' character on which the films are based.

Unlike Andrews, Blunt doesn't have anyone vaguely resembling a



**REBECCA
L. FORD**

Rebecca L. Ford is counsel to Scharf Banks Marmor LLC, and concentrates her practice on complex litigation, compliance, board governance and specialized employment issues. She is the former executive vice president for litigation and intellectual property at MGM. She can be reached at rford@scharfbanks.com.

love interest. For a moment, we are terrified she may be matched with Lin-Manuel Miranda's Jack, the cheerful lamplighter — she'd crush him like a praying mantis — but Jack is handily passed off to Jane, with whom no sparks fly.

Miranda's Cockney accent is on par with that of Dick Van Dyke's 1964 chimney sweep Bert. We gave Van Dyke a pass because of his frisson with Andrews and his contribution as a second tent-pole star of the movie.

Deferential Jack, unlike Bert, doesn't pretend to be Mary's peer. He's an earnest young man determined not to throw away his shot. Jack's good cheer resides outside the Banks household, leaving Blunt's Mary Poppins alone to lift

the movie. She's too remote to lift the blanket of gloom inflicted by sad sack Michael, whose predicament could be resolved by magic or a simple affidavit of lost shares.

Blunt has a beautiful clear voice, but not much range. She told NPR's Terry Gross she was cast in the early stages of the film's development, and its songs were written to accommodate her range. This process must account for the movie's lack of distinguishable climactic numbers.

How did this happen even as Miranda, creator of "Hamilton," stood in the wings? Indeed, the movie's music briefly comes alive when Miranda delivers his signature patter in a variety number.

Meryl Streep, Angela Lansbury and, of course, Dick Van Dyke also make brief and welcome appearances.

"Mary Poppins Returns" is visually sumptuous, particularly in scenes where the children and Mary travel through the bathtub into a color-saturated ocean and in a sequence that combines live action and hand-drawn animation, mirroring the racetrack mix in the original.

Still, a Disney "Mary Poppins" will elicit expectations of lightness and joy — delivered perhaps by a couple of Tin Pan Alley types at an upright piano.

But "Mary Poppins Returns" offers nothing to sing about.