

# Julie Andrews enjoys directing 'The Boy Friend'

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Changing careers can be difficult, particularly when you're a bit older.

But saying no to your pleading child can be even more difficult.

That was the situation facing Julie Andrews when her daughter, Emma Walton, asked her to direct a production of the flapper musical "The Boy Friend" two years ago at Walton's theater in Sag Harbor, N.Y.

Though not exactly a novice to show business -- Andrews, 70, is after all the star of musical classics including "Mary Poppins," "The Sound of Music" and "Victor Victoria" and continues to make her mark on pop culture in films such as "The Princess Diaries" and "Shrek 2" -- this was different.

"It's something very new in my life," said Andrews. ``And I thought it would not be a smart thing to do. But it's hard to refuse (one's child)."

Helping Walton's cause, though, was the fact that the show has a special place in her mom's heart.

"It's the first piece that brought me to America," said Andrews.

Indeed, "The Boy Friend" was Andrews' debut on Broadway in 1954, kicking off her career on stage and then screen. Just 19 years old at the time, Andrews played ingenue lead Polly Browne.

The show, written by Sandy Wilson, is a light musical set in the 1920s that revolves around the love affairs of British aristocratic schoolgirls in the south of France. Polly, the star, is the only girl without a boyfriend, so she makes one up to impress her friends. Luckily, though, she soon meets a real boy, though he is a deliveryman, and not the wealthy suitor she described to her friends. But then it turns out he may have more money than that.

Still, even the lure of nostalgia can go only so far with Andrews. The final carrot was the promise that the show wouldn't just be seen in New York.

"A tour was part of the deal," said Andrews.

So she finally gave in, and clearly doesn't regret it.

"We had a ball," she said. "I have enjoyed it tremendously."

"The Boy Friend" makes its West Coast debut in Costa Mesa Tuesday at the Orange County Performing Arts Center and Andrews will be there to cheer on her cast.

"I feel like a mother hen with her chicks," said Andrews.

While the mother role isn't new -- apart from Walton, Andrews has two daughters with her second husband, Blake Edwards, and is stepmother to his son and daughter from his first marriage -- being a director took some getting used to.

"It's very different," she said. "As a director, you have to have your eyes and ears everywhere."

A lifetime in theater has definitely helped. "Something's rubbed off on me," Andrews said.

Then there's her movie experience.

One of her best-loved roles was Maria in "The Sound of Music," which was re-released last month in a 40th-anniversary DVD package. And judging by the extras on the DVD, the film was a real ordeal to make.

"There were times I said, 'Help.' ... The downdraft from the helicopter in that great opening shot kept just blasting me to the ground," Andrews said. "I tried to stand my ground, but take after take, I was spitting hay and dirt."

Had she needed advice directing on stage or a movie, however, she could have had plenty from Edwards, who is best known for the classic "Pink Panther" films.

Or maybe not. Edwards had no intention of being a backseat driver.

"He very sweetly said, 'Go on, you're doing fine,' " Andrews said.

Nonetheless, Andrews was a bit unnerved when first tackling her new role, something not lost on the actors.

"This experience has been so much more relaxed," said Sean Palmer, who plays the titular boyfriend, Tony, in the tour and also played him in the New York show. "Last time she was a little nervous."

A nervous Julie Andrews, however, was still not a bad director to have.

"She's just wonderful and charming," Palmer said.

Palmer, a Reno native who has been based in New York for 12 years, wasn't very familiar with "The Boy Friend," but liked the idea of playing an Englishman.

"My mom is English, so I thought I could pull off the accent," Palmer said.

He was wrong.

"I'm the Eliza Doolittle," he said. "I got a lesson in being a leading man from Julie Andrews."

Working with someone he grew up seeing in films such as "Mary Poppins" was also an adjustment.

"In the beginning, I just couldn't fathom it," Palmer said.

Other cast members felt the same.

"I'd grown up watching her movies," said Jessica Grove, who plays Polly. "My mom took me to see 'Victor Victoria' (on stage). It was the closest I thought I would get to her."

An Ohio native who moved to New York in 2001, Grove was wrong. "It's so surreal. In rehearsals, she never raised her voice," Grove said. "She set the tone beautifully. It's crazy, truly. You hear this voice, and it's Julie Andrews, and she's telling you what to do."

Palmer also got the special treat of singing with Andrews during the auditions and rehearsal process.

"My mom was really impressed with that," Palmer said.

It was a bittersweet moment, since in 1997, Andrews suffered the loss of her singing voice following vocal cord surgery. It was a devastating blow for someone who epitomizes the joy of singing.

(Think "the hills are alive" in "The Sound of Music).

"I've been a singer my whole life, and when I discovered musical theater, it was like, 'That's what I know I can embrace.' " Andrews said. "I miss it very, very much. ... But, I wonder if one isn't supposed to learn something from this, because I've never been busier. And I'm embracing a lot of things I wouldn't have embraced if I still had been performing, and I wonder, in all honesty, how much performing at this age I'd actually be doing. But I loved singing. I loved it. It's really what I was raised to do."

In her new incarnation as director, Andrews did her best to make her actors feel at home.

"They called me Jules," she said, adding that everyone, including her grandchildren, uses that moniker. "I think she prefers it," Palmer said.

So what's up next for the multitalented Andrews?

"I have a publishing company. I write children's books. I have another one coming out in January. I'm tackling -- I'm about a third of the way through -my autobiography, which is long overdue. I've been promising it for years, and they've been very patient with me. I'm hoping to do a little bit more directing, which I discovered, to my surprise, that I really enjoy. It's as if suddenly, after all those years of work, I can pass on a little of it."