

Chitty Chitty Bang Bang Flies Into the Center

BY LIBBY SLATE

In March of this year, the invention of a car that can fly, scheduled to be on the market in 2011, made international headlines.

Well, the Terrafugia Transition of Massachusetts has nothing on Chitty Chitty Bang Bang of England. *That* car has been flying since 1964, first as the subject of the only children's stories ever written by prolific James Bond author Ian Fleming, then as a 1968 film musical and most recently as a stage musical, which opened in 2002 in London's West End, motored over to Broadway in 2005 and launched a national tour last year. The show revs up at the Center July 7–19.

Based on a real-life racing car named Chitty Bang Bang, the three *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* stories were written by Fleming for his young son, Caspar. The film, co-written by its director Ken Hughes and children's author Roald Dahl (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*), was reshaped and enhanced by Dahl and made even more memorable by songs from the Sherman Brothers (*Mary Poppins Academy*® Award winners); its catchy title tune was nominated for an Oscar.

Chitty follows the adventures of widowed eccentric English inventor Caractacus Potts, who buys and refurbishes a rusted old former race car for his two children, Jeremy and Jemima, and discovers it can fly and float. Along the way, he falls in love with a candymaker's daughter named Truly Scrumptious. Danger looms in the form of the Baron and Baroness of Vulgaria, who, consumed by their



Photos by Ian Ibbatson

country's racing losses to Chitty, have sent spies to England to retrieve the car. Worse, they have banned children from Vulgaria, dispatching the Childcatcher to round them up. Dick Van Dyke and Sally Ann Howes starred as Caractacus and Truly in the movie; Steve Wilson and Kelly McCormick are their stage tour counterparts.

When recruited for the film, the Sherman Brothers, Richard M. and Robert B., were under exclusive contract to Walt Disney but had a clause that they could do one outside project. Having turned down numerous other offers over the years, why did *Chitty* appeal?

"It was intriguing that a car could fly and float," says Richard, whose many other credits with Robert include *The Jungle Book*, *Winnie the Pooh* and, of course, the Disney theme parks' attraction *It's a Small World*. "There was the fertile imagination of Ian Fleming and the genius involvement of Roald Dahl—he took a simple story and made it into an epic. He realized you've got to have a little romance, so Caractacus meets Truly Scrumptious."

The stage version resurrected some songs dropped from the film,

such as “Come to the Fun Fair,” the Vulgarian national anthem, and added four new songs. Among the latter is “Teamwork,” first sung by the Potts family when they pretend to race the newly found, junkyard Chitty and later performed by Potts to urge the children of Vulgaria, hiding in sewers, to fight for their freedom.

Richard recounts that during a meeting with other members of the show’s creative team, “I said, ‘It takes teamwork to make a dream work,’ and Bob said, ‘That’s a title.’” Also written for the stage: “Bombie Samba,” a rousing production number depicting the Baroness’ plans for her husband’s birthday celebration, where, says Richard, “Everyone sings and dances and sambas all over the place!”

There are other production numbers, such as the candy factory-set “Toot Sweets,” from the film, inspired by the candy invention Caractacus hopes to sell to Truly’s father. There’s no difference writing for the stage or screen, Richard notes: “We write for the characters and the story. We create a lot of the storytelling through song.”

The Broadway production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* earned five Tony® Award nominations, including those for scenic and lighting design. Even given tour economics, the touring production remains a treat for the eye, with the huge gadgets and gears of Potts’ inventions, a sparkling carnival scene and, when the car takes off for the first time, a starlit sky. The overall show has been tightened and the story sharpened,



according to Richard. “I’m very, very happy with it. It’s great when the car floats and flies. You still have that wonderful illusion—a lot of magic goes into theater.”

As to how that flying-floating magic is achieved, “We’re sworn to secrecy!” laughs star Steve Wilson, who previously played at the Center in *Sweet Charity* and is looking forward to returning. There was no special training involved with the car, he adds. “It’s the easiest part of the job. It’s not much different than riding an amusement park ride—you just buckle up, and there you go. Once the car takes off, we’re in its hands. It’s actually a very comfortable ride.”

This being Disneyland territory, what theme park ride would he compare it to? He considers a moment, then says, “Dumbo [the flying elephants], going up and down. It’s not a take-off ride that’s intended to frighten you, but it is a thrill

ride in that it’s giving you something you didn’t expect. We get to see the audience when the car flies every night. [Their] jaws drop and eyes are shiny. You see them wondering, ‘Oh my gosh! How are they doing that?’”

There is one element of the show that does intend to frighten—but not too much: the Childcatcher, who glides about calling for children to entice into his candy cart-cum-jail. “You want people to enjoy being scared, as opposed to actually having them be scared,” Wilson believes. “I’ve yet to hear one child burst into tears or wail, ‘Mommy, I want to go home.’”

The Childcatcher’s capture of Jeremy and Jemima becomes the rallying point for the Vulgarian children to rescue the two and declare their own freedom. In each tour city, local kids are cast to play the Vulgarian youngsters. “That’s where the most fun is

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for me,” Wilson says. “There’s such an infectious, pure energy about being on stage with kids who are just playing. Sheer imagination has kicked in, and they’re playing. There’s nothing jaded about them—they’re having such a ball.”

And even though adult audiences may be jaded, Wilson has witnessed time and time again the infectious effects of the show, with its parental love story, kick-up-your-heels song and dance numbers and, of course, that magical flying car. “We are unabashedly heartwarming,” he says. “We wear the badge of ‘a family show’ with pride. Our show is an opportunity to come to the theater and bring anyone you want, turn down the lights and be reminded that

life can be very simple. You can get through it with teamwork and your loved ones, and follow your dreams.

“It’s not hokey,” Wilson adds. “These are timeless messages. You can never be reminded too much of that.”

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