Mary Poppins brings gravity-defying surprises to Overture Hall /Dean Robbins

It's hard to choose a favorite from all the show-stopping numbers.
Credit:Joan Marcus

A spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down, as we learned in the 1964 movie Mary Poppins. The 2006 Broadway musical based on the movie, which plays Overture Hall through March 17, adds a jolt of caffeine to the mix. The production is a relentlessly entertaining phantasmagoria of tap-dancing chimney sweeps, talking statues and flying kites—not to mention a flying English nanny. With her magical umbrella, Mary Poppins floats into an unhappy household to win over a stodgy banker and his family. By the end of the evening, she has surely won over any stodgy bankers who happen to be in the audience as well.

The leads all give robust performances, from mysterious Mary (Madeline Trumble) to brassy Bert the chimney sweep (Con O'Shea-Creal) to Mary's two difficult charges (Alexa Niziak and Lucas Schultz on opening night). But in this production, the characters play second banana to the stagecraft. In a musical about childhood wonder, the technical designers have the attention span of 8-year-olds—and I mean that in the best possible way. The sets transform ceaselessly, with elements sliding and dropping into place. (The budget for hydraulic lifts alone must have been staggering.) I won't even tell you about the gravity-defying coup de théâtre, so as not to spoil the surprise. Suffice it to say that Spider-Man must be eating his heart out.

It's hard to choose a favorite from all the show-stopping numbers, but "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" is the number that kept playing in my head as I tried to get to sleep last night. It's a riot of movement and color that does justice to this most wonderful of words.

Picking a favorite performer is easier: That'd be Karen Murphy as Miss Andrew, Mary Poppins' dour rival. When Mary floats away on her umbrella in the middle of the show, Miss Andrew shows up to spoil the children's fun with her stuffy rules and her foul brimstone-and-treacle medicine. Murphy hams it up during Miss Andrew's short time on stage, literally making the curtains flutter when she walks through a room. She has the evil intensity of Cruella de Vil, and she drives the audience wild whenever she drops into her exaggerated lower register.

Watching Miss Andrew disappear from the plot in a hellish green haze was my only regret of the night.