Being Mrs. Banks

Practice, practice, practice! My homeschool choir was taking on the colossal task of producing the real Broadway musical “Mary Poppins”, and I was auditioning for the refined role of Winifred Banks, one of the main characters. Despite my limited singing experience and only two voice lessons, I felt like I could take on the world! Heart pounding, I walked down the eerily dark hallway into the audition room. Facing the judges was no small feat! I forced myself to smile and sang “Much More” from the “Fantasticks” at the top of my lungs. Next, I performed the dance “Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious” with some others who were auditioning, and then I was free! Or so I thought. Unexpectedly, they called me back once again through the dark and foreboding hallway to the room of judgment. I read lines from the script in the best British accent I could manage. Then, thankfully, the auditions were done, and the days of anxious waiting began.

Finally, the cast list was posted after what seemed an eternity! As I scanned the list of names for my own, my heart fell. I had not been cast as Winifred Banks or any other leading role. I really could have used a “Spoonful of Sugar” to help that “medicine” go down! However, I did receive several ensemble parts and a minor solo as the character “Valentine”, a doll that comes to life. My hard work had payed off, though not fully in the way that I had hoped. After dealing with the initial shock, I came to realize that even though I was only a freshman, I had gotten a solo and several other roles including a banker, a statue, a chimney sweep, and a few more. Although I hadn’t gotten the part of Winifred Banks, I resolved to do my best at the parts I had been cast as.

As I sat down to my first musical rehearsal, I gazed around the room full of chatty children. Some I knew, and some I had never seen before. The directors emphasized an essential point that would, little to my knowledge, influence the entirety of my experience as a cast member and perhaps, my life. Mrs. Akers, one of the directors, earnestly entreated us to use the Bible verse: “Dear friends, let us love one
another, for love is from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love, does not know God, because God is love.” (1 John 4:7-8). She reiterated how crucial it was for us to have love and patience for one another, even when, inevitably, people would forget their lines from time to time. Theater was certainly going to be a new experience, but whether pleasant or not, was yet to be revealed.

In the following months of rehearsals, we mainly practiced choreography and vocals. I was always with the other ensemble members, and I learned to enjoy the musical more and more. We all bumbled through the choreography as best we could, but it was coming together! I was finally able to really accept my roles as an ensemble member and minor soloist. My love of theater increased, as did my enthusiasm!

Then, one day, to my complete and utter surprise, one of the directors asked to speak to me privately. What could be the matter? Did I do something wrong? Shockingly, she reported that the actress previously cast as Winifred Banks had resigned her role, and I was asked to re-audition at the following rehearsal! Wow! What a turnaround! There were five others who were also invited, and most of them were older than me. However, I wasn’t about to let that hold me back! Burning with excitement, I came home and practiced feverishly for days.

When that fateful day arrived, I was incredibly anxious. Back in front of the judges, I sang the solo, “Being Mrs. Banks” with all my heart! Whether I was chosen or not, I would always know that I had given it my all. I was sure the others did their best too. Waiting for the much anticipated judgment, we soon learned that there was none. All of our performances had gone so equally well that another audition was required! Oh no! Not again! Between those two days I practiced so much that I could have sung the song in my sleep!
Thankfully, the third audition went well, just as before. All the tryouts were over! Who was going to be Winifred Banks? It took all of my patience to wait for the results until the next rehearsal.

As I arrived in class the next week, I noticed some of the girls who had re-auditioned for the part of Winifred Banks sitting with the main characters. Had they given the results already? I assumed that one of them had gotten the part and handled my disappointment the best I could. Knowing I was one of the youngest, I had prepared myself for this. What I wasn’t prepared for, however, was when Mrs. McGee, one of the directors, asked me to read the lines from the script for Winifred Banks! Baffled but cheerful, I gave my positive reply. Then Mrs. Akers, the other director, asked me for confirmation that I would accept the part. I was so thrilled, I almost started crying! My practice had really paid off!

Now the real work began. Fortunately, being completely ecstatic about getting the part, I swiftly committed my lines to memory. “Being Mrs. Banks” was the new solo that I called my own, and it was the new solo that I drove my mom crazy with! When we practiced together, I was Mrs. Banks and she was everyone else. I threw myself into the role with renewed vigor! In addition to memorizing my lines and solos, I had to learn how to act and work with the other characters. I tried to have patience when others forgot their lines, and I appreciated their understanding if I forgot one of mine.

Putting on a real Broadway musical was a monumental task for our homeschooling community. Unlike most public and private schools, we had no facilities of our own, so we had to practice wherever we could. Our “stage” was often little more than carpet and masking tape! Finally, about a month before the actual performance, we obtained consistent use of the real stage and auditorium that would be our final destination. Because most of our funds went towards royalties so that we could perform the real Broadway musical, we had an extremely limited budget. Thus, we had to scrape up costumes from wherever we could, whether it was from Goodwill, Walmart, or our moms’ ingenuity in making them.
Although one of my most elegant dresses was strapped on with velcro, it did the job and made me feel more like Mrs. Banks!

A frantic call for help was given to all the parents of the cast to build sets and props. Gigantic room-sized structures were speedily transformed into the nursery, parlor, kitchen, and even rooftops for the chimney sweeps! In some of the last rehearsals, the set builders were still making the sets. Songs and heartwarming scenes were shattered by loud pounding and grinding noises. All we could do was just try to ignore it and sing louder! Through thick and thin, we all stuck by each other and made the best of it, even when over 1/3 of the cast was out with the flu just a week before the performance! People were coughing and throwing up everywhere! You could only hope you wouldn’t be next... In fact, one of the leading roles got so sick that she started crying and had to go home, so another actor and I had to fill in her role with improvisation that day. We all pushed through, even when we had cast members sick, but performing, on opening night!

The time of the show finally arrived! With the performance literally moments away, I got into my starting place and took a deep breath. Surprisingly, I wasn’t really nervous. I decided to hang on to that as much as I could, and the music began. The lights turned off backstage, and everything was pitch black. My excitement swelled, and I could tell that the audience was in for something really special! As Mrs. McGee had stated, the performance was very important, but the experience as a whole was meant to be something even more that. It was who we became that really mattered, not what we accomplished. What she wanted us to carry away was the friendships we had formed and the lessons we had learned. I know she was right. I hope the patience I developed and the friendships I made will last me a lifetime, and I know I can always look back with good memories and good humor on the days when I was “Being Mrs. Banks”.