

HerWords/HisMusic: Before Bob Fosse's *Chicago*, before Walt Disney's *Mary Poppins*, before Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Sound of Music*, there were Maurine Watkins, P. L. Travers, and Sr. M. Francis Borgia, O.S.F.

During the roaring twenties, Maureen Watkins, a savvy but novice *Chicago Tribune* newspaper reporter, was assigned to cover police reports from a 'feminine' perspective. Watkins, an educated journalist, had studied at Butler University, at Radcliffe in their Ph.D. program, and at Yale School of Drama under the renowned teacher of American playwrights George Pierce Baker. Baker awarded his highest grade ever to Watkins whose classmates included Eugene O'Neill and Philip Barry.

On March 12, 1924, Watkins was assigned the crime of a cabaret singer with a long history of affairs, who allegedly had shot her current lover. Knowing her crime report would be relegated to the back pages, Watkins spiced it up with wry humor. Less than a month later another married woman killed her lover, put on a record before phoning her husband to tell him she shot an intruder who tried to make love to her and that she shot him to save her honor. Watkins' headline on this crime read "Woman Plays Jazz as Victim Dies."

Watkins didn't get a byline until her third article on these jealous female killers of men who done them wrong when another, an illiterate immigrant, was sentenced to life. Her stories now made the front page with readers following Murderess Row. With the women's trials resolved and yesterday's news, Watkins was reassigned, lost interest, left the *Tribune*, relocated to New York and returned to Yale to rewrite her articles into a stage comedy she titled *Chicago*. It opened December 30, 1926 on Broadway, was a smash hit, and opened in Chicago September 1927. Watkins was famous.

Plans for a musical version in the 1950s were stifled because Watkins vehemently refused to sell the rights. She became a recluse and faded into obscurity. It was not until after her death in 1969 (when she was so forgotten the *New York Times* did not even print an obituary) that Bob Fosse finally obtained the rights and reinvented *Chicago* into a 1975 musical with all *his* jazz.

The first *Mary Poppins* book (there were four) was written by P. L. Travers in 1934. Ten years later, on a night before Christmas at bedtime, Walt Disney fortuitously heard his eleven-year old daughter laughing out loud and stepped into her room to learn why. It was the *Mary Poppins* book she was reading, a book she and her mom petitioned Walt to make into a movie.

The following year Pamela Travers was in New York and Walt sent his brother Roy to meet with her about a possible movie. Roy was unable to convince her to sign over the rights. But Walt was persistent, he was very successful, and he continually sought new stories with which to work his Disney magic. He repeatedly sought to secure the rights as she repeatedly refused, for more than twenty years.

Basically Travers wanted to preserve the character of the nanny she created in her book and Disney wanted to create a nanny to entertain his audiences. Walt was hard to resist and he did persist. In 1959, he sent two representatives to London with a new offer for Travers.

Though Pamela stood firm, she was advised to be practical and accept. At a time when her book sales were paltry, it meant an income for life that could be substantial. She

agreed, retaining copyrights to any material she wrote but gave up full rights to the stories. The stories were now Walt's to magically interpret.

Travers' Mary Poppins became Disney's Mary Poppins. Travers became a consultant offering conscientious consultation much of which Disney considered but skirted. In the end, her name appeared in small type in the beginning, opening credits of the movie. Realistically, no one knew or cared how Mary Poppins came to be.

At the movie premiere in 1964 Pamela cried as her Mary Poppins appeared before her so shockingly *his*. And while she telegraphed Disney of his splendid film, she maintained that the real Mary Poppins remained within the covers of her books.

Chicago-born Walt Disney died of lung cancer on December 15, 1966. Pamela Travers lived mostly as a recluse in London until her death in 1995 when Disney ads in trade magazines showed Mickey Mouse in tears.

The hills were not yet alive with the sound of music when the curtains opened. It was just a high school play with music about a postulant named Maria. *One Family Sings*, based on the 1949 book *The Trapp Family Singers* by Maria von Trapp, was adapted for the stage by Sr. M. Francis Borgia, O.S.F. and premiered as the 1953 senior class play at Alvernia High School in Chicago.

The first thoughts of producing this play with music were voiced in December 1952 during a lunch discussion brainstorming for a suitable play for that school year. It was mentioned it would be good to see a group work out the story of the Trapp Family Singers. It was a family story and the soul of the family was a woman. It was a perfect fit for this all-girls Catholic high school that always maintained a rich choral group and that year had a very gifted choral director.

Gradually the discussions moved from the cons of such an undertaking to the pros. Rights to adapt the book would be needed and the baroness was contacted. Her authorization came by telegram: "Permission granted if play strictly follows book." (Signed) Mrs. Maria Augusta Trapp. And so the stage script was written.

The school learned the Trapp family (living in VT since early 1940s) would be traveling through Chicago on a concert tour and invited them to a performance. They accepted. During intermission the baroness took the mike and spoke with enthusiasm for the performance. As a grand finale, the family and the parallel student cast sang the closing number for an endlessly applauding audience. The impact of seeing her story on stage perhaps emboldened consideration toward future productions.

Three years later, Wolfgang Reinhardt (son of the famous stage director Max Reinhardt) offered the baroness ten thousand dollars to make a film. Maria signed, inadvertently giving away all her rights including royalties. Wolfgang later offered \$9,000 in immediate cash. Maria, in need of money accepted. *Die Trapp Familie* (1956) and *Die Trapp Familie in Amerika* (1958) found success in Germany, much of Europe, and South America.

In North America, Mary Martin and husband/manager Richard Halliday looking for a project, were shown the German films and really liked the story but met resistance securing the rights. Their friend, Broadway producer Leland Hayward agreed to co-produce a Broadway show and thus was able to obtain the rights. Though not obliged, Hayward paid the baroness three eighths of one per cent royalties from the Broadway show, for which she was grateful.

Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II were asked to write a song for the play. They preferred to write a score. The play opened in 1959 to poor reviews, then ran for 1,443 performances, closing in 1963 with plans for a movie. But before the movie could be filmed, all rights needed to be in hand.

Back in 1955, Row, Peterson & Co. had obtained permission to publish *One Family Sings* as a play that could be performed by other schools. Thus, rights to Sr. M. Francis Borgia's play had to be rescinded before the movie could be undertaken. Once accomplished, the movie version opened in 1965 and sounds of one family singing in *her* high school halls long ago gave way forever to the hills now alive with the sound of *his* music.

Sources: *Chicago*, Maurine Watkins, Thomas H. Pauly, Ed.; *Mary Poppins*, *She Wrote*, Valerie Lawson; <http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/winter/vontrapps.html>; <http://www.the-sound-of-music-guide.com/sound-of-music-broadway.html>; and, my correspondence with former Sr. M. Francis Borgia in her now public position as founder and President of New Momentum for Human Unity.