

TV Close-Up: Julie Andrews

by Eirik Knutzen

Chances are good that Julie Andrews has been there, done that. She started out in British vaudeville at the age of 7, traversing England and adjacent territories with her singing mother and stepfather.

In the process, Andrews became the youngest entertainer to perform in a Royal Command Performance before Queen Elizabeth, King George VI, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret. It was a thrilling event, offering the emergence of her perfect-pitch, four-octave voice.

JULIE ANDREWS - Superstar Julie Andrews, seen here, center, in the movie 'The Princess Diaries 2,' recently received a Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award. The recipient of many movie and theater awards, Andrews is also an author of children's books, and served for 15 years as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Development for Women as an advocate of women's rights and economic security. Some five decades later, Queen Elizabeth II, with fond memories of her youth as a princess, returned the favor by conferring upon Andrews the title of dame of the British Empire on New Year's Eve 1999. It was a reward from a grateful nation to a true lady for her lifetime achievements in the arts and humanities.

To earn the huge accolade, Andrews did many things right and better: She made her Broadway debut in the 1953 musical "The Boyfriend," then followed it up with Tony Award nominations for "My Fair Lady," "Camelot" and "Victor/Victoria." She earned an Academy Award for her first of some 25 films, "Mary Poppins." She also received Oscar nominations for "The Sound of Music" and "Victor/Victoria."

She walked away with an Emmy Award for her musical-variety TV series, "The Julie Andrews Hour." However, nobody seems to know how many Emmy nominations or Gold Globe and BAFTA Awards she has earned during her lifetime. The best-selling author of children's books also served for 15 years as a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Development for Women as an advocate of women's rights and economic security.

Through it all, the 71-year-old Andrews has been married for 37 years to Academy Award-winning director-producer Blake Edwards, whom she worked successfully in such films as "10" in 1979 and "S.O.B." in 1981, but was cut out of his "Pink Panther" movies, and is the mother of five and a grandmother of seven.

And, just as she is probably running out of space for shiny hardware, she has received the Screen Actors Guild Life Achievement Award.

Most amazing of all, despite the endless number of kudos, Andrews remains sharp, focused, warm, gracious and unaffected.

"When my personal manager called about six months ago to tell me about the SAG award, I was really thrilled," she said. "It's a tremendous, awesome honor to receive and award when it is voted on by one's peers. A complete surprise, I wanted to ask, 'Are you sure?'"

"It evoked a jumble of emotions," she continued, "and left me thinking about all those people responsible for shaping my life - my singing teacher in England, Lillian Stiles-Allen, perhaps most of all. Besides teaching me technique, this great operatic singer was big of heart and recognized my fears.

"Treating me as an equal, she protected me a great deal, yet never dismissed me or put me down. She helped hone my craft, particularly through a love for the lyrics. The best of all possible worlds is a beautiful melody wedded to a superb lyric."

Sadly, Andrews no longer sings professionally, her voice badly damaged in 1997 during a supposedly routine surgical procedure to remove a polyp from her vocal chords. A malpractice lawsuit against a New York hospital and two surgeons reportedly netted her \$30 million, but little solace after a dozen or so Broadway and Hollywood musicals, plus 25 record albums of mostly show tunes.

"My singing voice is pretty much nonexistent - I have no soprano voice, I'm sorry to say, and I miss it

very much indeed," she explained in husky tones. "So I'm concentrating more on my publishing (of children's books) and my autobiography. Working with my daughter, Emma, I'm also planning a PBS television series for very young kids based on one of our books, 'Dumpy the Dump Truck.'"

She has had serious medical setbacks and occasional box office flops such as "Star!" and "Darling Lili," but Andrews rarely voices complaints.

"My life has been delightful and there's absolutely no doubt about that," she said. "The only painful thing now is getting all the facts right for a good autobiography. Emma is helping me organize an enormous amount of stuff, including photos, and keeps pushing, nudging and cajoling me to get it done by the end of the year."

The good life takes Andrews - who voices Queen Lillian in "Shrek III" and was last seen in "The Princess Diaries 2" - from her primary home in Malibu, Calif., to extended stays in a little cottage near Sag Harbor, Long Island, in order to collaborate on books with Emma and direct at her daughter's modest community playhouse, the Bay Street Theatre. And when winter comes, there is nothing like days of staring into a roaring fire at her handsome chalet in Gstaad, Switzerland.

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