

# arts

## \* Follow The Bouncing Ball.

We've been singing along with the sounds of music for a whole lot longer than just Julie By JOHN THRELFALL

It's Wednesday night at the Roxy and I'm surrounded by nuns: nuns with guitars, nuns who are pregnant, nuns who are men. People dressed as brown paper packages walk by, brushing shoulders with girls (and boys) in white dresses with blue satin sashes, deer, bees, goat herders, Austrian children, rays of sun, roses with raindrops and a smattering of folks named "Mi." Me? I've got a tea cozy on my head. The faces of bewildered passengers on a passing bus says it all: The *Sing-along-a Sound of Music* is in town; give your self-respect the night off.

Even before animation innovator Max Fleischer came up with the idea back in 1924, singing along has been a part of the movie-going experience since we've had movies. Time was when folks would join the house organist in singing between films, with the lyrics projected as slides onto the screen. It was Fleischer, though, who made the jump to putting the lyrics into the movies when he debuted his animated "Car Tunes" and came up with the "Follow The Bouncing Ball" concept. After that it was only a matter of time until the likes of *Merry Melodies*, *Sing Along With Mitch* and the midnight madness of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* made sing-a-longs a fixture in pop-culture.

For many, church is where they first fulfilled that sing-along need, so perhaps it's no surprise that the nun-heavy *Sound of Music* is so popular (indeed, Sing-a-long-a Productions' latest attempt at creating another "phenomena" is the already-running *Sing-a-long-a Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, another campy Christian "classic" starring Donny Osmond); for others, singing along came only at Christmas. Personally, I've always found it on screen, from *Rocky Horror* to *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. The *Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music* is only the latest (albeit most packaged) movie to bring us together in song—the only difference being that this time we're supposed to be singing along.

### Let's Start At The Very Beginning

Just coming up on its third anniversary, the sing-a-long *Sound of Music* first saw life at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in May 1999 and has played continuously in London's Prince Charles Cinema since August the same year. And while this may be the first time the "official" *Sing-a-long-a* version has hit town (you can tell it's the official version because it has that extra "a"), it's not the first time it's been mounted. Credit for that goes to Bruce Saunders, the man behind *Movie Monday* (celebrating their own anniversary with their 500th screening this week). After hearing about the film's British success, Saunders put on his own low-tech sing-a-long version back in July 2000: while the movie

ran on screen, the audience read the lyrics off a close-captioned version running on a TV set.

"We couldn't just put the captioning up," Saunders explains, "because the captioning is going at the same time. The words have to be a few seconds ahead, and that required a bit of mucking about to get the timing right." Thus one of the big advantages of the official version: the lyrics are up there on screen (*sans* bouncing ball, however). Saunders is a big fan of the sing-a-long concept; he's even mounted three other sing-a-longs in the same format: *Gigs and Dolls*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *My Fair Lady* (coming soon: *The Music Man*).

Of course, it's worth noting that the *Movie Monday* screening was actually illegal. "This was just at the point where the rights had been bought for *The Sound of Music*," Saunders recalls. "It was technically against the agreement... to show it in any way on the screen. But since I already had it advertised, I was given permission to run it." That's when things got tricky. "CBC radio heard we were showing it, called me up and did a little five-minute interview," Saunders recalls. "The next day all hell broke loose. The producer heard on the radio that I was showing his film totally against the copyright agreement—which said he had the sole rights to show the sing-a-long version. He immediately phoned down to L.A., who called the Vancouver distributor, where they yelled at the girl on the order desk so much that she offered to resign her job..." he sighs. "We worked it out over the next few days. The girl didn't lose her job, and neither did I."

### Doe, A Deer™

Which, in a nutshell, is one of the big differences with the *Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music*: it's very much a packaged—and copyright protected—product. "It took about a year to get proper legal permission," recalls Sing-a-long-a producer Tom Lightburn. "Rogers and Hammerstein were very supportive of it—they clearly thought it was a way of breathing new life into an old chestnut—and 20th Century Fox eventually went along. It's been clear sailing ever since."

It's clear from speaking with Lightburn that this is more business opportunity than labour of love. His conversation is filled with phrases like target demographics, interactive experiences, major markets, foreign territories, percentage deals, staying competitive. "The essence of it is that the



What do you do with a problem like Bruce Saunders? The poster for *Movie Monday's* 2000 version

audience is the star of the show," he explains to me. "We've worked on the pre-show to make it as inclusive as possible; that way, you can have a six-year-old, a grandmother and a drag queen sitting next to each other and it works for all of them. It's very unusual: a trans-gender, multi-generational type of project."

And you know what? It does work, despite the show's length (3 hours plus intermission plus pre-show festivities) and despite packaging that's just a little too slick (attendees receive a goodie bag filled with things to waggle at the screen, a prize card with space for demographic information and a pencil emblazoned with "www.singalonga.com").

"It's tough bringing these types of things to the marketplace," Lightburn sighs when I bring up the \$20-\$22.50 ticket price. "People think it's outrageously expensive, but at the end of the day, between what I have to pay Fox and Rogers and Hammerstein, we're not really making any money, so people should at least have a good time."

Yet despite the business side of things, it's clear that Lightburn's heart is in the right place. "Singing is a great communal experience," he offers. "That's why a lot of people go to church—to sing hymns. The fact that this is a fun-loving, joking environment makes it more enjoyable. It scores pretty high on the happiness quotient."

He's right. There's nothing quite like a movie theatre for raising your voice in song. Take *Moulin Rouge*, for example: not even a year old and it's already almost impossible to not sing along—even if it's your first time around. Imagine the fun if we could see the words, if we could follow the little green fairy as she bumps and grinds her way along the lyrics ("Voulez vous coucher avec moi, c'est soi?").

Come to think of it, *Moulin Rouge* is the perfect choice for a soon-to-be sing-a-long: it's inspiring, campy, has great songs, astounding costumes, a wonderful range of characters to mimic, perfect things to yell at the screen ("Emergency Rehearsal!") and is exactly the kind of movie you want to see again and again. Best of all, nobody else is doing it yet.

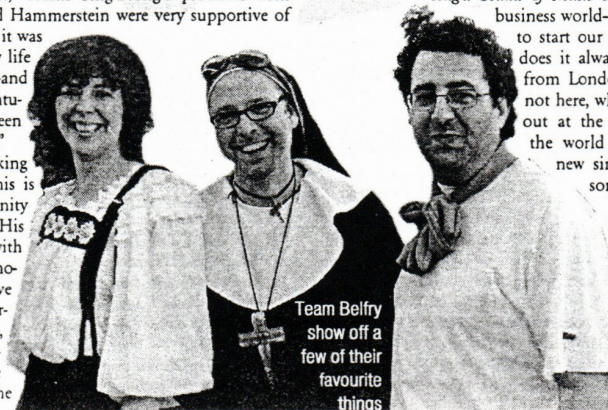
And maybe that's the answer for those of us who feel the *Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music* is just too slick. Rather than wait for someone to package it for us, why not just start our own sing-a-long? (Come on, it'd be worth it just to see Howie Siegal dressed as Toulouse Lautrec!)

Sing-a-longs are not going anywhere—except, as the *Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music* has shown us, into the business world—so why not be the ones to start our own phenomena? Why does it always have to come to us from London or New York? Why not here, why not now? As I found out at the Roxy the other night, the world is always ready for a new sing-a-long; why wait for someone to sell it to us?

Tell you what: If you sing, I'll sing louder.



Raindrops on roses and kittens with whiskers



Team Belfry show off a few of their favourite things

The *Sing-a-long-a Sound of Music*  
April 11 - May 2.  
The Roxy  
Tickets \$20 - \$22.50  
385-6815