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The Timeless Julie Andrews

a project by Yves Riou proposed by Félicie Roblin

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

As the star of Hollywood productions that have become cult classics and the winner of an Oscar for her role as Mary Poppins, Julie Andrews personifies all the fantasy of 1960s musicals. However, behind the clean-cut image often attributed to her is a surprisingly tumultuous journey in which both dazzling highs and painful lows have contributed to the longevity of a career which continues to this day.

The woman who played Maria in '*The Sound of Music*' was the same whimsical actress who starred in '*Victor/Victoria*', this time playing a woman who pretends to be a man pretending to be a woman. The musical was a bitter-sweet reflection on women's position in society and it became a point of reference for the gay community. Julie's decision to play such different roles was the artistic equivalent of doing the splits and showed how she wanted to evolve with the times.

Knowing when and how to reinvent herself has been fundamental to Julie Andrews' career. In 2017, she starred in a children's series on Netflix, again proving her undeniable ability to adapt to the times. This is what makes her a totally contemporary celebrity who has developed her own legend: a combination of myth and modernity that would not have been possible without such a strong character. Through Julie Andrews, we will explore the golden age of musicals and see how the world of acting has changed over the last few decades. Julie is a celebrity who has managed to explore the genres of her time, endlessly finding truth through the fragility of childhood and old age.

The film provides a unique opportunity to rediscover an incredible woman who left her mark in the history of stage and screen in the second half of the 20th century and who has continued her career in recent years.

The aim is not to paint a saintly portrait but to make a film that moves along with bursts of fantasy, laughter, life and the poetry of the music and images of Julie, without glossing over the inevitable difficulties of such a long career.

We will ask what makes this longevity so remarkable in a profession where fame can be so quickly forgotten. We will also look at what makes Julie Andrews such a modern celebrity, a muse who instead of being confined under a male gaze always managed to live out her life and passions through the characters she played.

Films and television shows

We will need to look back at what has made Julie Andrews who she is today. She herself has said that her career can be divided into three stages: vaudeville, theatre and cinema. Although she has never said as much, it is surprising to see how there was always a male influence in the background. Professionally, the connection between Julie and the men in her life is quite clear. Her stepfather played a key role in the emergence of her talent. Her first husband, Tony Walton, also proves to have been important, and finally, there was Blake Edwards, who helped her to shake off her goody two-shoes image. Julie always knew how to take support from her relationships and used them as a trampoline to create her own story.

This film about Julie Andrews contains a delightful selection of clips from her greatest films but also from the numerous television programmes she appeared in. This side of her career is often overlooked in France and Germany, yet it contains some veritable gems that illustrate the extent of her talent. A TV audience of 35 million ecstatic viewers tuned in to watch her dance with Gene Kelly. That was more than tuned in to watch shows with Barbra Streisand or Franck Sinatra that same year.

An early career

Born into a musical family (her mother was a pianist and her stepfather was a music hall singer), the young Julie Andrews was already a phenomenon as child, with a 5 octave range and voice like an angel. It was almost by chance that her stepfather discovered her exceptional ability. As a child, she appeared in a number of shows organised by her mother and stepfather and soon became the main attraction. Aged fifteen, she had already performed in most British theatres: *'To be honest, the theatres were mostly shabby. I resented the fact that my stepfather made me act in the show he did with my mother. He was the one who took all the decisions. In a way, he "sold" me. But he did make me embrace my talent.'*

Aged twenty, she became a hit on Broadway in *'My Fair Lady'* and the New York Times review read: *"Julie Andrews is wonderful. Her transformation from slovenly flower girl to sophisticated lady of the world is both touching and beautiful..."*. On April 30th, 1958, *'My Fair Lady'* moved to the Theatre Royal in London. Never before had a play been so eagerly awaited. It sold out at Covent Garden just as it had on Broadway. From the opening night onwards, English audiences were smitten, delighted to welcome back the girl who, ten years earlier, had lit up the stage at the London Palladium. Gone were the pony tail and the plaits, the gap-toothed smile and gangly legs, she was now a slender young woman who performed gracefully on the stage.

A not so quiet life

Behind all of the success, which seemed to come so naturally, her own life was considerably less idyllic than many of her roles would suggest.

Aged 5, she was devastated by the divorce of her parents, and a few months later, during World War II, she lived through the Blitz in London where she and her parents entertained the troops. Her relationship with her stepfather was very strained. He even tried to get into her bed when she was a teenager. She soon became the family's main source of income, financing the excesses of her parents who quickly sank into alcoholism. She would also later learn that the father she loved so much was not her biological father. Her childhood was in fact a far cry from the calmness and serenity that would later seem to emanate from her performances.

Top of the bill on Broadway, she starred in *'My Fair Lady'* for three years, and knowing the part inside out, achieved incredible vocal perfection in her performances. So when Audrey Hepburn, who was not a singer, was preferred for the role in the film version of the play (Hepburn was considered a more bankable proposition by Jack Warner), Julie Andrews struggled to conceal her disappointment. A few years later, when she received a Golden Globe award for *'Mary Poppins'*, she thanked Jack Warner for snubbing her when he was casting *'My Fair Lady'*.

After her great successes of the mid-1960s, everything seemed to be going well for her, but, unlike the characters she played, she was not happy. Her first husband, set designer Tony Dalton, who she had met in London, found it hard to cope with his wife's meteoric success. In 1967, the couple divorced leaving Julie emotionally fragile and plagued by doubts. She attended psychotherapy sessions to come to terms with her pain and it was on the way home from one of these meetings that she first crossed paths with Blake Edwards.

A record for longevity

Andrews could hold the record for professional longevity. In 2016, she was still presenting a television show on PBS. Her career is a rare exception in an industry where careers and relationships are often notoriously brief. Her extraordinary ability to move with the times was evident again in 2017 when the octogenarian launched *'Julie's Greenroom'* an original series for children on Netflix. She has also lent her voice to various animated film characters such as Queen Lillian in *'Shrek'* and the nasty mother of the not so despicable villain in *'Despicable Me'*. As if to thumb her nose at those clean-cut characters that still follow her around, Julie Andrews has taken on the heroes of a new generation that did not grow up with *'Mary Poppins'*. Julie Andrews seems to defy the passing of time, both professionally and in her personal life. Her 41-year marriage to filmmaker Blake Edwards, who she married in 1969, lasted until his death in 2010, which must be some kind of record in Hollywood.

The other side of the coin

Professionally, after her massive worldwide success, there was an empty period: having become a star and a superstar, her fans expected her to remain radiant, respectable, kind and totally asexual forever. She could not get away from the characters of Mary and Maria. *"I don't want to disown Mary Poppins or Maria, but I am prepared to do a nude scene in order to lose that image and make people understand that I'm not some little saint who performs miracles."* This is exactly what she did in *'S.O.B.'* (Son-of-a-bitch), a film directed by her second husband Blake Edwards in which she plays an actress who ends up in pornography. There were a few crushing failures such as *'Darling Lili'* and *'Star!'*, films which appeared dated and out of touch with what audiences wanted. Then, in 1997, as she triumphed on Broadway in *'Victor/Victoria'*, she lost her voice, and the show had to be cancelled. She desperately consulted the most eminent specialists and they advised an operation. Because the surgeons predicted she would be able to sing again six weeks afterwards, she decided to have the operation on her vocal chords as soon as possible so she could continue with the show. Unfortunately, the operation went badly and she lost her voice. It was a terrible shock, but she bounced back by writing books for children and, 10 years later, after getting to grips with her new voice, she was back performing again.

By showing her successes and her failures, with clips from her best-known films as well as the flops, we will be able to appreciate the uniqueness of Julie Andrews' career, that of a woman who took her fate in her hands and left her mark on the predominant genres of her time. From Walt Disney to Netflix, independent film to theatre, and as the voice of new heroes, Julie Andrews has reinvented herself again and again to become a truly modern yet timeless legend.





Céline Payot-Lehmann
Head of International Distribution
c-payot-lehmann@arteFrance.fr

Audrey Kamga
Sales Manager
Territories: Canada, Ireland, MENA region, Portugal, South America, Spain,
UK and USA Worldwide Inflight
a-kamga@arteFrance.fr

Franka Schwabe
Sales Manager Territories: Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Scandinavia,
Iceland, Switzerland, Netherlands
f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

Isabelle Monteil
Sales Manager
Territories: Asia, Greece Oceania, Africa, Language versions
i-monteil@arteFrance.fr

Sophie Soghomonian
Sales Manager
Territories: Eastern Europe, Israel, Russia, Worldwide Non-Theatrical Rights
s-soghomonian@arteFrance.fr

Florent Rocchi
Sales Assistant
f-rocchi@arteFrance.fr