

ENVELOPE ENTERTAINMENT

Versatile Emily Blunt steps into the timeless shoes of Mary Poppins

By **RANDEE DAWN**
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When Emily Blunt first learned that she'd landed the title role in "Mary Poppins Returns," she naturally told her mother. And her husband, actor-director John Krasinski. And her agent. Then she told her friends, one of whom remarked, "Whoa — you got balls of steel."

"Balls of steel" and "Mary Poppins" don't usually pop up in the same sentence, but they do make a nice Venn diagram if you put Emily Blunt in the overlap. Whether cracking us up in 2006's "The Devil Wears Prada," showing off her tough side (and spectacular abs) in 2014's "Edge of Tomorrow," or elevating Krasinski's indie sci-fi horror "A Quiet Place" to new critical heights, Blunt is an instrument of steel — with a twinkle in her eye.

"No one can out-Julie Andrews Julie Andrews," Blunt said, sitting in a New York City hotel suite in a striped sweater and flowing skirt, referring to the original, Oscar-winning star of 1964's "Mary Poppins." "This is about presenting my version."

Emily Blunt stars in "Mary Poppins Returns."

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Blunt seems to have hit the right tonal note with Poppins: reserved, not-to-be-trifled-with, but fun-loving with those who open their ears and hearts. The film itself, which

is a sequel rather than a remake, deals with the grown-up Banks children and *their* children and is both warmly familiar and fresh.

"The character needed not only a great actor, but one who can play all the layers of Mary Poppins — and one who is naturally warm," said director Rob Marshall, who first met Blunt while directing her in 2014's "Into the Woods" and was looking for another chance to collaborate with her.

"I feel like I *get* her," he said, referring to Blunt. "I get who she's playing as an actor, and that doesn't happen a lot. When Mary Poppins came along, it took maybe a half-second to realize it was for Emily."

For this version of Poppins (Blunt occasionally refers to her as "Mary P" or "Mary Pop-Pop"), the actress says she avoided rewatching the original film. "I had seen it as a child," she said. "But for this, I dove into the books — and she's very different there: completely batty and eccentric and funny and rude and extraordinarily vain. I went with my instinct from there."

The actors were fortunate to receive a generous eight weeks of rehearsals before jumping into the first day of shooting the big song-and-dance number, "A Cover Is Not the Book," but Blunt had a particular side project she had to cope with: "My youngest [Violet, 2; she and Krasinski also have Hazel, 4] was only 5 months old when I started, so I had to rush off to pump between high kicks," she recalled. "That was multitasking for sure."

From her earliest days in the business, Blunt has always proved up for whatever the challenge may be, and is as familiar with comedy as with drama. Such fluidity could stem from her original entry into acting as a way to control a stutter that developed when she was 6. When she was 12, a teacher encouraged her to try doing a "silly voice" in the school play, and that helped draw out the self-described "shy" adolescent.

"It probably paved the way for me to embrace so many different types of characters, because if I impersonated them I could speak more freely," she said. "I people-watched so much as a kid. I was doing research back then and I didn't know it."

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— EMILY BLUNT

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It's a facility that made her a formidable heroine in this year's "A Quiet Place." Working alongside an auteur husband could have been trouble for any married couple, but as she recalled, "John and I have a secret language and shorthand with each other, so we were able to create something intimate. Because he's an actor he understands when to step back and when it's appropriate to come in with a note. Like, not in the childbirth scene. I'm like, 'What do you know?!'"

Clearly, that steel reference is true both on screen and off. But Blunt said she feels like she's moved into a new phase of her acting life with "Mary Pop-Pop."

"I don't feel I've had this insane meteoric career path," she said. "I went through waves of [impostor syndrome] for many years, but I feel very honest with myself at this particular moment. It's been a slow burn — I've gone from 'Are you the girl in "Devil Wears Prada?"' to 'You look like the girl from...' to 'You look like Emily Blunt' to 'You *are* Emily Blunt.'"

She paused and took a sip of hot water. "And once they know your name, that's when you know you've got to put a hat on when you go out."

And these days, maybe a flying umbrella too.



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