Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

# My Half-Century with The Sound of Music

Norman Allen · Wednesday, March 11th, 2015

The thing I remember most about the first time I saw *The Sound of Music* was the size of the marquee that loomed over the doors of the now-demolished Coronet Theater in San Francisco. It was a bright afternoon in 1965. I was five, my sister Sheryl was eight, and we were dropped on the sidewalk with my grandparents, visiting from Denver. Mom and Dad were always good about exposing us to new things, but this time I think they just wanted three hours to themselves. Grandma Allen, in particular, could be a bit trying.

I don't remember actually seeing the movie, but fifty years later I know that it speaks to some of my greatest passions. I love being at high altitudes, hiking through thick woods and suddenly coming upon great open vistas. And I have a lifelong fascination with monasticism. As much as I'm drawn to the arm-flinging enthusiasm of Maria's traipse across the Untersberg, I'm equally drawn to the quiet contemplation of the nuns who challenge and protect, and who sing so gloriously.

But beyond the specifics of abbeys and Alps, *The Sound of Music* presents a worldview that is now largely mine. (Perhaps a courageous thing to say in 2015.) Maria's devotion to God, a theme often overlooked, is more literal than my own belief, but familiar and resonant nonetheless. She worships as deeply in the mountains as she does in the cloister and, more importantly, she learns that happiness comes when we get outside our own heads and start thinking about others. She finds her greatest joy in teaching, in parenting, and in partnering – as I do.

The advent of video means that Sheryl's two girls, now grown, have seen the movie more times than they can count. I've tried to be more sparing. My DVD copy has never been unwrapped, and I can name each of the times I saw the film on the big screen. Its impact was greatest during a celebrated re-release in 1973 when I could fully understand the story and be carried away by the cinematography and music. Seven years later, on a break from college and travels abroad, I sat beside my parents at a film festival showing and heard Mom whisper to Dad, "He's been there!"

I made that visit to Salzburg during the spring break of my freshman year in London, traveling with a friend through Europe, and dipping down through Bavaria into Austria. In Salzburg we wandered cobblestone streets, ate Weiner Schnitzel, stood before the locked gates of Nonnburg Abbey, and found the country road that Maria dances along, guitar and carpetbag akimbo, as she sings "I Have Confidence."

For laughs, we took the official Sound of Music Tour, led by an embittered young American who explained that the Von Trapp's trek over the Alps from Salzburg would have landed them in Nazi

Germany. I wanted to explain, first, that the family flees in a car and would obviously drive to a safe border before starting their climb. But more importantly, it's a movie. And a musical. With cloistered nuns who sing classic Broadway show tunes by Rodgers & Hammerstein.

The need to belittle the film has been there from the beginning. Critics accused both Broadway and Hollywood artists of setting the musical genre back 60 years to its operetta roots. Pauline Kael, writing in *McCall's*, said of the movie, "It's the big lie. The sugar-coated lie that people seem to want to eat."

It's true that there's one enormously offensive moment in the film when Maria makes herself entirely subservient to her new husband. I've heard it boo-ed in the cinema, and rightly so. But overall the story carries a profound message that has nurtured and, yes, challenged audiences for five decades. It gives us the experience of a young woman who struggles to discover her true calling, a man surprised by life just when he thought his future was proscribed, and children who, made aware of love, wake up to the beauty and joy that surround them.

Fifty years after the premiere of *The Sound of Music*, it's time to unwrap that DVD and enjoy it again.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, March 11th, 2015 at 4:20 pm and is filed under Film, Lifestyle
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.