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THEATER ALIVE WITH 'SOUND OF MUSIC' SING-ALONG DRAWS WILLING CROWD

By **Cara Feinberg**, Globe Correspondent

Two nuns standing in the concessions line at the Arlington Regent Theater lobby were comparing wimples and scouting out men in lederhosen.

So far, they'd seen only one - a man whose traditional Austrian outfit was fashioned from a pair of knee-high tube socks, black Bermuda shorts, and clip-on suspenders with a handmade cloth crossbar taped to his chest. His 6-year-old daughter, a miniature Liesl in a flowing pink party dress, was pulling him mercilessly toward the theater's ticket-takers, brushing by a Captain von Trapp, some bearded frauleins, and a woman who was having trouble seeing through the paper snowflakes she'd taped to her nose and eyelashes.

"I can't believe how many people have turned up - and dressed up," said a beaming Gary Adelson, owner of the Regent Theater, this year's Boston-area stop for the "Sing-A-Long Sound of Music," a show in which the 1964 film "The Sound of Music" is shown with lyric subtitles so audience members can sing along.

Though Adelson was not in costume,

he nonetheless granted pious nods to incoming mother superiors and Nazi generals alike.

The show, which played a four-run engagement at the Regent on a recent weekend, nearly filled the 500-seat theater for each performance, drawing enthusiastic crowds of all ages for the matinees and evening shows. Though the show has toured the Boston area before - it appeared two years ago at the Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline - this was its first appearance at the newly reopened Regent, and the run was so successful, Adelson and his staff have decided to bring the film back Dec. 26 through 31.

Since its debut in the United Kingdom in 1999, the smash-hit show has swept through packed movie houses all over the world. Audiences are encouraged to show up in costume, sing along with the lyrics, and heckle the characters as they climb every mountain.

And heckle they do.

At the Regent's Saturday-evening show, Julie Andrews received cheers and whistles when she first appeared on screen, but a close-up shot of the Mother Superior in her habit prompted anonymous taunts of "Take it off!" and "She's got no hair!"

Rolf, the bicycling telegram boy, was greeted with dog barks and disapproving "tsks," and when Captain von Trapp asked Maria what that "curious singing" was, someone shouted, "It's the theme music, stupid!"

"I grew up listening to the Broadway version of this musical," said audience member Charlotte Perrine of Newton, whose costume "Sixteen-Going-On-Seventeen" required her to carry her sister-in-law, Anne Roche, on her back. "You always wish you could blurt all these things out, and now, with this show, you finally can," she said.

Though audiences have long enjoyed "The Sound of Music,"

the sing-along phenomenon is relatively recent.

"People have been attending cult films like 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' for decades," explained North American Sing-A-Long producer Tom Lightburn, in a telephone interview from the Sing-A-Long Productions headquarters in Vancouver, Canada, "but the whole Hollywood musical sing-along began four years ago at a nursing home in the north of Scotland.

"One of the therapists at the home would

rent Hollywood musicals once a week for group therapy and hand out song sheets to get people involved," he said. "One day, a man who worked for the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival came to observe her patients while they were all singing along to 'Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.' He was so intrigued, he brought the idea to the Prince Charles Cinema in London's West End, where 'The Sound of Music Sing-A-Long' became an immediate hit. It's been running there for four years straight, every Friday night and Sunday afternoon."

After Lightburn saw the British phenomenon, he knew he wanted to bring it to North America.

"The show transcends age, gender, sexuality, and culture. You can't really go wrong with it," he said. After a nearly eight-month-long process of obtaining the rights to the film from Twentieth Century Fox, the film's original distributor, Sing-A-Long Productions released the show in North America and has never looked back. "The show appeals to so many people and brings out the best of their creativity," Lightburn said. "People just love this."

Now, nearly four years later, Sing-A-Long has evolved significantly since its London debut. Whereas the earliest versions showed an old print of the 1964 film with the subtitles digitally projected over the screen, the current show boasts brand-new prints with subtitles burned onto the celluloid. Audience members are now also treated to "magic moments" packs - goody bags filled with props to use at designated points in the movie.

"Because the show is hard to explain on

a poster, each screening begins with a half-hour introduction," explained Mary Beth Cahill, who served as MC at the Regent's Sing-A-Long production this past weekend. Cahill, best known locally as the founder of the "punk-mambo" band Babaloo, and the charismatic host of "Maryoke" Karaoke night at the Milky Way in Jamaica Plain, began the Regent's show with a warm welcome to the audience, and a systematic orientation to the props they'd find in their packs.

Among other things, audience members were treated to a sprig of plastic edelweiss, a small "champagne-popper" firecracker to pull when the Captain kisses Maria.

"I was hoping for a flibbertigibbet or a will-o'-the-wisp," said Laura Isenberg of Newton to her husband after rifling through her pack and finding neither. The couple, who later took third place in the costume contest for their matching gray sweatshirts - his with the words "Someone Older and Wiser" scrawled on the front, hers with the message, "I need Someone Older and Wiser" - proudly represented the more seasoned sector of the audience.

"It's wonderful to see so many generations here together," said Paul Lewis, who by day is the chairman of the English Department at Boston College. He and his wife were wearing a matching set of "brown paper packages tied up with string" piled atop their heads like pyramids. "We've had a lot of fun tonight - though I won't cop to it at work on Monday morning."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, 1. Chris Carden (left) and Rebecca O'Brien, both of

Newton, dressed as "snowflakes that stay on your nose and eyelashes" for the "Sing-A-Long Sound of Music." / GLOBE PHOTO / SARAH BREZINSKY 2. ONLY THEIR HAIRDRESSER KNOWS - Paul and Wendy Lewis of Newton are dressed as "brown paper packages tied up with string" for the sing-along showing of "The Sound of Music" at The Regent Theater in Arlington.