

The Column by John Garcia

Peter Pan by Garland Summer Musicals

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Reviewed by LK Fletcher, Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

“All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs Darling put her hand to her heart and cried, ‘Oh, why can’t you remain like this forever!’ This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.” — J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan*



Growing up is not all it's cracked up to be. Ask any adult. If the idea of a brief return to childhood holds any charms for you, *Peter Pan* might be just the ticket. My experience on opening night at the Garland Summer Musicals production featured audience members donned in glittering wings, valet parking and a reception afterwards. My eleven-year-old daughter was thoroughly impressed. That alone is the stuff childhood memories are made of. Add actors that fly through the air and the evening becomes magical. It doesn't matter a farthing if you are two or a hundred and two (Yes, there were patrons at both ends of the spectrum in attendance).

For those of you who bypassed childhood, *Peter Pan* is a boy who lives in Neverland, a magical island where children never have to grow up. Peter visits the Darling nursery looking for his lost shadow and befriends Wendy Darling and brings her to Neverland, along with her two brothers, Michael and John. Once there, they experience many adventures involving Indians, fairies and even fighting pirates! I won't spoil the rest if you don't know it but, ultimately, *Peter Pan* is of childhood, imagination and the eventual realization of growing older.

There is a story behind the story. *Peter Pan* first appeared in J.M. Barrie's 1902 novel *The Little White Bird*. The character was inspired by Barrie's brother's tragic death at a young age as well as Barrie's relationship with the Llewelyn Davies family. In 1904, Barrie extracted the chapters about the *Peter Pan* character from the novel and developed them into a play entitled *Peter Pan or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*. A novel called *Peter and Wendy* was later published. The story in the novel was adapted from the play with additional material added. *Peter Pan* was first seen as a Broadway musical in 1954. Edwin Lester had the original American rights to *Peter Pan* and added music to the production.

After a failed pre- Broadway tour, Director Jerome Robbins decided the musical score needed some attention before the show could be a success. Comden and Green, along with composer Jules Styne, were brought in to add musical numbers to the production. In addition to the music changes, Mary Martin was cast to star as *Peter Pan*. The new cast and musical score paved the way to *Peter Pan*'s success on Broadway. It went on to win three Tony Awards, including Best Performance by a Leading

Actress in a Musical for Martin. The musical has been revived many times on Broadway, toured the country, and been broadcast on television.

Garland Summer Musicals did an outstanding ensemble piece in their full-scale musical production of Peter Pan. The huge, lush auditorium with emerald green carpeting, seating and velvet drapes was the perfect showcase for flying people about as well as entertaining the large audience of small children and former children of all ages.

The set was beautifully appointed with stunning backdrops and scrim, and a considerable amount of set pieces. The nursery was brightly colored in a floral print with trim and myriad details. A large dog house for Nana, oversized dressers and matching nursery beds with head and footboards all were part of this Darling Victorian nursery. The quick transition to an immense pirate ship with multiple levels and windows and planks or to the forest with immense 3D trees, toadstools and foliage was magical. The lighting throughout the production was both effective and ephemeral, creating a soft storybook feel to each scene.

The Darling nursery walls extended into the twinkling stars in a night sky while immense shuttered windows upstage opened for the magical entrance of Peter. The set pieces appeared as solid as the furnishings of any proper English home in spite of flying children, bouncing dogs and a leaping Peter Pan. That each set effortlessly disappeared into each scene only to be followed with massive ships, forests, and underground caverns was all part of the artful magic of Set Designer Kelly Cox and the well-honed stage crew under the direction of Stage Manager Rachel DuPree.

Beautiful costumes for Mr. and Mrs. Darling were on parade as well as the traditional nightdress and footed jammies for the Darling children. Mrs. Darling's crimson gown replete with bustles and lace and a high ruffled neckline was stunning. The pirates were fabulous in their assorted trappings, each a uniquely-appointed character in their distinctive apparel. Captain Hook was quite the buccaneer in his velvet jacket with tails and ruffles and an immense hat with plumes while his sidekick Smee had outstanding accessories including his boldly striped hose and jaunty head wrap. Likewise the Lost Boys and the Indians all had outstanding pieces, beautifully fitted and designed for the rigors of flying and fighting. The Indians moved beautifully in their fringed tunics and leggings complete with dark braids and feathered headdresses. Costumers Michael A. Robinson and Suzi Cranford, with the Dallas Costume Shoppe, presented the perfect picture book image of each and every character.

The orchestra was very capable under the direction of Michael Mullino. The overture, which was at times lethargic and less than crisp, was eclipsed by excellent ensemble and solo work in the subsequent pieces, notably that of the clarinet section. Of course, watching the floor of the pit descend is always a notable event as well.

The production was in every regard a well-produced, efficient, and enjoyable ensemble piece. The depth of talent and professionalism throughout the cast was showcased in consistent vocals, crisp choreography and well-developed characters. The Lost Boys, Indians, and Pirates really stole the show with exceptional energy, polish and charm. Director Buff Shurr and



Choreographer Kelly McCain created and completed a polished, professional evening in scene after scene.

The Darling children that open the musical were, well, darling. Helena Lynch offered a sincere and earnest portrayal as Wendy, and Liam Taylor and Parker Niksich, brothers John and Michael, were poised and capable thespians on stage. Jackie Lengfelder brought a soothing and elegant presence to the family, playing Mrs. Darling, while Michael A Robinson offered a frantic, distracted father figure to his role of Mr. Darling.

Michael A Robinson is also cast as the villain, Captain Hook. The energy for both the two roles was full throttle; Mr. Robinson commanded the stage and absolutely shone in his ensemble work with the pirates, notably in the dance numbers and in the delightful banter with his sidekick Smee, played by the talented Jon Morehouse who brought wonderful timing and physical charm to his role.

Other notable performances included the lovely Lissie Mays as Tiger Lily who was charming in her feisty and eventually friendly role. Miss Mays is a capable soprano and an accomplished dancer.

And the boy Peter? Mary-Margaret Pyeatt tackled the iconic role with aplomb and style. Physically, Ms. Pyeatt was a beautiful fit for the role. Her husky alto voice sounded strained in the performance reviewed, although it was not an impediment to her character. Her singing was expressive and musical. Ms. Pyeatt's Peter was clever and witty, and she moved effortlessly from the sky to the stage. She was believable and engaging as a young boy, a brash leader and a sentimental friend.

The musicality of the vocal ensembles was really exceptional. As a professional musician I am always a critical listener and I was delighted with the vocals. The opening "Tender Shepherd" trio with Wendy, John and Michael was pure and sweet. Each actor creating a beautiful, pure soprano line. The Pirates had a full, choral sound that was crisp and energetic in their musical numbers; "Pirate March", "Hook's Tango" and "Hook's Tarantella" infused with Michael A. Robinson's vibrant baritone. Peter and Tiger Lily (Lissie K. Mays) had a beautiful duet "I Gotta Crow" that showcased her clear and crisp soprano with the artistry of Peter Pan (Mary-Margaret Pyeatt).

One of the greatest joys of childhood is the magic of discovery, the joyful wonder and fulfillment of dreams that come true. In adulthood we call them fairy tales. As adults, we need to preserve the fairy tales for the next generation- and the fairies as well! As Peter Pan says; "...children know such a lot now, they soon don't believe in fairies, and every time a child says, 'I don't believe in fairies,' there is a fairy somewhere that falls down dead." Please do your part. Save the fairies. Take your child or inner child to Garland Summer Musical's Peter Pan. Peter Pan is much more than a fly by night production.... and you don't want to miss it.