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LUNT-FONTANNE THEATRE

I have high standards when it comes to Peter Pan for two reasons. First, the book by J.M. Barrie improves on his play and is a witty, heartbreaking masterpiece. You enjoy it as a child; you savor its bittersweet truths as an adult. If you haven't read it (or not since you were ten) and do so now, you're in for a treat. Second, one of my favorite theatrical experiences was the Mabou Mines adaptation called Peter and Wendy, which featured one actor interacting with puppets that captured the magic and wisdom of the book brilliantly. (At the same time, it made me appreciate the charm and unique appeal of puppetry like never before.) The Disney animated film? Thin stuff with cheap animation, mostly terrible songs and a dumbed-down approach to the story. The recent live TV event? Oy. So tread carefully when it comes to Peter Pan.

Despite a quietly charming performance by Johnny Depp, I wasn't a big fan of the feature film Finding Neverland, which tells the story of how Barrie was creatively inspired by a widow and her sons while helping them deal with tragedy. It was too tear-jerking for my tastes. But just as Barrie's book improved on his play, this musical improves on the film. It's more cheerful, more imaginative and basically more fun. Of course, it marks Harvey Weinstein's foray into the theater world. He's backed brilliant, ground-breaking films, as well as turned a lot of middlebrow fare into big commercial hits. His success here is surely of the latter sort, but if it means he returns and backs more daring work in the future, all the better.

Do you know the story? It's captured succinctly in the musical's tagline: How Peter Became Pan. (There alone Weinstein has raised the marketing bar on Broadway. Not since Cats came up with "Now And Forever" has a show's one-line marketing slogan been so effective; I'll bet every show down the road works hard to come up with their own distinctive tag.)

Barrie (Matthew Morrison of Glee) is an unhappily married man. His wife is pretty but seems utterly uninterested in her husband or his work; as long as they're in high societyand he doesn't embarrass her with his eccentric ways, she will be placated, but nothing more. His American producer Charles Frohman (Kelsey Grammer) just wants Barrie to keep churning out more shows like the ones he's done before. But Barrie knows he's in a rut. His new comedy is a rehash of material he's done better in the past. So Barrie retreats to Kensington Gardens and is struck...not by imagination, but by the fierce play of a troupe of wild boys, who have momentarily lost their mother and are having fun as pirates. They're alive, silly, engaged, and happy -- everything the dour Scotsman Barrie is not at the moment. Almost reluctantly, he's drawn into their adventures, but before you know it Barrie is "argh-ing" with the best of them.

Their mother is the charming Sylvia Llewelyn Davies (Laura Michelle Kelly, an Olivier winner for Mary Poppins). She apologizes for her rambunctious lads. But there's a sad charm about her and even more sadness

surrounding the one boy who doesn't join in the fun. That's her son Peter (Aidan Gemme). This Peter doesn't refuse to grow up; since the death of their father, he's growing up too fast, sinking into depression and stubbornly incapable of playing or smiling or having fun. What's the point?

Barrie sees himself in the boy, naturally. He returns to the park again and again, hoping and then expecting and then planning to meet and enjoy the company of this broken but spirited family. His wife is confused. Her mother Mrs. Du Maurier (Carolee Carmello) is worried about propriety and the strain on Sylvia's health, who is rather frail. Society begins to wag its tongue over such an unconventional friendship. But Barrie is having fun, the boys and especially Peter are clearly benefitting from his presence and the germ of an idea is forming for a work unlike anything he's done before. It will have pirates and fairies and NeverNever Land and maybe a boy who won't grow up....

Director Diane Paulus directs this amiable tale briskly and with precision. Still there's no denying that the songs by Gary Barlow & Eliot Kenndy flit from your memory almost before they're over. A few numbers stick, such as the act one closer "Stronger" and the act two highlight "Play," which shows the actors working on Barrie's new show letting out their inner child via nursery rhymes and nonsensical behavior. But they're memorable more for the staging of those numbers and the energetic choreography of Mia Michaels rather than the songs themselves. "Stronger" ends with a pirate ship materializing before our eyes and "Play" is silly fun in a pub and they work -- despite an inordinate number of lyrics with lazy "off rhymes" that trip you up while listening. "Stronger" does have an excellent melody, it must be said. The cast delivers them with gusto and Kelly almost makes her solo spotlight "All That Matters" feel grand. But again, it's the performance not the song that registers.

And for all the drama, this is a fairly conflict-free story, courtesy of the book by James Graham. Yes, Barrie's marriage to Mary (Teal Wicks) ends, but since it seems an unsuccessful one when the show begins, that's neither here nor there. He's had a flop and needs a hit but, while his producer and the actors grumble, they are ready to see what Barrie comes up with next. The looming possibility of a love affair with a widow is barely addressed; their romance is of the chaste variety (despite one kiss) and you don't need to see the movie to know it's not a good sign when Sylvia is repeatedly tired and seeing doctors.

So it's a credit to the appealing cast and creative team that the evening moves along with amiable verve. All the tech elements are solid, starting with the scenic design by Scott Pask and the costumes by Suttirat Anne Larlarb. Sometimes sets and costumes shouldn't call attention to themselves and that's the case here, where stately homes, London streets, pubs and backstage at a theater are all evoked effectively and without fuss. (The exception is that act one closer with the ship, which pulls out the stops and helps the show reach a visual peak lacking in the story.)

Kelly is effortless as the kind-hearted Sylvia; her charm and sweetness anchors the show and makes the friendship between a widow and a married man one we never question. But like the show itself, there's no friction: they are friends and don't really seem to long for more. It's telling that the most engaging scenes are the ones with Sylvia and her mother or Barrie and his manager. Carmello keeps the starchiness in Du Maurier understandably, ably aided by Graham's canny first scene between mother and daughter that establishes their love and the mother's sense of humor. And Grammer is having great fun in dual roles as the manager and Captain Hook, here seen as Barrie's id and urging him on to kiss the girl already.

Morrison has always had a certain emotional reserve for me. It worked well as the straight arrow hero in the revival of South Pacific, as a seemingly clueless but kind Italian in The Light In The Piazza and it works well here for the tamped down Barrie, with Morrison indicating the Scottish origin of our hero with a modest but effective burr. After many years of performing on Broadway or celebrating the theater on TV, he's finally got the lead role ni a hit new musical. The ensemble as a whole delivers their secondary comic bits with broad appeal. (This is a family friendly show, if a dead parent isn't too problematic for the very young.)

The four boys as a group are appealing; their big number "We're All Made Of Stars" is another winner, though again I hasten to add it's because of the staging by Paulus and their performances, not the forgettable song itself. However, Gemme is a modestly weak link as Peter. We get so spoiled by excellent child acting in shows like Matilda and Billy Elliott that it's easy to forget how hard these roles can be. Gemme is fine in the straightforward scenes of a depressed lad who thinks "playing" is silly now that his dad has died. But he has two big dramatic scenes and falls notably short on both of them. In the first he's gesticulating wildly to indicate passion; in the second towards the end he was desperately reaching for a breakdown, repeatedly squinting his eyes shut apparently in an attempt to gin up a tear or two. Paulus molded the cast well, but here failed her young charge. He should dial back the histrionics dramatically; the audience is so primed to feel empathy for Peter that Gemme's work is mostly done for him already.

So with weak songs and a mild book, why is Finding Neverland clicking with audiences? (It's been a significant draw from day one.) I think perhaps the very lack of high drama is a plus. It's a happy show with a sad heart and that's actually an appealing combination. Peter Pan can easily be performed as schmaltz or just a tale for kiddies. But there's a dark center to it that is the reason for the story's enduring appeal.

When we catch glimpses of the show Barrie has created, of course we get the moment where Tinkerbell is fading and Peter urges the audience to clap if they believe in fairies and want Tink to live. This time, it takes place in the Llewlyn Davies home, with a clearly ailing Sylvia propped up in bed since she was too weak to attend the premiere. The entire cast has come to give a command performance and so it's this frail woman who joins in on the clapping for Tinkerbell. The audience I saw it with clapped immediately without any need of prompting; they were ready, of course. I was struck for a moment by how often that scene has been repeated in theaters around the world since the play debuted in 1904. It's touching, really:millions and millions of people have clapped because they believe in fairies, clapped to celebrate make believe. But really they're clapping to stave off death. If only it were that simple.

HAMLET no stars out of **** CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

Who were the first people to climb Mt. Everest? Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, of course. But did you know they succeeded because of earlier attempts that broke paths and left caches of oxygen? Who were the next group of people to conquer it? Only mountaineering fanatics can answer that. So if you want to be remembered for conquering a mountain, you better be first or you better do something memorable, like being the first woman or so on. Most mountains aren't even conquered on the first attempt by the ones who succeed; they have to make a climb just to get an idea of what they're up against. One other, awful way to fame is to fail spectacularly, like the 1996 expedition that resulted in the deaths of eight climbers and was immortalized in Jon Krakauer's Into Thin Air.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is of course a mighty peak to conquer for actors. Perhaps only Lear offers a similarly forbidding challenge. Your first Hamlet needn't be your defining one and surely many middle-aged or elderly actors believe that only after being too old to actually play the role did they really feel ready to do the part justice.

Peter Sarsgaard is a very good actor with the requisite intelligence needed for the part. His Hamlet and this entire production directed by Austin Pendleton does not conquer the play. Far from it. Indeed, it is memorable for all the wrong reasons, a cascading disaster with almost every actor stumbling or forgetting their lines at one point or another on the performance I attended. By the end of the night, actors were dropping props, kicking swords towards the "bodies" of dead characters (making us fear for their safety) and looking relieved it was all over at the curtain call. Classic Stage Company is the home of some of my happiest theater memories in recent years. This one will endure too, unfortunately. One wonders if perhaps it would have been kindest when realizing they weren't even off book as opening night approached to step in and pull the plug on the entire affair.

The one saving element is the look of the show. They've gone for a modern dress, Festen sort of vibe here, setting the entire piece at a wedding reception. This doesn't really inform their take on the play, which is thoroughly traditional. This is not a high concept spin on Hamlet that goes for some crazy vision and falls flat, more's the pity. It simply doesn't work from start to finish.

But it looks good: scenic designer Walt Spangler has a handsome white floor with elegant metal trimming along the edge. Two bars are located at the back towards each exit and actors sometimes linger there before heading off or wait there and have a shot before coming on. (Who can blame them?) It's a conceit with no thought behind it; if there's some dramatic sense to when and how people linger and leave, I missed it. That floor lights up beautifully during the performance of the play within the play, another effective touch. And the costumes of Constance Hoffman set the tone right (though, oddly, I disliked the shoes of Hamlet and his mother and found them distracting). The lighting was...fuzzy at the start; somehow Justin Townsend managed to make the set seem out of focus before the show began. It was a nicely subtle way to keep you a little uncertain though it also proved symbolic of the show. The original music and sound design of Ryan Rumery of Scapesound was fine, though some of the background noises felt vague and indeterminate, undoubtedly reflecting the lack of sense in the entire work.

But that's about it for kind thoughts. The cast is filled with solid actors who have all done better work before and will again and thank goodness for that. On the positive side, the always dependable Stephen Spinella was the best of a poor lot as Polonius, though I couldn't grasp his take on this character from scene to scene. (In the famous "neither a borrower nor a lender be" speech he's intelligent and sincere; later he's buffoonish and then savvy again.) But he was clear and present and the language made sense when he spoke it (something almost no one else managed). And when he forgot his lines, no one handled it with more aplomb. Scott Parkinson scored capably in several roles (especially the Player Queen) and Jim Broaddus, also fine in several parts, handled the Player King with precision.

Glenn Fitzgerald was a welcome presence on stage (I haven't seen him in ages) as Laertes, though when the character returned late in the play he'd been affected by the disease of confusion that had spread through the show. The talented Penelope Allen was elocuting with determined high drama as if she'd wandered in from an RSC production, while everyone else was speaking more colloquially. The usually excellent Harris Yulin was mumbling the role of Claudius. As a couple, they seemed so innocuous and frail even after we discover he really did kill Hamlet's father that you wonder why the Prince doesn't just put them in a home.

In numerous roles including Guildenstern, Daniel Morgan Shelley invariably looked annoyed at whomever he was sharing the scene with. He looked annoyed at Hamlet, annoyed at Rosencrantz, annoyed at Claudius and annoyed at everyone else. Perhaps he was just annoyed at being trapped in this production. Lisa Joyce as Ophelia was her own unique disaster; I've always found Ophelia's mad scenes abrupt and very tricky to pull off and this wasn't the production to make that work.

Hamlet is in a hell and surely the talented Peter Sarsgaard is feeling that way as well. The Dane famously dithers and that can cover a lot of hesitation. But Sarsgaard spent the entire night struggling for his lines; when he remembered them he pounced and poured them out in a rush, so glad that they were available to him. He didn't actually call out "line" but one was constantly under the strain of expecting him to do so. Under such circumstances, at best the actor survives; he certainly doesn't put his stamp on the role.

Not being off book is a theatrical sin; what can excuse it? But if blame must be placed, it will be shared by all the actors yet fall most squarely on Sarsgaard and the director Austin Pendleton. Pendleton has enjoyed great success as an actor and director. Not here. The show is filled with curious directorial touches, like the way actors wander on and off the set, lingering at those bars. (I wanted to join them.) Again and again he has actors sit and observe the action, rarely to any purpose or effect. It works when the Player King lingers, but mostly you are distracted during monologues by the unnecessary and unrevealing presence of a character. Early on, Joyce

as Ophelia must sit in the back and look concerned and worried in eighteen different ways, pursing her brow, clutching her hands and so on.

But why is she present during "To be or not to be..?" Why does she lie down and feign sleep when Hamlet utters the lines "to sleep, perchance to dream?" Why does the gravedigger hang out and clutch the skull of poor Yorick during the final bloody scene? And why the choice after Polonius is mortally stabbed to have him walk across the stage and exit at a slow and stately pace? Worse, why does he pop back in during the massacre at the end? The dead Polonius doesn't look censorious or angry or sad or even pay much attention to the numerous deaths taking place. He just walks across the stage, as if on an errand.

Even the last moment is botched, with poor Sarsgaard caught awkwardly between slumping to the floor and sitting back on his seat after being poisoned to death. He's neither here nor there physically and it must have been fiendishly uncomfortable speaking his lines while a poor edit of the show's ending stumbled to its conclusion. He abruptly sat up, letting us know the show was blessedly over. I wouldn't bet money on who was happier, the audience or the cast.

THEATER OF 2015

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Honeymoon In Vegas **
The Woodsman ***
Constellations ** 1/2
Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s ** 1/2
Let The Right One In **
Da no rating
A Month In The Country ** 1/2
Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center ** 1/2
Hamilton at the Public ***
The World Of Extreme Happiness ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year 1915-1940 **
Verite * 1/2
Fabulous! *
The Mystery Of Love & Sex **
An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center *** 1/2
Fish In The Dark *
The Audience ***
Josephine And I ***
Posterity * 1/2
The Hunchback Of Notre Dame **
Lonesome Traveler **
On The Twentieth Century ***
Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular ** 1/2
The Heidi Chronicles *
The Tallest Tree In The Forest * 1/2
Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965 ***
Twelfth Night by Bedlam ***
What You Will by Bedlam *** 1/2
Wolf Hall Parts I and II ** 1/2
Skylight ***
Nellie McKay at 54 Below ***
Ludic Proxy ** 1/2
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