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Peter Pan: Ever Changing, Ever Young

Norman Allen · Monday, December 12th, 2011

Peter Pan is everywhere these days. An elaborate annotated edition of James Barrie's novel recently marked the centenary of the book's release. A theatrical prequel, *Peter and the Starcatcher*, arrives on Broadway this spring and the original play has hit select cities in a thousand-seat tent billed as "the world's first 360-degree CGI theater set." If that's not enough, Cathy Rigby brings the Broadway musical to New York for the holidays.

Each of these Peters is vastly different from the others and all a departure from the lad who first flew threw the windows of the Darling nursery at the Duke of York's theatre in 1904. Even Barrie's own novel of 1911 lacks the mystery and awe that must have surrounded that stage premiere.

It's nearly impossible to imagine Peter Pan as he was then—or to imagine us as his audience. We would have entered the theatre never having seen a movie, never having seen our world from the air, never having heard a voice or musical instrument artificially amplified. We would have stepped into the lobby from streets lit by flickering gas flames.

The children we brought with us might have noticed the beggars at the corner of St. Martin's Lane or heard news boys call out headlines about a war in Japan but they would not have known the spectrum of violence and poverty that pervades our children's consciousness today.

Hook would become the stand-in for an evil his audience had yet to encounter. Daphne DuMaurier, describing her father Gerald in the role, noted that, "Children were carried screaming from the stalls." Barrie himself wrote that "Hook should be played absolutely seriously, and the actor must avoid all temptation to play the part as if he was conscious of its humours."

By all accounts the first Peter, played by Nina Boucicault, was also a darker, even sorrowful creature. After all, Peter demands that he never be touched. Barrie's biographer Denis Mackail wrote, "If Barrie writes something that raises a slight shudder in print, Miss Boucicault only has to say it and your heart turns over three times while tears trickle from your eyes."

Peter first crowed that he is "youth and joy" just a decade before those things were lost in World War One. But the darkening of the century seems only to have brought out the boy's lightest and most endearing qualities. Actors, directors and filmmakers have molded him to meet the expectations of an audience eager to escape their earthbound troubles, lessening the brilliance of Barrie's creation in the process.

Depending on your generation, you grew up with the animated Disney film, the Mary Martin stage and television musical...

...Sandy Duncan in a revival of the same, Robin Williams and Dustin Hoffman in Spielberg's *Hook*...

...or a live-action film released in 2003. Rigby's been playing the role so long that her portrayal has become trans-generational.

Over the decades, Hook has lost all his danger and Peter has become a spokesman for all that is joyous—days free of responsibility and free of gravity. Happily, he can't entirely shake the dark side that Barrie bequeathed him. Like a child, Peter lacks empathy. He manipulates people for his own ends. He saves Tink's life at the 11th hour but has forgotten her name by the close of the play. Locked out of his own nursery as a child, he will never know what home is.

It's Wendy who gets the happy ending. Grown up and exiled from Neverland, she starts a family of her own while Peter remains trapped in childhood. In an epilogue tacked onto the play for a single performance in 1908 and later included in the Broadway musical, the grown-up Wendy watches Peter lure her daughter Jane into the night. In the novel, Barrie goes a step further, explaining that Jane's own child, Margaret, "will have a daughter who is to be Peter's mother in turn; and thus it will go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless."

With a plethora of Peters upon us, Margaret's great-great grandchildren can now suspend their disbelief and fly with Peter into the night, the wires disappearing as they set their course by the "second star to the right." Like Wendy, we will sit back and see our children lured away to Neverland, grateful, perhaps, that Hook has lost his bite. Grateful, certainly, that Peter's tragedy is not our own.

Image: Arthur Rackham's illustration.

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