

## A LITTLE NIGHT MAGIC

*Peter Pan: The Prequel.*

BY JOHN LAHR

In a review of the 1904 début production of J. M. Barrie's play "Peter Pan," the British critic Max Beerbohm wrote, "Mr. Barrie is not that rare creature, a man of genius. He is something even more rare—a child who, by some divine grace, can express through an artistic medium the childishness that is in him." Barrie believed fiercely in the wisdom of children. "I am not young enough to know everything," he once wrote. When he was six—he was the ninth of ten children—his older brother David died in a skating accident. In an attempt to comfort his inconsolable mother, Barrie took to imitating David's look, his posture, even his way of whistling. He became, in other words, a kind of apparition, whose goal was to animate the dead and keep grief at bay. (Barrie charted the number of his mother's laughs. "One laugh with a tear in the middle I counted . . . as two," he noted.) In *Peter Pan*, Barrie created a figure not unlike himself, a ghost child who, in constant flight from adult responsibility and loss, takes up residence in the world of his own imagination. So deep and richly developed was Barrie's yearning for a life and a home without shadow that Never-Never Land, Peter's eternal isle of joy, has become part of the mythology of contemporary life, with a long entry, and even a map, in Alberto Manguel and Gianni Guadalupi's "Dictionary of Imaginary Places."

Rick Elice's "Peter and the Starcatcher" (superbly directed by Roger Rees and Alex Timbers, at the Brooks Atkinson) is a larky séance with Barrie's mythic characters: part pantomime, part story theatre, and all delight. This well-told tale, based on the novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, is a prequel to Peter's adventures with the Darling family, and it brings sensational news from the Never-Never Land franchise—how Peter got

his name and his flying mojo, how Captain Hook lost his hand, how the crocodile got its ticktock—as well as a piquant array of new characters, including the marauding denizens of Mollusk Island, who speak a patois composed entirely of words from Italian menus and wine lists. ("Dodo," "Norse Code," and nautical gibberish are also spoken in the play. "Furrow the jib and let fly the frammistan!" one old salt shouts.)

As in Barrie's template, the light-hearted brilliance of the play is staged against existential shadow. The mournful opening words of Barrie's book concern the pain of growing up: "Two is the beginning of the end," he notes in his first paragraph. Here, on a bare stage, we hear the characters, before we know anything about them, broadcasting regret: "We change." "We grow up." "It always happens. Nothing is forever." "That's the rule." "Everything ends." From these rueful, realistic lines, the audience and the characters are carried, with a snap of the fingers and a change of the lights, into the eternal present of make-believe.

The charm of the storytelling in "Peter and the Starcatcher" is as important as the story itself. Barrie saw children as "gay and innocent and heartless"; the directors' accomplishment is to honor in the staging the spirit of the original narrative—to be at once naïve, knowing, and playful. "Use your thoughts," a character advises the audience, which is made to see things that aren't there. In this scintillating game of show-and-tell (which is supported by the quirky elegance of Don-yale Werle's scenic design and Paloma Young's costumes), toy ships become real ones; banana leaves become pirate shields; ropes become windows, waves, or the maw of a behemoth crocodile; and yellow rubber gloves are transformed into flitting tropical birds. Al-

though Peter (Adam Chanler-Berat), who gets to the point of takeoff, never actually flies in the show, the directors' many inventive visual transformations banish gravity so adroitly that we feel as though he does. In one scene, the perky and patrician Molly, played by Celia Keenan-Bolger, who falls for Peter on board a pirate ship, and who grows up to be the mother of Wendy, says, "To have faith is to have wings," and proceeds to levitate before our eyes—a piece of astonishment that is manufactured by actors pushing down on the opposite end of the ladder she is sitting on, turning it into a seesaw.

For most of the play, which begins in Victorian England, in 1885, Peter is known only as the Boy, a name that signals his psychological emptiness. Whipped, abandoned, sold into slavery, and deprived of self, he has experienced a kind of soul murder. "I hate, I hate, I *hate* grownups!" the Boy says, with ample justification. He is one of three filthy orphans—the other two are Prentiss (Carson Elrod) and Ted (David Rossmer)—collectively labelled the Lost Boys, and referred to by the pirates who abuse them as "mules," "food for snakes," "garbage," and "pigs." Their impoverishment is so severe that when Molly offers to read them a bedtime story, they don't know what she means: they've never had a bed. Molly apologizes for her insensitivity, but the Boy interrupts with words that bring her and the audience up short: "You say 'sorry' so easy, like the rough patch's smoothed over, no hard feelings, and everything's fixed. Well, no. There's dark, a . . . a *mass* of darkness in the world, and if you get trapped in that cave like us, it beats you down. 'Sorry' can't fix it." This strategic speech—the Boy's only real moment of eloquence—keeps hurt at the center of the high

jinks; it also mightily raises the stakes of the play.

Molly and her father carry amulets filled with magic "starstuff," which has the power "to break the oldest of nature's laws." This is the MacGuffin that finally liberates the Boy from what weighs him down. It is released into the sea when the pirate ship capsizes, and the Boy, who can't swim, paddles on



Chanler-Berat and Borle as archenemies in "Peter and the Starcatcher."

Molly's trunk to Mollusk Island. The starstuff allows an array of local fish along the way to mutate, with a nod to "South Pacific" (the music is by Wayne Barker), into mermaids, mostly of the hairy-chested, bearded, hula-skirted variety. "We'll never be fish again because— / Starstuff / Made a mermaid outta me! / . . . It makes you what you wanna be!" they sing at the opening of Act II.

Of course, the Boy's exploits wouldn't be memorable without an archenemy. The pirate captain Black Stache (Christian Borle), a dyslexic prince of darkness, expertly fits the bill. A whirl-

wind of menace and malaprops, Stache is all swash and no buckle, straight out of pantomime heaven. "Now you're likely wondering, can the fellow before you be entirely evil? Can no compassion uncrease this furrowed brew?" he says. "Brow," his piratical lieutenant, Smee (Kevin Del Aguila), interrupts. As written, Stache is a compendium of comic influences: he owes his angular outline and his "face foliage" to Groucho; his bravura ignorance to Kevin Kline's character in "A Fish Called Wanda"; and his foppish swagger to Tim Curry in "The Rocky Horror Picture Show." Stache's jokes work the delicious trick of mocking the adult world while staying in the realm of child's play. He declares a hidden treasure chest "as elusive as a Philip Glass opera"; when it proves to be empty, he pronounces it as "clean as the sheets in a convent." Stache, who lives by the pirate code of "one for all and all for me," finally names Peter and tries to win him over to his nasty pirate crew. "You need to connect, Peter," he says. "No man is an archipelago." When, in a fury at the empty chest, Stache inadvertently slams the lid down on his own hand, he gets in a full minute's worth of mug-

ging, before accusing Peter of "single-handedly" rendering him "single-handed." "You cut your hand off, not me," Peter protests. "Oh, pity the child who lives in a fact-based world!" Stache replies, clambering onto the chest. "You may think my ship has sailed, but I have an *armada* of options at my former fingertips."

At his exit, Stache warns Peter to watch out for his return. "For just when you least expect it, there I'll be! The Stache, right under yer nose!" He starts to leave, then stops and turns to the audience. "Clap if you believe!" he says. And we do. ♦