

A 'Peter Pan' For All Ages

By ELLEN MCCARTHY
Washington Post Staff Writer

Olney Theatre Center will open its curtains next week on a production that explores the meaning of time and of family, of life and death, love and loss.

It's called "Peter Pan — The Musical."

The play had been on the company's calendar for several years, long preceding the arrival of Eve Muson. But when the longtime Boston University theater professor joined the company and was tasked with directing the children's classic, she decided one thing: This "Peter Pan" would fix its gaze on those too old to exist in Neverland.

The play "is utterly delightful, of course," Muson says. "But it's also about our very complicated relationship with growing up and the passage of time. It speaks to children and to adults as well."

When Muson began thinking about the play last winter, she found herself envisioning an adult cast. "And I wondered why I was jumping to that conclusion," she recalls.

She threw herself into researching the story of "Peter Pan," which was written by J.M. Barrie, a childless man whose first draft was completed in the early 1900s. It was based on stories he frequently told to a family of five rambunctious boys. (Barrie would eventually become guardian of the brothers after their parents died.)

Muson says that what struck her most profoundly about "Peter Pan," the story of a timeless boy's adventures with the Darling children, Wendy, John and Michael, was that "it's an adult's yearning and observation and idealization of childhood. It's not a child's point of view." And in casting adults, the production would be mirroring that vantage point, a grown-up's reimagining of youth.

The casting also allows the production to plumb more depth out of the story, exploring themes that are often glossed over in kid-centric versions. Without changing the fabric of the story, for instance, Muson has ratcheted up the complexity of the relationship between Peter and Captain Hook. In that complexity, she says, lies the tension that always results as one generation usurps another.

Muson wanted a cast of adults, and she wanted one thing more: that Peter be played by a man. The role has been performed by women since its first production, even though Barrie objected to that tradition.

The author "always imagined Peter as an utterly boyish little boy," Muson says. "He's a rough-and-tumble, dirty, impish, volatile, lovable, maddening little boy."

Peter Pan — The Musical

Olney Theatre Center,
2001 Olney-Sandy
Spring Rd.
301-924-3400.
www.olneytheatre.org.

Nov. 19-Jan. 4.
\$25-\$48, with discount
tickets for children.



BY STAN BAROUH

Patricia Hurley and Daniel Townsend as Wendy and Peter in Olney's "Peter Pan — The Musical." The adult cast and the costumes aim to dispel preconceived notions of the classic children's tale. Below, a sketch of Captain Hook's costume by designer Pei Lee.

The director wanted her Peter to be that way, too. To Muson the meat of the tale is the affection between Peter and Wendy, two children playing at being grown up and truly falling in love even though only one of them will ever really grow up.

"I was interested in the romance between them and the heart-break between them," she says. "He can't love her the way she wants."

Some of Muson's colleagues initially balked at the idea of a male Peter, and she agreed to audition men and women for the part. But the more actors she saw, the more she became convinced that it had to be a man. And even then she struggled to find one who embodied the "wicked glee" she wanted in a Peter.

Though actors from all over the East Coast auditioned, the role went to Daniel Townsend, a 20-year-old Howard County native. Townsend "just gets how to combine open-heartedness with playfulness," Muson says. "And he's extremely cute."

While casting was underway, musical director Christopher Youstra worked to revise the music to fit the voices of adult singers, including the deep range of a grown-up Peter Pan.

Muson's production is still very much ap-

propriate for children, but in giving it layers of maturity, she stripped away some of the leafy-green ambiance.

"I was interested in a very spare, modern design," she says. It's a big, open stage where mood shifts are denoted by light and projection. The costumes, too, are meant to capture the essence of each character without deference to Disney or the audience's preconceived notions of Hook, Tinker Bell or the Lost Boys.

"They're wonderful and beautiful and different and funny," Muson says of the interpretations by costume designer Pei Lee.

Muson hopes that the combination of all these elements will result in a nuanced production that appeals equally to kids and adults. "If we get it right, there's the possibility for this wonderful doubleness: that we see [the characters] as kids and we see what their adult urges are."

Even more, Muson hopes that adults in the audience can chase down some shadow of themselves through the story of Peter Pan.

"I want them to laugh and have their spirits be lifted by Peter's joy," she says. "And I also want them to be moved by our own mourning for childhood."



BY PEI LEE

the war has come between old friends and acquaintances.

— P.M.

Saturday at 8, Sunday at 3 and 7:30,
Wednesday and Thursday at 7:30. 1529 16th
St. NW. 800-494-8497.

★ KOOZA

At the Plateau at National Harbor through
Dec. 14

Cirque du Soleil's latest effort is more knockabout than knockout, more Keystone Kops and high-wire acts than luxuriously upholstered bohemian fantasia. Mostly, though, it has first-rate performers doing

jaw-dropping things. Where to begin — with the three contortionists whose bodies are pliant as warm Play-Doh? The gasps are universal as they arch backward, touching their heads to their backs. But wait, there's also the Wheel of Death, a large, metal swinging contraption powered by two men. The flawless performers include juggler Anthony Gatto, who cascades clubs so rapidly they look like a school of fish around his head. This isn't a design-intensive show. Instead, its signature image is of an innocent trying to fly a kite. The act's pleasures aren't quite that simple, but they don't feel that far removed.

— N.P.

Friday and Saturday at 4 and 8, Sunday at 1
and 5, Tuesday and Wednesday at 8 and
Thursday at 4 and 8. 201 Harborview
Avenue, Oxon Hill. 877-628-5427 or
800-678-5440.

★ THE LIEUTENANT OF INISHMORE

At Signature Theatre through Sunday

A gloriously macabre immersion awaits you in this riotous comedy that, of all the crazy things, milks Irish terrorism for laughs. A word to the faint of heart: It's crude, it's noisy, it's messy in there. Which of course is the only way to send up a history of pointless carnage. The pleasure of the piece

is the manner in which it makes a farce of violence and, after all the mayhem subsides, builds to one last, brutally funny joke. The play's plot concerns a sadistic terrorist hightailing it home to Inishmore at some distressing news. For though he blithely tortures people, Padraic (Karl Miller) harbors a soft spot for Wee Thomas, whom his own wary father (John Lescault) gingerly informs Padraic is feeling poorly. That Wee Thomas is a cat will set in motion a series of twists leading to a wild rendezvous at Pop's cottage. McDonagh's humor is a wondrous mix of the sick and sublime. These nut jobs could be unbearable if not handled with care, with a

clear idea of the Irish stereotypes that the dramatist is making fun of.

— P.M.

Friday at 8, Saturday at 2 and 8 and Sunday
at 2 and 7. 4200 Campbell Ave., Arlington.
703-820-9771 or 202-397-7328.

★ PLAYING FROM THE HEART

At Imagination Stage through Nov. 30

Rhythms dance through Imagination Stage's exceptionally affecting drama — not that you'd expect otherwise. After all,

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