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Strike A Note Of Wonder: A Director's Adventures In Peter Pan

Brianna A. Sloane

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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STRIKE A NOTE OF WONDER:
A DIRECTOR'S ADVENTURES IN *PETER PAN*

A Thesis Presented

by

BRIANNA A. SLOANE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2014

Department of Theater

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A DIRECTOR'S ADVENTURES IN PETER PAN

A Thesis Presented
by
BRIANNA A. SLOANE

Approved as to style and content by:

Gilbert McCauley, Chair

Harley Erdman, Member

Regina Kaufmann, Member

Christopher Baker, Member

Penny Remsen, Department Chair
Department of Theater

DEDICATION

To everyone who helped me fly

Especially

To Andrew and our first descendant, soon to arrive from the Isle of Birds:
May you always wear a child's outlook on life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I want to thank my husband Andrew for his infinite patience, sense of humor and compassion - and for always making sure I didn't go hungry when I was deep in the work.

I would like to thank my MFA directing colleagues Jared Culverhouse and Glenn Proud for their support from within the thick of it.

This production would simply not be what it was if it wasn't for the wonderful, moving and inspiring conversations with my advisor, Professor Gil McCauley, who often asked me questions I couldn't answer and would have to go in search of.

I must acknowledge with humble gratitude the brilliant cast, all thirty of you, and the incredible *Peter Pan* team: Amy Brooks, Tori Clough, Miguel Romero, Stacie St. Louis, James Horban, Emily Taradash, Michael Blagys, Annelise Nielsen, my sweet Andrew Roberts and the incredibly supportive Sheila Siragusa.

Finally, a shout out to the entire Theatre Department, the amazing faculty, staff, graduate and undergraduate students who have made these three years so incredible. Thanks especially to Gil McCauley, Gina Kaufmann, Harley Erdman, Chris Baker and Julie Nelson for your invaluable guidance.

ABSTRACT

STRIKE A NOTE OF WONDER:

A DIRECTOR'S ADVENTURES IN *PETER PAN*

MAY 2014

BRIANNA A. SLOANE, B.A., HAMPSHIRE COLLEGE

M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Gilbert McCauley

This written portion of my thesis documents how I, as Director, set about to bring J.M. Barrie's classic, *Peter Pan* to the contemporary stage. I take the reader through my in-depth research into Barrie's many adaptations of his story, seeking an understanding of the evolution of *Peter Pan* and noting major elements that were retained across time and those that were changed, in search of the "true" story of *Peter Pan*. I explore how my discoveries informed design choices, were folded into rehearsals, and ultimately arrived on stage.

In seeking the backbone of a classic, the vast interpretive history of *Peter Pan* and its many adaptations also gave me a sense of freedom to make my own changes. I discuss the major re-imagining of Tiger Lily and the Redskins to become the collaboratively created Never Landers, a dance ensemble of otherworldly characters sprung from the land itself.

I explore the major themes I identified in the play and discuss decisions to bring darkness, longing and loneliness to the stage rather than glossing over the complex elements of the story in order to create something cute for children. Finally, I offer an

exploration of the production process as a major collaboration with many artists and consider various elements of my collaborations with the design team, fight director, dance choreographer, and the actors.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I was a little girl, I was captivated by Peter Pan. I found his cockiness charming and hilarious. I wanted to walk in his footsteps, to deny the ridiculous adult world, to stay a joyful little child forever. I belted out the songs from the musical while swinging through the treetops at the local park. I made a solemn pact with my best friend never to grow up. I wished on every star that someday, I would fly. Peter Pan permeated my child imagination so completely that when I look back now, I have no recollection of how I came to know him. Indeed, Barrie's *Peter Pan* has been so widely adapted, and in so many forms, that it can arguably be considered folklore.

As I grew older, I fell in love with Barrie's novel, *Peter and Wendy*, for qualities beyond Peter Pan's personal charms and what he represented. I found a deeply satirical portrait of Edwardian England's rising middle class, a whimsical peek into a fairyland of absolute magic, a rollicking adventure story, a complex and bitter-sweet portrait of childhood, a meditation on love and change, and a somewhat regrettable (to my modern tastes) use of early twentieth century stereotypes, all wrapped into one dazzling story.

It felt like a natural step to propose a production of Barrie's play for my thesis, all these many years after first love struck, and I am grateful that the Theatre Department selected a season that would allow me to follow a natural attraction. I believe that there is something of great value to be shared in this play that has endured, with regular productions, for over 100 years, and I became curious to get to know it better and to identify that intangible quality that has made the play a classic.

I began the production process with an in-depth reading of Barrie's many adaptations of his story, seeking an understanding of the evolution of *Peter Pan* and noting major elements that were retained across time by the author and those that were changed. I set out to find the "true" story of *Peter Pan* to bring to the production, delving into various aspects of the story's creation and early appearances of Peter Pan in Barrie's writing to find the deepest understanding possible. I was seeking the backbone of a classic, but the vast interpretive history of *Peter Pan* and its many adaptations, even by the author himself, also gave me a sense of freedom to make my own changes.

It became my goal to reintroduce the world of 2014 to the Peter Pan of 1904, without creating a "museum piece" or replicating the theatrical style of 100 years ago, and allowing space for respectful adaptation. Coupling historical research with a dedication to making ethical choices about representation on stage, I stepped foot into the fantasy world of *Peter Pan*.

At the beginning of the production process, I asked my design team to read Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy*, which I have come to believe is the most comprehensive version of Barrie's story. Universally, designers were struck by unexpectedly dark tones and surprised by the heartbreak so prevalent in the experience of many of the characters. Their reading deepened my understanding that sorrow, longing and danger are intrinsic to the heart of the story.

Design conversations were shaped around a commitment to explore the shadows and to create a Never Land filled with real danger, as a fantasy world actually come to life would surely be. We resolved to highlight the darkness alongside the joy, and to be careful not to gloss over the complex aspects of the story. We also decided that we had a

certain responsibility in representing a “classic,” and that certain production elements, especially costume, would have to balance expectation with new interpretation.

I imagine that a post-Disney and post-musical *Peter Pan* audience might expect something cartoonishly bright from this play, perhaps a product of a cultural movement away from darkness in children’s stories, but I wanted to place *Peter Pan* in its original context of nineteenth century adventure stories and the legacy of fairytales. I set out with my customary trust for an audience that could love and understand the production, whatever their ages, expectations or past experiences with the story.

In my research I discovered a story of opposites wound so closely together they contain and define one another. This is a story with not one but two central protagonists (interesting to note that the novel was published under the title *Peter and Wendy* though it is often known today just as *Peter Pan*) whose coming together enables the adventures they share. I was drawn into a complex dichotomy wherein Peter, the wonderful boy, was as heartbroken and vulnerable as he was joyous and brassy. Perhaps this is why he forgets, so heartlessly and regularly. I came to see Wendy’s fantasy played out in Never Land – though a world defined by boyish adventures and Peter’s rules, she embodies the organizing force of storytelling, of remembering, and is celebrated and cherished for her otherness by the Lost Boys. At last, she is a “lady” and treated with due respect she does not receive at home among her brothers. Yet being a lady is a limiting role to play, and Wendy is caught between being the one girl in Never Land and her brother John’s civilizing reminders that being the girl means she can’t always play the boy’s games.

I became intrigued by the dual forces pulling these children: childhood vs. growing up, longing vs. the joy of the present, and what their navigation of the world

through role-play illuminated about the world they were mimicking. Exploring these opposites and how they defined one another on stage became a central goal for the production.

In this production I aimed to stay truthful to a deepened understanding of the story in its early twentieth century context by balancing, through design and staging, images of loneliness, sorrow and longing with the boisterous joyfulness of play. I set forth to honor the classic while allowing space for respectful changes in order to address issues of representation. I worked to bring thematic elements of the story to life by enriching the 1904 play script with use of the novel in rehearsal. I sought, with my collaborating fight director, assistant director and choreographer, to create an actor-driven rehearsal culture based in play in order to embody an experience of *Peter Pan* that would ultimately be brought to the stage.

CHAPTER 2

LAYING A FOUNDATION

My process as a director has been consistently characterized by starting with questions, and then heavily immersing myself in research. I have a dramaturgical way of thinking, and early in the process my analysis of a play is grounded in historical context. Learning about the playwright, the origins of the work, and especially going deeply into the socio-cultural elements of its setting sparks my imagination while giving me access points by which to enter the work. I also tend to do a huge amount of visual research, which is rooted in history, intuition, feeling and artistic taste, and the shared database of over 1500 digital images collected by me and my design team can attest to the use of visual research for this production. These images were used practically for a range of purposes: from sparking general inspiration and feeling, to identifying color and tone that could be translated through design to the stage, to placing us in history.

For *Peter Pan*, I found my research into the personal life of the playwright, and the many forms his story has taken, much more dominant and intriguing than the wider “world-view” contextualizing I might normally pursue. Perhaps this speaks to the singularity of Barrie’s work and vision. *Peter Pan* has been widely adapted by other artists over the last century, but even in the first decades of its life the story was continuously re-worked by the author himself. He seems to have been continuously exploring possibilities for the story, and the play went unpublished for twenty-four years following its 1904 premiere. The novel was published much earlier, in 1911, and the final published play of 1928 directly mirrors much of the action in the novel, though it does have some significant differences as well. It was my early and exhaustive foray into all of

these versions of Peter's story that most informed the first stages of the production process.

I should point out that Barrie's "singular" vision, so often credited, might be a misleading way to think about the creation and development of *Peter Pan*. Barrie practiced co-narration, "telling stories *with* children rather than *to* them," and spent a large amount of time with children, especially the five Lewellyn Davies boys whom he adopted, playing with them, "fishing, staging pirate games, and most important, improvising tales" (Tatar, xlv). Barrie's practice was to tell the boys about their own adventures in a factual manner, often basing his stories on their games or play. He later wrote: "I would say: 'Then you came along and killed a pirate' and they would accept every word as the truth. That's how *Peter Pan* came to be written. It is made up of only a few stories I told them" (Tatar xlvi).

Figure 1: Michael Lewellyn Davies playing Peter Pan



This co-narrating process may be a clue into what makes *Peter Pan* so appealing to adults and children alike. It was interesting for me to think about the many evolutions a story must take when it is exchanged back and forth with children and played out through games. When I later reached rehearsal, I would try to model my own take on co-narration, spending time with the actors improvising adventures based in the story, and bringing elements of those adventures to the stage, either literally or through the cultivation of a child-like experience the actors could return to and draw upon. I was inspired by the collective nature of a co-narrated story, and aimed to give actors a sense of ownership while firmly guiding the production.

Before the actors entered the picture, before conversation with designers, my intention as a director was to get to know all manifestations of Peter Pan, the boy and the myth. Setting out to work on the production, I found that what I most wanted or needed to know in order to make my own choices was reliant on getting to know the story itself – Barrie’s story – in all its manifestations. In order to better understand the themes, characters and evolution of what ultimately ended up on stage in his 1904 production, I set out with dramaturg Amy Brooks to uncover the lineage of *Peter Pan*. Reading these variant tales of Peter and discussing them with Amy enriched my reading of the play and led directly to many decisions about how I would work with designers and performers in this production, as I will describe below.

Peter Pan through Time: From Story to Stage

1902: *The Little White Bird, or Adventures in Kensington Gardens* by J.M. Barrie

In Peter Pan's first literary appearance, he is seven days old and runs away from home to the Island of Birds in Kensington Gardens where all children are hatched. In these chapters, Peter notably goes "part way" with dead children and sometimes buries them, an association he had lost by the time the novel and play were published but an interesting fact of his origins, linking him to an other-worldliness and immortality that stayed true aspects of his nature through the many adaptations. I found the Peter Pan who survives many future literary and theatrical appearances to be clearly linked to the adventures his baby self has in this book.

Not a bird, not a fairy, no longer living like a human, he is called "Betwixt-and-Between," a name that describes his singularity and equally the source of his captivating difference, magical nature, and his loneliness. Even his marvelous capacity for pretend can be linked to his otherness, to his desire to understand and be accepted by real children.

Recognizing this difference and desire in Peter, it became important for me to consider Peter the Outsider in the play, where he did belong (if anywhere) and where he stood apart. This also led me to questions about Wendy, and how she stood as different or akin to Peter and what this illuminated about each of them. In my directing, I decided it was important to consider both children as protagonists, and to identify the places they delight, satisfy or frustrate the other. This relationship, for me, is the core of the play.

The Little White Bird bears many clues into Wendy's origins, though she is not a character in the story. Peter meets a fiery little girl named Maisey, certainly the precursor to Wendy, in the garden after lock-out time and in danger from the cold, and instructs the fairies to build a little house around her. Wendy gets a house in a similar way in the play and novel. Peter also exchanges "thimbles" with Maisey, (Wendy teaches him to kiss in the play and novel and exchanges an actual thimble from her sewing basket for an acorn button), and suggests they get married (alas for Wendy, this proposal remains her greatest unanswered wish). Also notable is Peter's thrush's nest, which he uses to navigate the river like a little boat, clearly linked to the Neverbird's nest that rescues Peter on the Lagoon in the play and novel. Many elements of the later story are evident in this first appearance of Peter Pan.

Also a critical discovery for me was the room for change Barrie writes into the myth. The story of *Peter Pan*, from the very beginning, is not made up of rigid rules, but evolves depending on who is doing the telling. In the first descriptions of Peter, Barrie writes:

If you ask your mother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a little girl she will say, "Why, of course, I did, child," and if you ask her whether he rode on a goat in those days she will say, "What a foolish question to ask; certainly he did." Then if you ask your grandmother whether she knew about Peter Pan when she was a girl, she also says, "Why, of course, I did, child," but if you ask her whether he rode on a goat in those days, she says she never heard of his having a goat. Perhaps she has forgotten, just as she sometimes forgets your name and calls you Mildred, which is your mother's name. Still, she could hardly forget such an important thing as the goat. Therefore there was no goat when your grandmother was a little girl. This shows...that Peter is ever so old, but he is really always the same age, so that does not matter in the least. His age is one week, and though he was born so long ago he has never had a birthday, nor is

there the slightest chance of his ever having one. The reason is that he escaped from being a human when he was seven days' old; he escaped by the window and flew back to the Kensington Gardens.

This flexibility written into the very nature of the story reflects Barrie's future work adapting and re-telling it. As a director, I felt a sense of permission to bend the rules, to be involved in a sort of co-narration with Barrie himself, taking his story and passing it on to the world through the filter of my own storytelling. My goal was always to serve the play, but I came to understand that making my own choices could be a part of that service. This was critical to me in ethically addressing *Tiger Lily*, as I will discuss in Chapter Two.

Also of particular importance to me in *The Little White Bird* is an anecdote wherein Peter cleverly wins a wish from the fairies and is allowed to fly home to see his mother, whose loneliness haunts him. But when he arrives the window is barred and there is a new baby in his bed. This story, so linked to the Changeling tales in Celtic folklore, turns up in later versions as well, as a memory of Peter's past that informs much of how he navigates the world.

After casting, I brought this anecdote (which also appears in the text of the play) to Emma Ayres, who played Peter, as something to pay particularly close attention to. It was illuminating to me that Peter did make the choice to go home, even just for a reassuring peek, and was met instead with a tragic sense of being forgotten. What would it mean to this outsider boy to have tried to go home and been barred out? How would this inform his relationships to the other children, Lost Boys and Darlings alike? This special knowledge could give him status, a terrible secret, a melancholy world-view, an opposing

outlook to Wendy's utter faith in her parents awaiting her. It became a touchstone for our explorations of Peter in rehearsal.

27th Dec, 1904: *Peter Pan, or the Boy who would Not Grow Up* by J.M. Barrie

The play premiered after a secretive rehearsal process at London's Duke of York Theatre. Though Barrie would have preferred a child in the role, labor laws forbade it, thus Nina Boucicault was the first professional actor to play Peter, establishing a century-long tradition of casting women in the role. Peter was no longer depicted as a baby, but a "wonderful boy." Witness accounts describe stunned silence when the curtain rose on a man in a dog costume turning down the beds in a cozy nursery - then uproarious applause.

Beginning the play with a dog (but really, an actor costumed as a dog who behaves like a human, except she performs her duties on four legs), seemed to me to be a major clue into the play. What does it mean that the first character we see is this dog? Early conversations with scenic designer Miguel Romero were fixated on this Dog-Nurse. Eventually it became clear to me that the entire world of the play is a fantasy, not just the world of Never Land as I had earlier imagined. This was a significant realization that changed my interpretation of the Darlings' London, placing it within the context of fantasy as well, and influencing both design choices and character development in rehearsal. Eventually published as "A Fantasy in Five Acts," the play's subtitle seemed to confirm the realization Miguel and I had come to.

The 1904 production utilized stage affects the likes of which no one had ever seen before, including a new flying mechanism invented for the play in collaboration with a

circus company. There was lavish scenery and a cast of nearly fifty actors in Barrie's "fairy play." When it came time to imagine our production, I was interested in the Victorian legacy but had no intention of replicating it for historical accuracy. I love a good spectacle but I am loathe to stage anything redundant or empty of purpose just to be flashy, an opinion strongly shared by Miguel, who kept me on task. I was, however, very interested in expressing this fantasy through marvelous visuals with the twist of keeping things purposeful and not just lavish. This was a major guiding principle of the scenic design, as I will discuss in Chapter Two.

Barrie subtitled the 1904 play "The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up." Almost twenty years and as many revivals later, a devastated Barrie would write in his diary after the death of the real-life Michael (Lewellyn Davies): "It is as if long after writing 'P.Pan' its true meaning came to me- Desperate attempt to grow up but can't" (Birkin 297). To my reading, the published play is rife with this notion, of the boy who *couldn't* grow up, whose bravado and fear, as well as the fun he is having, won't allow him to. Peter's vulnerabilities contradict his outer confidence regularly, as is pointed out by the sly narrative voice of the stage directions (92):

PETER (*passionately*). I don't want to go to school and learn solemn things. No one is going to catch me, lady, and make me a man. I want always to be a little boy and to have fun.
(*So perhaps he thinks, but it is only his greatest pretend*).

This quality of Peter Pan became one of his most intriguing to me and I started to look for the cracks in his façade in every scene. Where was Peter really brave and bold and where was he masking his terrible loneliness and fear of change? This question, so

connected to the memory of returning to find his mother's window barred, was central to my work with Emma in rehearsal.

The play ends in a pretty way with Wendy (and, inexplicably, the maid Liza) flying back to Never Land on brooms because they are starting to get too old to fly on their own. Wendy and Peter picturesquely make a domestic scene in her little house, which is now on top of the treetops where the fairies have relocated it at Peter's command. Peter has forgotten all his proceeding adventures with Captain Hook, but has managed not to forget Mother Wendy.

Outside of the longing on Wendy's part, and the smiling denial on Peter's, in their parting words, the closing scene was very dissatisfying to me and even felt trite. While I wanted primarily to bring the 1904 script back to the stage, I was not committed to being true to it blindly. Rather, I decided to look to other manifestations of the story to find the strongest dramatic arc for our final text.

1905: Barrie's play *Peter Pan* flies across the pond to open on Broadway, starring Maude Adams as Peter. It is equally lauded in the United States.

1906: *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* by J.M. Barrie

Peter's chapters from *The Little White Bird* were released to capitalize on the play's overwhelming success. Bound as a children's gift book, it included illustrations by Arthur Rackham. These illustrations would eventually become a major influence on this production's design choices, especially the scenic design created by Miguel Romero.

Figure 2: A favorite illustration by Arthur Rackham. Seven-day old Peter flies over an industrial London. Peter is soft and light in a world of smoke and brick.



22 February, 1908: *When Wendy Grew Up: An Afterthought*, by J.M. Barrie

For one performance only, an epilogue was performed as a surprise for Barrie's manager, Charles Frohman, who was coming to London from America for the final night of the 1907-08 Season. It was rehearsed secretly and played to a totally unsuspecting audience, with the purpose of answering the question "what happened when Wendy grew up?" that the author so often received. It takes place in the Darling Nursery many years later, where an adult Wendy must painfully reveal her grown-upness to a betrayed Peter.

Wendy, no longer playing at being mother but a real mother at last, must confront the decision whether to allow her daughter Jane to fly away in her place to be Peter's mother. It is a decision that comes immediately after Wendy's bedtime tale of heartbreak over her abandonment by a forgetful Peter. The question of why and how she would

make her decision, as well as the satisfaction I felt after encountering this ending, led me to decide early in the process that my production should conclude with Wendy grown up.

When it came to casting, it was important to me to find an actor who could play Wendy as both a child and an adult, so that she could fully embody the story. In some productions, Mrs. Darling is doubled as adult Wendy, but this felt like an incomplete journey for the audience. In rehearsals, I worked with Gwendolyn Tunnickliffe to explore through her physicality the difference in playing the role of mother to actually being a mother. Wendy the girl was exaggeratedly a dainty lady, as she wished to be perceived by the boys. We worked together to find a physical distinction for her when she was “playing mother,” a put-on sternness that could become overtly feminine and domestic. As an adult, Gwen’s Wendy was more natural and grounded. It was challenging to show maturity on the body of an actress who we had watched so long play a child.

Wendy chooses to let her daughter go, and creates a legacy of mothers for the boy who is betwixt-and-bewteen. She explains to an ancient Nana:

This is how I planned it if he ever came back...and when she grows up, I hope she will have a little daughter, who will fly away with him in turn – and in this way I may go on for ever and ever, Nana, so long as children are young and innocent (32).

Later, Barrie would use this scene to wrap up the novel, adding the word “heartless” to her description of children. I in turn added that word to Wendy’s text in the production. I believe that it does not connote intentional cruelty, but the careless selfishness of childhood that is so characteristic of Peter.

1911: *Peter and Wendy* by J.M. Barrie

Though Barrie refused to publish a continuously revised play, he adapted his work into a full-length novel, *Peter and Wendy*. In considering the novel, I worked very closely to compare the narrative voice, point of view, action and storyline to the play as it was eventually published in 1928. In countless ways, the novel mirrors the play, though it seemed in many ways to be a richer document. As one might expect from the two mediums, the play tells its story through dialogue and descriptive stage directions, while the novel's narrative voice manages to bounce around in time and through various consciences, illuminating the subtleties and inner worlds of the characters and adding insight into the humor and themes of the play. The following is the opening passage of the book:

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 (1).

I think it is important to note that, while the play was titled *Peter Pan*, the novel acknowledges Wendy as a protagonist in her own right. This opening passage alludes to Peter (the one child who does not grow up) and immediately positions him as the exception to normal children, who know they will grow up. Wendy is our example, and following this passage we encounter a description of Wendy extending (or supplanting) her mother's role in the house - "until Wendy came her mother was the chief one" –

setting up the theme of legacy that is central to the 1908 *Afterthought*, and I believe to Wendy's view of the world.

This is followed by a description of Mrs. Darling from Wendy's point of view - "her sweet mocking mouth had one kiss on it that Wendy could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner." The novel treats the reader to descriptive backstories as well as tongue-in-cheek satirical narration and thorough portraits of all of the characters.

While it would be impossible to bring all those riches into the production, the novel, I decided, would be the most excellent source to bring to designers and actors in order to deepen their reading of the play. I started the design process by asking all the collaborators to read the novel, which we discussed at our first meeting. James Horban, the lighting designer, was especially captivated by passages in the book describing color, mood and seasonal change in Never Land, which became building blocks for his design. Costume designer Emily Taradash expressed excitement with the enhanced sense of character she got from the novel, and there was a prevalent sense around the table that somehow people "got it." While reading the play alone had left designers feeling overwhelmed by long passages of stage directions and outdated language, there was a palpable excitement for the task of bringing this story to the stage after reading the novel. Barrie's book sparked the team's imaginations in a way that the play somehow did not.

I decided to bring this deeper reading of the story to the stage in a direct way, by filling out the production script with text from the novel. I added small sections of dialogue to scenes where the story felt incomplete or unclear. I used the novel to inform staging, working with the actors in rehearsal to translate passages from the book into

physical action, gesture and tableau. I analyzed the storyline of the Redskins from the novel and it became the task of Annelise Nielsen's choreography to narrate that story. Similarly, I discussed the descriptions of the battles in the novel with Andrew Roberts to inform his fight direction. The novel became in many ways the true working text of many scenes, and illuminated the story of the fights, choreography, relationships, tone and ultimately the entire production.

1924: *Peter Pan*: The Silent Film

Describing the capacity for film as a medium that could do things for Peter Pan that the stage could not do, Barrie wrote: "Strike a note of wonder...and whet the appetite for marvels" (Ohmer, 151). This felt like a touchstone for me and illuminated what having a "dog" onstage as the first character in a play could do, and what that choice revealed about the whole play as a fantasy world.

Barrie's screenplay and scenic titles were originally intended for a Charlie Chaplin film. The film is ultimately Americanized and made in Hollywood starring Betty Bronson as Peter and Anna May Wong as Tiger Lily. Tinkerbell was played by an actress minimized through the magic of film technology, rather than a ball of light. This film, with its heightened physical gesture typical of the silent era, would become another great inspiration and useful resource for me when it came time to work with the actors.

I re-watched the film several times, looking for the ways descriptive passages of the story were played out in a medium that uses so little dialogue. I was struck by particular moments, such as Mrs. Darling's ritual lighting of the nightlights or the

pirate/boy action on board the Jolly Roger. I used these physically expressive moments as inspiration for crafting my own staging with actors.

Perhaps more significantly, I was excited to have a resource I could turn performers towards to consider physical storytelling, gestural language and archetypical character types. The 1924 film was by far the closest we could get to showing actors an historical performance style evident in the structure of the play but perhaps too abstract to grasp without an example. I believe that watching clips from the film allowed actors to connect to the self-aware and presentational style I was asking them to explore, and to synthesize their rehearsal experience with a visual illustration.

1928: The Play is Published

Peter Pan was first published in an anthology of plays by Barrie. Gone were many scenes that played once or twice, or perhaps even for a full season, never to be heard from again. I managed to find vivid descriptions of some of these scenes, including “The Beautiful Mothers” in which the stage was flooded by fashionable ladies desperate to claim their missing progeny, and each Lost Boy went off with one of them under Peter’s direction (and Wendy and Mrs. Darling’s careful guidance, but they let him think he is in charge). But there seemed to be no dramatic reason to put them back on stage so they remained points of interest only.

Barrie’s play opens with a long dedication, “To the Five,” in which we see again hints of co-narration, or at least the major influence of the Lewellyn Davies boys on Barrie’s work and indeed their impact on his heart:

Some disquieting confessions must be made in printing at last the play of Peter Pan; among them this, that I have no recollection of having written it. Of that, however, anon. What I want to do first is to give Peter to the Five without whom he never would have existed. I hope, my dear sirs, that in memory of what we have been to each other you will accept this dedication with your friend's love. The play of Peter is streaky with you still, though none may see this save ourselves. A score of Acts had to be left out, and you were in them all...As for myself, I suppose I always knew that I made Peter by rubbing the five of you violently together, as savages with two sticks produce a flame. That is all he is, the spark I got from you.

Barrie's play also contains directions on the playing of it that I took to heart, a whittled down instruction from his earlier *Notes on a Fairy Play*: "All the characters," he writes, "whether grown-ups or babes, must wear a child's outlook on life as their only important adornment. If they cannot help being funny they are begged to go away. A good motto for all would be 'The little less, and how much it is'" (7).

I understood this to mean that every actor had to commit totally and to believe in the stakes of the play. Though their character might have satirical moments of expression, they could not make commentary or indicate the joke through their performance. In rehearsal, whenever actors seemed to play up a joke, I would call their attention to it and ask them to re-ground themselves in the story and the stakes. In this way, coached posthumously by Barrie, I believe we found the complexity in the story that came from utterly trusting the text, rather than making clever choices to call attention needlessly to what was already there.

In 1929, Barrie, in a typical act of philanthropy, passed *Peter Pan's* copyright to the Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital. They still hold the rights to both the play and the novel.

While the above timeline introduces many of the adaptations that I considered in the early stages of my work on this production, two others deserve special note. The first worth noting is the singular adaptation I consulted which is not by Barrie himself. John Caird and Trevor Nunn's 1982 version for the Barbican Theatre, home of the Royal Shakespeare Co., is a truly thorough adaptation drawn from the play, the novel and several early drafts by Barrie. The production introduces a Storyteller character, costumed to resemble Barrie, whose narration draws on stage directions and descriptive passages from the novel. Peter Pan was notably played by an adult male actor in the production, a controversial choice at the time.

I was interested in these choices, though I ultimately decided not to embody the text of the stage directions through a narrator or storyteller character as Caird and Nunn did. I believe that placing a literal storyteller on stage could potentially be a tyrannous element, placing the story strictly in the time, place and point of view of the Barrie-lookalike and taking it away from the children and the imaginations of the audience. Additionally, I was coming to understand the importance of Wendy as the storyteller.

Peter comes to the Darling Nursery window to listen to the stories Mrs. Darling tells. Wendy in turn becomes the keeper of tales, and Peter's favorites to hear are the ones about himself. Peter forgets; he lives only in the moment, necessary for his consequence-free existence. Wendy remembers. She becomes the timekeeper, the memory-builder. Throughout the play she tells stories, and indeed it is her stories that seem to be the greatest commerce she has to offer the boys. Her stories, which sometimes she tells just to keep Peter believing in himself, seem to be the primary thing that makes her the Mother among them. This raised an exciting dramatic question for me entering the

production. What does it mean that Wendy is the only Lost Girl? What is it about her, and how do she and Peter complete each other?

The second influential adaptation was Barrie's unpublished manuscript, *Anon: a Play in Three Acts*, which may be the earliest draft of the play. This three-act text originates many of the story elements that continue through the varied versions and mediums in which Barrie wrote. The family is called the Darlings, though some of their first names differ. Peter breaks through to their nursery and is described as "of extraordinarily quick movements as if made of air" (30), a quality no doubt left over from his days among the birds and one I made note to bring to the production through the actor's physicality.

In *Anon*, Wendy stalls very effectively when Peter tries to lure her away to Never Land. I had made note of this in Caird and Nunn's adaptation as well, and eventually I nearly doubled the dialogue between Peter and Wendy in the scene as published, in which Peter's ease at convincing Wendy seemed out of character and lowered the stakes.

There were other illuminating moments in *Anon* as well, that helped me to better understand the play. In Act II, Captain Hook delivers the cake he only alludes to in *Peter Pan*, but the most interesting thing about the scene is the description of the cake and the rising miasma that issues from it, which Wendy does away with by burning it (27). Amy Brooks was able to link this for me to the Edwardian terror of germs, and that was a very useful historical element to be aware of going into the production. As I got to know the play better and better in rehearsal, I realized that the Never Land we see is a fantasy indeed for the clean, pressed Darling children who lead such structured lives under the care of adults.

Following a reading of *Anon*, I met with Amy to discuss its usefulness and the ways it illuminated moments in *Peter Pan*. Out of that conversation came two more elements of great value to my understanding of the play's themes. The first was an image of Peter as mockingbird or raven-like, highlighting themes of mimicry and mockery in the children's games. The other was the image of letting a caged bird fly, which raised the thematic question for me of who in the story holds dearly onto the one they love, and who decides to let them go.

The Indians are much more active players in *Anon* than they are in the 1904 play. Rather than appearing only twice as in *Peter Pan*, their action is strung throughout the full narrative, leading me to conclude that Barrie had greater intentions for them originally. Also of interest: Wendy's irresistible storytelling prowess is what draws the Indians to sit around Peter's home, supporting the importance of Wendy's role as story-keeper. Ultimately, they are instrumental in the final fight on board the pirate ship. Recognizing their much more active role in *Anon* was illuminating and useful in my consideration of the Natives and their role in the story, which was a subject of a great deal of thought and discussion.

Finally, after deep readings and research into these many adaptations, I felt like I had a grasp on the narrative, and a solid idea about what had survived many revisions and what had ultimately been let go. As I went into design conversations, casting, and rehearsal, I was able to verbally articulate what I wanted to ultimately see on stage. I had strengthened my understanding of the characters, themes and the dark and lonely underbelly of a story filled with joy, play and the incredible.

CHAPTER 3

STIRRING THE IMAGINATION

I believe *Peter Pan* is a complex story filled with dualities and paradoxes, archetypal yet well-rounded characterizations, a self-aware performativity punctuated with magic, and a deep understanding of what it is to navigate (and replicate) the world through imaginative play. After looking into various aspects of the story's creation to find the deepest understanding possible, I set out to create a production that could be appealing to both children and adults.

Probing the story, I was fascinated by both Peter and Wendy as protagonists, and how each came together with or stood out from the other. Similarly fascinating are the ways Pan and Hook mirror each other. I was drawn into themes of longing for what cannot be; transformation and transportation; civil order and wildness; wonder and play; the inevitability or fear of change; holding or releasing what is loved; storytelling and forgetting; childhood and adulthood; mimicry and mockery. It would be my challenge to root out these elements in my directing, and to maintain what I found most true or most important in the story through the many byways of communication in a major collaboration.

The production was indeed a major collaborative effort. Ultimately I was working with thirty actors, a fight director, a choreographer, puppeteers, a professional stage-flying company, and a substantial production team with myriad assistants. We featured original music by Emma Ayres, utilizing both Barrie's lyrics as found in the play and W.B. Yeats' poem, *The Stolen Child*:

Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild

With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

This snippet of the poem became the lyrics for the lullaby, which is left open in the published script. It was chosen as representative of the qualities of fairyland – a place to escape the sorrows of the world and stay a child forever, preserving innocence – indicative of Barrie's Never Land. Having Mrs. Darling sing it in innocence of her children's soon-to-be disappearance added a sinister tone for me, and the song took on a doubleness as a sweet tune from home, as seductive as Peter and his adventures, and a promise of the sorrow of separation.

This production was a substantial collaboration that gave me the opportunity to explore the creative energy of many inspiring artists, including of course the playwright, and to further my vision of directing as an embodiment of a unifying force at the helm, guiding the work and standing up for the integrity of the story, exploring darkness and joy, balancing Peter and Wendy as protagonists, and setting the rules of the Darling's world against the wildness and adventure of Never Land.

Collaboration with Designers

At the beginning of the design process, after researching Barrie's many adaptations of *Peter Pan*, I asked my design team to read Barrie's novel *Peter and Wendy*. Across the board, the designers were surprised by the tone of the novel, its darkness and danger and willingness to explore heartbreak and loneliness. Less surprising to them but also acknowledged was the humor and playfulness of the story. We pledged to have a matching willingness to be shadowed, dark and dangerous

rather than falling into the trap of an idea that a show children may enjoy should only be saccharine, bright or cute. This decision was not the same as setting an intention to be frightening or inaccessible to children. Rather it was an acknowledgement that sand-blasting away the “darker” elements of the story in place of a candy-coated version would not only compromise the story and fail to serve the play, it would fail to serve the children.

It was important to acknowledge that from the first moment, this play is a fantasy - the first character we meet is a dog working as a nurse, or more specifically a person in a dog costume. We may choose to believe she is a real dog or enjoy the illusion, but the significance of this character for me is the recognition that even the Nursery is a fantasy of British middle-class domestic life. While scenically we agreed that the Darling’s world should be architectural and aurally “British” in juxtaposition to a natural and Celtic-sounding Never Land, the “world of the play” must be big enough to hold both these places in it. I will describe the choices that created our two halves of this world here.

The Nursery

Though it was initially a spatial consideration for the flying system, the designers and me stumbled upon an exciting way to represent the Nursery that I think is exemplary of our commitment to steeping the whole world in fantasy. While it is apparently typical for productions of *Peter Pan* to have a fairly standardized ground-plan, stemming from the musical and including a fireplace with mantle and beds and

window in a particular arrangement, we wanted to create our own vision of the Darling's domestic space. As Barrie describes it in the opening of Act I:

The blind (which is what Peter would have called the theatre curtain if he had ever seen one) rises on that top room, a shabby little room if Mrs. Darling had not made it the hub of creation by her certainty that such it was, and adorned it to match with a loving heart and all the scrapings of her purse... (6).

Based on our discussion of the play and novel, we decided that what the Nursery must be is a children's space in a tidy lower middle-class house in Bloomsbury, London, 1900-1905. Cozy, but properly done, tidy with a mother's touch, this is not a space of material wealth but it is filled with wealth of the heart. Scenic designers Miguel Romero and Stacie St. Louis worked to create an intimate place in the lavish spaciousness of the Rand Theater. They brought intimacy to the space and framed the picture with a portal mimicking the shape of an attic ceiling (Miguel was especially charmed by an image from the novel of the children bonking their heads on the low ceiling when they flew). They kept the Nursery bare-bones, stocked with only what was necessary in true Edwardian fashion. Lighting Designer James Horban created a dark night-time with plenty of shadows for stealthy children, and sneaky flying boys, to hide in, and created a stunning star-drop in the background, setting the Darlings against the night sky.

Within this space on this Friday night the parents get ready to depart for dinner. The pre-bedtime ritual is enacted to the warmth of candle light. Stories are spun and played out (this is a place of stories, and Mrs. Darling and Wendy must be champion storytellers, for Peter Pan is called to their window), Fathers throw childish tantrums;

Nurse-Guardians are chained up outside when they should be inside at their post.

Nightlights are left in charge.

The Darling Nursery becomes a place of marvelous things when Peter breaks through, a place of seduction, longing, magic, shadow dancing and flight. Ultimately, it becomes a place that is left behind. Barrie describes a ripple that goes through the space upon the arrival of Peter Pan, somehow making it more alive. This was a moment where sound and lighting worked together to build a sense of suspense, a deepening of the night before the moment things change. The nightlights blink out, a ball of light “no bigger than your fist,” accompanied by the sound of bells, darts this way and that. Michael Blagys, the sound designer, wanted Tinkerbell to communicate through bell-like flute sounds, linking her to what he imagined as a Celtic sounding Never Land and creating more variety in her demeanor than he believed bells could accomplish.

James had also felt strongly about re-imagining Tinkerbell, imaging early in the process a light source that could be more directly interactive with the actors than a laser. We had a vision of a Tinkerbell who could land on Peter’s shoulder or be closed in a child’s hand. We considered some puppet options but all our tactile solutions lacked elegance or seemed like they would get in the way. Eventually it was decided that a laser was traditional for a reason, and was the most practical way to go.

Our Nursery was a sweet and simple place bearing only the necessities, foreign only to Peter, the other-worlder. For me, the magic of the Nursery was in its secret. Recognizing that the children traditionally fly out through the window, but faced with a need to open up our intimate space for the visual feast of the flying, we questioned the meaning of the through-the-window flight. We realized that the act of

flying itself was the portal, and the whole world could respond with a transformation of its own. We pictured *opening*, a camera lens widening its aperture to take in more and more. Thus it was decided that, at the moment of transformation when all the rules change, the Lost Boys would rush on at Peter's call and dismantle the Nursery before our eyes, leaving the Darlings free to soar in front of the stars.

The Never Land

“Never Land is a theater for the imagination” –Maria Tatar

It was very important to Miguel and me to create a set design that sought to evoke imagination rather than to illustrate location. While we wanted to create a strong visual contrast to the architecture of the Darling's world, we did not want to have to bring on multiple set pieces in order to swap locations in Never Land the five times demanded by the story. Rather, we were looking for a solution that could suggest five distinct places without losing the rapid transitions or the sense of a small island where all adventures are squished together. Never Land is a compact place, described by Barrie in the novel thus:

Of all delectable islands the Neverland is the snuggest and most compact, not large and sprawly, you know, with tedious distances between one adventure and another, but nicely crammed. When you play at it by day with the chairs and table-cloth, it is not in the least alarming, but in the two minutes before you go to sleep it becomes very real. That is why there are night-lights (14).

Independently, he and I had both come to the idea that shadow puppetry would be an exciting element to utilize in this play. After all, if Peter hadn't come

back for his shadow, there would be no adventure at all. Further research unveiled a silhouette-based illustrative style popular for Edwardian children's books and, with this additional discovery, using shadow puppetry in Never Land became a commitment. We agreed there was nothing better to invite and incite imaginative work on the part of the audience.

Utilizing the silhouettes to establish location allowed for one central set design in Never Land. Miguel's vision was a massive backdrop covered in organic shapes that could be vines or tree branches. Central on the drop were three portals where the overhead projectors would direct their light and the shadow puppets would be seen. Center stage was another organic structure, a raised platform with a driftwood-like facing that would serve as everything from the rood of the Lost Boys' underground house to Marooner's Rock to the deck of the Jolly Roger. This platform was connected to a ramp leading offstage and a small platform downstage.

All the staging in Never Land took place around this central structure, with simple objects carried on and off stage by the actors themselves, such as the mushroom chimney of the Lost Boys' house, or the seats and props of the home below. The most dramatic changes were in the Lagoon, where, through a nod to Victorian Toy Theatres, we created a diorama of puppet-tailed mermaids and fabric waves; and the pirate ship, which included a mast and ship wheel in addition to many crates, nets, barrels and a trap door. The complex scene onboard the Jolly Roger was set during the intermission, allowing the transitions within Never Land to be as simple and fluid as we had imagined.

The production team's vision of Never Land developed further to embrace the idea of a magical island, expressed as a responsive, possibly sentient space. In the novel, the island itself is out looking for Peter when he is flying back after abducting the Darling children. "Feeling that Peter was on his way back, the Neverland had again woke into life" (70). It was our intention to express this magic land through both sound and lighting design, in which cues would anticipate entrances as though a character's influence arrived before the character themselves. This also lent itself to the theatrical, parade-like march of the characters through our first glimpse of Never Land, as one group hunts another in an endless circular go-around in Peter's absence. They are all "out for blood," and the island is both conscious and rather sinister.

Of course the Neverland had been make-believe in those days; but it was real now, and there were no nightlights, and it was getting darker every moment, and where was Nana? (63).

The shadow puppets also became an excellent device for staging the heightened moments (such as the wolves, closing in on Nibs, or the Neverbeasts coming out at night) as well as the more clunky or technically challenging moments in the play, without resorting to 'tricks.' For example, when Wendy flies away from the Lagoon on the tail of a kite, or Peter sails away in the Neverbird's nest, we decided to express these actions through the shadow puppets. The puppets created simple and charming storytelling moments that fit the tone of the play. Ultimately, they were used in a third way as well, at key points of tension, such as the clock motif that accompanied the arrival of Hook's dreaded arm-eating crocodile. I was especially committed to the choice to use the clocks as larger-than-life visual elements, bringing

to the fore Hook's obsession - his fear of death and the thematic element of time ticking away.

Figure 3: Shadow Puppets indicate location: the mountainous "Aboveground"



Figure 4: Peter and Wendy see the kite



Figure 5: Shadow Puppet clocks accompany the approaching crocodile



Finding the Never Landers: A Note on Costume

Costume designer Emily Taradash and I discussed the need for a design that recognized archetype while allowing original interpretive vision. Thus, Hook should resemble Charles II as he is described, the Darlings should come from the clean and starched white world of Edwardian childhood, and Peter Pan should be clad in leaves. But within the expected or the traditional, she had free reign to imagine.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, ethical considerations about representation led me, after much debate and soul-searching, to the re-imagining of Tiger Lily and the Redskins. Emily and I knew from the outset that we wanted to be conscientious about our approach, and were not interested in representing them as exotic, feathered mascots. I thought for a time about, and discussed with Emily, the possibility of representing them as oppressed people from all over the Empire, who have come to

Never Land as refugees like the Lost Boys have from London. But I was very uncomfortable with using the text Barrie gives them, which is primarily composed of grunts and bad grammar. I began to lean toward a vision of them as dancers, perhaps expressing themselves through various cultural forms of dance.

This was in itself problematic for me and I still felt crushed with questions. I felt the weight of a choice that would require actors of color that I may not be able to find when it came to casting; or else a choice to color-blind cast what was meant to be a multi-ethnic group. Additionally I was not unaware of the implications if I took away their spoken text. I was trying to solve a problem of racist, outdated language by taking away the voice of the displaced people of the Empire. Not a good alternative.

I looked closely at their function in the story, as warriors and allies to the boys against the pirates, and probably as exotic elements meant to distance Never Land from England. I looked specifically at the character of Tiger Lily, who is, like Tinker Bell, a rather coquettish and sexual female compared to innocent and lady-like Wendy, and who tries to seduce Peter Pan much to Wendy's chagrin. I felt confident that with the right choreographer, we could tell their story without the use of Barrie's spoken text. But it was too problematic for me to represent them as real or historical people without a voice.

Finally, I landed on depicting these characters in an utterly new way, as non-human beings who have sprung directly from the land itself. Rooting them in the earth-spirits of Celtic mythology they were called Never Landers for convenience-sake in production meetings and the name stuck. I believe that, while the Never

Landers may not be the only or the ultimate answer to how to deal with Barrie's Natives in our post-colonial world, this choice does do honor to the play, and served the story, though a recognized and perhaps expected group of characters was removed. Barrie's constant adaptation left me room to trust I could make a radical choice without losing my dedication to bringing the core of the 1904 play to the stage.

Creating the Never Landers became a developmental collaboration between me, Emily and choreographer Annelise Nielsen. Together we guided the actors through an evolution of their characters, encouraging them to take ownership of their own mythology while grounding them within the larger story. Emily attended many early rehearsals, led by Annelise or me, and stayed actively tuned in to the development of the choreography. In fittings, she asked them about their characters, the element, plant or animal that they were embodying, and worked these actor-driven character choices into the costumes. What we finally created was indeed a warrior tribe, but one of otherworldly beings. They broke us out of England and claimed Never Land as a world apart so effectively that I re-ordered the scenes in Act II so that these characters were the first we met when we washed up on Never Land's shores.

When the curtain rose, we had certainly left the Nursery and arrived in a totally new world. James' deep pink, textured lighting against the tangled vines of the backdrop was a vibrant and eye-grabbing change. The Never Landers were present in the scenery, and they unwound themselves, accompanied by the deep resonating beats of a Celtic drum sound-scape, to come forward and welcome us to a magical place.

Figure 6: Tiger Lily and the Never Landers



CHAPTER 4

LEARNING TO FLY

Collaboration with Choreography and Fight Direction

At least a third of the action in Never Land takes place in giant, fantastical fights straight out of the adventure novels of the nineteenth century. Every tribe of characters is involved in at least one fight; Lost Boys, Pirates, Natives, even Mermaids. Many of the play's crucial power-plays, much of the emotional drama, and critical character development and relationships are expressed through the story of these battles. Even a moment as poignant and important as Captain Hook's death is played out without dialogue, in the narrative of an action sequence.

It was crucial that I have an artist on my team who could work with me to translate Barrie's pages of stage directions into safe, effective, story-based stage combat. I was lucky to be able to bring my top choice onto the production team, fight director Andrew Roberts, who is also my husband. Though we have worked together on several productions in other capacities, this was the first time I was able to fully utilize his nearly twenty years of stage combat experience.

Andrew and I sat down early in the process to talk through the story of each fight and discussed what the fights would accomplish and who should be featured. We drew upon both the script and the novel to fully flesh out the actions and tone. As I mentioned earlier in rehearsal I asked the actors to turn to the novel as well, to better understand their role in the action of the fights.

We agreed to adhere closely to Barrie's vision, so clearly articulated in the script. Barrie describes a tussle among the Lost Boys early in Never Land, a wild summertime

water-romp between the Pirates and the Lost Boys at the Mermaid's Lagoon, a bloody surprise skirmish when the Pirates take the Natives, standing guard outside the children's underground home, unawares, and a final, epic adventure-battle of Children vs. Pirates on board the Jolly Roger. In *Anon*, the Natives lend a crucial hand on board the pirate ship and turn the tide of the battle. I decided to add Tiger Lily and her Never Landers to our final fight as well.

Andrew had a strong vision for how the fights would work, from the slapstick tumble of the Lost Boy tussle to the sight-gag laden goofiness of the brawl at the Lagoon to the high stakes life-or-death scrap over protecting the children outside their home, to the fun-filled dramatic heroism of Errol Flynn swordplay on board the pirate ship. Andrew's vision and the scope of his work were crucial elements to the staging of this play.

Translating even the most descriptive words and list of actions from the page into physical action, played out with and on the bodies of thirty actors in a relatively small amount of space, was a joyful challenge. We agreed to set aside one rehearsal a week at minimum for Andrew to choreograph and work the intensive fights, and I pledged to run a fight-call nearly every day; tricky with scheduling because that meant I had to call the full cast into rehearsal daily. As the production developed, I watched the fights closely for storytelling and slowed down or teased out moments of significance. I also looked closely at Wendy, the One Girl, and used the fights to give her the agency her brothers enjoyed.

As I discussed in the Introduction, I came to identify Never Land strongly as a fantasy of Wendy's, where she gets to play Mother to a respectful and worshipful group

of boys who call her ‘Lady’ and pledge their respect and servitude, a far cry from the treatment she receives from her brother John at home, who “just despises” girls. She is however, arguably inactive compared to the scrappy rough-and-tumble boys or the adventurous Peter. I saw the fights as an excellent place to play up some of the sexist roles that Wendy encounters and is expected by the others to play, and to give her a place to finally let loose. In our staging of the fight at the Lagoon, Wendy attempts to confront the no-good bully Captain Hook, but John, often her antagonist, interrupts her and pushes her on her way with the ad-lib, “be a lady!” thus enforcing the pesky rules of home in Never Land.

So much of *Peter Pan* is about role-play. We see the Darling children play at being Mother and Father in the first scene, and even the parents seem to be playing at being themselves. Mr. Darling the blowhard, especially expects a level of grateful worship from his family just for being the breadwinner, and acts out in childish tantrums when he does not get his way. This role playing seems to me to be a key to the satire of the play (after all, how many plays of 1904 staged the man of the house lowered to living out his days in a dog kennel?) but it is also a wonderful glimpse into the nature of children’s play and the ways it mimics the world around them, for better or for worse.

Wendy may genuinely be a little girl who loves babies and wants to be swept off her feet. But she is not only that. She is firm, and pert, and as stubborn as Peter. She loves and keeps reign on two boisterous brothers. She is moral compass and storyteller. I could not stage this story without seeing the potential Wendy has to stand up for herself played out in the fights. So Andrew and I crafted a moment on board the pirate ship when Wendy must step out of her role by necessity, and act outside perhaps the way she

believes she can. In the midst of playing the damsel and asking for protection, Wendy is attacked by a pirate and shocks herself by absolutely destroying him in a hand to hand fight. As we staged it, Wendy caught ahold of herself after a moment of triumph, remembered the social role she had to play, and ducked behind Peter again.

In the Wendy moments of the fights especially, I felt that Andrew and I found a great collaboration in poking at the rules of the world and challenging the gendered images on stage. I wanted to interrupt the action just enough to create the possibility that Wendy could play other parts in her life, and that being the one Lost Girl did not have to be a game played only one way. Ultimately casting an all-female ensemble of dancers for Tiger Lily's band created more opportunities to see warrior women onstage acting out the fantasy in similar ways to the boys.

At auditions, I realized that, while I had an excellent pool of actors who could move and be self-aware enough to trust with a sword, there was little experience in stage combat. Andrew's role quickly expanded to educator and we kicked off the rehearsal process with a weekend intensive in stage combat for the entire cast. They learned safety first, followed by the basics of footwork and hand-to-hand. Knowing that there would be slapstick elements to the production, they learned pratfalls, rolls and silly hair-pulls, eye-pokes and head-bonks. Finally, they moved on to dagger and rapier basics and began to compose short sequences in partners. Andrew and I had discussed early that part of the rehearsal culture I wanted to create was one of actor-driven work, and he was very much on board. Once they had the basic tools, he empowered them to explore and to invent their own choreography, which he then tempered and adjusted to fit the story we wanted to tell.

The early work with stage combat ended up being a model for the rest of the early rehearsal process in microcosm. Actors were given basic tools and rules of the world they would inhabit, then asked to generate material and make character-driven choices while simultaneously creating the characters they would inhabit and the relationships they would share. We gave them guidance, feedback, or totally new directions to follow, and they played. This process created a circuit of creativity and a dialogue with empowered and playful performers, a way of working I find inspiring and positive. Working in this partnered way with actors was a conscious choice for the experience I wanted to create in building this production.

In a similar fashion, Annelise and I sat down early to discuss the storytelling that the dance choreography would necessarily accomplish. She was aware of my desire to represent the Never Landers as otherworldly and to avoid stereotypes of any historic tribal people. We discussed the Tiger Lily scenes as written, and plotted the important points of action and narrative she would need to accomplish without spoken text.

My first opportunity to see her movement ideas for these characters was at callback auditions, when we completely packed the room with dancers of all shapes and sizes, colors and genders. The characters we were creating would come from a marriage of my vision, Annelise's choreography, Emily's costumes and the actors themselves. I was very excited when Annelise taught her combination: an organic, fast paced dance drawing on the movements of winding plants, predatory animals, flying birds and timid woodland creatures. She told stories when she taught the dancers, communicating in image and intention rather than in empty counts.

Working with Annelise was another fit of fortune. A recent alum of the UMass Amherst undergraduate program, she and I have collaborated on every show I have directed in the department. I kept coming back to her for choreography, because I find her to be a deeply intuitive actor-director and I can trust her to translate story into movement in a highly theatrical way. She was the perfect artist to create a new species on stage that could fit in a Never Land of my devising. We cast a group of women who we felt could carry the necessary expressiveness as well as the choreography, and in that casting choice made the discovery that the Never Landers would be a fierce female presence on the island populated by boys and pirates. Annelise was fully on board with my actor-partnered rehearsal process, generating tools and imagery and giving the dancers space to create; thus the cast members had a large hand in developing what the characters would ultimately become.

Collaboration with Actors

Peter Pan is a story that can mean many things to different people, and I suspected that a good number of the cast had interacted with the story in some way in their lives. It would be critical for me to make sure the whole cast was on the same page, whatever their preconceptions. Immediately after casting, I asked the actors to read Barrie's novel in the week before rehearsals began. When we all came together for the first rehearsal, we sat in a massive circle and talked about the book; what surprised or captivated them, what imagery, themes or events stood out. We brainstormed our reactions to make a list of words describing the story's most resonant images, and I was not surprised to see how unexpected the darker elements were to many of the readers. We

sent the brainstorm of words out to actors in a follow-up email, and set the stage for the story that they would join me in telling: *our* story, which was laid on the foundation of their first key points of resonance.

I had gone back and forth for the weeks leading up to rehearsal with Amy Brooks and my assistant director, Tori Clough, about whether to have the cast read the script with the native “savage” voices in it or not. Ultimately I decided that if they were to be fully on board with the story, they needed to understand where it had come from in the same way that I had spent so many months reading the many manifestations of *Peter Pan* to find its roots. While the script we handed around did have some additions in it, including Lost Boy dialogue I had added from the book, a lengthened Nursery scene between Peter and Wendy raising the stakes through her resistance to his seductive charm, and the entire *Afterthought* in place of the original ending, I decided not to cut out the Redskins and to have the dancers give voice to their story. I gave the cast a verbal explanation that that language felt insensitive and that we were reading it both to acknowledge its problematic nature and to understand the foundation on which we would build. I gave them space to discuss it afterwards. Then we moved on, and in time those dated words became wonderful, expressive dances.

I was very interested in bringing my background in British Panto and broadly performed proscenium comedy to the production. I’m not incredibly versed in early twentieth century performance style (nor did I want to turn this production into a museum piece) but it was clear to me that the text leant itself to broad style and I knew that Barrie took the Llewellyn Davies boys to the Pantomime *Bluebell in Fairyland*, the experience of which supposedly influenced his desire to write a fairy play. I realized that this stylistic

choice would involve a fair amount of training for the actors, learning to face out consistently, deliver lines to a scene partner without “naturalistically” facing them, and even in some cases break the fourth wall. I set out to approach the production with a sense of physical embodiment explored with the actors through movement, tableau and expressive gesture. I believe that theatre, and especially performance, is in essence a giant game of “pretend,” and what better play to explore pretending than this, a story infused with the role-play and mimicry that defines a child’s exploration of the world they are a part of?

I wanted to place the production in 1904, which opened up all the imagery of Imperialist England for us to play with. We began the rehearsal process on our feet with physical play centered on the icons and archetypes of *Peter Pan*’s world, from ladies and gentlemen to servants and urchins, to what it meant to be “English.” I used these first hours of physicality to toy with gender roles and the way power is worn on the body. Men and women alike stepped into all the physical types and we investigated our own stereotypes, blowing things up to cartoon proportion with no attempt at being “correct.” This work created a vocabulary through the aping of the English middle class as they existed in our imaginations and modeled the role-play of children.

We additionally used physicality as the base for all the initial character development, starting with Laban work. The foundation we laid was instrumental, and Tori would often return to it in her work with the actors as Assistant Director, while I was leading scene work. In addition to the Laban work, the actors worked to create individual “character topographies”: staging the five peak moments of their lives, from birth to the end of the play, as tableau-snapshots and moving through them in space. Working with

Annelise to develop the exercise, I had each actor embody her or his journey with a line of text, a sort of title card, accompanying each image, and then in total silence. The goal was to physically communicate with specificity, rhythm and gesture, the emotional tone of the moment as well as the narrative. These topographies proved to be especially enriching for the ensemble characters, who had fewer given circumstances in the text and got to take total ownership of their own mythology. Annelise was able to take this work into her dance rehearsals, and I played with relationship by setting more than one performer against each other or in relationship to each other as they played out their topography in a shared space.

As we continued to lay the foundation of individual character physicality in the first week of rehearsal, we began to fold characters into tribes. The design team had found common ground in an element-based vocabulary (the Pirates were cold and dark like winter ice; the Lost Boys were sunshine and dirt) that I brought into rehearsal to be embodied by the actors in their groups. I looked for common physical threads to encourage while accentuating individual leading points to distinguish characters within groups. We discovered that the children's game follow-the-leader was a perfect tool to keep the Lost Boys moving together.

Within all of this foundational work, I was highly collaborative with Tori and Annelise, and as the physical character work developed we brought it into the fight choreography. Andrew and I made adjustments to fighting styles as the characters became more distinguished. It was very important to me to take a generous position on my work with the collaborators. I knew that giving them my trust was a necessity, and that the work would be better for it.

Likewise, it was important to me to treat every actor with care and to help them draw out the boldest choices they could make, and root them in their bodies. In such a big show where there is the potential to get lost, I wanted to establish the impact every actor made on the whole, to build a culture of play and to encourage a sense of ownership for the story that I would one day turn over entirely to them to embody.

As we moved into scene work, I found a balance between threads of discussion, identifying action and exploring through tableau and gesture. We would sometimes return to the novel to go deeper into the narrative, then jump into the scene with the goal of playing out the action as described in such detail in the book. In the actor-generated gesture work, I found many inspirations for the staging. Many of the moments I wished to put on stage in addition to the spoken text were directly created out of these thematic tableaux. These moments included the Darling's romping bedtime ritual in the Nursery and the intimate sense of legacy generated by Wendy assisting with the night lights and singing harmony with her mother on the lullaby. The actors were universally dedicated and rapidly came in off-book and eager to work on their feet. We worked to define the laws of the Nursery juxtaposed with those of Never Land. We drilled physical precision. Ultimately, I was pushing hard to have the whole show staged by Spring Break, because I feared what a week away would do to our momentum, and I was unsure how much time I would really have once we introduced the element of flying.

Harnessing Flight

It seemed to me that no one really knew what to expect when it would come to the flying. We had to wait for the experts. When we returned from a week away we were off the stage for load-in, so Tori and I returned to some of the physical play we had begun with, to reconnect with the ensemble and to ground ourselves in something fun before the final push. Returning to the stage mid-week we discovered that load-in would not be complete for several days, but we did our best to start to incorporate the scenic elements we did have available to us.

Then, ZFX arrived. In order to teach the actors and the student fly-crew the magic of flight, we had to ask the five performers who fly to make themselves available during the daytime whenever possible, especially Emma Ayres, who played Peter Pan. Everyone seemed to be coping remarkably well with the extra hours, and spirits were high. There is something inescapably visceral about literally being lifted off the ground. One of my wonderful and generous advisors on the production, Professor Gil McCauley, had asked me many times about what it was to really fly. We could answer metaphorically and probably make a pretty good imaginative guess about the experience. But when those actors were physically jerked into the air, and the panic quickly turned to glee, we finally knew what the flying really meant, and why it was so absolutely crucial to really, actually, literally fly in this production.

In Tony Kushner's 2004 interview with *Text and Performance Quarterly*, he said,

People are always getting upset because they can see the wires. But the wire, of course, is the point...if it's a really great production of it, you

have a feeling at the same time that you know that it's not real, that you're seeing something kind of supernatural and magical. And that doubleness—that's the only way to get through life (53).

Kushner is of course talking about a very different and very adult play, *Angels in America*, but for me he speaks directly to the experience of the clanging flying wires in *Peter Pan*. I was extremely worried that in this fantasy, where children “really” fly, the wires would cause the whole illusion to crash down on me. I was worried about my, and thus my audience's, ability to believe. But once I had experienced watching the actors hang suspended, and worked with Daniel Kondas of ZFX to set the choreography, I realized that the overt obviousness of the wires was actually wonderful. Just as the water in the Lagoon was made of strips of fabric, and no one got wet swimming, just as you could sometimes see the fingers of the puppeteers manipulating the shadow images, the wires did not demand to be hidden at all. On stage, there was no need for the green screens or clever tricks our eyes have become accustomed to in other mediums.

Somehow, seeing the wires asked me to *believe* all the more, allowed me to get a peek at how it was done and as Kushner suggests – the *doubleness* made it theatre. I have discussed the value of playing pretend in the theatre, and I understand it and put it to use in cultivating experience for the actors. Working with the flying system, as fallible and human as it was, brought something to me about that intangible thing of value I believe lies in the heart of this play. There is a twinkle of pretend in Nana the costume-dog as much as in the flying, and yet there they are before us. For me this is a thing of wonder, something inherently theatrical, and brings me back to Barrie's command, “strike a note of wonder – and whet the appetite for marvels.”

Figure 7: Jane Flies



CHAPTER 5

REFLECTION

Loved, loved, loved the play! The directing was sensitive to the original Peter and Wendy, while giving a nod to other versions. The sets were creative and well done – especially Neverland. Hook’s costume was grand! The crocodile and Nana were terrific in both design and execution. Updating the savages as Wild Women was brilliant.

Best of all, this interpretation features what I love most about the story, the introspection about relationships between men and women, the difficulty of growing up, the pathos and loneliness of the boy who will not/can not grow up; and the poignancy of growing up. AND THEY FLY!

– Pennington L. Geis,
Community member/owner of a beloved 1911 edition of *Peter and Wendy*,
commenting about the production on my Facebook page, April 2014

Directing this play was like a mad love affair. I was over the moon for over a year, and I hardly knew which way was up. In my typical fashion, the obsession permeated my thoughts, my dreams and my heart. As I got deeper and deeper, I struggled to stay alert to the elements of storytelling I felt were most important, and not to lose sight or take for granted the story I wanted so deeply to give the world. It is always the challenge when you root yourself deep into the work, I think, to maintain the scope of vision to see whether things are really there before your eyes and clear enough to see as though it were the first time. It was infinitely more difficult to stay objective working on a play I have loved my whole life.

Watching the work once it was out of my hands and in front of an audience, I was able to successfully trace certain motifs through the entire production, including those “darker” elements I had so early dedicated myself to. The frightening nature of a fantasy come to life was palpable, creating a portrait of Never Land as a place populated by

wolves and beasts and mermaids who drown children, given the opportunity; a place that only gets worse after dark. The very real and violent presence of the Pirates (who were funny too), and the sinister drive of Captain Hook to obliterate Peter, the nemesis who haunts him yet somehow completes him, was satisfactorily followed through. Peter's incredible and palpable loneliness, his deep, horrible terror of change masked so excellently so much of the time through his otherworldly joy, pride and all-over wonderfulness was definitely present, though I think sometimes the actor's exhaustion took her in unpredictable directions of lost focus. The incredible danger of a boy who lives by no rules but his own, a boy who is outrageously cunning and will abduct you or claw the stories out of you if he wants them was clear in the performance, especially in the Nursery. I was able to see in the children the horrible realization that home is a place that can be forgotten if you stay away long enough, and the frightening prospect that grown-ups may not be as steady as they pretend. These elements and more make the story the rich and deeply complex world that it is, so witty and so fun yet holding up the mirror to even the things we'd rather not see, as any good satire should.

I am very pleased with the inter-scenes that were created in front of the Act Curtain during transitions. I had wanted to follow the Darling parents, the mourning family that's been left behind in a child's heartless leap toward adventure. As a child, I never paid much attention to the Darling adults. As a woman expecting my first child, the whole world has shifted, opened to me to go deeper. I realized in my research that the book follows closely the parents left behind. I wanted to work their storyline into my production, so that we would not forget the consequences of flying away. The necessity to mask major transitions between the Nursery and Never Land afforded me the

opportunity to place these images in a surprisingly intimate space; the edge of the thrust with the flickering light of a fireplace and the deep curtain behind. These moments became “the Nana story” and added a life outside the proscenium as well as a melancholy drama playing out in London while the children are away. I chose to link Wendy to these moments by placing her final speech downstage while the curtain fell on flying Jane and Peter behind her.

In addition to the inter-scenes, I am very glad I added a pre-show romp with the Lost Boys playing in the audience. For me, this accomplished a break with the sit-down-be-quiet-we’re-in-a-theatre vibe of the proscenium. I wanted to bring the show into the audience, to begin with play, and to put the incongruous Lost Boys in the space before we got to London as the curtains rose. I broke the rules again with several entrances made through the aisles from behind the house, and most importantly, when Peter flew right off the stage and over the audience.

I was offered the option of an over the house flying moment very early in the process. In the big tours of the musical, Peter flies over the house on a pendulum wire, usually at the end of the show. We would be using a track system instead and I wanted to use this magical opportunity to its fullest. It didn’t take me long to realize that the absolute best time for Peter to fly over the house is when he directly addresses the audience, when he desperately needs to break the invisible wall and ask for help saving Tinkerbell, who has nobly sacrificed herself to save him by drinking his poisoned medicine.

I had struggled for a long time to find the appropriate place for an intermission with this production. Initially I had thought that we would need to take two breaks in

order to support the massive scene changes as we switched the stage from the Nursery to Never Land and back again. It seemed very important not to interrupt the flow of Never Land, where one adventure follows another and where Miguel's chameleon set would allow five locations to play out on one amorphous structure that would serve as hill, roof, rock, and finally, the deck of the Jolly Roger. With everything we had done to create our sentient island, where sound and light and shadow puppets and actor energy was synthesized to go, go go – it would be impossible to stop it for an intermission. But once we ran the show for the first time in the space, knowing the wonderful surprise of Peter flying over our heads and discovering the feeling of a finale that moment, so different from everything else in the play, it became totally obvious. We would break after the flight, after we had clapped out hands and saved Tink, after Peter had cried “And now to Rescue Wendy” and rushed away. It was the perfect cliffhanger.

Looking back at the piece as a whole, I am very happy with the way all the elements were integrated. The fights worked wonderfully to advance the story and create epic moments of fun adventure on stage. I think that the intensive work we did to create physicality and style really paid off. I feel extremely gratified by the decision to re-order the top of Act II so that the Never Landers were waiting for us when the curtain rose on Never Land. The architecture of the Nursery was replaced by the wild and skewed driftwood structure and stunningly lit background of tangled organic shapes that made up Never Land. It felt harmonious and exciting to bring the audience into this strange world with the unearthly presence of the Never Landers. It made me sit up in my seat and pay attention.

There were also places that I never felt totally satisfied. In the rush and exhaustion of flying rehearsals with an undertrained crew, sets that were unfinished until the last moments, barely choreographed transitions and a tech process that lugged along in the face of an overwhelming number of elements coming together, things did get lost. I never felt totally content with the presence of Tinkerbell as a laser/sound cue combination. She was incorporated too late and the actors never adjusted to her. She didn't always speak when I wanted her to, and sometimes she said too much. This was a huge learning experience for me and I understand how much it would have helped all to have her voice in rehearsal at an earlier point. I requested to, but the technology and the designers weren't ready to bring her in early and I did not demand it.

I was happy with the flying choreography but felt like it unraveled when it should have been getting better. It was inconsistent and unreliable and I wish I had the experience to have been a more active part of supporting that element of the show. There were moments among the actors that started to stray from the story as well, small ones that perhaps only a director would catch, but I have to let go at some point and I was resolved not to give notes once the production opened. Instead, I used my pick-up rehearsal after the first weekend of performances, and we worked the few crucial "meeting moments," where the worlds come together in the meetings between characters, so integral to the show but getting lost in the excitement of performing.

I owe my other generous advisor, Sheila Siragusa, so much for being a discerning set of outside eyes and catching the moments where I was missing the impact of two worlds colliding. By drawing my attention to these moments, I was able to work with the actors to draw them out and clarify the story telling. When Mrs. Darling first sees Peter in

the window, the magic draws her in and they share a long stare across the room which was ultimately supported by a sound cue of blowing wind. This moment was the first hint of Never Land breaking through, and set a tone of danger for the mother who must leave her sleeping children. Peter enters the space – the Nursery of a real child, a place as dangerous to him as Never Land will be to Wendy. When Wendy and Peter first discover one another, something incredible happens. They size each other up. Here is a child who Peter needs to think wonderfully of him. By slowing down this moment and giving them time to really drink each other in, we heightened tension and put a frame around the moment. The same happens, in echo, when Wendy is grown, both between her and Peter upon his return and between Peter and Jane when she acts out the legacy of her mother, greeting him for the first time, in the same room and the same bed as the adventure that began a generation ago. In retrospect, I wish there had been sound and lighting to heighten those moments even more, though I think the actors did a lovely job.

It was not until very near opening that I finally understood Jane, not just as Wendy's daughter but as all of us, the ones who dream and wish we could fly away with Peter Pan. If I was graced with more time I would spend some of it on Jane, and help the story to be not just a cycle, but a promise.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As I have grown as a director, and a thinking artist, through the three years of the M.F.A. program, I have learned to draw out my values and give them deliberate intention in my production processes. I believe that theatre making should come from a desire to give. I am a fairly articulate person, but making theatre opens me to something deep in my core and allows expression unlike any other. It drives me, this desire to share, to awaken, to play with others, to give of myself.

The other thing I love most deeply about the theatre-making process is the collaboration. I am inspired by other artists working to make the magic that drives them. *Peter Pan* was the collaboration of my career so far. Never have I had to orchestrate moving so many people toward a common goal. For me, directing gives me an opportunity to lead, not just by default, but through careful and deliberate sense of presence, attention and listening. When things got tough, when communication broke down or I became concerned about an element of the show coming together on time, I tried to actively problem-solve, yes, but most importantly, I tried to act from a place of generosity, to model patience, to teach myself trust.

I have total gratitude for all the amazing people who came together to make this show the labor of love that it was, and ultimately the successful and sumptuous feast of storytelling it became. In many ways, I feel I was midwife, ushering the living entity of this production into the life it would inevitably inhabit in surprising and unexpected ways. I literally could not have done it without the dedication of others. I could not have

done it if I tried to do it alone. I had to lean on my collaborators, I had to ask for help, I had to let myself trust in the scariest and most chaotic moments.

I tried to model the same heart to my cast of young actors. I tried to consciously work from a place of love, to inspire their growth and above all, to create an experience for them that they could truly enjoy. There is nothing simple or to be taken for granted about the generation of joy, and I hope that the actors and the audience alike received joy from this production. I saw them grow in myriad ways, in skill, craft, confidence. I saw them fly.

It is fascinating to me that *Peter Pan* is back on the cultural radar, with new productions and film adaptations being made right and left this year. I am too close to understand why it's making a comeback now, but I do understand the deep value of this story, of its meditations on power, love, leadership, generosity, the power of play and the terrible riddle of growing up. I have a deep feeling of satisfaction that I gave the community back the truest version of Barrie's original story that I could muster, because I think that it is one we need to hear. I am glad I changed what I did, so that I could stand responsible for the whole work. I can honor the fact that I do not have all the answers, but I know that I asked the questions, I made choices I could stand by, and they lead to incredible discoveries.

This was the perfect cap to a journey of incredible growth and change for me as an artist and a person. From a little girl with wild-blown hair and the gnashing teeth of Peter Pan, to a woman carrying her first child, I have grown up with this story. I can put myself in Wendy's shoes, still, but now I can also imagine what it will be like to play the

mother in real life. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have grown so much. It was an awfully big adventure.

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