

Review - Threesixty Entertainment's staging of Peter Pan (Photos)

When it comes to cinematic special effects, *Peter Pan* soars. Imagine watching a play inside a planetarium, with a set that arcs in a massive dome over and around you in glorious, 360-degree surround-sound and surround-visuals. Technically, [Threesixty Entertainment](#)'s innovative take on J.M. Barrie's classic novel is thrilling, a dizzying, dazzling array of wall-to-wall and floor-to-ceiling eye-candy that is the closest thing to flying short of hitching a ride on a moon launch.

View slideshow: [Production photos from threesixty's Peter Pan](#)

But even the most extraordinary and innovative of special effects can't create a wholly successful production. William Dudley's 3-D projection design is astounding. The characters that design serves? They're two-dimensional at best. As they make their episodic way through Tanya Ronder's somewhat lurching adaptation of Barrie's story, it becomes clear that *Peter Pan*'s appeal is largely skin/3D-screen deep. Director Ben Harrison's production is one of lavish style overlaying a want of equally solid substance.

Which isn't to say children won't adore this production: If you have yet to breach the double digits, you'll likely find *Peter Pan* thrilling. Opening night, we were surrounded by youngsters enthralled by the spectacle unfolding before them, and completely caught up in whether Peter Pan's adventures would culminate in a happy ending. As a show for little kids, *Peter Pan* is as close to a can't-miss proposition as you're apt to find.

What director Harrison and adaptor Ronder fail to do is craft as story that's as involving for adults as it is for children. That's a tough assignment to be sure, but as anyone who saw Lookingglass's [Lookingglass Alice](#) or just about anything by Chicago's [Barrel of Monkeys](#) troupe know it can definitely be done.

Part of the problem with *Peter Pan* lies in its underwritten characters, a problem that is compounded by cartoonish acting styles more suited to a Saturday morning cartoon than a live stage show. There's not much more depth to Peter, Wendy and Hook than there is to the gossamer slip of a shadow Peter loses in the Darling nursery. Evelyn Hoskins' Wendy is the production's most empathetic character, charming both Peter and the audience with her guileless, wide-eyed wonder. She makes a nice foil for the tough, twinkling Tinker Bell, played with as a punkish, mischievousness minx by Emily Yetter.

As for the titular child who refuses to grow up, Ciaran Joyce's Peter exhibits all the traits Barry gave him – cockiness, forgetfulness and signature bravado of a pre-pubescent boy knows for certain that he is invincible. But beyond those broadly played characteristics (and his wondrous flight capabilities), there's little that's warm or engaging or even particularly compelling about Peter. Hook (Steven Pacey) is similarly two-dimensional, a lip-smacking villain who is little more than a series of grimacing snarls and squinty-eyed mugging. (And who, btw, commits a grisly murder early on that is startlingly inconsistent with the rest of the production's little-kid-friendly aesthetic.)

Perhaps worst off is Tiger Lily (Heidi Buehler), here reduced to little more than a dancing doll, her speech a series of barely articulate monosyllables. She doesn't actually say "How" in the fashion of old time spaghetti westerns, but that grunting cliché pretty much captures the essence of Lily's language capacity nonetheless. And while Buehler is a lean, athletically enchanting dancer performing Fleur Darkin's [Rite of Spring](#)-like choreography, the dance itself feels crammed into the show almost as an afterthought. Rather than further the story, Tiger Lily's performance interrupts it.

There's a similar problem with a scene involving mermaids. Aerial artists Amanda Goble and Kasumi Kato look lovely twirling high above the stage on flowing lengths of aqua silk, but their interlude has no integral place in

the story. As for Darkin's ariel choreography, it's is ethereally delightful but not extraordinary. You can find far more impressive and intricate silk aerial work on any given day during advanced classes at the [Actors Gymnasium](#) or a mile or so west, at [Cirque Eloize](#).

Still, while Peter Pan fails to make any lasting emotional connection – either among its characters or with its audience- there is no denying the jaw-dropping creativity and elaborate gorgeousness of its flight sequences. When the Darling children, Tinker Bell and Peter take flight over London, the effect of Dudley's projection designs is breathtaking. Neverland is equally magical, a verdant, living tangle of swaying tropical trees and hypnotically rippling water. The effect is that of being transported to the farthest islands of the Galapagos, a wild and lush world where all things are mysterious, bright and beautiful.

Also terrific are the whimsical puppets used to portray Nana, the Darling family's sheepdog nanny, and the massive, clock-eating crocodile forever on the hunt for Hook. The croc in particular is laugh-out-loud fun, a whimsical contraption that's all giant, snapping teeth and tick-tocking innards.

There's no question but that *Peter Pan* will entrance young children. It looks spectacular, from the bird's-eye views of London bridge to the mysterious lagoon of the mermaids. But the essential, bare bones foundation of great theater – smart dialogue and multi-faceted characters in the service of a well-told story – are lacking. And that lack keeps *Peter Pan* from consistently soaring throughout.

Threesixty's Entertainment's production of Peter Pan continues through June 19 at the Chicago Tribune Freedom Center, 675 W. Chicago. Tickets are \$20 - \$75 and are available by calling 800-775-2000 or at www.broadwayinchicago.com. For more information click [here](#) go to <http://www.peterpantheshow.com/venues/chicago/>

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