

ENCORE MICHIGAN

Peter Pan soars at Tibbits Opera House

[REVIEW YOUTH/FAMILY](#) July 10, 2015 Bridgette Redman

The inhabitants of the Tibbits Opera House are taking flight with the Broadway musical Peter Pan.

With the help of their “flight club,” they’ve brought in Flying by Foy for a thoroughly charming visit to the classic tale of a boy who won’t grow up and the Darling children who visit Neverland with him.

Directed by Kevin Halpin, this version stars the Tibbits Summer Professional Theatre’s artistic director, Charles Burr, as both Captain Hook and Mr. Darling. It’s a move that delights the regulars at Tibbits, and Burr received warm laughter and applause every time he came on stage. It was a reaction well-deserved too, as he was bluff and boisterous in the role.

The choreography, done by Dougie Robbins, takes center stage in this production. The dance numbers were all different and served well to establish different groups. There were distinct dance styles for the pirates, for the lost boys and for the natives. It was, indeed, a dance extravaganza and Robbins was creative and made full use of the stage, even circling dancers around the pit.

Big, fun and charming are three words that could describe the entire production. It captivates both adults and children with a lush set, vibrant music, dancing and characters we either love or love to hate. Tinkerbell is a bright green light that flits about the set and has a keyboard solo providing her “voice.”

Lizzy Palmer plays the part of Peter Pan. She works hard at being boyish, but it often comes through that she is a woman playing the part of a boy. She interacts wonderfully well with the ensemble, leading them and playing the trickster with pirates. She’s always playful and brings the sprite aspect to the Neverland Boy King.

Ashley Elizabeth Smith’s Wendy Darling is iconic in interpretation. Thanks to Marc W. Vital II’s costuming, she looks the part of the classic Wendy. Smith acts it too. She is motherly, while at the same time crushing on Peter Pan. She immediately takes charge of the Lost Boys and they love her for it. She has a sweet singing voice and evokes a long-past time of history and childhood with her moves, particularly when she dances.

Vital’s costuming is consistently top-notch, from the iconic look of the Darling children, complete with top hat for John and teddy bear for Michael, to the striped tights of the pirates, to the decorated skirts and tops of the natives. The lost boys are deftly costumed so as to all look raggedy, yet distinct from one another. Vital pays careful attention to detail with each costume in this large cast play. He also creates great animal costumes for Drew

Porrett who plays both the overly large sheepdog Nana and the Crocodile with the ticking clock. He's able, in both roles, to amble about the stage and herd children and pirates both.

Jamie DeHay's set design is broad in scope. The play moves from the nursery to Neverland exteriors, the Lost Boys house and a pirate ship. Each scene gets its own set piece that is detailed and large. The nursery is large and has tall moving windows for Peter and the Darling children to fly in and out of. Dresser drawers move as Tinkerbell looks for a shadow and the beds are strong enough to dance upon. Later, when they arrive in Neverland, the set is filled with greenery, mushrooms that pop open, doors to enter the Lost Boys' lair and everything needed to set the scene and even build a house around Wendy that fits in with the rest of the scenery. The lost boys home is filled with nooks crannies, ladders and slides. The pirate ship has two stories with steps that make for great sword fighting.

All of these set pieces glide in and out quickly to make for set changes that happen in the space of a song. While the musical is two hours and 40 minutes long (with two intermissions), it is never the set changes that slow things down. In fact, the play never seems to slow down at all, it is fast paced and filled with energy.

With sound effects and music provided by the orchestra, Cheryl VanDuzen's musical direction is constant and sharply focused. She works hand-in-hand with actors, choreographer, director and tech crew to create a seamless show. There are a few times early on when the orchestra overpowers actors who are far upstage, but those moments are few and limited to the nursery scenes.

Each of the ensembles contribute to make the show delightful. The natives, in particular, do a lot with limited vocabulary and are highly animated in all of their dance and fight numbers. The pirates are entertaining, especially as they do tango or tarantella numbers to provide backup to Captain Hook's plotting. The lost boys are endearing and playful, sweet boys who are filled with snips and snails and puppy dog tails.

This cast of 25 and the skilled technical team all work together to create a charming show that is fun for kids and adults alike. It takes audiences back in time to a classic story that still mesmerizes with its adventure and affection.

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