

High-Flying: "Peter Pan," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through August 29

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 22 June 2009 06:00

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By the time the title character takes to the skies in the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Peter Pan*, the effect, while wondrous, is also somewhat superfluous, since the presentation had already been airborne for a good 40 minutes beforehand, and will continue to be for the two hours that follow. If ever a production deserved to be called "ethereal," it's this one, but even that adjective doesn't suggest just how enthralling this

Peter Pan

truly is.

Considering the deeply impressive talent, commitment, and invention on display in director/choreographer Jim Hesselman's musical, Circa '21's latest will no doubt prove magical no matter which performance you attend. Yet if you weren't present on opening night, Lord almighty how I wish you *had* been, because the only thing that might've been more thrilling than the show itself was the experience of sitting in that audience.

Over two decades of Circa '21 productions, I'd never before witnessed a crowd paying attention to the proceedings with such glorious, heart-stopping *silence* as they did on Friday; it was as though every patron in that house - and the majority of us were well past 30 - were five years old again, and being read our favorite story by our favorite storyteller. (For most of *Peter Pan*

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's length, no one so much as
coughed

, perhaps for fear of breaking its delicate spell - the way you don't want to accidentally wake yourself from a beautiful dream.) Beyond the quiet, the only sounds heard were the frequent, raucous laughs and equally frequent, hearty applause, though if you listened carefully, you could probably make out the occasional snuffle, as this enchanting, hilarious

Peter Pan

is also almost ridiculously
moving

. The ovation that greeted its curtain call was so powerful and sincere you felt it could go on forever. Moreover, you

wanted

it to.



To be sure, miracles were anticipated right off the bat, given the gorgeous rear curtain of illuminated stars and the fairy-tale perfection of designer Susan Holgersson's nursery set, featuring center-stage windows some 20 feet high. (Holgersson goes on to top herself with her extraordinarily clever, playful Neverland fortress and pirate ship.) It only takes a few beats to correctly presume that Jim Hutchison's lighting and Greg Hiatt's costuming will be sensational throughout, and a few more to predict that the portrayals will be focused and imaginative; young actors Zach Finn, Tanner Konrardy, and the remarkably gifted and poised Lauren VanSpeybroeck are blessedly real, Andrea Moore is a lovely, sensible Mrs. Darling, Tom Walljasper provides an ingratiatingly eccentric Mr. Darling, and Adam Galarza, bless his fur-covered heart, is adorable and funny as the pooch/nursemaid Nana.

But if there are any lingering doubts as to how breathtaking this *Peter Pan* is going to be, they'll likely vanish the second Peter Pan him(her)self leaps into view. With her hair cropped short and her alternately nimble and impetuous movements exuding tomboyish

joie de vivre

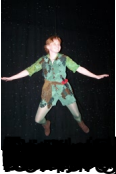
, Brittany Church easily looks the part, and given the radiant purity and Broadway-belter panache of her vocals, definitely sings it. Yet there's not a moment here when Church doesn't also appear to be actively

living

the role; her every emotion - from Peter's ache for a mother to his above-ground exhilaration to his anguish at Tinkerbell's potential demise - is richly, deeply felt, and the instant she arrives, an already-inspired production blasts off into the stratosphere.

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