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Stage magic

"Finding Neverland" succeeds — if you believe

BY VICTORIA DAVIS

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Jeff Sullivan and Conor McGiffin in "Finding Neverland."

The lights dim as the sound of a fife begins to float up into the balcony. A single flickering light takes center stage, dancing back and forth and laughing while pirates, a crocodile and mermaids suddenly burst onto the stage. It's a battle between Peter Pan and the infamous Captain James Hook. Suddenly, everyone on stage freezes and there's a spotlight on a bearded man dressed in a tan, three-piece suit. The man looks around at the characters and remarks, "None of you should be here yet."

The man is J. M. Barrie (Jeff Sullivan), the playwright who became famous for his 1904 creation: the boy who never wanted to grow up. The playwright's inspiration for *Peter Pan* was drawn from his own imagination and his relationship with a widowed mom and her four boys. It made its debut as a Broadway musical that's part circus, part magic show. The touring version of the musical plays through Jan. 13 in Overture Hall.

Brought to life by the team behind *Shakespeare in Love*, *Chicago* and *Pippin*, *Finding Neverland* made its world premiere at the Curve Theatre in Leicester in 2012, and the reworked show premiered in 2014 at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The musical then transferred to Broadway with its cast originally starring Kelsey Grammer as Hook and Matthew Morrison as Barrie.

Jan. 10 marked the *Finding Neverland* team's 100th performance, so magic was already in the air before the curtains were even drawn. It was obvious from the start that the show's actors, giddy as school children, love their jobs.

Finding Neverland, inspired by Allan Knee's 1998 play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan* and his award-winning 2004 film adaptation *Finding Neverland*, draws its most tangible magic not from the play's unremarkable script, but from the lights, special effects and tearful and cheerful music by Scott Frankel and Michael Korie. A bonus is Conor McGiffin, who plays a snarky and uptight acting company manager and then makes an astonishing transformation into Captain Hook.

There are roughly six different set backdrops, all dressed with vibrant greens and pinks, but the most impressive scenes include projected videos

of flying through clouds over London, and ships braving typhoons on the open sea. Barrie's "Stronger" number involves pirates swinging from hanging ropes and fog filling the stage and the orchestral pit.

Ruby Gibbs delivers a standout portrayal of the mother and love interest, Sylvia Llewelyn Davies. Her rendition of "All That Matters" is especially moving. And a massive round of applause should be given to child actor Caleb Reese Paul, who plays her son, Peter Davies, whose relationship with Barrie draws him out of his shell. The two sing a powerfully sad duet, "When Your Feet Don't Touch the Ground." These songs urge us to hold onto joy in a world that constantly aims to get our heads out of the clouds.

Of course, this is a play about a play and the creation of *Peter Pan*, so along with the tear-jerking comes plenty of silly fun. There are bar table dance numbers, dogs that turn into dancing bears — then nannies — and children that, of course, fly. Mia Michaels' choreographic direction kept every scene humming like finely tuned clockwork.

Finding Neverland is all one big beautiful illusion that takes the efforts of all actors and stage hands involved. The glitter, the wind, the lights — it all draws audiences out through the unlocked windows of their imaginations and into a world that dares them to play like children. That is, of course, only if they believe in fairies.

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