



Well, look who grew up

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PETER PAN

Elgin Theatre, Toronto

Kurt Browning must be the first visibly balding Peter Pan in the history of Neverland. This may have something to do with the fact that he seems to be part of its post-history.

For this year's Ross Petty "family musical," Chris Earle has devised a script that plays on our knowledge, and maybe the characters' too, of the authentic J. M. Barrie story. This, as the funny and friendly Eddie Glen tells us in a prologue, is "not that story." It is, though, an ingenious variation on that story, one that serves up most of the familiar ingredients but not necessarily in the order or in the shape that we expect.

It's also an update. Of the three Darling children, Wendy is a wannabe pop star who treats her life as it were an audition for some Idol show or other, John is enslaved to video games, and Michael is deeply attached to his asthma puffer. Nana the dog (Glen in shaggy mode) has acquired a voice; he has a mournful-sardonic Snoopy persona, and a kennel to match.

There's no Mrs. Darling visible; she's run off with some chap, leaving her husband to the tender mercies of the kind of upper-class British airhead once known as a Sloane Ranger. The Darlings are here as a Canadian diplomatic family who've been posted to London; I'm not sure why except as some kind of homage to the original, since the story could unfold just the same if its jumping-off point were Canadian. But it does give Petty himself, as Mr. Darling, the rare opportunity to show that he can act in a more-or-less naturalistic manner in a more-or-less naturalistic setting, and that he can do it well.

Anyway, Peter flies in through the window as usual, looking for his shadow and seeming rather weary of the whole thing. The shadow, unwisely, is given a separate identity, and a separate actor to play it; he keeps coming back for no good reason, and is called Elvis, as in Stojko, as in the real-life skating rival to the star. But that's a quibble. Browning, making his theatrical debut, turns out to be a passable singer, an adroit actor especially in

comic bits and a thoroughly winning personality. He is also one novelty star who gets to make constructive use of his specialty; when he literally puts his skates on for his final fight with Hook, the result is one of the most entertaining fights a boy and a pirate could ever have.

One's sympathy goes out to Hook, whose main ambition here is to steal Peter's magic powers, fly off to Hollywood, make millions as a sort of Johnny Depp-praved and come back to take over the world. It seems a modest enough scheme, and I wanted him to get away with it.

Anyway, Petty is in fine villainous form here, better if anything for being kept somewhat within bounds; I would like -- as I think I remarked when he first essayed the role in a different version a few pre-Christmases back -- to see him play the real original Hook, preferably with his wife Karen Kain as Peter. As things are, he does get to share a nice mid-fight gag with Browning about each of them being married to a ballerina.

The Lost Boys here have matured into Lost Twentysomething Dudes, conversing in a diverting mixture of whine and twang and uneasily aware that it's high time they Grew Up. Even if they didn't know this, they have Meghan Hoople's immemorially bossy Wendy to remind them. I was unsure about the evolution of Tinker Bell (Jennifer Waiser) from twinkling light to full visibility, and to a respect-resentment relationship between her and Wendy that echoes the Hook-Peter dynamic.

I did like the transformation of the Red Indians into South Asian entrepreneuses of the virtual economy; not so much for the gag itself as for the aside in which Petty's Hook steps out of frame to cop to the political correctness of it all. He shares this moment with Glen who, in his second but primary role as Smee, is the main source of the evening's laughs. On the whole, Earle's script is less funny than clever, but the cleverness is bracing, especially as backed up by Susan H. Schulman's shrewd staging; this is the glossiest Petty panto, or whatever, ever. It falls down on its music, which is mostly a collection of forgettable, or just forgotten, recent pop hits; the closest thing to a good tune is Walk On By, oddly entrusted to a trio of mermaids, naturally incapable of walking anywhere. The story's climax is a talent contest. I'm not quite sure why it's there, but it's fun. - Until Jan. 6. For tickets call 416-872-5555.

