

The ageless appeal of Never Land



Sheila McCarthy as J.M. Barrie's boy in green.

Ross Petty's version of Peter Pan continues the tradition of casting a woman as the eternal boy

BY REBECCA CALDWELL, TORONTO

Nearly a century old, the story of *Peter Pan* is one of the most enduringly popular with children. But one feature has endured along with the play: the tradition of casting an adult woman in the role of the boy who never grows up.

The latest production of the tale of Peter, the Darling children and their battles with pirates in Never Land, which opens tonight at Toronto's Elgin Winter Garden Theatre, is no exception.

Sheila McCarthy will star as the flying boy in Ross Petty's pantomime version. Petty, who also stars as Captain Hook, knew he wanted the elfin actress from the start, ever since he saw her perform Sally Bowles in *Cabaret* 12 years ago.

"I never felt we should have a young boy as Peter Pan, because it's important for me to have people of name and stature in the title roles for these shows," Petty said.

Although wildly popular in Britain, it's thought to be the first time a *Peter Pan* pantomime has been performed in Canada; audiences here are more familiar with the less raucous and more yearning Broadway musical version, popularized by Mary Martin in the 1950s. Petty, who has steadily forged a reputation for delivering Christmas pantomime family shows, has put together a brand-new, \$1.4-million production starring marquee-name Canadian performers, a score penned by Canadians Judy and David Gershon and a script adapted by Petty himself.

The role of Peter became so associated with women even early in its production history that Gareth Hughes, a silent film actor, despairingly asked in 1924, "Why does it always have to be a Peter-less Pan?"

Why indeed? Was it just a genteel Edwardian assumption that only women were capable of capturing the innocence of a child — or a statement that the so-called weaker

sex was caught in a state of arrested development?

Reverse casting was probably more practical than political, says Petty.

"Even when J.M. Barrie wrote the play, it was deemed that the character of Peter Pan was so complex that a child playing the role would not have the abilities to portray the various elements, and there are productions where the darker side of Peter Pan is plumbed — the boy who never grew up — so I think at that early point [it was] chosen to have a woman play the part," he said.

Nina Boucicault first thrilled audiences in London as Peter at the Duke of York's Theatre in 1904. At 37, she was a stage veteran and seems to have been hand-picked

for the role, as Barrie was familiar with her work and her brother Dion was directing the production. Since then, Peter has been played almost exclusively by women, ranging in age from their 30s to their 50s. Pauline Chase, Eva Embury and Maude Adams popularized the show on stage in the early part of the century, while Martin's appearance on NBC in the mid-1950s crystallized a spunky Peter for a whole generation of kids. More recently, Sandy Duncan and former gymnast Cathy Rigby have straddled on the harness.

McCarthy, 44, is best known for her work on *Emily of New Moon* and her Genie-award winning performance in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. She's been coveting the role of Peter for some time, but had to pass on it a few years ago because she was pregnant.

More recently, "One of my daughter's friends said to her, 'Why do they always cast old women as Peter Pan?'" the tiny, youthful-looking McCarthy says, with self-

mocking laughter. "And I thought, Mary Martin did it until she was 55! I'm thrilled to be doing it. It's a part I've always wanted to do, and I thought I'd passed it, so this is just in the nick of time."

It seems children haven't changed that much since the play was written in their response to the notion of flying away to a timeless land of adventure.

"Somewhere in there is this incredible elixir that keeps grownups and children transfixed in the idea of this child who doesn't grow up but still gets to do whatever he wants to do," muses McCarthy.

"It's something from an age that was probably never real, from an innocent time, and just the whole idea of make-believe, reminding us that make-believe is so much fun — it's what Never Land is all about."

Peter Pan runs to Jan. 6, at the Elgin Winter Garden Theatre, 189 Yonge St., Toronto. Tickets: 416-872-5555.

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