

Ballet: Peter Pan

Choreography: Sir Frederick Ashton

Composer: Julian Slade

The Story

“Peter Pan” is a timeless play written by J.M. Barrie that revolves around the adventures of a boy who refuses to grow up. The story begins in the nursery of the Darling household in London, where the nursery dog, Nana, alerts Mr. and Mrs. Darling to strange occurrences. They dismiss her concerns, leaving their children, Wendy, John, and Michael, alone. This is when Peter Pan and his fairy companion, Tinker Bell, enter the nursery, looking for Peter’s lost shadow.

While in the nursery, Peter wakes up Wendy, and he enchants her with tales about his adventures in Neverland, an island where children never grow old. He teaches the Darling children to fly with the help of Tinker Bell’s fairy dust and takes them to Neverland. There, they meet Peter’s crew of Lost Boys, a group of children who were lost by their parents and now live with Peter.

Their peaceful existence in Neverland is disrupted by the wicked Captain Hook, who holds a grudge against Peter for chopping off his hand and feeding it to a crocodile. Hook and his band of pirates attempt to capture Peter and the Darling children, leading to several battles, during which the Darling children and the Lost Boys show great bravery.

In the end, Wendy decides that she and her brothers should return home, as they miss their parents. She also invites the Lost Boys to return with them, and they accept, longing for the love and care of parents. Peter, however, decides to stay in Neverland, remaining a boy forever. He brings the children home and promises Wendy he will return for her every spring, marking the bittersweet end of their adventure.

The History of the Play

“Peter Pan” was first introduced to audiences as a stage play in 1904, written by Scottish playwright and novelist J. M. Barrie. The play premiered at the Duke of York’s Theatre in London, under the direction of Charles Frohman, a well-known American theatrical producer. It was met with immediate success, enthraling audiences with its imaginative tale, unusual stage effects, and the novel idea of a boy who never grows up. The character of Peter Pan was initially played by a woman, Nina Boucicault, as was the tradition for portraying young boys on stage during this era.

The original production of “Peter Pan” underwent various adaptations throughout its early years. Barrie continued to revise the play, making significant changes such as adding the character of Tinker Bell and the idea of children flying. The play was first adapted into a novel, “Peter and Wendy,” in 1911, which solidified some elements of the story. In 1929, Barrie gifted the rights to “Peter

"Pan" to the Great Ormond Street Hospital, a children's hospital in London, creating a significant source of income for the institution.

Despite its age, "Peter Pan" continues to be a staple of theatrical repertoire worldwide. In the U.S., it gained notable popularity in the mid-20th century with the 1954 Broadway musical adaptation starring Mary Martin, which was broadcast on television to enormous ratings. The play's universal themes of childhood, imagination, and the fear of growing up continue to resonate with audiences, ensuring its place in popular culture. Today, "Peter Pan" is performed in various forms, from large-scale professional productions to school and community theatre, maintaining its status as a timeless classic.

The History of the Ballet

The first ballet adaptation of J.M. Barrie's beloved play, "Peter Pan," was choreographed by Sir Frederick Ashton for the Royal Danish Ballet in 1955. Sir Ashton, a revered figure in the ballet world, embraced the playful spirit of the story, incorporating elements of pantomime into the choreography to communicate the narrative in a compelling, non-verbal manner. The role of Peter was performed by a female dancer, echoing the theatrical tradition of having Peter Pan played by a woman.

The ballet was set to a score composed by Julian Slade, who captured the whimsy and wonder of Neverland through his music. The production included all the familiar characters – Peter Pan, Wendy, Tinker Bell, Captain Hook – and incorporated the magical elements of flight and fairy dust, pushing the boundaries of ballet production at the time. The costumes and set were designed to evoke the fantastical world of Neverland, with lush greenery, sparkling stars, and an imposing pirate ship.

Over the years, this ballet version of "Peter Pan" has been performed by numerous ballet companies worldwide, each bringing their unique interpretations and artistic vision to the stage. The story's inherent magic and adventure lend themselves to the expressive power of ballet, creating a memorable and enchanting performance piece that appeals to audiences of all ages.