

illuminations

A guide to the 2020 plays

Oregon Shakespeare Festival



PETER AND THE STARCATCHER



Peter and the Starcatcher

By Rick Elice

Based on the Novel by Dave Barry and
Ridley Pearson

Music by Wayne Barker

Directed by Lavina Jadhvani

Notes by Paul Adolphsen

Who's Who

The Orphans

Boy (Peter): An orphan with no name, no friends and a mistrust of adults, Boy dreams of something more: escaping to the stars and finding a home and a family. He's quiet and observant, and ready to learn what it means to be a leader. He might have a crush on Molly.

Prentiss: An orphan, and friend to Boy and Ted. He desperately wants to be a leader, but the more he tries, the more true leadership alludes him.

Ted: An orphan, and friend to Boy and Prentiss. Ted is obsessed with food, fainting at the mere mention of sticky pudding. He's ultimately a sweet boy, with some talent as an actor and storyteller.

The British Subjects

Lord Leonard Aster: A dedicated minister to Queen Victoria (God save her!) and the devoted father of Molly. He's wise and stoic, if a bit conservative. As one of only six-and-a-half Starcatchers on the planet, he's responsible for preventing Starstuff from falling into the wrong hands.

Molly Aster: Lord Aster's daughter. A confident and smart young woman who yearns to help her father and become a Starcatcher herself. She's clever and perceptive, but also a little inflexible. Driven by a strong moral compass, she has a knack for thinking of just the right thing at just the right moment. She might have a crush on Boy.

Mrs. Bumbrake: Molly's stern but loving Nanny. British through and through, she also likes to have a bit of fun here and there.

Captain Robert Falcon Scott: Captain of the *Wasp*. In later years, he will lead an expedition to the South Pole and, tragically, freeze to death.

Gremplin: The nasty and vicious schoolmaster of Saint Norbert's Orphanage for Lost Boys. Uninterested in teaching his pupils or transforming their lives, he whips them and keeps them locked in the dark.

The Seafarers

Bill Slank: The cruel captain of the *Neverland*. Driven by greed, Slank is also an orphan, and his desire for more might just be an attempt to fill a hole in his life.

Alf: A well-meaning, if gruff, seafarer. He doesn't have much time for orphans, but does have a soft spot for very British nannies.

Black Stache: The malapropism-dropping, mercurial menace of the high seas. A bit of a showboat, Black Stache might hide some insecurity (but don't tell him that) behind his panache. He can switch on the anger in an instant. Black Stache is on the hunt for treasure, but more than that, he seeks a hero to complement his villainy.

Smee: The right-hand man to Black Stache, Smee tries (and often fails) to carry out the bidding of his captain, even if it means dressing up as a mermaid and playing the ukulele.

The Natives

Fighting Prawn: The king of the Mollusks. He spent years enslaved in British kitchens, and his desire for revenge runs deep.

Hawking Clam: Fighting Prawn's son. One day he will rule over Mollusk Island.

Teacher: A Scottish salmon who is now a wise mermaid.

The Story

It is a misty dawn in 1885 at the docks of Portsmouth, England, where two ships are preparing to depart, both bound for the faraway isle of Rundoon. Aboard the *Wasp*—the fastest ship in the British fleet—is Lord Leonard Aster, charged by Queen Victoria (God save her!) to destroy a trunk of valuable Starstuff by throwing it into Rundoon's Mount Jalapeño, lest it fall into the wrong hands. Hoping to keep his only daughter, Molly, safe, Lord Aster leaves her on the other, slower ship—the *Neverland*—in the care of her very British nanny, Mrs. Bumbrake. Also aboard the *Neverland* are three orphans—Prentiss, Ted and Boy—bound to become pet food for the snakes of King Zarboff III, Rundoon's tyrannical ruler. Just before the two ships set sail, Bill Slank, the *Neverland's* conniving captain, swaps the trunk full of Starstuff for an identical one filled with sand.

Out on the open water, the *Wasp* is overtaken by pirates who had stowed aboard disguised as sailors. Their captain, the fearsome Black Stache, seeks the Queen's treasure of Starstuff, only to discover that he's been duped by Slank. Furious, Black

Stache pursues the *Neverland*, where Molly has discovered the Starstuff and teamed up with Boy to return it to her father. Can Molly and Boy work together to find the precious Starstuff before it's too late?

An Origin Story

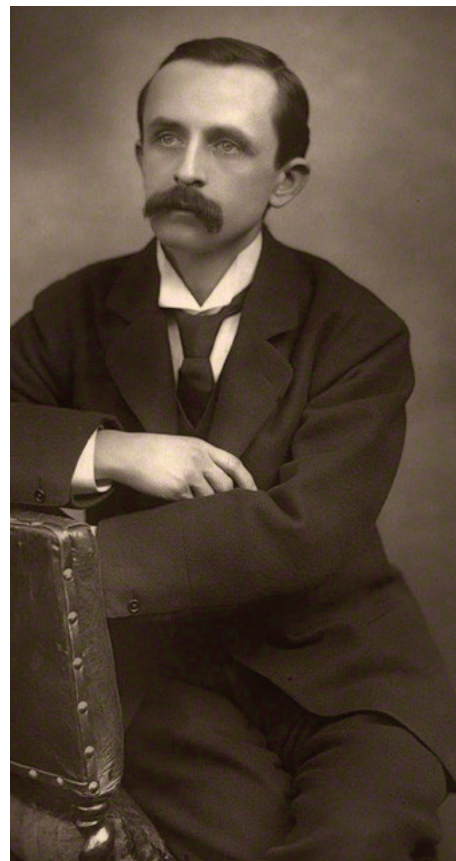
P*eter and the Starcatcher* has a fascinating constellation of origin points, from a lonely and searching writer telling stories to children in Kensington Gardens at the turn of the 20th century, to two American authors “ping-pong-ing” chapters back and forth between St. Louis and Miami at the beginning of the 21st.

The idea for *Peter Pan* came from stories that writer J. M. Barrie imagined with the five boys who would become his muses—the sons of London socialite Sylvia Llewelyn Davies. From these adventure tales came the wildly popular 1904 play that introduced Western audiences to Peter Pan, headstrong and boastful, mercurial and charismatic.

Nearly a century later, inspired by Barrie's original story, humorist Dave Barry and thriller writer Ridley Pearson decided to write a prequel, imagining how the iconic characters from *Neverland* became who they are. Their first book, *Peter and the Starcatchers* (published in 2004), was a huge success and generated an entire series of popular young-adult novels.

In 2007, Disney (who popularized a very particular image of Barrie's Peter Pan) began to explore how *Peter and the Starcatchers* might live onstage, telling Barry and Pearson's imaginative origin story in the form that Barrie himself first used: the theatre.

When considering these points in *Peter and the Starcatcher's* journey to the stage, storytelling—as act and structure—emerges as a guiding thread. *Peter Pan* began as a tale told to and with children, meant to entertain and engage them. As a fable, it was also devised to soothe J. M. Barrie's own uneasiness with the adult world. The connective and transporting magic of telling a story has always been at the heart of *Peter Pan*. It's an adventure presented to



James Matthew Barrie—better known as J. M. Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*.



Sketch by costume designer Melissa Torchia.

intergenerational audiences hungry for the pleasure of imagination and the thrill of recognition. The boy who never grew up, then, finds a homecoming of sorts in the fantastical world—brought to life by an ensemble of storytellers in *Peter and the Starcatcher*.

J. M. Barrie and the Creation of Peter Pan

“All children, except one, grow up.” A reference to Peter Pan, this line could also summarize the central ambiguities and tensions of his creator’s life. A man who was obsessed with childhood and deeply fearful of growing up, J. M. Barrie experienced the central trauma of his life at age 6, when his beloved brother David died suddenly in a skating accident at 13 years old. Barrie’s mother was devastated by David’s death, and Barrie threw himself into becoming the older son his mother would never have, even going so far as to dress in his dead brother’s clothes. David’s sudden death instilled in Barrie a fixation on staying forever a boy and an uneasiness with growing up, traits that would contribute to the creation of Peter Pan later in his life.



K. T. Vogt, seen here in 2017’s *Shakespeare in Love*, portrays Alf, a mermaid, and other roles in this ensemble-driven production. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Throughout his years at school, and then in his life as a promising young writer, Barrie was uncomfortable with the adult world. Short, small and very shy, Barrie was, as Jackie Wullschläger writes in her book *Inventing Wonderland*, “a bachelor by temperament.” And yet, in 1894, Barrie married actress Mary Ansell, who had performed in his play *Walker, London* two years before. Barrie was unsuited to marriage, and while he loved children and Mary wanted them, the couple only had a large Saint Bernard dog named Porthos.

It was Porthos that brought Barrie into contact with the boys who would inspire *Peter Pan*. Barrie had a habit of taking long walks with the dog in London’s Kensington Gardens, and there, around 1896, he met 5-year-old George Llewelyn Davies and his younger brother Jack. Barrie soon fixated on the boys and later met their mother, Sylvia, with whom he became entranced. She was the wife of Arthur Llewelyn Davies, a wealthy and well-connected London barrister. Wullschläger writes: “Her sons were living versions of [Barrie’s] ideal of boyhood.”

Barrie quickly became a very close friend of the family. It was a complicated relationship. Given the mores of the time, it was unconventional for a married man with no children of his own to become so attached to another family. And given our contemporary perspective, Barrie’s close association with the Llewelyn Davies boys can be concerning. Addressing this, biographer Andrew Birkin (who interviewed the youngest Llewelyn Davies boy) offers that Barrie was “a lover of childhood, but was not in any sexual sense the paedophile that some claim him to have been.” Writing in the *New Yorker*, Anthony Lane suggests that Barrie’s parasitic relationship to the Llewelyn Davies boys “may have been creepy and pathetic, but it was not a crime.” Barrie became a voyeur of this happy family and its spirited, charming boys, who embodied the childhood he had so uneasily left behind and for which he pined.

From this convoluted relationship between personal desire and societal norms, between unwanted adulthood and unattainable childhood, came the character of Peter Pan. On one vacation with the Llewelyn Davies family, Barrie

told a story about how George and Jack’s baby brother Peter could fly. The story later made it into Barrie’s 1902 novel for adults, *The Little White Bird*, in which Peter Pan first appeared as a 7-day-old infant who escapes his family and lives in Kensington Gardens. By playing games with the Llewelyn Davies boys and encouraging their imaginations, Barrie created Neverland and its inhabitants. These characters were often drawn directly from life. The Darling boys were named after the Llewelyn Davies boys (John and Michael). The made-up name Wendy came from a friend’s daughter, whose lisp made her nickname for Barrie—“my friendly”—sound like “wendy.” The Saint Bernard Nana is modeled directly on Barrie’s dog Porthos. Barrie may have included some of the tension he felt toward Arthur Llewelyn Davies in the hotheaded and inept Mr. Darling. And Mrs. Darling, with her “sweet mocking mouth,” is Barrie’s beloved Sylvia Llewelyn Davies.

Despite many barriers to success, Barrie’s play *Peter Pan*—based on these characters created with the Llewelyn Davies boys—opened in London on December 27, 1904, and was a triumph. Building on the success of the play, Barrie wrote an expanded version of the story and published it in 1911 under the title *Peter and Wendy*.

Barrie’s Peter Pan—the character, the play and the novel—have been subject to many adaptations. Throughout films and television shows, plays and novels, Barrie’s creation has proven its appeal across generations. Barrie himself turned to storytelling and fantasy to live out an idealized life, to imagine a different world and to escape conventional roles that never fit him. That core impulse—to tell a story, and thus shape the world—might be what brings people back to Peter Pan and Neverland generation after generation.

Peter and the Starcatchers

Like Peter Pan himself, and many children’s stories before and after, *Peter and the Starcatchers* began with a question from a child. One evening, writer Ridley Pearson was reading *Peter Pan* aloud to his daughter when she turned to him and asked, “how did Peter Pan meet Captain Hook in the first place?” Pearson thought it was a good question, and would make an even better book.

Committed to writing a “prequel” to Barrie’s original that would answer his daughter’s question, Pearson went on the hunt for a co-author. He found his partner in Pulitzer Prize-winning humor columnist Dave Barry, his bandmate from the famously terrible Rockbottom Reminders—a band made up of authors including Stephen King, Barbara Kingsolver and Amy Tan.

Writing a book, unlike making a piece of theatre, is a solitary endeavor. Pearson, the author of over 50 suspense and young-adult novels, had never written collaboratively before. To create *Peter and the Starcatchers* together, Pearson and Barry split up the characters and then took turns writing chapters from these different perspectives. This method ensured that the style of the book was true to Pearson and Barry’s authentic voices. Their focus was less on literary devices, or trying to emulate Barrie’s particular style, than on telling an exciting story that would answer Pearson’s daughter’s original question.

In addition to imagining adventuresome and exciting backstories for Peter, Captain Hook, Tinker Bell and the other inhabitants of Neverland, Pearson and Barry also had some larger goals as adapters. First, they wanted to address Barrie’s racist depiction of the “Indians” who live on Neverland. In an interview on the website of Powell’s Books, Barry explains that he and Pearson wanted to focus on creating a more “sophisticated, maybe a little scarier, certainly a more competent and dignified” representation of the island’s imagined “natives.” Thus came the characters Fighting Prawn and Hawking Clam, human inhabitants of Mollusk Island who had been captured and enslaved in British kitchens. Barry and Pearson use this backstory to level a gentle critique at British colonialism, while also giving dimension to the indigenous Neverlanders and their suspicion of newcomers arriving on their shores.

Pearson and Barry were also determined to correct the gender imbalance in the story of *Peter Pan* by creating a central female character who is “strong” and “brave,” descriptors mentioned by Barry in the Powell’s Books interview. He elaborates on the character of Molly: “Peter is the pro-

tagonist, but Molly is the hero. She is the one who in the end gets it done despite incredible odds. . . . She is the brave, strong character who brings Peter up to her level. . . . We wanted a kick-ass girl in there.”

The two writers had only planned on creating a slim volume to capture the origins of Peter Pan, but before they knew it, they had written a nearly 500-page book, and Disney approached them to publish more under the “Starcatcher” umbrella. The series now includes five books. And Pearson’s daughter has a spectacular answer to her question from all those years ago.

From this convoluted relationship between personal desire and societal norms, between unwanted adulthood and unattainable childhood, came the character of Peter Pan.

***Starcatchers* Goes to Broadway**

Peter and the Starcatcher, the adaptation of Barry and Pearson’s book that opened in 2009, was an exciting theatrical experience for many reasons. Chief among them was the ensemble nature of the production, which focused on the act of storytelling itself to bring the novel to life onstage. Using ropes and planks and their own bodies, a group of 12 actors shifted quickly between characters and created the magical circumstances of the plot. In the annotated script of the Broadway production, dramaturg Ken Cerniglia writes that the original goal of the theatrical adaptation was to turn the novel into “a play that celebrated the sound

of words, the transformation of actors, and the thrill of imagination.” This was a canny choice on the part of playwright Rick Elice and directors Roger Rees and Alex Timbers. Their focus on storytelling resonated with Peter Pan’s origins in the imaginations of the Llewelyn Davies boys, aligned with Barry and Pearson’s desire to tell a captivating tale for their own children, and produced a theatrical event that continues to delight audiences a decade after its premiere.

Over the course of developmental workshops and a first production, the team behind *Peter and the Starcatcher* discovered and deepened this foundational focus on storytelling. The first workshop came in the summer of 2007 at Williamstown Theatre Festival, where, according to Cerniglia, the main organizational principle was “everybody plays everything.” Actors transitioned between different characters and narrated key moments of action, establishing a theatrical vocabulary that foregrounded the act of storytelling as a structural device and an overarching theme. This allowed audiences to clearly see and understand how the story was being told even as they were swept up in its wake.

It was at this workshop that directors Timbers and Rees also began incorporating music (lullabies, sea shanties, vaudeville tunes) into the storytelling. After Williamstown, Wayne Barker joined the creative team. Barker had been, among his other credits, the accompanist to famed drag queen Dame Edna. His knowledge of a wide variety of musical styles and his familiarity with a certain “over-the-top” aesthetic played well with Timbers and Rees’s imagination-filled staging. Music became a core component of the storytelling of the play. *Peter and the Starcatcher* is not a musical in the traditional sense, but it is a play that *uses* music: to underscore moments of transformation, to give texture to the emotion of the characters, and to help the ensemble create one fantastical world after another.

During a La Jolla Playhouse workshop production, the team cemented the adaptation’s “poor theatre” aesthetic, supported by the choice to source all of the production’s scenic elements directly from the

LANGUAGE AS A PROP

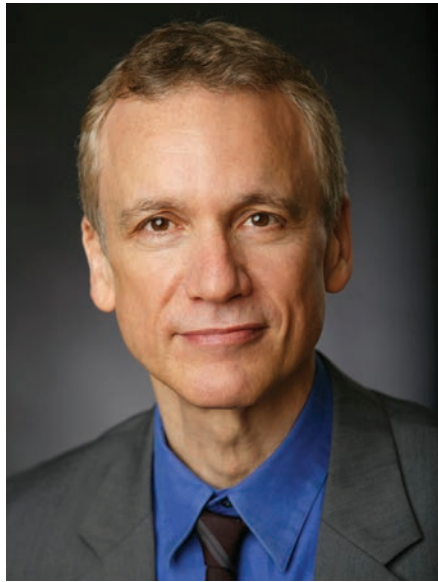
To transport Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson's novel to the stage, Rick Elice did the normal cutting, splicing and combining that are required for telling a story within the time constraints of live performance.

Some changes from the book to the stage adaptation will be apparent to anyone who is a fan of Pearson and Barry's original. The first half of their book concerns the convergence and fate of not two, but three ships. The blustering Captain Pembridge of the *Neverland* is gone, replaced by his first mate from the book, Bill Slank. In the novel, Molly and her father, Lord Aster, communicate through a porpoise named Ammm. In Elice's adaptation, they talk via their amulets in the language of the extinct Dodo bird.

One of Elice's particularly hilarious changes is making Black Stache—a menacing, if overly dramatic figure in the novel—prone to ridiculous malapropisms. This is in keeping with the delight in language that infuses Elice's adaptation. In the annotated script of the Broadway production, Elice recounts that, as the play was developing, "The directors told me that language was to be considered a prop, so I used as many linguistic tricks as I could." The play is full of alliteration, anachronism, narration, song, wordplay, anagrams and a profusion of literary, cultural and historical allusions that will delight particularly nerdy audience members.

Elice has fun dropping Shakespeare "Easter eggs" throughout the text, with references to the famous Sonnet 18 ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"), *King Lear* (Black Stache: "Blow you winds! Oh, you winds! I'm still the man!), and *Macbeth* ("Screw your courage, steel your heart!"), as well as a play-within-a-play that feels reminiscent of the Rude Mechanicals' production in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Timbers, Rees and Elice were inspired at the beginning of their process by David Edgar's large-scale, narration-



Playwright Rick Elice.

theatre's prop storage. "Poor theatre" is a style of performance and production that comes from Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski and his work with actors in the 1960s and '70s. The aesthetic emphasizes the connection between the actor and the audience by removing costumes and sets and focusing on an unmediated, "stripped-down" acting style. Considering its antecedents, it is interesting that this theatrical adaptation of *Peter and the Starcatchers* utilized such an aesthetic, as it echoed



Sketch by costume designer Melissa Torchia.

Barry and Pearson's simplified focus on story and the analog theatrical technologies of Barrie's time.

In his production history, Cerniglia remembers, "our biggest criticism from La Jolla was that the character arcs of Molly and Black Stache were so successful that the titular character was often lost." In response, Elice made a decisive shift to the character of Peter, making him less of the active, confident child he is in Pearson and Barry's novel. Peter became "a dark, abused, nameless boy" whose journey toward a name and a home became the backbone of the play. After La Jolla, the word "Starcatchers" in the title lost its "s," a move that helped to focus the play even more on the relationship between Boy and Molly.

While he had to jettison some characters and situations from the novel, Elice did decide to keep its historical setting, placing the action of his adaptation in 1885. His adaptation acknowledges Britain's status as an imperialist power, with narrators critiquing England's sense of superiority and the people of Mollusk Island testifying to the abuses that British colonialism engendered. The historical context is also felt most keenly in how gender works in the play. In particular, Molly and the Orphans argue about whether or not women can be leaders. To emphasize this thread in the plot, and to show the isolation felt by women during Queen Victoria's reign, the wildly successful Broadway production featured an ensemble of male-identifying actors playing all the roles, save for Molly, who was played by female-identifying actor Celia Keenan-Bolger.

***Peter and the Starcatcher* at OSF**

Many of the regional productions of *Peter and the Starcatcher* that followed the Broadway run also decided to cast an all-male ensemble. Lavina Jadhvani, who is directing the play at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, is interested in exploring how the casting for *Peter and the Starcatcher* might be more inclusive, inspired by a note from Elice and the original creative team that describes the play as "a celebration of 'all-ness.'" OSF's production will include female-identifying performers playing both male and female characters, and will be performed by a

more racially diverse company than the original Broadway production.

For Jadhvani, this is right in line with what OSF does best: “What we do here, be it with Shakespeare or other canonical work, is to take these stories that we think we know and say, ‘But what if it looked like this?’” This sense of curiosity and exploration is perfectly suited to Elice’s lively adaptation, which plays with audience expectations and delights in the kind of imaginative play that gave rise to the character of Peter Pan in the first place. This production will be a celebration not only of inclusion, but of OSF’s excellent and virtuosic acting company, who will bring this imagined prequel to life.

“So many people in this play are looking for home,” says Jadhvani. There’s Boy, who finds his place in Neverland, Molly, who learns what it means to be a leader, and Black Stache, a villain who finds his hero. It’s personal, too, for Jadhvani. Last at OSF as the 2016 Phil Killian Directing Fellow, Jadhvani sees this production “like a little homecoming.”

The symbol of home has always been at the heart of *Peter Pan*. Barrie searched his whole life for a home and found it in the magic of telling stories with the Llewelyn Davies boys. Barry and Pearson created an origin story for Barrie’s boy who would never grow up, imagining what his “home” might be. And Rick Elice found a home for this prequel on the stage, in the form where Peter Pan first took flight. It’s a fascinating constellation, and OSF’s production—inclusive and celebratory—will be one more bright spot along the way.

Five actors in this ensemble shot from 2017’s *Shakespeare in Love* will be reunited in *Peter and the Starcatcher*: James Ryen, Preston Mead, Brent Hinkley, Michael J. Hume and Cristofer Jean. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Further Reading

Peter and Wendy, by J. M. Barrie. This is the novel Barrie published in 1911 following the success of his 1904 play *Peter Pan*.

Peter and the Starcatcher: The Annotated Script of the Broadway Play, by Rick Elice. This beautifully designed commemorative edition includes informative insights from Rick Elice and other members of the original Broadway creative team about the development process and the script itself.

Inventing Wonderland: The Lives and Fantasies of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, J. M. Barrie, Kenneth Grahame and A. A. Milne, by Jackie Wullschläger. An engaging group biography of influential British children’s book authors. Wullschläger expertly places their lives and their works into fascinating historical context.

Hook, 1991 film, directed by Stephen Spielberg, starring Robin Williams. A sequel to Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*, the film imagines what happens if Peter Pan did grow up.

The Starcatcher Series: *Peter and the Starcatchers* (2004), *Peter and the Shadow Thieves* (2006), *Peter and the Secret of Rundoon* (2007), *Peter and the Sword of Mercy* (2009), *The Bridge to Never Land* (2011), by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson.

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filled adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*, which had been a success at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1980s. Elice credits Dickens as a “spiritual father” of his adaptation, and references the author a few times (“Please, sir—is there a vegetarian alternative?”).

Other literary and cultural figures get shout-outs, including Robert Browning, John Bunyan, Herman Melville, George Bernard Shaw and Philip Glass. Capping off the many high-brow allusions are a whole string of anachronisms: Ayn Rand, BVDs, “two thumbs up!” and more.



Director Lavina Jadhvani.