

Theater: Unwieldy script diminishes 'Peter and the Starcatcher'

Hillbarn production offers several excellent performances, some good laughs

[Joanne Engelhardt](#) January 22, 2018 at 6:50 pm





Nicole Bruno, left, and Will Springhorn Jr. in Hillbarn Theatre's production of "Peter and the Starcatcher," which runs Jan. 18 through Feb. 4, 2018. (Mark and Tracy Photography)

Like the unrelenting flu going around these days, mid-Peninsula theaters seem to be experiencing an incurable (but sometimes irreverently funny) case of the “wackys.”

First was Los Altos Stage Company’s excellent “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” last April, then Dragon Production Theatre’s passionate production of “The Further Adventures of Hedda Gabler” last fall, and now Hillbarn Theatre in Foster City takes theatergoers on an equally insane — and even more madcap — adventure with “Peter and the Starcatcher,” through Feb 4.

There’s a presumption with Rick Elice’s loopy 2009 play (based on the 2004 Dave Barry-Ridley Pearson novel) that people are interested in learning this much about what actors call the “back story” behind J. M. Barrie’s beloved “Peter Pan,” which had a stellar run at Palo Alto Players last November.

That’s not altogether untrue, but it’s also not altogether true. And while some of the raunchy humor of “Starcatcher” is distasteful for long-time theatergoers, it goes over big with exactly the right age audience theaters seek to attract these days: Millennials.

Yet for some in the opening night audience last Friday night, the overly long, occasionally tedious and frequently difficult to hear (or even understand) first act was enough of a turnoff that some left or were heard to remark, “Hopefully that’s the end” at intermission.

It’s not that Jeffrey Lo didn’t direct the dickens out of his versatile, hard-working cast. He did. And you can’t fault the astounding talent of several phenomenal actors.

So the fault that this production isn't uniformly fabulous most likely lays at the feet of Elice's peculiar, long-winded, frequently incongruous, incomprehensible script.

Give credit to a bevy of uber-talented actors who do everything but fly (well, one levitates, a little) to entice the audience to enjoy the frivolous goings-on. Way before the actual start of the show, wily actors jump, hiss, prod and hug audience members — even offering up a heart-cutout frame to get couples to share a smooch on camera. There's definitely no fourth wall in this production.

If there were no one else in Hillbarn's rendition than Will Springhorn Jr. (as Black Stache), Heather Orth (as the nanny Mrs. Bumbrake), Wes Gabrillo (as Lost Boy Ted), Dan Demers (Smee), David Blackburn (Slank), Adrienne Kaori Walters (Molly) and Sean Okuniewicz (The Boy/Peter), it might have simplified this messy conglomeration of adventures, mishaps and misunderstandings.

But, alas, there are others who contribute little or complicate matters with unintelligible British accents and superfluous goings-on.

Springhorn himself could carry an entire show on his broad shoulders, salacious grin and wicked laugh, so Lo deserves a lot of credit for finding him for this role. The actor gives a comedic masterpiece of a performance in Act 2 as he slams his hand down inside a heavy shipping trunk. Yes, he milks it for all it's worth, but everyone in the audience is in blissful hysterics.

As for Orth, not only does she have a wondrous singing voice that helps carry things along musically, her sly sense of humor and embellished facial expressions make the stage light up whenever she's part of the action.

It's a delight to watch nimble Gabrillo as Ted, who is always hungry and obsessed with food — he actually faints every time he thinks of sticky pudding. His antics with a pineapple (trying to eat it with the prickly outside

shell on and, later, devouring it when it finally breaks in two) are enchanting.

Some newcomers to Hillbarn may only know Dan Demers as its affable artistic director. But here he gets to exercise some of his considerable comedic chops as Black Stache's loyal assistant Smee. Demers is always fun to watch as he rolls his eyes, mugs shamelessly and whips around the stage as agile as a 20-year-old.

And, although Blackburn often carries his antics a shade too far, his bendy body and searing eyes help him etch a fine characterization as the greedy, whip-cracking captain of the ship Neverland.

As for the youthful Walters and Okuniewicz, they vacillate between being exceptional and mediocre. Walters played the same role in the TheatreWorks production three years ago, so she's got all the sass and savvy down pat. But neither of them are very convincing as 13-year-olds, so it takes a leap of faith to imagine them that age.

Still, both have that youthful exuberance and starry-eyed innocence that helps audiences root for them to beat all the horrific creatures they encounter in "Starcatcher."

Christopher Fitzer's robust, moveable set (mostly half of the Neverland and half of the other ship, the Wasp) is an excellent backdrop for the majority of the action, while other scenes take place in ship cabins, the bowels of the ship and, for the mermaid scene at the top of Act 2, underwater. That scene is clearly a crowd-pleaser, with bad guys and good guys (and gals) all donning flimsy mermaid-esque costumes and flitting around daintily to Lee Ann Payne's choreography.

Sharon Pang worked way overtime creating all the many costumes needed for this production, and Kevin Stanford deserves a shout-out for props. Michael Palumbo's lighting and Matt Vandercook's sound were uniformly satisfactory, even though some British accents were hard to understand.

At times welcome melodious sounds are heard from high overhead where music director and pianist Amanda Ku (Bob Sunshine subbing for some performances) and Lane Sanders playing percussion (Stuart Langsam subs on some shows) sit unseen.

In 2012, “Starcatcher” was nominated for nine Tony Awards, won five, and ran for more than 300 performances. And that original Barry-Pierson book was followed by a series of additional adventures about Peter and his friends (and even early reader chapter books).

That’s why this play has a built-in cult following of young people. No doubt they’ll adore the Hillbarn production, perhaps not realizing it could have been so much better.

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Theater

What: “Peter and the Starcatcher”

Where: Hillbarn Theatre, 1285 E. Hillsdale Blvd., Foster City

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays – Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

Through: Feb. 4

Tickets: \$28-52, (650) 349-6411 or www.hillbarntheatre.org

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