

Dear Brutus

by J.M. Barrie, directed by Julia Rodriguez-Elliott

A Noise Within • November 3-December 16, 2007 (Opened, rev'd 11/10e)

Allusions to Shakespeare, parlor game plotting, and a flopped-image mirroring of his famous 1904 'Peter Pan' give a sense of playfulness to J.M. Barrie's 'Dear Brutus,' rounding out A Noise Within's three-play repertory through December 16. But that should not obscure the weightier themes that Barrie has buried, like bittersweet nougat, at the center of the confection.

Co-Artistic Director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott has sensitized a top ANW ensemble of actors and designers to ring both ends of this emotional scale. They've executed things so well, in fact, that houses may slide off the swing as it arcs from comedy-of-manners silliness at one extreme to half-empty melancholy at the other. Still, audiences who can take the ride will leave the theater half-filled with escapism and half-filled with nourishment.

In English letters, Barrie's creations stand with Lewis Carroll's as singularly iconic. Like the worlds Alice found beyond the looking glass and rabbit hole, Barrie's Neverland continues to provide children with colorful coordinates for their developing imaginations more than a century later. Thirteen years after Barrie's timeless fantasy about eternal childhood debuted in London, he returned to the aging theme from another angle. 'Dear Brutus' is set in a childless environment: there are no children in the story, and there are none even referenced by all the adults. The exception is Lob (Robert Towers, a casting bulls-eye), a tiny man of indeterminate age.

Before getting into the script's merits, which predominate, a quick word about its weakness, which may explain why it is so seldom staged. The boyish Barrie has taken some shortcuts to get to the fun part. To assemble the properly disparate characters required for the plot, he brings the community's saddest sorts together in the house of its oddest. As one character points out: "We have been here a week, and we find that when Lob invited us he knew us all so little that we begin to wonder why he asked us." Barrie seems to have had little interest in justifying his set up. It's unlikely people who are filled with the requisite regret would willingly oblige such blind-siding.

But with that quibble nibbled, we happily hoist our suspenders of disbelief back to our clavicles, and enjoy the ride. The view is another triumph from scenic designer Michael C. Smith, who creates a world of lush mystery and uncertainty. With lighting designer Ken Booth, they conjure up a nice trick with stage smoke to make it appear a mist has settled above the stage floor. Soojin Lee adds another two racks of detailed costumes to her impressive Fall Collection (previewed in ANW's 'Winter's Tale'). Rachel Myles' sound and Laura Karpman's music provide sonic accompaniment while the actors look and sound natural thanks to Monica Lisa Sabedra's hair and make-up and Nike Doukas' guidance with dialects.

Lob, hiding his powers under a chosen name that in British slang means a dimwit, could be an aging Peter Pan, in the way Barrie, who was 57 when the play premiered, saw himself. But to not appear he was riding Peter's kite-tails, Barrie instead models Lob after Puck. In fact, one character recalls hearing him referred to as Robin Goodfellow. Another says villagers "remember him 70



Jessica Berman
Geoff Elliott

PHOTO CRAIG SCHWARTZ

WITH Erin Bennett, Abby Craden, Mitchell Edmonds, Geoff Elliott, Jill Hill, William Dennis Hunt, Sally Smythe, Deborah Strang, Bruce Turk, with Robert Towers and Jessica Berman
PRODUCTION Michael C. Smith, set; Soojin Lee, costumes; Ken Booth, lights; Rachel Myles, sound; Laura Karpman, music; Monica Lisa Sabedra, hair/make-up, Nike Doukas, dialects; Rebecca Dove Baillie/Liza Tognazzini, stage management

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years ago, looking just as he does today.” Then again, there are possible ties to Peter’s world. Lob’s valet, Matey (William Dennis Hunt), could be Captain Hook’s First Mate, Starkey, brought back in servitude (which would explain his compulsive stealing.)

The play begins at 10 p.m. on Midsummer Night’s eve. Matey has leaked that Lob may suggest a trip to a mysterious wood, but insists they not go. These house-bound guests, anxious for adventure, are not to be deprived. They will leave as soon as Barrie introduces us to Mr. and Mrs. Dearth (Geoff Elliott and Deborah Strang), Mr. and Mrs. Coade (Mitchell Edmonds and Sally Smythe), Mr. and Mrs. Purdie (Bruce Turk and Jill Hill), and the unattached Joanna Trout (Abby Craden) and Lady Caroline Laney (Erin Bennett).



Bruce Turk
Jill Hill

The Purdies have a lackluster marriage with a hole in its boat-bottom. Squeezed in on the incoming water is Miss Trout. Barrie shifts the writing pace to light farce for the Purdies’ love-triangle scene with Joanna. Like ‘Midsummer’ mechanicals, they are delightfully dim, and Craden, Turk and especially Hill bring off the comedy nicely. Though our house wasn’t quite ready to make the stylistic leap so quickly, the actors will likely learn to trigger them early enough to permit full enjoyment.

We briefly glimpse the other guests’ humdrum lives and lack of fulfillment. As intermission nears, the group starts off for the wood, but Mr. Dearth, who seems to have done this before, eagerly reveals a better way. A man with a secret life, and looking a little like Barrie under his mustache, Elliott’s Dearth opens the lanai and everyone except Lob and Mrs. Coade trips into the wood. Rodriguez-Elliott and Smith have fashioned the trees as columns, to remind us that fantasy is

a product of human imagination, not the natural world. The wood represents, literally, what ‘would’ have happened if people had chosen another, presumably harder but more rewarding path. As Matey explains, “I am not bad naturally. . . . It’s touch and go how the poor turn out in this world; all depends on your taking the right or the wrong turning.”

Timeless plays are as independent of their author’s life stories as moon landers are of the mine fields that produced their raw materials. And yet, some dimensions of a story are only understood by understanding the writer’s background. J.M. Barrie, endearingly brought to life by Johnny Depp in 2004’s ‘Finding Neverland,’ had a dissatisfying personal life. At age 6 his 13-year-old brother David died. While David’s disappearance left him eternally young, it may have intensified Barrie’s embrace of his own childhood and antipathy towards death.

Barrie never had children of his own. And although he gained shared custody of a friends’ four boys, one suspects that the artist Dearth silently suffers an emptiness that Barrie endured. While much of ‘Dear Brutus’ is a great parlor game, as we watch the spellbound guests return from the wood and wonder how many secrets they’ll expose before their trances drop, the heart of the play rests heavily in the scene between the childless painter and his imagined daughter Margaret (Jessica Berman). The scene could seem unnecessarily long if its connection to Barrie’s philosophy and personal life were not understood. Credit Berman in her brief appearance with helping to draw together the extremes of Barrie’s vision. She and the director let that final parting between never-to-be parent Dearth and his make-believe child be honestly painful. It gives this cautionary tale its heft. Don’t let opportunity pass, said Barrie, who called Peter Pan’s fantasy paradise “Never” land for good reason. Imagination can take you only so far. In reality, if you have to make it happen, or live with regrets. ■