

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large:

Review: Avast! Comedic whirlwind sighted at Peninsula Players



“Peter and the Starcatcher,” Rick Elice’s grown-up prequel to Peter Pan based on the Novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, with music by Wayne Barker is on stage at Peninsula Players July 5-July 23, 2017. From left Valerie Maze, Henry McGinniss, Kyle Hatley, Sean Fortunato, Joe Foust, Nick Vidal, Dan Klarer, Harter Clingman and Karl Hamilton. Photo by Len Villano.

FISH CREEK, Wis. - Some people never grow up. They’re caught in a time warp from when they were kids making up adventures beneath the dining room table. The table could be a space ship, a Conestoga wagon, a castle dungeon, a sailing ship. Or, better yet, two sailing ships.

Call one Wasp, a sleek and speedy vessel. Call the other Neverland, a worn and sluggish thing. Aboard one ship is a trunk with the valuables of the queen of England. Aboard the other is a trunk containing what people take for sand but is the stuff of magic. Be a pirate and switch the trunks. Confusion is certain.

The vessels are destined for a far-off place. One has three orphan boys who are captives. That vessel also carries the daughter of a lord who is on the other vessel, and the two communicate by way of amulets that are akin to cell phones that glow goldenly.

And so the show “Peter and the Starcatcher” starts. Hang on.

I tried to follow along with what was happening early on on opening night Wednesday but soon gave up. Keeping up is like trying to get a grasp on a kids adventure made up underneath that table. They’re oh so scatterbrained. But “Peter and the Starcatcher” is not by kids but from adult males who achieved greatness in the back of the class after watching too much of the Marx Brothers, “Rocky and Bullwinkle,” Robin Williams, Abbott and Costello, “Saturday Night Live,” The Three Stooges, Benny Hill, 59 other goofy comedy types and “Monty Python’s Flying Circus” – a lot of “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.”

Zaniness abounds.

Everything is a joke – or soon becomes a joke.

Sample one (verbal): A scene with a rough-looking knot of guys leads to a two-liner. Head guy: “We’re not ruffians.” Head guy’s minion: “Why, we’ve never been to Ruffia.”

Sample two (visual-plus): Act II opens under the sea with a song by mermaids in splashy mermaid-y getups that include colorful tails that sweep back and forth when operated from behind in puppeteering fashion. All the mermaids save one are mer-men – mermaids portrayed by men in sea-shell tiaras, bare shoulders, colander bras and curvy tails. Oye – it’s that kind of bizarre show.

“Peter and the Starcatcher” is a Niagara Falls of comedy. The jokes and one-liners and sight gags and nutty capers just keep coming. And coming. And coming. Oh, there’s stuff touched on about orphans and loneliness and grown up ways and home as we are led to believe we now know how Peter Pan and Captain Hook and the crocodile with the ticking clock in its belly came to be. There is a little bit of form to the thing. Mostly, “Peter and the Starcatcher” is for fun for adults as created by overgrown children who like things smart, smarty-pants and sometimes gross (passing wind, eating worms and puking in a bucket type humor).

This silliness is extremely intricate. The 12 cast members (11 male, one female) and two musicians/sound effects creators are do-all performers. Like the kids under the table, everything is enacted, often with found objects. Sample: Two rivals fight with swords; look closely... the swords are toilet plungers with the handles becoming blades and grip and the guards being the rubbery business part of the plunger.

The whimsy is endless. In a way, the show is overly clever. The humor shotgun style: If this joke doesn't work, maybe some of these next dozen will. Lots do, but the barrage is dizzying and numbing, too.

The cast is continuously in motion in song, dance and being growly pirates or ragtag kids or island savages or sea waves or birds or walls or – whew – anything necessary in a pinch to move the action along to the next bonkers bit.

There's comedy tonight (indeed) most every night at Peninsula Players Theatre's Theatre in a Garden to July 23.

In the giant ensemble piece, the performers are practiced and veteran pros who are having a blast re-visiting kid-dom.

The show is a whopping big case of timing of every kind – verbal and physical, including physical to the point of being moving objects.

Director Matt Crowle is akin to a New York City traffic cop in a caffeine fit.

Motion is at a premium. Joke lines tumble or erupt like chewed scenery (a joke in the show) or are caught up in a jungle-y chant.

Wordplay includes this: Norse Code – not Morse Code (dit-dot-dit) but Norse Code spoken in Norwegian – literally.

The story centers around a nameless orphan boy (Henry McGinniss) and a girl, Molly (Emma Rosenthal) who becomes the reason for Peter Pan to be (or something like that; I guarantee nothing in the way of clear explanation). Molly joke: Confronted about her age, 13, Molly quickly says she's 15. Confronted, she says she only counts odd-numbered years.

Flashy performances pop up like Fourth of July fireworks. Everybody in the cast has some kind of nifty burst. Sean Fortunato gets a lot of attention as over-the-top Black Stache (even his name is a series of jokes) whose transformation to Captain Hook-to-be is handled (pun intended) big time in a gob of oh-my-hand-just-got-cut-off jokes.

Fueling the frenzy by the ever-scurrying cast are wild-eyed props, costumes and set pieces. For instance, the set includes a proscenium arch laden with references to food and eating (one character is always hungry). Included are knives, forks, spoons, assorted serving dishes, pineapples and cupcakes and, perhaps, slices of pie serving as the shoulders of the arch. In short, there's a lot to meet the eye in this production of "Peter and the Starcatcher."

The show is a major task with more jokes and gags than you can fit into your little pea brain by the end of the night. It's sheer comedy escape on steroids.

Contact me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air Critic at Large editions on WFRV-TV at 6:20 a.m. Sundays.

Creative: Playwright – Rick Elice, based on the novel by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson, with music by Wayne Barker; director – Matt Crowle; scenic design – James Maronek; costume design – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting design – Emil Boulos; sound design – Chris Kriz; properties – Jesse Gaffney; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; musical direction – Valerie Maze; production manager – Cody Westgaard; scenic artist – Sara E. Ross; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; general manager – Brian Kelsey

Cast: Peter – Henry McGinniss; Prentiss – Nick Vidal; Ted – Dan Klarer; Lord Leonard Aster – James Rank; Molly Aster – Emma Rosenthal; Mrs. Bumbrake/Teacher – Jackson Evans; Captain Robert Falcon Scott – Matt Holzfeind; Gremplin/Fighting Prawn – Joe Foust; Bill Slank/Hawking Clam – Kyle Hatley; Alf – Karl Hamilton; Black Stache – Sean Fortunato; Smee – Harter Clingman

Running time: Two hours, 15 minutes

Remaining performances: To July 23: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except for 4 p.m. July 23.

Info: peninsulaplayers.com

NEXT: "The Bridges of Madison County," July 26-Aug. 13.

THE VENUE: The location of Peninsula Players Theatre's Theatre in a Garden is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. Flowers and other decorative foliage grace footpaths that weave through the grounds, which have been extended to the south. Driving along Peninsula Players Road and passing farms and trees, the thought may occur: "This theater is in an unusual place." The 621-seat theater house features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wooden slats of the side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with radiant heating for comfort. While the company dates back 82 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure, which got wobbly with age. The location on the shores of Green Bay provides playgoers with pre-show picnicking and viewing the sunset. Here's a theatrical rarity: The Players' website provides sunset times.