



Seeing Things

WITH THE GREATEST OF EASE

NOT that it matters, but the wire seemingly no thicker than a thread, which makes it possible for Mary Martin to soar with birdlike ease as Peter Pan, does catch the light occasionally. The wire supporting all the Peter Pans I have seen, from Maude Adams down through Marilyn Miller, Eva LeGallienne, and Jean Arthur, has always shown. No doubt it would be better if it did not, though it seems a safe guess that most children never see it. To adults, however, its showing is a reminder of how slim is the strand which supports all innocence, especially the regained innocence of mind and heart that makes it possible for grownups not only to put up with Barrie's fantasy but to surrender to it.

Miss Martin does not really need such a wire to fly. Of this I am confident. Well, almost confident. She must use it merely out of courtesy to her predecessors in the part who have relied on it. I do not mean to deny the wonders of Joseph Kirby's flying machine as supervised by Peter Foy, because if reality had a place in Never-Never Land this contraption would deserve star billing. But such is the magic of Miss Martin's performance that in this new version of "Peter Pan"* reality is exiled to the wings.

I must admit I dreaded seeing "Peter Pan" again, fearing I had grown too old for it or it too old for me. After all, it was first produced in London a half-century ago, the year after the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk, N. C., had done some flying themselves aided by a very different type of machine, intended for very different purposes. Where the Wrights were making an experiment which would shove the world into an unpredictable future from which there was to be no retreat, Barrie was moving back, escaping rather than advancing. He was concerned with the present of children, which is the past of adults, and writing as firm, if gentle, a protest against

the horrors of growing up as can be found.

That he wrote as a sentimentalist his worshipers (staunch sentimentalists themselves) have neither disputed nor deplored. As late as 1921 Galsworthy complained to William Lyon Phelps (of all people) that in most of Barrie's work he "found so many little lapses from what one can only call 'taste'—austerity of sentiment—so many little scrapes at one's epidermis—that" he confessed to "listening to him often with great discomfort." Long before, others, though safely on dry land, had felt a kind of seasickness when confronted with the more elfin of his whimsies. Certainly since 1921, as tastes have changed and toughened, Barrie's reputation has suffered, and many among his older admirers now wince at the archness which they may once have accepted.

I know I never thought that at fifty-four I would be touched as decades ago I had been by Peter's teaching Wendy and the Darling children to fly, or that I would sit wet-eyed among hundreds of other wet-eyed adults (there were scarcely any children present on the night I saw the new "Peter Pan"), all of us applauding furiously to save Tinker Bell's life at Peter's request.

AS EVERYONE must know by now, this "Peter Pan" is not exactly the "Peter Pan" that Barrie wrote. It is a musical comedy closer at times to Broadway than to Kensington Gardens. In certain scenes it is over-produced. Its second act drags a bit. And its music at best is what is chillily described as serviceable. These are adult reservations which the honest performance of drab critical duties forces me to mention. I suppose I could think up more, and with ease, if I were Captain Hook's prisoner on the bad ship *Jolly Roger* and he gave me the choice of doing so or walking the readied plank. Since I am not and write instead as one captivated by the evening as a whole and especially by Miss Martin's Peter, let me quickly get on to the production's enchantments.

Among these count the jubilantly contributive gadgets which somehow produce the magical effects they are supposed to; the lively and jealous Tinker Bell created by some unsung

Homer of the switchboard; Norman Shelly, whose dominion over the animal world is such that he can play both Nana and the Crocodile with equal skill; Margalo Gillmore, whose Mrs. Darling is the only one I have ever seen to have warmth and true kindness and not to be a cardboard figure; the unsentimental goodness of Kathy Nolan's Wendy; the attractiveness of Miss Martin's daughter, Heller Halliday, in the written-in part of Liza, the little maid who follows the children to Never-Never Land; the beguiling meekness with which Joe E. Marks once again plays Smee, the tailor; the children who are blessedly free of those shiny tricks which can make stage brats intolerable; the Indians who are drolly "heap big"; and the Pirates who are as fiercely Jolly Roger as if Howard Pyle had drawn them.

Cyril Ritchard, properly stuffy as Mr. Darling, is the more overpowering as Captain Hook because, though a fierce and scowling pirate, he appears to have strayed out of Congreve and Wycherly into that unholy calling, carrying with him some of the airs and graces of high comedy to make the brutality of his bloody threats the more terrible.

As surely as no playgoer who saw Maude Adams in the surrendering days of his youth can discuss "Peter Pan" without mentioning her, no playgoer who had thought he was past the age of this particular kind of surrender will be able to talk about "Peter Pan" in the future without naming Mary Martin if he has seen her. Before the curtain rises Miss Martin's Peter has flown the Atlantic and taken out naturalization papers in America. Her "boy who would not grow up" is the brother of Nellie Forbush. Yes, and of Danny Kaye, too. Yet vital and humorous as her Peter is, he can suddenly clutch at the heart, speaking without affectation for all that shining goodness of spirit Miss Martin abundantly possesses. He can also fly, fly as no previous Peter has ever flown, sweep through the air with a frightening speed and a grace that is truly celestial.

Quite rightly, the new scene in which Peter and the Darling children are shown on their journey to Never-Never Land has been described as an aerial ballet. It is a dance, beautiful and breathtaking, during which the dancers never touch the earth. Miss Martin dominates it, a figure who, as she sweeps and glides, turns and soars, creates poetry without speaking a word. Does the wire show which sustains her? It does. But, remember, not because it is really needed but merely as an act of courtesy to the more earthbound Peter Pans who preceded her. —JOHN MASON BROWN.

*PETER PAN, Edwin Lester's new musical production of James M. Barrie's play. Lyrics by Carolyn Leigh. Music by Mark Charlap. Additional music and lyrics by Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green. Directed by Jerome Robbins. Settings by Peter Larkin. Costumes by Motley. Presented by Richard Halliday. With a cast including Mary Martin, Cyril Ritchard, Kathy Nolan, Margalo Gillmore, Norman Shelly, Joe E. Marks, Sondra Lee, etc. At the Winter Garden, New York City. Opened October 20, 1954.

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Broadway Postscript

"Fanny" is daring. "Fanny" is ponderous. "Fanny" has a heart to give. "Fanny" has no heart to give. For all the laudability of the project of converting Marcel Pagnol's trilogy into a musical comedy, it ends up as the typical Broadway mass-collaboration that partly conquers all, and wholly captures none. This lack imposes upon its creators the art-poisoning task of infusing Broadway glucose into each line and number.

The musical comedy begins as an old operetta set in romantic Marseilles. Picaresque Gerald Price (the Admiral), who jumped to fame last season by singing about a shark, enters to sing about an octopus. A thin plot-thread is set in motion when the ventripotent Walter Slezak (Panisse) proposes almost in joking terms to pretty young Florence Henderson (Fanny). And William Tabbert (Marius) yearns for the sea slightly against the wishes of Ezio Pinza (his father, Cesar). Suddenly and gratefully we are whisked to an Arab Quarter peepshow for some genuinely voluptuous entertainment. However ungermane it may be, it is most welcome to be treated to the writhing talents of Nejla Ates, who is there with bells, but virtually nothing else, on. Joshua Logan, who has been credited with bringing the undraped male torso into our theatre, has, at last, done something for the boys. After this welcome excitement "Fanny" flounders around in the pathos surrounding the pride of nominal fatherhood gags. There are moments where Mr. Pinza and Mr. Slezak seem on the verge of "getting with" the Pagnol formula of deep sentiment, surface annoyance, and practical resolution. But there are also such unpagnolian spectacles as an underwater ballet and a fairytale schooner that passes across the stage to gasps of admiration from the audience.

Harold Rome's score is simple, sincere, and melodic, though hardly French. Ezio Pinza's angry rendition of "Love Is a Very Light Thing" and Walter Slezak's understated epithalamium "To My Wife" are moving and memorable. And Jo Mielziner's lovely faded green backdrop decorated with pink nursery animals has the flavor that "Fanny" so desperately lacks elsewhere. However much we appreciate these elements and the courage of S. N. Behrman, Joshua Logan, et al., in tackling such a Gallic story, we suspect that one sure-handed and relaxed chef might have been preferable to the dozen good cooks who seasoned "Fanny" into flavorlessness.

—HENRY HEWES.

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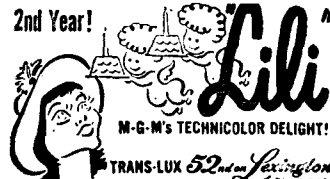
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