

THEATER REVIEW

Reviving a Barrie Fantasy Not Called 'Peter Pan'

by CHARLES ISHERWOOD

The adventures of Peter Pan have flitted across many pages, stages and movie screens in the century since he first sprang from the peculiar imagination of J. M. Barrie. But recently the sad, singular life of the man who created Peter has snatched a sliver of the media spotlight, thanks to the movie "Finding Neverland," a gauzy biography of Barrie starring Johnny Depp, in his winsome pallor, as the novelist, playwright and lifelong yearner after a youthful idyll.

But if the man and his eccentricities have been brought into new focus, Peter and his frisky pals continue to hold his literary reputation hostage, which makes the Vineyard Theater's rare revival of Barrie's "Mary Rose" an occasion of some interest. Although Barrie wrote many plays, even his popular successes, like "The Admirable Crichton" and "What Every Woman Knows" have been largely relegated to the ranks of the unrevived. After its United States premiere in 1920, "Mary Rose" was seen on Broadway very briefly in 1951. Then, like the rest of Barrie's stage work ("Peter Pan" spectacularly excepted), it sailed off into the Neverland of theatrical obscurity.

Such a fate is somehow apt for this elegantly plotted ghost story, which tells of a spunky British lass who has an odd habit of evaporating and then reappearing. The play is in many ways a more mature and mournful reworking of themes Barrie explored in the tale of the boy who refused to grow up. Time is seen as a quiet despoiler of happiness and innocence, and the lure of another world unblemished by its passing has an irresistible seduction.

The title character, played by Paige Howard, is a girlish young woman who climbs the apple tree outside the parlor window, barefoot and beaming with excitement, to announce her plans to marry. This news is greeted with furrowed brows by her doting parents, Mr. and Mrs. Morland (Michael Countryman and Betsy Aidem). They feel duty-bound to reveal to her jovial fiancé, Simon (Darren Goldstein), a mysterious incident in her past, of which they have



never spoken, even to Mary Rose herself.

When Mary Rose was a young girl, the family vacationed near a tiny Scottish island. While father fished, daughter was left to gambol on the island in the afternoon. One day, as Mr. Morland was getting ready to fetch her, Mary Rose disappeared, only to return three weeks later with no awareness that any time had passed. Traces of a lingering girlish abstractedness are the only hint that she was in any way affected by this disturbing adventure.

"I have sometimes thought that our girl is curiously young for her age," Mrs. Morland says. "You know how just a touch of frost may stop the growth of a plant and yet leave it blooming. It has sometimes seemed to me as if a cold finger had once touched my Mary Rose."

Scenes from the lives of Mary Rose and her parents, spanning at least a half-century, are bookended by encounters, many years later, between the caretaker of the Morland house, Mrs. Otery (a wonderfully vinegary Susan Blommaert), and a soldier recently returned from World War I, a cheeky Australian lad named Harry (Richard Short). Avoided by the locals, the house has fallen into disrepair and is now inhabited only by Mrs. Otery and perhaps a ghost or two.

It would spoil the fun to explain what this ornery Aussie is doing poking around the old house, or to relate any more details of the plot. Although the play flits back and forth in time, the lineaments of the story are easy enough to follow, particularly since there is a helpful narrator on hand, in the person of Keir Dullea, to embroider each scene with descriptive detail. Originally part of Barrie's loquacious stage directions, this commentary has been incorporated by the director, Tina Landau, into the play itself.

This innovation adds a freshening gloss of contemporary theatri-

cality, and a measure of literary texture, to Barrie's melancholy fantasy. For unlike its heroine, the play is undeniably dimmed by the patina of age. Mary Rose and her family occasionally muse on the evanescence of happiness and the workings of time in human life, but they lack the depth and complexity of enduring dramatic characters. They tend to speak in neatly trimmed Victorian sentences that suggest that their depths are all on the surface.

"I have passed through the valley of the shadow, dear," Mrs. Morland says to her husband, reflecting on a long-ago loss, "but I can say thankfully that I have come out again into the sunlight."

Although Mr. Dullea seemed tentative at the reviewed performance, he is an apt participant in this tale of strange lacunas in the seemingly unstoppable march of time. After his young-heartthrob years in the 1960s, Mr. Dullea himself seemed to have fallen into a black hole of showbiz, although his biography lists a litany of stage and film work throughout the decades that followed.

Just beginning to bloom is Ms. Howard, a New York University student making her professional debut. (She is a daughter of the actor and director Ron Howard, so presumably she comes honestly by her striking red tresses.) Poised and natural, Ms. Howard is best at conveying Mary Rose's bright earthiness; the otherworldly yearnings that haunt her are glimpsed less clearly.

The rest of the cast, including Ian Brennan as a vicar with whom Mr. Morland spars in a couple of passages, does well by both the chipper comedy and the wistful sentiment. Mr. Short, bounding spiritedly around the stage in his military woolens and boots, makes an especially lively impression as the energetic Harry, the kind of fellow who can greet a ghost with a hearty welcome and a firm handshake.