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TRAPPED IN TIME

BY JOHN LAHR

Can we agree that we're all haunted? The ghost world is part of our world. We carry within us the good and the bad, the spoken and the unspoken imperatives of our missing loved ones. As children, we are dreamed up by our parents; as adults, when our parents die we dream them up in turn. Conversations rarely stop at the grave. So, when we encounter ghosts onstage, they both terrify and compel us; within their trapped energy is an echo of our own unresolved losses. Ghosts must be banished, in order to get rid of their aggression toward the living and our aggression toward them for having left us. In the theatre, ghosts are traditionally agents either of tragic provocation (the ghost of Hamlet's father) or of comic persecution (Elvira in Noël Coward's "Blithe Spirit"); in Tina Landau's clever and stimulating revival of J. M. Barrie's 1920 play "Mary Rose" (at the Vineyard), however, the ghost turns out to be a catalyst for autobiographical repair.

At first sighting, the jejune, elusive Mary Rose Morland (Paige Howard) is clearly one of Barrie's charming embodiments of arrested development. She climbs an apple tree, then clambers through a window into her mother's drawing room. Mary Rose is not an eight-year-old tomboy but a woman-child of eighteen, who is about to announce her engagement. "I'm hiding," she tells her father. "I'm not sure whom I'm hiding from. From myself, I think." This speech, both knowing and unknowing, gives Barrie's game away; his heroine doesn't want to grow up. Nor do her cosseting, sentimental parents really want her to. Even after her marriage, she and her husband, Simon (Darren Goldstein), live with her family. The Morlands infantilize their daughter both in speech—she is her father's "hoyden" or "gosling"—and in action. When she was eleven, on a trip to the Outer Hebrides, she disappeared for twenty days, a period of which she has no memory. "We never told her; she doesn't know now," Mrs. Morland tells Simon. The parents won't let their daughter experience loss or help her to think through it. No wonder she is stuck.

Inevitably, when Mary Rose eventually returns to the Hebrides with her husband, she disappears again, this time for twenty-five years. The netherworld she inhabits during that time is a paradigm of Barrie's literary process, which he called "playing hide-and-seek with angels": a sort of heavenly place that "kills time" and in which the unreal becomes real. ("Lovely, lovely, lovely" is how Mary Rose later describes it.) But, when she finally returns to the living, her family has aged beyond recognition, and her son, Harry, who was nearly three when she disappeared, is gone.

"The only ghosts, I believe, who creep into this world, are dead young mothers, returned to see how their children fare," Barrie wrote. He knew, from experience, that a mother could be both alive and dead. In 1867, when he was six, his thirteen-year-old brother, David, was killed in a skating accident. Barrie's mother, Margaret, took to her bed and became a ghostly presence, who was both there and not there for her little boy. "Do you mind nothing about me?" Barrie recalled asking her as he sat on her bed, in his idealizing memoir, "Margaret Ogilvy." To revive his mother, Barrie even dressed up as David and tried to imitate David's whistle. (He also is said to have stopped growing at the age at which his brother died, and was only five feet tall.) "She lived twenty-nine years after his death," Barrie wrote of his mother. "But I had not made her forget the bit of her that was dead....In those nine-and-twenty years he was not removed one day farther from her. Many a time she fell asleep speaking to him, and even while she slept her lips moved and she smiled as if he had come back to her, and when she woke he might vanish so suddenly that she started up bewildered and looked about her, and then said slowly 'My David's dead.' " In life, Barrie could not heal his haunted mother or reclaim her; in "Mary Rose," written fifteen years after "Peter Pan," when Barrie was almost sixty, he does both. In the play, Harry (Richard Short), who left home at the age of twelve to go to sea, returns as an adult to release her ghost from its restless tribulation. "Being a ghost is worse than seeing them," he tells his mother when they confront each other at the finale.

For this production, Landau has taken Barrie's sometimes elaborate stage directions and turned them into a character, the Narrator (Keir Dullea). This trope adds visual and intellectual strength to the delicate play. The Narrator is the first person we see, through the diaphanous curtains of James Schuette's subtle set, with its torn wallpaper signalling both physical and psychological scars; he is "remembering"—the play turns out to be a flashback within a flashback. Hiding in a corner of the parlor, lurking on the threshold, or looking on from the front of the stage, the Narrator haunts the story, as its ghost haunts both the characters and us, and the authority and eloquence of his voice lend an eerie credibility to the unfathomable.

When Harry first returns to the haunted family home, he's dressed in a First World War uniform; he takes a dagger from his belt and sticks it mysteriously into the floorboards. "It's not a knife, it's a visiting card," he tells the housekeeper, who goes to make him some tea. The knife augurs some kind of battle. While Harry waits for his tea, the play happens; he imagines Mary Rose's entire story. When her ghost is finally coaxed into view, the knife disappears. Harry, who doesn't seem at all scared, demands that she return it; she hands it over. There is no contention, no struggle, and, finally, no drama. Barrie didn't want to face his own aggression in life; he can't face it in theatre, either. Here, with the empathic power of his imagination, Harry, whose mother never actually recognizes him, nonetheless liberates her from woe and engineers a kind of salvation for them both. The psychological progress—this is commercial entertainment, after all—is strangely painless, a fairy tale of deliverance, mostly Barrie's own. The last line of this production is Barrie's final stage direction, "Harry hears nothing but he knows somehow a prayer has been answered"; that prayer was Barrie's.