

Do you believe?

Kids at Play tickles the imagination with lovable fairy tale 'Peter Pan'

By Diane Huber | The Olympian • Published July 13, 2008

It looks so easy: A sprinkle of fairy dust and some happy thoughts of Christmas or sailing or flowers, and up you go.

Flying is what makes the musical "Peter Pan" so magical.

But it also is harder than it looks, say actors and crew members who are part of the Capital Playhouse Kids at Play production, which concludes today.



"Flying - it's a very intricate process that involves everyone being precisely where they need to be," said Elisabeth Graham, the show's visiting production and stage manager who hails from Southern California, where she leads youth theater workshops with Disney Entertainment Productions.

Taking flight

As if there isn't already enough going on in producing a play with costumes, makeup and memorizing lines and dance moves. With this play, actors had only two nights to transfer the choreography to the air. During dress rehearsals, they repeatedly practiced the stunt.

"I'm always thinking right at this moment, 'Don't put flying in a play,' " said artistic and stage director and Jeff Kingsbury.

Cast members learned to fly with the help of Flying by Foy, the same company that brought theatrical flying to Broadway in 1950.

Revealing exactly how it all works might ruin the magic, but the best way to describe it is to picture operating a human puppet. For actors, it can feel a bit awkward.

"It was really fun" at first, said Jefferson Middle School eighth-grader Gordon Shaughnessy, 13, who plays Wendy's youngest brother, Michael. "But when you keep going, it just keeps getting more uncomfortable."

The acrobatics are learned on the ground because they can be tricky to master mid-air, said Naomi Seifter, a 20-year-old musical theater major at Syracuse University in New York who plays Peter. Once mastered, the experience can be exhilarating, she said.

"It's exciting free flying 20 feet from the ground. It's incredible," she said.

Off stage

The technical aspects of flying are just part of how "Peter Pan" comes together on stage.

"It's a complete backstage show that's going on along with the show that's on stage," Graham said.

A 20-member orchestra of horns, flutes, trumpets, violins and drums supports the production. There's people in charge of costumes, lighting, makeup, choreography and sound.

And then there's the 35-member cast of adults and children, all learning their lines and how they fit in with the story.

Seifter said her challenge was relating to a young boy. "I'm a 20-year-old female having to bring myself back to childhood. (Peter Pan) wants to be a little boy and always to have fun," she said.

Likewise, 18-year-old Anna Swanson, who plays John, set out to master the male swagger. The recent Olympia High School graduate had to chop off her shoulder-length brown hair and think like a proper British boy.

"He's a bit of a nerd. When the other boys say 'Not me,' he corrects them and says, 'Not I.' He is the most obviously destined to grow up," she said.

She said she enjoys the role reversal.

"It's really fun to take on another role and inhabit another character. ... It's a process of self-discovery."

Costumes

Costumes help to set the scene, and they also help actors identify with their characters.

Kingsbury, who is playing Captain Hook for the fourth time, said putting on his hook helps him become the evil pirate and nemesis to Peter Pan.

Hook leads the cotton-candy-colored clan dressed in billowy blouses, striped tights and extravagant hats.

Then there's the Lost Boys, wearing a mismatch of fabrics and textures with shredded tunics, dirty pants and ratted hair.

Creek, played by Sofia Sanchez, 11, has leaves stuck to her moccasins and mud and grass stains on her face. Oak, played by Anna Thornton, 9, has a bird's nest atop her head, a tangle of leaves, sticks and flowers.

"I want them to have the appearance that these kids made it themselves," costume director Tom Hudson said.

Peter Pan, the boys' arrogant leader, has spiky hair and a hat that's been boiled, dyed and fitted with a feather. Seifter wears green tights, green moccasins and a green vest over her felt tunic, a pouch of fairy dust at the waist.

Watching her soar and dart through the air, it's easy to believe she is Peter Pan, leading the audience on a flight to Neverland.

"It's such a magical story," Kingsbury said. "When you see someone fly, it almost lifts you out of your seat. It's so thrilling."