

Flighty dancers take off in 'Peter Pan'

By KATHLEEN WESSEL
For the Journal-Constitution
Published on: 10/26/2007

Call it magic. Or just call it a great technical crew (don't tell the kids), but there is no denying the excitement of seeing a human being in flight.

In Thursday night's revival of artistic director John McFall's "Peter Pan," Atlanta Ballet dancers soared through the air under a starry, climate-controlled night sky at the Fox Theatre. Adult ballet goers and dance patrons should know that this "Peter Pan" is best appreciated as a family event. Carmon DeLeone's musical score is sweet and simple, and the themes, choreography, and costumes are primarily directed toward children.

Colorful sets and oversized animal costumes reminiscent of your last trip to DisneyWorld help establish a childish atmosphere befitting the beloved J.M. Barrie story. But those looking for a new twist on some old magic need to be paying attention. Nuanced creativity emerges in small but potent doses.

Though not an imposing villain, seasoned star John Welker is hilarious as Captain Hook. His comedic timing is perfect as his arrogant swagger instantly turns to fear at the sight of an approaching hip-hop dancing stuffed crocodile. In an attempt to settle their differences, Hook and the croc dance together near the end of the ballet, a ridiculous and clever choreographic choice that is sure to have audiences howling.

Other standouts in this production are Captain Hook's bumbling and drunken pirates. Despite their swaying, hiccupping and burping, these men execute perfect pirouettes and soaring leaps without once falling out of character. The physical contrast between ballet skill and uncoordinated intoxication provides genuine humor amidst often-forced comedy.

The Lost Boys, though talented dancers, are among those characters responsible for a simplistic and uninspired comedic tone. Aside from a very funny scene where the Boys are learning (unsuccessfully) to dance, they are generally too childish and innocent. McFall even includes a scene where the Boys kill someone with a bow and arrow, and yet the Lost Boys possess none of that "Lord of the Flies" edginess for which they are famous. Instead, the Boys' characters are watered-down versions of the appropriately inappropriate pirates.

Wendy, danced by Tara Lee, is one of the only standout female roles in "Peter Pan." From the moment she begins to dance, Lee is captivating. Her grace in flight is

especially beautiful, as her dress billows and her smile lights up the stage. In contrast, the Indian maidens are bland and boring, costumed in clichéd, Halloween-like "Indian" garb that teeters on being culturally offensive. These women are intended to be warriors, but their jazzy, showy movements sing a different tune.

Even Tinkerbell is disappointing. Her dancing is spastic, flighty, and completely one-dimensional. Her entrance is strange and anti-climactic, and as a result, poor Tinkerbell's magic is lost.

But not to worry. Kids, and even some adults, will love this performance. The sets are spectacular, and the flight journey over London alone is worth the price of a ticket. David Blumenfeld is the quintessential Peter Pan, wondrous and childlike. And like many of his fellow company members, Blumenfeld's dancing is an exciting blend of technical skill and character ability.

With this kind of talent in a concert aimed at children, maybe refusing to grow up for one night isn't a bad idea.