

Award for Outstanding Achievement Peter Pan's Neverland

fly me to the lagoon



by Brian Szaks

J.M. Barrie's tales of Peter Pan and Neverland have been lovingly told and retold, staged and restaged in a variety of formats – theater, cinema, puppetry, literature, cartoons - for more than a century. They include Peter's first appearance in the early 1900s, Mary Martin's classic characterizations in the 1950s and '60s, the popular 1953 Disney animated feature, and the 2004 silver screen Barrie biopic, "Finding Neverland."

Now, with "Peter Pan's Neverland" - the fresh and lavishly staged live stunt production at Universal Studios Japan (USJ) - young and old again savor the joy of flying out the bedroom window and into the unknown as sweet Wendy Darling takes the plunge to Neverland. They see spunky Tinker Bell flit about, smarmy Captain Hook cross swords with Peter and the Lost Boys be boys.

The world was first introduced to Peter Pan as a minor character in Barrie's 1902 novel, "The Little White Bird." Two years later, Peter became a star with "Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up," Barrie's play detailing the adventures of the charismatic gamin from Neverland, which Barrie followed with the novel "Peter and Wendy."

Peter Pan's Neverland was created as part of the USJ fifth anniversary celebration in 2006. Located on the lagoon in the center of the park, four floats – Captain Hook's pirate ship, the Lost Boys' forest, Indian Rock and

the Mermaid Stage – serve as the backdrops to this unique live show, featuring music and lyrics by Mike Avila and Jonathan Barr, and the direction of Jay Smith. The 25-minute show was a hit and its popularity has soared to a greater degree than originally expected.

Executive producer Mike Davis lauded his creative team, citing the contributions of Avila, Barr, Smith, producer Amelia Gordon and set designer Stan Meyer. "Jay's strong choreographer background led the overall staging design and direction of the show," he said. Davis also noted the "athletic and energetic" work of choreographer Gail Davies-Sigler and Cynthia Nordstrom's "inventive costume design."

Thanks to Davis and his dedicated production team, the colorful characters of the Peter Pan story enact their magical performances onstage in Wendy's London home and Peter's

Neverland compound. The two worlds collide with special effects, pyrotechnics, lights and waterworks, and performances, songs, dance and stunts by the cast of 35 with a certain amount of audience participation. The stages have numerous entrances and exits, hidden trampolines and extravagant scenery that bursts with vibrant colors.

The storyline allows audiences to fly with Wendy into the past, as she tells her daughter about the exciting adventures she experienced as a young girl. As the crowd gets involved in her memories, they are taken to Neverland where they are introduced to the Lost Boys, Captain Hook and others. In one scene, Peter and Wendy fly overhead at the rate of 30 feet per second while suspended from a wire more than 560 feet long, stretched between two 156-foot towers – said to be the world's highest free-standing flight towers.



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In creating the stage show for USJ, Davis and his team found an important difference between the way Japanese and Americans interpret this British story. According to Davis, audiences in the US consider the main theme of Peter Pan to be "never grow up" – i.e. Peter represents the child in everyone and there is still room in everyone's life to play, dance and sing, whatever one's age. But in Japan, Davis explained, the ultimate message of the story is the universal need for a mother figure. Peter has no mother, the Lost Boys are all children accidentally separated from their mothers... and Wendy is recruited to Neverland to act as their mother. This led to Avila & Barr's creating three new musical numbers to enhance the storyline, including one entitled "A Mother's Love," which dwells on the many things a mother can do for you, such as holding your hand, keeping you safe and knowing when you are sad. Music production was provided by Paul Freeman and Bob Wackerman of Audio by the Bay.

The show has proved popular to an unexpected degree, with some guests staking out their viewing spots hours in advance. To enable more people to see the show clearly, the park has added video screens to broadcast the show live, and also installed a special, paid standup viewing area – the tiered Neverland Deck.

For more than 100 years, Peter Pan has flown and soared through novels and movie adaptations, gliding on and off stages and screens and adventuring into our hearts. Whether you are looking for the voice of your inner child, or for a mother's love, Peter Pan's Neverland at Universal Studios Japan will inspire you to believe in its power.



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