Peter Pan: (Why) Should He Rather Be Played by a Woman?

Mihaela CERNĂUȚI-GORODEȚCHI

Since its first representation on stage (on 27 December 1904), J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up* most frequently has featured an actress in the title role[1], although, being generally seen as "the quintessential masculinity"[2], Peter Pan has lent his name to a so-called complex – or syndrome (see Kiley) – often invoqued by popular psychology to describe a type of personality, *usually male*, characterized by immaturity, irresponsibility, narcissism and manipulativeness. Truly, choosing a woman to play the part of a "typical man" may seem rather odd, all the more so when taking into account the fact that the author was a passionate, not in the least prejudiced theatre-lover[3] and "a highly professional dramatist" (Hollindale: x), who never ruled out the possibility that Peter could be played by a boy; allegedly, he did consider one young actor for the 1920-1921 *Peter Pan* production (see "Cross-Dressing in *Peter Pan*"), but eventually no male Peter of Barrie's choice ever appeared on the stage[4].

Cross-dressing has been a long (by no means exclusively) English theatrical tradition. Elizabethan boy actors used to play girls (reversely – or complementarily, perhaps –, more than one Shakespearean female character take risks and play a male role on the "world's scene"!); some three centuries later, on the other side of the Channel, a 55-year-old Sarah Bernhardt impersonated the sad and haunted Hamlet, prince of Denmark, without her being plagued by any inhibition (or gender prejudice), of any sort. Why so much controversy when it comes to Peter Pan, then? What makes various people question Barrie's "real motives" for not choosing a male actor for the role, what do they think it is so unusual about his views and options so that they label him as "queer"?

Along the years, hundreds of English-speaking professional actresses played Peter Pan; of them, only a dozen or so made a long-lasting impression. The "string" of the most memorable interpreters of the role began with Nina Boucicault (aged 37 when starring in the 1904 premiere of the show) and continued with: Maude Adams (1905[5]), who apparently was in the playwright's mind as he was writing, so it was she who

[1] Also, the Lost Boys have mostly been played by young actresses. But, strangely (or not), the Darling boys were *always* played by young *male* actors – with an exception: in the first production (1904), Michael was created by Winifred Geoghegan. (See "Cross-Dressing in *Peter Pan*")

[2] Defined mainly (in a male critic's view!) by lack of sensitivity: "His protean name suggests he is everything in make-believe and role-play, but he has a heart of stone." (Hollindale: xi)

[3] "An invederate attender at rehearsals, he was always prepared to listen to the actors, and, if appropriate, to change his mind. A Barrie play was a collaboration between cast, director and playwright: never finally completed, the texts were always open to revision." (Ormond: 108, qtd. in Hollindale: x)

[4] And this although he "stood by" the play and watched it closely for more than 20 years. He kept on changing it again and again after its opening and did not issue a final script until 1928.

[5] She starred in *Peter Pan* tours and revivals until 1915.

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would have been his first choice for the role[6]; Pauline Chase (1906-1913[7]), Barrie's undisputed favourite as Peter Pan impersonator; Jean Forbes-Robertson (1927-1935[8]); Jean Arthur (1950); Mary Martin (the star of the 1954 musical, filmed for television); Sandy Duncan (a theatrical sensation in 1979, when she sung and danced in a *Peter Pan* Broadway show); Cathy Rigby (who revived the part on Broadway, in the 1990s). Interestingly enough, the same actresses often played different (male or female) parts at different times: in various performances, Jane Baxter was a Redskin, Mrs. Darling, and Peter Pan, while Lila Maravan, Dinah Sheridan, Joan Greenwood and Julia Lockwood played alternatively Wendy and Peter (see Lancelyn Green: 41-44).

In spite of the (huge) success of all these talented actresses, there were voices (critics and thespians alike) that deplored the consistent casting practice (and policy) which had brought them into the limelight. In 1924, Patrick Braybrooke declared that Peter Pan should never again be played by a woman, for obvious and indubitable reasons: "There is no character of Barrie's so essentially masculine as 'Peter Pan,' yet the part is played by actresses who are in every sense horribly and inevitably grown up" (Braybrooke: 5, qtd. in Billone: 189). By no means he was the only one to feel that way (and say it). Hearing that Peter Pan was to be played by an actress in a forthcoming movie, the American actor Gareth Hughes made a (licentious) pun, expressing his bemused vexation: "Why does it always have to be a peterless Pan?" (see "Cross-Dressing in *Peter Pan*"), while Giles Gordan showed more than just irritation when he exclaimed: "Let us never see a gal as Peter again" (Hanson: 239).

Although a *foreign* production (a 1952 German show based on Erich Kästner's translation of the text) is generally credited with the breaking of this enduring cross-gender casting and with setting a continental trend (to which the British eventually bowed no sooner than 1982, when Trevor Nunn and John Caird produced their version of *Peter Pan* at the Barbican Theatre in London), the truth is Peter Pan had been (occasionally) played by English-speaking actors before: Herbert Hollom, in 1910; Freddie Bartholomew, in a 1932 radio adaptation; Leslie C. Gorall, in 1934[9]. The German example was soon followed by the French (in 1954)[10] and by other European (non-British) theatre professionals. The United States also tipped the scales toward male performers in the role of Peter Pan, at least on film (possibly because cinematography is thought to be a more "realistic" medium than theatre), beginning with Bobby Driscoll, the child-actor who provided the voice and movements of Peter in Disney's animated 1953 version. In more recent years, while Peter Pan is usually played on film by a

[6] In fact, "Barrie had originally wanted Adams for the role of Wendy, who in his mind was the star of the show" (Bacher).

[7] It is estimated that she gave over 1,400 performances in the role.

[8] During her eight-year "reign", she played Peter even more times than Pauline Chase; she also appeared in the last *Peter Pan* show before the WW II (1939).

[9] "On at least five occasions between 1906 and 1911, the Duke of York's Theatre hosted a one-performance-only presentation of scenes from *Peter Pan*, organized and performed by the juvenile members of the cast. However, at these invitation-only shows Peter was still played by a girl: Winifred Geoghegan, Tessie Parke or Mary Glynne. Except in 1910, when on February 8th Herbert Hollom became the first male Peter Pan." "Leslie C. Gorall played the part at the Clare Tree Majors Children's Theatre of New York – the first actor to play Peter on stage at a public performance. This version toured the States for a year." ("Cross-Dressing in *Peter Pan*").

[10] La Comédie Française followed the trend set for mainland Europe and cast a male actor in the first French-language adaptation, signed by Claude-André Pujet ("*Peter Pan* in Europe and Beyond").

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young male actor, on stage the lead role still goes either to a woman, or to a handsome male actor (see "Cross-Dressing in *Peter Pan*"). Which brings us back to the initial dilemma: (why) should the role of Peter Pan be performed by a theatre artist with a (quasi-)feminine appearance?

"Male and female relationships collide in *Peter Pan* much as do relations between children and adults. We constantly find people playing all the wrong parts" (Billone: 187). True, cross-dressing in *Peter Pan* does not regard the title role or the Lost Boys only: for instance, Nana, the Newfoundland dog trained to be Darling children's nurse, is referred to as a "she", while in the early drafts (and "biographically"[11]) the character was a *male* dog; the author goes even further in speculating Nana's ambiguous gender, by recommending her being played "by a boy, *if one clever enough can be found*" (Barrie: 88) (emphasis added) – irony not lost on most readers. Apparently, Barrie is not very comfortable (or satisfied) with his gender status, but it is more than obvious that he would *never* trade it, or even think of giving it up. In his view, boys may not be perfect, but they are always *the best*; although not a blessing whatever the circumstances, being a boy is (by far) the best thing that could possibly happen to a human.

Is gender really an issue for J.M. Barrie? Is *Peter Pan* really a disguised battlefield, where the masculine and the feminine incessantly fight to death, trying to surpass and oust each other, where all truce is just another deception? It has been argued (Billone: 178-185) that there is a "gender imbalance" in children's literature: "until very recently childhood has been an unsettlingly masculine space"; female characters are generally prevented to enter fantasyland, while male characters are more than welcome and made feel at ease there. Barrie's "fantasy of permanent childhood" would privilege male experience, recreating "the strict gendered division of Edwardian England; the boys go hunting and fight pirates while Wendy becomes a surrogate mother figure who stays at home and cares for her 'children'". (Foster and Simons: 175, qtd. in Billone: 184-185) Both Peter and Hook "long for a mother, yet keep her out of their domain" (Miller: 8), out of their *real*, *active* world. Naturally attracted to female gender, they try to deal with this fearful temptation, investing it in a *mother-son* relationship. Projecting themselves as children helps them keeping safe from the dangers lying in women.

Perhaps (as repeatedly suggested) sexuality in itself is what, in fact, troubles Peter (and, implicitly, Barrie), and not an alleged latent homosexuality[12] striving to assert itself. In spite of his being disputed by no less than three "women", Peter seems to refuse to know what sexuality (or sexual desire) is. Because of him, Wendy and Tinker Bell are jealous on each other and do not hesitate to engage, heart and soul, into this all-consuming rivalry, while in early versions of the play Tiger Lily tenaciously "assails" Peter, refuting one by one all his objections:

> TIGER LILY: Suppose Tiger Lily runs into wood – Peter Paleface catch her – what then?
> PETER (*bewildered*): Paleface can never catch Indian girl, they run so fast.

[11] Nana the dog-nurse was a character (in the play, as well as in the *Peter Pan and Wendy* novel) inspired by Porthos, Barrie's beloved St Bernard.

[12] Kincaid (rather unconvincingly) argues that the adults set to destroy Neverland, children's real enemies, seem to "wear skirts instead of hooks, come in the form of women who threaten to disrupt the pederastic unity being forged" (285, qtd. in Billone: 187).

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TIGER LILY: If Peter Paleface chase Tiger Lily – she no run very fast – she tumble in a heap what then? (*Peter puzzled. She addresses Indians*) What then?
ALL INDIANS: She him's squaw.

(qtd. in Hollingdale: xii)

With a swift and adroit manoeuvre, Peter manages to put all his "suitors"[13] to their places:

PETER: Now, then, what is it you want?
TIGER LILY: Want to be your squaw.
PETER: Is that what you want, Wendy?
WENDY: I suppose it is, Peter.
PETER: Is that what you want, Tink?
(*Bells answer*)
PETER: You all three want that. Very well – that's really wishing to be my mother.

(qtd. in Hollingdale: xii)

Peter wants to remain a child forever because he wants to keep his indeterminate gendered state: he is "the genderless androgyne of pre-pubescence, who evades adult sexuality and refuses to grow up" (Whitely: 74, qtd. in Withers: 128). He knows he is a child rather than a grownup (Billone: 189), but he likes to play the adult too (he likes being a "Betwixt-and-Between", as Solomon Caw of Kensington Gardens calls him). He knows he is a boy rather than a girl (Billone: 189), but he is determined never to become a man. At this point, his being interpreted by a female actor could function as supplementary collateral offered to the audience, since a grown woman may be physically attractive without the threatening edge of a virile actor: "Part of the success of Martin[14]'s performance of sweetly heroic and yet vulnerable maleness no doubt derived from the poignancy of the sight of a boy who truly could not become a man – because he was really a woman." (Siegel)

J.M. Barrie wrote *Peter Pan* as a Christmas pantomime (a popular holiday entertainment for children). In the 19th-century English pantomimes, cross-dressing was current; with time, it even became a must[15]: "The most important boy characters were generally played by women rather than male children, in part because adults could better handle the many lines and because women – more easily than men – could successfully masquerade as little boys" (Billone: 188). Some jocularly think that Victorians had other reasons too for favouring women in male roles:

[13] Given Peter's (unexpected and puzzling) passivity, the three "women" assume that they are to shake off their feminine reserve and become active themselves, so they proceed to act "manly" and to woo him.

[14] The actress Mary Martin, who played Peter Pan in the 1954 musical.

[15] "Historically, the pantomime originated in Italy. The first of these Italian performances came to Britain in the early 18th century. By the mid-18th century the form of entertainment had been adopted by the famous clown family, the Grimaldis, and by the end of the 19th century, pantomimes were generally based on fairy stories such as *Cinderella*. For more reasons than simply practical ones, cross-dressing contributed to the topsy-turvy format both of Italian harlequinades and British pantomimes. Not only did grown women play the parts of boy protagonists in 19th-century England, but men also played the parts of Cinderella's stepsisters" (Billone: 199).

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> Quite simply, the Victorian male, living in a society where even the legs of the parlour piano were covered for modesty's sake, craved the vision of a well turned calf, or shapely ankle. Whilst ladies were corseted, crinolined or bustled on the street, artistic licence allowed ladies upon the stage to wear costumes that revealed shapely legs in tights on condition that they were playing a male role!" (Ellacott and Robbins)

As for Barrie, it is all too fair to presume that he genuinely believed an actress should play the role of Peter because a child would not have the acting experience required to interpret the part properly. Somehow, he must also have felt that a man (even a young one) would not sound or look right. That is why he accepted the best solution he had at hand: a small and slender woman acting Peter. Which is no statement whatsoever. Reading (and judging) Barrie's choice (as well as judging Lewis Carroll's or Hans Christian Andersen's works, for that matter) through a gender lens is a quite far-fetched (and utterly unjust) critical approach. For the author of *Peter Pan*, the cross-gender casting of a female as Peter Pan is definitely not an indicator of a "category crisis"[16]. It only indicates his two acts of smart submission to: 1) the tradition of the British pantomime; 2) the theatrical demands and circumstances.

The queer trend may push some to make a (big) case out of the history of Peter Pan-interpretation on stage. The abuse may even affect the author's private space. In Eric Hill's production at the Berkshire Theatre Festival (August 2003) "the Storyteller… soon transforms into the fairy, Tinker Bell. The sight of Tinker Bell played by a smallish, mustachioed man in a white suit makes for one of the greatest joys of this production and one of the *gayest* [emphasis added] of fairies to ever flit across the stage" (Ralph Hammann). The (mean and strained) pun is intended to the closing lines of *Peter and Wendy*, the 1911 novelization of the *Peter Pan* play, where the fantasy adventure is said to "go on, so long as children are gay and innocent and heartless". The small man in a mustache, wearing a white suit, is to remind us of the frail-framed Barrie. But, as playful and interested in experiments as he was, it is highly improbable that Barrie would have enjoyed the joke (or felt flattered by the stinging "tribute"). His casting as Tinker Bell would have certainly appalled him, since he deeply loved "his" real Peter and unselfishly (and most purely) devoted all his life to him and to his siblings. Having *a decent sense* of humour must be a tricky thing, indeed.

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[16] That is, "a situation in which the lines between the two categories (of gender, class, race, age or religion) have become blurred or permeable. In wearing the clothes of another gender, the transvestite called into question the inviolability of all social codes and the possibility of their enforcement" (see Garber).

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Peter Pan: (Pourquoi) Devrait-il être interprété par une femme?

L'étude essaie d'identifier, dans la mesure du possible, les «justifications» d'une tradition dramatique longévive, au moins en Angleterre: le rôle de Peter Pan, le prototype de la masculinité narcissique et évasive, fuyant les responsabilités, est généralement interprété par une (jeune) actrice. Tout en évitant les poncifs d'une approche psychanalytique (quelque tentante qu'elle soit!), l'auteur y envisage deux autres explications plausibles (qui sont complémentaires) de cette pratique théâtrale si répandue: 1) l'influence de la pantomime britannique (*British pantomime*), genre de divertissement établi dans les dernières décennies du XIX-ème siècle et fort populaire parmi les Anglais pendant la saison des fêtes de Noël; dans ce genre de spectacle, le travestissement fonctionne soit comme déclancheur d'amusement, soit comme rappel de la convention scénique, et le jeune premier (*the principal boy*) est toujours joué par une actrice svelte, d'un charme adolescent, en quelque sorte ambigu; 2) le souci de l'auteur dramatique de la précision, pour la finesse et la richesse de l'interprétation artistique: tout bonnement, il se méfiait de l'habilité d'un garçon de satisfaire ses exigeances et de jouer d'une manière adéquate un rôle si complexe; une jeune actrice à la silhouette gracile et, à la fois, nerveuse pouvait passer pour un garçon et, en outre, elle pouvait se servir de tous ses atouts professionnels; un acteur adulte, malgré la compétence nécessaire, aurait été trop masculin pour le personnage pré-pubère (d'ailleurs, Barrie n'a jamais exclu la variante d'un interprète masculin de Peter; seulement, il n'a pas eu la chance d'en trouver un qui lui paraisse fait pour le rôle).

„Alexandru Ioan Cuza" Universitaty, Iaşi
Romania

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