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Another magnificent flight of fancy for Cathy Rigby

By John Farrell
Special to U-Entertainment

Since Sir James M. Barrie created his beloved "Peter Pan," every generation has had its own cherished star who owned the role.

The tradition has always been that Peter is played by a woman. Maud Adams was the first and her crown of fairy-dust passed to Mary Martin when "Peter Pan" became a Broadway musical in 1954 and then a staple of annual television reruns. For the current generation, the star who has been Peter Pan on stage, on Broadway and on television is gymnast-turned-actor Cathy Rigby, who turned Peter's flying into a daunting acrobatic show. Now Rigby, in what is billed as her farewell tour, has again climbed into green tights to recreate the role she has dominated since she won a Tony nomination for her performance in the Broadway revival of 1991.

Rigby's biography brags that she has more air miles as Peter than any other actor, and when you see her leaping around the stage, doing athletic spins and near-crash landings that require superb athleticism (and a great team on her flying wires), you will believe the boast.

But, as she demonstrated in the revival of "Peter Pan" that opened last weekend at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts (Saturday's performance is reviewed here), there is much, much more to her Peter Pan than just gymnastic ability. Indeed, if Rigby were to develop vertigo and never fly again, she would still inhabit Peter Pan in a way few other actors could.

Rigby is just under 5 feet tall and in the real world is a middle-aged mother. But when her Peter Pan comes on stage, you will not doubt for a moment that Peter is a willful, uncouth 7-year-old. He is filled with energy, curiosity, uncontrolled in the way that only little boys can be, physical and physically shy, a bundle of id who loves rude words (provided in fairy language by Tinker Bell) and toys and stories and has no idea of the real, and complicated, world he finds in London.

Rigby also sings with clarity and power, in a voice that sounds more than a little like Mary Martin and is a joy to hear. She dances, too, with an athletic grace that makes her more than a match for the

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rest of the dancing cast. This show is based on the original, which was conceived, directed and choreographed by Broadway legend Jerome Robbins — with choreography for this version created by Patti Colombo. There is no question about it, Rigby was born to be a musical comedy star — gymnastics was just a youthful indiscretion.

The rest of the cast may not be as stellar as Rigby the aeronaut, but together they bring Barrie's enduring fantasy to life, with the help of some memorable and singable songs: "I Won't Grow Up," "I Gotta Crow" and "I'm Flying." And memorable characters, too, notably that elegant arch-villain Captain Hook, his fawning first mate Mr. Smee, the Indian maiden Tiger Lily and, of course, Wendy Darling.

Howard McGillan's Captain Hook is a wonderful picture of malevolent ego: he loves to be booed. His obsessive evil is partly comic, partly threatening, balanced between murderous thoughts and fear of a certain ticking crocodile who appears on stage like a *deus ex machina* whenever needed. (McGillan is also, as is traditional, the somewhat confused paterfamilias Mr. Darling.)

Patrick Richwood as Smee takes every chance to bend, fall and jump as a physical comedian trying to please the fickle Hook. It's a delicious comic turn.

Elisa Sagardia is wonderfully knowing as Wendy Darling, the girl who Peter takes to Neverland to be a mother to his tribe of lost boys. Gavin Leatherwood as John Darling and Greyson Spann as Michael Darling are a fine duo, discarding civilization for the wild ways of the island boys.

Dana Solimando turns the Indian maid Tiger Lily into something of a sultry, sexy vixen (the only sexy performer in the show) and matches Rigby dance move for dance move in the large choreographed numbers, which move with exhilarating speed. Tracy Lore is a sympathetic Mrs. Darling, and Ryan Mason, hidden in the huge dog costume, makes a comic and endearing Nana.

This production, which is scheduled to move to the Pantages in Hollywood before going on to Broadway, is slick, professional and comfortingly familiar, from the fly-away walls of the Darling children's bedroom to the fantasy island of Neverland, with its lurking pirates, Indians and red-eyed crocodile. The action, dancing and singing, shepherded by Director Glenn Casale, is energetic and lively, with never a slow moment. Craig Barna, who created orchestration and new dance music for the production, directs the pit bands with the requisite energy and panache.

"Peter Pan" is the perfect musical for children, and there is plenty in this show for adults as well. You owe it to yourself to see the Peter Pan of your generation so, when the inevitable Peter of the next generation arrives, you can make invidious comparisons (it is a century-old theatrical tradition already). And you owe it to your children to give them this timeless memory. Here, in the intimate confines of the La Mirada Theater, you'll be up close and personal no matter where you sit. You'll probably have Peter flying right overhead. Just watch out for the fairy dust; you might end up wearing some on the way home.

John Farrell is a Los Angeles freelance writer.

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