

The way to Wonderland

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Published: 10 May 2013

John Logan *PETER AND ALICE* Noël Coward Theatre, until June 1 "To a book man, every nook and cranny is a potential story." The particular nook or cranny of literary trivia lighted on by the playwright John Logan is a fleeting reference in *The Real Alice*, Anne Clark's biography of Alice Liddell Hargreaves, the inspiration for Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*: "On June 26 1932 Alice opened the Lewis Carroll exhibition at Bumpus, the London bookshop. Beside her was Peter Davies, the original Peter Pan". There survives, in fact, a deliciously detailed account of that summer's afternoon in the ancient and honourable establishment of Messrs J. & E. Bumpus on Oxford Street, in the form of an essay by the Australian writer Miles Franklin (the author of *My Brilliant Career*), published in the December 3, 1932 issue of *All About Books for Australian and New Zealand Readers*. It is an enchanting chronicle in which rock cakes and ginger snaps jostle with priceless Carrolliana and a guest list brimming with unexplored theatrical promise: Kenneth Grahame, J. B. Priestley, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Walter de la Mare, and Sir Gerald du Maurier (Peter Llewellyn Davies's grandfather and J. M. Barrie's favourite actor), to name but a handful of invited luminaries.

Logan's is a tantalizing conceit and follows in a tradition of speculative, dramatically imagined coincidences in time and place - of chance encounters between historical figures, grounded in half-hidden, tangential fact. A successful example of the genre is Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*, which discovers James Joyce, Lenin and Tristan Tzara all working in the Zurich Public Library in 1917, an extraordinary conjunction of revolutionary forces used as a framework in which to examine the nature and purpose of art and its relation to politics. *Peter and Alice*, directed by Michael Grandage, is an intriguing but less adroit attempt to dramatize, even monumentalize, the stuff of a mere moment. At the heart of this chance encounter is an examination of lost innocence - the tragedy not of growing old but of growing up. That lapsarian state has its peculiar markers and milestones: the loss of parents to disease, the loss of children to war, the loss of self to a childhood fantasy and again to a grown-up reality. It also confronts the intense and complex relationships Peter and Alice had with their surrogate fathers and literary progenitors, showing how they were fixated on, dream children in dreams they could not possibly comprehend.

The play is, in essence, two melancholy love stories half a century apart. Although captivated by the storied world of his childhood, the adult Peter perceives the storyteller as parasitic ("he feeds on your youth") and possessive, while Alice, fixed in time and silver nitrate by her "lover", knows that Carroll's photographs of her were "a safe framework to explore some unknown and dangerous landscape". She knows, too, that the characters of "Peter" and "Alice" were born out of sadness and loneliness, and terror of the place called Adulthood.

The burden of being Alice and Peter is something each shoulders in a different way. Alice finds comfort in remembering "golden afternoons all gone away"; sick and alone at the age of eighty, she cannot afford Peter's truth, the truth of nightmare and wakefulness. Peter is haunted, marked by and for tragedy, a Lost Boy of the Lost Generation, and the very embodiment of G. B. Stern's diagnosis: "They were suffering not from shell-shock, but from the echo of shell-shock". Unlike his namesake, who is untroubled by memory ("I forget them after I kill them", Peter Pan cries), Peter remembers killing a soldier at close range in the deep, dark woods and watching him die; he remembers and goes

mad.

Logan's script is rather leaden and expository, too often red-flagging what the audience is to feel, too reliant on aphorism and antithesis. Because of the fantastical and factual territory it enters, it could be more magical and moving, its shadows more substantial.

Part of the problem is that neither Carroll (Nicholas Farrell) nor J. M. Barrie (Derek Riddell) sufficiently convinces as a spellbinder. There is no real sense of their physical metamorphosis through the act of storytelling, that the diminutive and austere Barrie became a mesmerizing giant or the shy, stuttering Carroll beautiful.

Christopher Oram's set design, with its brightly coloured Pollock's Toy Theatre proscenium and its borrowings from Tenniel and Rackham, tends to accentuate and conspire in the darker, more sinister aspects of fairy tale, as do the shadowing, heartless presences of "Alice" (Ruby Bentall) and Peter Pan (Olly Alexander). But the real Alice and Peter, played by Judi Dench and Ben Whishaw, are beguiling studies. Whishaw is all posttraumatic stress and tenterhooks. Hunted and emaciated, he yearns for Neverland but is in thrall to reality. Dench evokes, with a beautiful elegiac quality, summer on the Isis in a dreaming and dreamlike Oxford. She can communicate, almost simultaneously, knowingness and wonder, acerbity and vulnerability. And she provides perhaps the only true magic of the piece when, stretching out her hand as a last, failed lifeline to Peter, she says: "I'm a dying old lady, not much loved by anyone ... But I know the way to Wonderland".