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AN INVITATION TO OTHER WORLDS: Clarence Brown Theatre opens its season with a whimsical adventure

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Class has been in session at the University of Tennessee for more than a week, but a number of graduates, undergraduates, staff members and faculty have been hard at work long before now.

Friday night, the curtain rises on “Peter and the Starcatcher,” the inaugural play of the 2017-18 academic year, at the Clarence Brown Theatre, the campus playhouse that’s been an institution of dramatic, romantic, comedic and musical productions since it first opened in 1970. In a fine arts scene that’s abundant with talent, the Clarence Brown stands out as both a showcase of that talent and a learning laboratory for its continuation.

“I think we have been growing steadily since I got here in 2006, largely based on the appeal and the quality of the productions we have done,” Calvin MacLean, the CBT’s artistic director and head of UT’s Department of Theatre, told The Daily Times this week. “The word has just gone out — if you go to a Clarence Brown show, you’re likely apt to enjoy it. The programming that we do is certainly not simply audience-appealing; we also do some very challenging work, but we do a variety of work, and there’s something in any given season for everybody.”

Case in point — “Peter and the Starcatcher,” billed as a prequel to the classic J.M. Barrie tale of “Peter Pan,” will be followed by “Three Sisters,” a play by the Russian playwright and short story writer Anton Chekhov. The holiday season will bring the annual production of the Dickens’ classic “A Christmas Carol,” and one of the spring shows will be “Urinetown The Musical.” It’s a smorgasbord of the familiar and the exotic, and while some of the more arcane works, at least to casual theater-goers, may seem off-putting, they’re anything but — as audiences themselves will attest, MacLean said.

“We’re aided a lot by word of mouth; even the most challenging of our productions — and I would say that ‘Urinetown’ is not the most challenging; it just has a challenging name — gather steam once they open, once word of mouth of the quality of the production gets out into



The cast in *Peter and the Starcatcher*; photo by Brynn Yeager

the community,” he said. “We spend a good deal of time with audience engagement. We very much like to get our theater out there, not just as a commodity, but as a group of people concerned not only about community, but things that are also of concern to the community as well.

“We are involved in working with children and working with young people, and we consider a show like ‘A Christmas Carol’ as much a community service as it is a show we do. It’s part of the tradition of the Clarence Brown Theatre, and part of the tradition of the season is that show. We serve a lot of different communities.”

Stage productions on the UT campus date back more than 150 years, according to the Clarence Brown website, but it was in the 1940s and ’50s that the current program took root. Courses in theater were added to the English syllabus at the time, but with no playhouse, students and faculty members staged productions around campus and in Knoxville. As the program grew, the

university, with help from the Knoxville Junior League of Women and community volunteers, erected a tent on campus and christened it the Carousel Theatre.

A series of summer shows there was successful enough to warrant financing for a permanent facility, and over the next two decades, the Theatre Department “produced over 200 shows, and total attendance was in excess of 70,000 people.” In 1970, the Clarence Brown was constructed, named after the filmmaker and UT alumnus who was nominated six times as Best Director at the Academy Awards in the 1930s. Since its opening, it’s provided an outlet for aspiring students who go on to professional acting careers as well as those who flirt with a love of the stage during college only, all of them dedicated to a craft that creates other worlds for those in the audience.

“The Clarence Brown Theatre has a mission of bringing young actors and professionals together, and we’re doing that in spades in this production,” said Casey Sams, a UT faculty member who’s serving as director of “Peter and the Starcatcher.” “We have two out-of-town guest artist professionals, two faculty members, two local professional actors, and then we have three

graduate students and four undergraduate students. It's a real mixed bag in terms of amounts of experience and age and all that stuff."

Based on the 2006 children's novel "Peter and the Starcatchers," written by Ridley Pearson and humor writer Dave Barry, the play — which opens Friday and runs through Sept. 17 on the Clarence Brown main stage — is a "magic-filled adventure (that) features Peter, Molly Aster and the Lost Boys, who battle evil pirate Black Stache in their journey to keep their treasure safe and save the world," according to the show's description. A prequel to Barrie's "Peter and Wendy," it premiered on Broadway in 2012 and won five Tony Awards and eight Lucille Lortel, Drama Desk, Tina, Obie and Broadway.com Audience Choice awards. Although a familiarity with the "Peter Pan" story will maximize the enjoyment of those in attendance, it's not a requirement, Sams said.

"I think their assumption is that you have some knowledge of the Peter Pan story, but I don't think you need to know the Peter Pan story to enjoy this one — it's just that some of the jokes won't mean as much to you," she said. "This play kind of answers a lot of questions a small child might have about Peter Pan — where did Tinkerbell come from, how did Peter learn to fly, how did Capt. Hook get his hook."

The head of undergraduate studies whose primary focus is movement and musical theater, Sams is originally from State College, Pa. Her mother was an actress and her father was an English professor, so her upbringing included copious amounts of both literature and theater, which she majored in as a Penn State undergraduate. Afterward, however, she left the stage behind to focus on medical school, but while earning a master's degree in motor learning and control, she got back into the dance studio and fell in love with it all over again.

"I remember what I liked about doing dance and theater; there's just something about being in the studio space, about being collaborative and creative at the same time that I just really value," she said.

She's intimately familiar with "Peter and the Starcatcher," having choreographed other productions in Cincinnati, Milwaukee, St. Louis and Chapel Hill, N.C., so when the play was added to the Clarence Brown schedule, she lobbied hard to direct it.

"What I love about this play is that it looks at childhood and the end of childhood in a way that is both very honest and truthful, but is also playful and joyous," she said. "I love that about this play, in that it seems to be saying that we overvalue maturity in this culture. That's not to say that we should all be immature, but I do think there's something wonderful about being childlike and remembering the time in our lives that had wonder and possibility. I think we all still have it; we just forget to look at it."

And that, she pointed out, is at the crux of what theater does — open those doors of the mind to a place where reality and imagination intermingle, where fiction becomes possibility and other worlds arise from the set pieces, the movements, the words and emotions conveyed by actors who inhabit the roles they so artfully command as their own.

"We've got this fictional world we're creating, but we need to create it so that it feels true," Sams said. "Maybe not realistic, but it should feel truthful, and it's not going to feel truthful to the audience if it doesn't feel truthful to the actors. That's what we work on all the time in theater — how do we live in these fictional situations in a way that the audience can believe it, too?"

"With 'Peter and the Starcatcher,' it's not about a big flying rig and wires and that kind of stuff, although Peter does learn how to fly over the course of the play. I think it's more inventive to that; it's not so much about theater magic and how they do it. We're actually showing you how we throw Peter off the edge of a ship, but you're going to use your imagination to flesh out the scene.

"That's the trick: to give you enough pieces so your imagination can do the rest of the work," she added. "That's part of what the play is about — remembering how to use your imagination, and we make it easy for you."

Behind the scenes, it's a complex process for MacLean and his team to bring these plays to life. Right now, he's wrapping up programming for the 2018-19 season, and he compares putting together a season to solving a Rubik's Cube — every turn lines up one row of colors but complicates another, and it takes patience and persistence to assemble a slate of shows that serves the needs of everyone, he said.

"We are a school, and the faculty and students need to be served," he said. "We have what I like to refer to as our 'grid,' and there are shows to address this. For example, it needs to be a light comedy or musical to open our season, and then the next show needs to be a drama that serves the (master's of fine arts) programs in acting and design. And that grid, through the course of an eight-show season, is something I spend a great deal of time working with a committee of faculty and staff, along with our managing director and a board of advisors who represent the community and kind of let me know what their interests are. Then I sketch out a season, and that's when the cube starts to turn."

Once a season is tentatively mapped out, input is sought from the theater's production staff, department faculty members and university administrators, all of whom have a hand in building, promoting and serving the institution's educational needs. "Peter and the Starcatcher" was a holdover from last year, and "Alabama Story," a play by Kenneth Jones that will premiere in the Southeast on the Clarence Brown stage, has been in the hopper for a year as well. With "A Christmas Carol," those two filled three of the four main stage slots, and the rest of the programming involved shows to serve the graduate and undergraduate programs. The cogs are many, but the machine is a well-oiled one, and the end result are performances that serve East Tennessee and feed other theatrical groups in the area, MacLean pointed out.

In other words, it's a win all the way around for a thriving fine arts scene.

"Those people who have started these theaters and groups, many of them were educated at the UT Theatre Department," he said. "Nearly everyone has, at some time or another, worked at the Clarence Brown Theatre. We're a theater that pays its non-student actors, and so in many ways, we are the parent of a lot of different theaters in town, and we're very proud of it. We're very proud of the fact that the people who have either been educated at the UT Theatre program, or have worked here, are doing their own work in the community, and we're happy that they can come back and work with us and make a buck doing it.

"We like to think of ourselves as a kind of a resource for them, both intellectually and professionally, as well as some of their biggest fans, because they are our former students. We're connected to everybody and don't feel at all that they are either competitors and interlopers, but that they're fulfilling our mission."