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The Feminine Peter Pan

Felicia Jones

The act of cross-casting, casting a female in a male role or vice-versa, is an important part of the history of the performing arts in societies throughout the world. Although cross-casting has been used to solve certain social problems regarding gender and its performance, it has also created as many social dilemmas in every society where it has been practiced. Fascination and occasionally outrage have often followed when a character is specifically cast as a cross-dressed figure. Whatever its use, cross-cast characters often times have a powerful stage presence and deliver important cultural messages.

The cross-casting in Peter Pan is no exception to the power and intrigue associated with cross-dressing. Since the first time Peter Pan was performed as a play in 1904 in London, England, the main character, Peter, has been cast as a woman. For a long portion of England’s history, boys were used to replace women on stage owing to a fear of female sexuality, which will be discussed later. As a result, this created a connection in the British mind between women and young boys.

England’s practice of using boy actors and boy sopranos has led to the development of England’s preoccupation with the idea of youth, establishing a perfect setting for a play about Peter Pan—a boy who would never grow up. Yet, since the play’s first performance on stage, Peter has almost always been cast as an androgynous (non-sexual) woman and not by a prepubescent male. One is able to understand why Peter has always been played by a woman by looking at the history of boy actors and choristers in England, as well as in the author’s own personal life, both of which are full of androgyny and blurring of gender lines to achieve an ideal.

1. See Orgel, Prest, Goldstein, and Robertson as selected examples of the ways in which cross dressing has both solved and created problems associated with gender performance on stage.
J.M. Barrie wrote *Peter Pan or the Boy Who Would Never Grow Up* as a reflection of family members, young friends, and childhood memories that inspired his love for the innocence of youth and were models for the characters of the story. As a child, his older brother David was killed in a skating accident just before David turned fourteen (Garber 169). His mother was so devastated by the death that she would not leave her room for weeks, leaving Barrie deeply worried about her (169). Marjorie Garber goes into greater detail about his concern, saying, “In a pathetic attempt to please his mother he learned how to whistle and stick his hands in his pocket like David, doubtless inflicting more pain as he made himself into the ghost—or the shadow—of the lost golden child” (169). Barrie eventually had to grow into a man, while David, like Peter Pan, was able to forever remain the perfect boy of thirteen. Hence, David became the inspiration for Peter Pan and other characters in many of Barrie’s stories. A similar situation arose with another one of Barrie’s childhood friends. A friend, Margret, tried to call Barrie “my friendly,” but in her inability to pronounce her “r’s,” instead called him “her Wendy” (Garber 173). She died at the age of six and remained, in Barrie’s imagination, forever caught in her unadulterated youth. It was the beginning of an obsession for Barrie, who continually tried to find the purity, innocence, and joy of childhood.

A female cast as Peter becomes untouchable herself because she, as a gendered being who will never become a man, is able to fully represent a young boy who will stay eternally young.

In addition to David and Margret, the five boys of Arthur and Sylvia Llewelyn Davies also became symbols of eternal youth for Barrie. He spent a lot of time with these boys, inventing new plays and games for them (Garber 170). Devastated when two of the boys died, Barrie did his best to capture their memories in many of his stories. The memories of these children ultimately shaped his life and history, influencing the development of Neverland and the never-aging Peter Pan. But Barrie’s deep interest in youth went further than the events in his own life. He was also greatly influenced by England’s own history, which was full of this passion for youth.

The history of theater in Europe, and particularly in England, reveals many instances of cross-cast roles. Women were banned from the stage by the Catholic Church as early as the thirteenth century, fearing the power of performing females over men (Austern 84). The late sixteenth-century Puritan writer Philip Stubbs not only speaks against the unmanly effect of listening too closely to
secular music, but warns “that the intensive study of practical music would effectively transnature young men into women” (Austern 90). In other words, listening to the female voice, or viewing the female body on stage, would cause a man to lose his manliness. Stephen Orgel explains, “Early modern moralists continually reminded their charges that manhood was not a natural condition but a quality to be striven for and maintained only through constant vigilance, and even then with the utmost difficulty” (19). Hence, men were in a constant battle to maintain their manhood and the mere presence of women on stage was considered threatening to men's patriarchal dominance. In order to keep the superiority of men over women, women were forced into the sphere of private performance. To fill the void left by women, boys were cast as women and sang the women's parts. Austern notes that “at the most basic levels of psychology, a large number of Renaissance thinkers noted specific similarities between boy's and women's underdeveloped masculinity, for the true distinction in this patriarchal society was not between the sexes, but between fathers and children” (Austern 85). In other words, women and children were no different until the boys hit puberty. This perceived androgyny of prepubescent boys allowed boy actors to capture the very essence of a woman without any sexual anxiety associated with actresses. Hence, boy actors were able to transgress gender structures as androgynous figures, which relieved the concern associated with females performing on the stage. This capacity to reach a wholesome state by watching these boys was even more powerful when the audience was listening to boy choristers.

In the case of choir boys, England grew to have a particular fondness for their vocal skills. Because their lives were dedicated to the art of singing, boy choristers were able to develop sounds that replicated the sounds of women. As Beet explains, “What is the boy's voice . . . ? It is the women's voice” (4). Boy sopranos replicated the treble sound of a female soprano beautifully, but also provided some unique features that were different from the sounds of a female soprano. It was believed that boys’ voices were those of angels, and one was able to be closer to God by listening to them. The voice of any boy soprano was considered a religious experience by many English aficionados of boy choristers (Beet 4). Boy trebles lacked the sexuality of females and males, so therefore were able to transcend gender and the anxieties that were associated with it.

Consequently, when the play, Peter Pan, was presented to English audiences, it was loved by many because it portrayed the same kind of purity embodied by the boy actors and choristers, allowing people to experience vicariously the joy and freedom of youth. Unlike the “real” boys found in the contemporary performing arts, the character of Peter was one who would never grow up. Thus, one of the
most important reasons for the play’s success was its celebration of the British fondness for the joys of boyhood.

Regarding this particular affection for boys, Cernauti-Gorodetchi explains that, in the traditional British way of thinking, “being a boy is by far the best thing that could possibly happen to a human” (Cernauti-Gorodetchi 125). Barrie not only shared this British fondness for boyhood, but his own life circumstances further emphasized his attachment to the magic of boyhood. In particular, the young Davies boys inspired Barrie so much that he tried to capture the memories of all of them in the character of Peter. By doing this he was able to create a character that most British people loved: the androgynous boy that transcended gender. Peter is able to capture both the semi-religious transcendence of the choir boys and the anxiety-relieving androgyny of the boy actors. The incorruptibility and purity of Peter is lost the moment a boy grows up—a state not easily portrayed by a mature male actor.

Therefore, the need to portray this arrested state of innocence is the very reason why women have always been cast as Peter Pan. Barrie understood the historically rich association between boys and women when he wrote the play, and he wrote the role of Peter Pan with the actress of Maude Adams in mind as the idealized boy on stage (Garber 166). All the women who have played Peter have attempted to achieve this androgyny, transcending the issue of gender and capturing the innocence of childhood—something a man, who represents the opposite end of the gender spectrum, would never be able to do. By playing a boy, the woman becomes androgynous, just like Peter, and just like the beloved boy choristers.

Furthermore, the very reason that women have been cast as Peter is because they unequivocally lack the masculine sexuality of a grown man or even a growing boy. Peter is a masculine figure lacking full maturity, and Cernauti-Gorodetchi explains that “he knows he is a boy rather than a girl, but he is determined never to become a man” (126). The very act of cross-casting the character captures him in the world of impossibility, a place that could never be reached by the common person, who eventually has to grow up. He is untouchable, unreachable in reality, but on the stage he represents something that everyone can enjoy for a night. Rose calls attention to Peter’s untouchability: “‘No one ever touches me,’ Peter Pan says to Wendy in their famous dialogue at the start of the play. It is because Peter Pan can never be touched” (16). Not even the Lost Boys can fully access all of Peter. But everyone reaches for him, just as Wendy, Tinkerbell, and Tiger Lily attempt to do at various times in the play. A female cast as Peter becomes untouchable herself because she, as a gendered being who will never become a man, is able
to fully represent a young boy who will stay eternally young. Billone states that "because grown women may have physical attractiveness without possessing the sexual potency of manhood, their impersonations of Peter Pan help us to see precisely what it is he lacks"—the mature masculinity of a grown man (9).

It is the actress's job to create that complete absence of masculinity, a real-world impossibility for a young boy. The audience notes that a woman plays Peter, which should be implausible. Explaining the power and credibility of the cross-cast actor, Prest says, "It is the essence of theatre—this tension between reality and illusion, mediated by performance, and the discomfort it can still sometimes produce, that is perfectly captured by the cross-cast actor" (162). Nina Boucicault, the first woman to play Peter on the stage, was able to embody this world of reality and fantasy. She was the "Peter of all Peters . . . She was unearthly but she was real. She obtruded neither sex nor sexlessness" (Garber 166). She, like Peter, was able to stay in the world "that [is] between youth and age, or time and timelessness," a place that the English have been enthralled with for hundreds of years (182). The resulting ideal Peter is, in fact, a woman and not a boy.

In addition to achieving the timeless androgyny of male youth, women are also able to cross gender lines so well because Peter himself has a very cross-gendered role. Throughout the play Peter pretends to be many different figures in order to play tricks on others. He pretends to be, at different times, Tiger Lily, a mermaid, and even Hook himself. Who better to capture this cross-casting of characters than a boy who is an androgynous woman? Billone argues that "we watch an adult woman disguised as a boy hero pretend to be a little girl and then reveal herself to be a little boy after all" (189). Hence, the cross-casting of Peter as different characters in the play, as well as the cross-casting of a woman as Peter, relieves the potential sexual tension that would normally be found in a play about a prepubescent boy. Bulman states that this sort of cross-dressing in actors "unmasks the inherent absurdity of conventional gender expectations" (19). The moment that fantasy is taken from the play and a man or young boy is put into the role of Peter, all that innocence and relief is lost, for the play becomes too realistic.

In the eyes of those who desired a male Peter, Peter is a not an androgynous figure but rather a symbol of the quintessential male. As such, he defies the control of women: his mother, Wendy, Tinkerbell, and even Tiger Lily. In his defiance of women, he nonetheless remains youthful, always seeking adventure. Accordingly, for Peter to be played by a woman was seen as an insult to the very essence of masculinity. These feelings were felt since the plays first performance. Patrick Braybrook, who was literary critic at the time, stated "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" (Cernauti-Gorodetchi 124). His opinion was shared by many. The Royal Shakespeare Company also believed the play to be too childish when it was played by a woman. The play was originally written for the British Christmas Pantomime, a lower form of comedic opera and, therefore, considered childish. As Peter Pan became more popular, however, there was a call to make it less juvenile, so it was reconceived as a tragedy.

But this desire for realism lost the original intentions of the play. To many people, a male Peter destroyed the very idea of Peter, who is not considered tragic in any way. In their view, the real Peter was a boy who refuses to grow up. If Peter were played by a man, the audience would not be able to experience that catharsis of watching a boy enjoying being young. It is not ironic that the popular book The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up was published the following year after the Royal Shakespeare Company's rendition of Peter Pan. The men, who were the object of the research conducted for this book, were unable to grow up and face the realities of the world. Unlike Peter Pan, however, these men were not innocent of the world around them but were unwilling to assume a mature, masculine role. However, equating the situation in which adult males refuse to accept adult responsibilities with the fictional character of Peter Pan is unfair to the original conception of this fantasy figure and misinterprets the role.

Ultimately, the youth, purity, and joy of Peter can only be truly captured by a woman, who herself is innocent and lacking male sexuality and the implied patriarchal dominance. As Schalow explains, "A neutral, androgynous object ... allows men and women alike to give up their male or female positions and prerogatives, to enjoy a pleasure ... based in the relief of gender anxieties" (64). It is the very reason why boy figures have been so loved in English history. The feminine, cross-cast Peter Pan perfectly embodies this androgyny and is the reason she continues to be found in plays even in modern times, allowing for a perpetual fantasy of Neverland.
Works Cited


