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## 'Finding Neverland' showcases joy, vulnerability behind Peter Pan

By DEREK HALSEY For The Herald-Dispatch

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Courtesy photo J. M. Barrie, left, and Captain Hook interact during a scene in 'Finding Neverland the Musical.'

Submitted photos

It is the turn-of-the-century England, over a century ago, and Scottish author J. M. Barrie is in London trying to become a successful playwright. Barrie was seeing his work performed onstage and even serialized in newspapers in America, yet he was still waiting for his big breakthrough.



Then, a character created in a 1902 called Peter Pan appeared in a novel written by Barrie called “The Little White Bird.” The idea for the Peter Pan character came from befriending the family of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, a widow and her five children who lived in London. At the time, the Davies kids, George, John, Nicholas, Michael and Peter, were big fans of pirate stories and would act them out in the way American children acted out cowboy-and-Indian tales during the same time period.



Courtesy photo J. M. Barrie, left, and Sylvia Llewelyn Davies, a widow who lives with her five children in London, interact during a scene from 'Finding Neverland the Musical.'

Barrie’s imagination was sparked by the boys and their stories, so he invented the character of Peter Pan as a way of convincing the other boys that their brother Peter could fly and do amazing things. Barrie then took that idea and created what would become his most enduring work — “Peter Pan” or “The Boy Who Would Not Grow Up.”

Since then, countless versions of Peter Pan have been brought to the stage, the TV screen, the movie house and now the many forms of video that is available in this digital age.

In 2004, the story of Barrie and the Davies clan was told in the hit movie “Finding Neverland.” Starring Johnny Depp as Barrie, the film would receive seven Academy Award nominations, including for Best Picture, winning the Oscar for Best Original Score. The success of the movie spawned the popular Broadway musical version of the true tale of the same name, which ran for an impressive 17 months on Broadway, and by 2016 the national touring company of the hit musical was on the road.

On Feb. 20, “Finding Neverland the Musical” will be performed at the Keith Albee Performing Arts Center. The show begins at 7:30 p.m. and tickets range from \$54 to \$85.



This nationally touring production of Finding Neverland is directed by the Tony Award-winning Diane Paulus with an original score written by composer Gary Barlow and Grammy Award-winner Eliot Kennedy. The play's book was written by playwright James Graham and the impressive choreography was conceived by three-time Emmy Award-winner Mia Michaels.

The lead actors of "Finding Neverland" include Mark Bacon as J.M. Barrie, Kirk Lawrence as both Charles Frohman and Captain Hook, and Josephine Florence Cooper as Sylvia Llewelyn Davies.

Cooper discussed the musical after a performance in Texas. A native of Maine, she has been steady in her climb as an actor, inspired by her mother who performed in musicals with her at a young age. She earned a bachelor's degree in theater with honors at Emerson College and then took roles in regional theater and overseas in Italy before eventually moving to New York City to pursue her career. That led to her being hired to play the all-important role of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies in "Finding Neverland."

Acting is a hard business, and highly competitive — but Cooper credits her success to a positive attitude and her times getting out into the greater world to accumulate real life experience from which to draw from.

"Having the foundation of supportive parents has been really helpful, but on my own, I have traveled a lot alone," Cooper said. "Two summers ago, I traveled throughout Southeast Asia by myself. I wanted to accumulate interesting life experiences so I could get to know myself outside of myself as a performer, if that makes any sense. I never felt unsafe, even though people thought I was crazy for being a woman traveling alone. Besides, I've lived in big cities for the last six years, where you're never actually safe. So, I traveled through Indonesia and Cambodia."

Now, Cooper is relishing playing the character of Sylvia Llewelyn Davies.

"I love playing the role of Sylvia, as she is a woman living in 1903 London who was so radical for her time," Cooper said. "She plays with her children and pretends to be a pirate and encourages them to be playful while being playful herself. She fights against a society that doesn't want her kids to behave that way. She shakes the hands of men without even thinking twice about it.

"In the play, her children have recently lost their father, who dies right before the show begins a year earlier, and she is invested in helping her kids get through that grief process while encouraging them to find joy. One of the reasons that I love her character is that she was Bohemian in that time (a



socially unconventional person involved with the arts), and it is all true as historically she was a real person.”

Cooper’s role involves performing with five young actors on a nightly basis who play the roles of Davies’ children, and she is amazed by their talent.

“There are five boys that travel with us as actors, and throughout the run of ‘Finding Neverland’ I have had 17 different young actors playing my sons onstage,” Cooper said. “I am blown away by them every single day. It makes me choked up to even talk about it.

“We live in a time when we talk a lot about masculinity and the pressures being put on young men, which is a whole complicated thing in itself. But to see young men be vulnerable is amazing as I get to look into their eyes every night and sing to them, helping them in their roles as kids experiencing the grief of their father passing away. These young actors are so smart and kind and talented and they remind of me of what it is like to be really present and in the moment.”

More information on the show and the entire Marshall Artists Series can be found at [marshall.edu/muartistseries](http://marshall.edu/muartistseries).

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## If You Go

WHAT: "Finding Neverland the Musical"

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Feb. 20

WHERE: Keith Albee Performing Arts Center.

TICKETS: \$54 to \$85, available online at [marshall.edu/muartistseries](http://marshall.edu/muartistseries) or [ticketmaster.com](http://ticketmaster.com), by phone at 304-696-6656, or in person weekdays from 12-4 p.m. in the box office of the Joan C. Edwards Performing Arts Center.

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**Be Nice.** No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

**Be Proactive.** Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

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