

Make believe

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

Scottish writer James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) was a great success during his lifetime, with 40 plays, six novels and numerous works of nonfiction to his name. But he is remembered today for one play only: *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, first performed 100 years ago this December.

Finding Neverland, directed by Marc Forster and scripted by David Magee (and based loosely on the play *The Man Who Was Peter Pan*, by Allan Knee), seeks to show how the 44-year-old Barrie (played by Johnny Depp) came to write the play that some claim changed the face of children's literature forever. That it plays fast and loose with the facts in order to fashion a neat fable about the creative process is just one of its shortcomings.

Most of us were introduced to the story of Peter, Wendy and Captain Hook through the 1953 Disney animated version or the 1954 Mary Martin teleplay, which is why most tend to think of Peter Pan as a lighthearted tale about a rough-and-tumble young boy from a faraway place called Neverland. (I, for one, couldn't get enough of the Peter Pan ride when I was taken to Disneyland.)

A closer inspection of the play, along with the novel *Peter and Wendy* which appeared seven years later, casts a darker light on the adventure. The theme of remaining young forever is part of the desire to ward off death, a subject Barrie was painfully familiar with after the accidental death of his beloved older brother at the age of 13.

Death and disappointment abound in *Finding Neverland*, starting with the opening scene, where Barrie's latest play, *Little Mary*, proves to be a colossal flop. (In fact, it was a huge hit.) Barrie's dismay extends to his home life, where he is caught in a loveless and childless union with his wife, Mary (Radha Mitchell). He finds rejuvenation one day during an afternoon stroll through London's Kensington Gardens, where he meets the Llewelyn-Davies family, which numbers four young boys and their recently widowed mother, Sylvia (Kate Winslet). Barrie becomes fast friends with the boys, joining them daily for games of make-believe, and is soon a

regular visitor to the Llewelyn-Davies home, much to the chagrin of Sylvia's mother, the very proper and vocal Emma DuMaurier (Julie Christie).

The second act of the film charts how Barrie's relationship with the family leads to the writing of *Peter Pan*. It was a curious (and expensive) stage play, requiring special-effects that taxed the patience and pursestrings of the money-conscious American producer, played by Dustin Hoffman. The portrayal of the creative process involves way too many "Eureka" moments—scenes showing the exact moment a brilliant idea hits the author. The filmmakers are quite literal in their understanding of inspiration—they show a grandma holding a hook, and children bouncing high above their beds.

Instead of plumbing the magical possibilities of the story, the film trudges along, banking too heavily on Depp's well-established charm. This dramatic lethargy extends to the two supposed love stories. The dying marriage is played out with a lot of staring, sighing, and retreating to separate bedrooms. Barrie's blossoming relationship with Sylvia is left to wither on the vine, in large part because her character is severely underwritten, even when she starts to grow pale and cough a lot.

This emotional lethargy of the film raises a question: If the filmmakers were going to twist the facts of a man's life to suit their own purposes, why did they create a story more tedious than the truth? In reality, for instance, Sylvia's husband, Arthur, was very much alive when Barrie first entered the family's life. That made for all sorts of intriguing complications, but they are ones that the film abandons by having him die sooner rather than later.

There is one moment in the film that both moved and surprised me. After the successful opening night of *Peter Pan*, Barrie speaks in the lobby to an elderly woman he has met before. He asks about her husband, and she says that he has died. With tears in her eyes, she adds that he was always a boy at heart, just like Peter, but that like the crocodile that pursued Hook, the ticking clock caught up with him. I confess I never before made the connection of the ticking clock in the crocodile's belly to the inevitable passage of time, the major theme of the play. I wish the rest of *Finding Neverland* provided half as much revelation and magic.