AN INTERVIEW
WITH JOHN CAIRD
by Robert Vaughan

As the centennial of the December 1904 premiere of Peter Pan approached, Director of Professional Licensing Robert Vaughan had occasion to talk with renowned director John Caird about his and Trevor Nunn’s magical stage version of the beloved classic.

ROBERT. How did you and Trevor Nunn decide to do your own version of Peter Pan?

JOHN. We were curious as to why the story of Peter Pan was so famous, such an apparent...
Of Peter himself you must make what you will. Perhaps he was a little boy who died young, and this is how the author conceived his subsequent adventures. Perhaps he was a boy who was never born at all — a boy whom some people longed for, but who never came. It may be that those people hear him at the window more clearly than children do.

—J.M. Barrie

In the play are children, or adults behaving like children, so there isn’t any room in their scenes for Barrie’s ironic and humorous tone of voice, without which the story seems so thin and insubstantial. By including Barrie as the Storyteller, Peter Pan can become a fantasy that is equally enjoyable by children and adults alike. What is more, children can enjoy their parents’ pleasure in the story as well as indulge their own more child-like imaginations while adults can smile at Barrie’s irony and simultaneously enjoy their children’s wonderment.

Your version incorporates material from Barrie original novel as well as unpublished material from the original manuscript — it also includes some material from a 1920 film scenario. How did you come to include this in your play?

When we investigated Barrie’s original material — which we did with the help of Andrew Birkin, the leading world expert on Barrie and Peter Pan, we found that although Barrie had written the original play in 1904, there were half a dozen other versions written subsequently. It seemed that he had so fallen in love with his own story that he couldn’t stop writing it! But it was re-reading the novel, published in 1911, that made us realize how the stage play had managed to fall so very short of his original vision. The 1920 film scenario was written for Charlie Chaplin to play Peter Pan — but the film was never made. Paramount wanted the part to be played by a woman; however, your original production starred a young man named Miles Anderson. What do you think about the casting issues — the most famous Peters, again, women, are Jean Arthur, if I’m not mistaken, and of course Mary Martin and … the list goes on.

Barrie himself hated the idea of a woman playing the part of Peter and was persuaded, against his better judgment, by the producer Charles Frohman. What he dreaded was that his precious “fantasy in five acts” would get turned into a pantomime — as it soon did. Peter is a little boy, a devilish and thoughtless little boy, who has decided by sheer willpower not to grow up and is so stuck at the age of ten. It’s hard enough for an adult man to play a devilish little boy but well nigh impossible for an adult woman. More importantly, the story at the heart of Peter Pan is a love story between Peter and Wendy. To have the little boy and girl at the center of this romance played by two adult women is really quite perverse and makes it impossible for the audience to understand and enjoy the real depth of emotion between the two central child characters. Peter loves Wendy but won’t grow up. Wendy loves Peter and can’t help growing up. Because of this they are bound to drift apart, however deeply they feel for each other. This brings a tragic flavor to the story that really sharpens all its other aspects — including the fantasy, the laughter and the adventure. But the love story is that of a little boy and a little girl. You have to get as close to that as you can when you cast it or you do really risk missing the whole point!

In 1904, Daphne du Maurier described children in the audience as being terrified of Captain Hook — she wrote, “When Hook first paced his quarter deck, children were carried screaming from the stalls, and even big boys of twelve were known to reach for their mothers’ hands in the friendly shelters of the boxes. How he was hated, with his flourish, his poses, his dreaded diabolical smile.” Since that time, Hook has been played as comical right up to Dustin Hoffman in Spielberg’s film Hook. The most recent Hook, played by one of my favorite actors, Jason Isaacs, however, was certainly not. What’s your take on Hook? Where do you stand?

The actor playing Hook should be scary and funny, in equal measures. Children enjoy being scared as long as they also feel fundamentally safe. This is what is at the heart of many of their playground games, or when they turn Mommy or Daddy or Big Brother or Sister into a monster or a dragon or a killer robot. Barrie has written Hook as scary but with many little comic safety valves so that just at the moment he seems to be getting too scary, he says or does something ludicrous and lets the children off the hook, so to speak. The best actor to play Hook is a comic actor who isn’t trying too hard to be funny. Hook himself wants to be scarier than he really is. He constantly disappoints himself in the scary stakes.

As you know, a new bio-flick of Barrie, starring Johnny Depp, has just been released. What is it about Barrie and Peter that keeps us all wrapped up in them?

Barrie’s brother David died when he was six, and it had a profound effect on him, especially because his mother nearly died herself of grief for David and never recovered from her terrible loss. Barrie himself seems to have been held in a perpetual boyhood thereafter, emotionally speaking, although he was intellectually the most adult and sophisticated of artists. But Peter Pan is a self-portrait of Barrie only in that both Peter and Barrie find true emotional communication
too difficult to manage. In other respects Barrie is actually much more similar to the character of Wendy — with all her care and maternal love and overwhelming feelings that she isn’t allowed to express. But perhaps the real reason for the perennial fascination of audiences with Peter Pan is that we all have some part of us that regrets our growing up — that harks back to our own childhoods, with an impossible yearning, even though we know we can never return there, not really. And I think it’s both simplistic and reductive to say that men are more likely to feel this than women. All people feel it to some extent, and some feel it much more deeply than others, but men and women of all ages are equally capable of yearning to fly away effortlessly to the shores of Never Land once more.

ROBERT. Do you recall your first encounter with these wonderful characters?

JOHN. When I was 6, and my father read me the story for the first time.

ROBERT. How do you feel about the musical versions?

JOHN. I don’t know the musical very well, but I don’t think Barrie’s version needs any additions from anyone, however talented or well meaning. Barrie’s tone of voice is so particular, his words so uniquely coined, that anyone else’s words added to his will always sound out of place — artistically intrusive because not really necessary. There is so much excitement in the story that it should never have to stop for a song, however good it is. There are a couple of little songs in our version but they are made necessary by the action, and indeed accompany some very necessary action, and the words in them are drawn from Barrie’s own material. A production of Peter Pan should be intensely musical but should never become a musical, or seem like one. Peter Pan isn’t a musical, or a pantomime, or even a play. Barrie called it “a fantasy in five acts,” and if we want to get the full value out of his unique genius, we should do everything we can to honor and trust his mesmerizing vision.

ROBERT. Now a tough question, who is your favorite character?

JOHN. I love Tinker Bell. She’s so naughty and willful and wicked — a tiny adult in the middle of a child’s fantasy with all her frailties and jealousies and complications on full display!


“I’ll teach you how to jump on the wind’s back, and then away we go — and if there are more winds than one they toss you about in the sky — they fling you miles and miles — but you always fall soft on to another wind — and sometimes you go crashing through the tops of trees, scaring the owls — and if you meet a boy’s kite in the air you shove your foot through it. The stars are giving a party tonight! Oh, Wendy, when you are sleeping in your silly bed you might be flying about with me playing hide and seek with the stars!”

—Peter Pan

THE WOMAN WHO CAME TO LUNCH

An Interview with Anne Kaufman Schneider by Craig Pospisil

When you think about families in American plays, the Sycamores from You Can’t Take It with You by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart immediately spring to mind. So with family as the theme for this issue of AT Play, it seemed natural to talk with Anne Kaufman Schneider about her famous father, his plays and herself. I sat down to lunch with her soon after she returned from seeing a revival of The Solid Gold Cadillac in the West End in London, starring Patricia Routledge.

CRAIG. It seems like every time we talk, you’re just getting back from a trip to see one of your father’s plays or just about to leave for one. How much traveling do you do in a year seeing productions?

ANNE. Well, let’s see. I went to The Man Who Came to Dinner at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I went, in part, because I thought the idea of a Shakespeare festival doing the play was hilarious. And it was wonderful. When the bigger places do the plays, they bring me out, which is nice. I love traveling. Steppenwolf did two plays. They did The Man Who Came to Dinner with John Mahoney. And opening night the convicts who come on were played by John Malkovich [and Steppenwolf co-founders] Gary Sinise and Terry Kinney, without telling him. Well, they came on as the convicts, and John Mahoney went to pieces. He actually did. He sat in that wheelchair and fell over laughing. The rest of the company knew, but he didn’t. It was great. And they put me up at the Four Seasons. They always applaud at the beginning of the second act when it’s all fixed up. If there’s a theme to the earlier ones, the theme is that the leading girl — not necessarily woman, girl — is smarter than the others. And I think that was very much a theme of my father’s early on. It’s true in The Butter and Egg Man. Once in a Lifetime, the girl is the smart one of the trio. June Moon, in that one the girl is smarter. That’s the kind of theme that went through them. That’s what he liked in real life, so he put it down on paper. He liked snappy, kind of wise-cracking, smart girls.

CRAIG. That’s something I have in common with him then.

ANNE. Exactly. Solid Gold Cadillac, there the woman is smarter too.

CRAIG. Smarter than all the men on the board of the company.

ANNE. Yes. That was the last play he wrote.

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THE FAMILY THAT PLAYS TOGETHER
by Michael Q. Fellmeth

The Play Service catalogue offers a first-class selection of plays suitable for the whole family, with Peter Pat being perhaps the consummate example. But where the catalogue is especially rich is in another kind of “family play” altogether, the kind that takes the family as its subject. Too often in our daily lives and in our political discourse it is taken for granted what a family is. Even into the twenty-first century, the iconic imagery of the 1950s suburban household — suited father, aproned mother, two well-behaved kids and a two-port garage — still holds sway, informing our perceptions of what constitutes a family and what families should aspire to. Thankfully, sometimes hilariously and sometimes heartbreakingly, American dramatists tell us otherwise about the family and about ourselves.

A look at the subject of family in the Play Service catalogue must begin with Eugene O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize–winning drama Long Day’s Journey into Night. Widely regarded as one of the greatest American plays, O’Neill’s portrait of a family, his family, struggling with its demons and with a mother addicted to morphine offers one of the theatre’s most wrenchingly beautiful experiences. As one reviewer writes of the recent Tony Award–winning revival, “This barely disguised autobiographical work remains half a century later the cornerstone of American drama.” It is, he continues, “a sympathetic yet devastating portrait of the Tyrones as they struggle through the worst day of their lives.” A deeply private man, O’Neill left instructions that Long Day’s Journey not be published until twenty-five years after his death. The reason for his reticence to share the play is precisely what makes it so powerful — the brutal intimacy with which O’Neill exposes the dynamics of his family for all the world to see. While we may not associate the particulars of O’Neill’s Tyrones with our own families, the play transcends these particulars and allows us to recognize in the Tyrones’ failings, longings and hopes our own families’ failings, longings and hopes.

And yet as much of a masterpiece as O’Neill’s dark vision of the family is, it remains only one vision, incapable of representing the diversity of treatments the family has received at the hands of American dramatists. Among our most popular titles on the subject is George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s Pulitzer Prize–winning You Can’t Take It with You, which was published until twenty-five years after his death. The reason for his reticence to share the play is precisely what makes it so powerful — the brutal intimacy with which O’Neill exposes the dynamics of his family for all the world to see. While we may not associate the particulars of O’Neill’s Tyrones with our own families, the play transcends these particulars and allows us to recognize in the Tyrones’ failings, longings and hopes our own families’ failings, longings and hopes.

Other very popular titles from the catalogue include Christopher Durang’s Baby with the Bathwater, a sidesplitting journey into extreme familial dysfunction that takes its title literally; Amy Freed’s quirky Freedomland, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, which in a distinctly contemporary way offers echoes of You Can’t Take It with You; and Sam Shepard’s classic Buried Child, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. There are also many lesser known but equally worthy plays to consider.

Jane Anderson’s Looking for Normal, for instance, asks what happens to a family when the father of a respectable middle-class Midwestern home decides to realize a lifelong yearning to become a woman. Recently made into an HBO film entitled Normal, the original play on which the film is based is even more powerful and eye-opening. Jessica Goldberg’s Refuge tells the story of abandoned children who seek to rebuild their broken home a family among themselves. It is a moving portrait of the struggle to form a nontraditional family of a kind that is all too common today. Similarly, in Angus MacLachlan’s The Dead Eye Boy a broken home is the setting for an
attempt to rebuild a family from the detritus that drug abuse leaves in its wake. The play offers a picture of what can happen when parents neglect their responsibilities to children. A very fine and critically acclaimed play, Tom Donaghy’s The Beginning of August examines what happens to a family when a man’s wife abruptly and mysteriously leaves him and their infant daughter. In the words of one reviewer, “Donaghy holds a cracked mirror up to the contemporary American family, anatomizing its frailties and miscommunications …” As always with Donaghy, the result is both funny and poignant. Also poignant and one of the funniest plays in our catalogue is Cheryl West’s Jar the Floor. A celebration of four generations of women in an African-American family as they gather for the nineteenth birthday party of the great-grandmother, Jar the Floor reveals in the eccentricities of its characters and their generational differences, and ultimately turns affecting as family members manage to come to terms with longstanding conflicts that had seemed unresolvable.

Family, of course, is a staple of the sitcom, and one marvelous new acquisition, Julian’s Sheppard’s Love and Happiness, begins with a sitcom-like premise: A teenager rejects his divorced mother’s new boyfriend and does everything in his power to drive him away. But where a sitcom would stay on the surface and milk the situation for cheap laughs and sentimentality, Sheppard’s sharp-edged, uproarious comedy digs much deeper and finds gold. Also of note are Gregg Coffin’s lovely musical Convenience, about a mother and son and their difficulties with communication; Carol Burnett and her daughter Carrie Hamilton’s Hollywood Arms, based on Burnett’s bestselling autobiography, about growing up in a family living beneath the shadow of the Hollywood sign; Lee Blessing’s Black Sheep, in which a prominent white family must deal with the black son of an interracial marriage; David Wiltes’s Dance Lesson, in which a neighbor becomes an interloper who tears a family apart; Tracy Letts’ provocative Man from Nebraska, about an ordinary husband and father’s crisis of faith and its effect on his family; Charlayne Woodard’s Pretty Fire, a lyrical examination of three generations of African-American family life, in which, as Woodard writes, “the family bond is as strong as steel”; and Paula Vogel’s stunningly original and haunting “puppet play with actors,” The Long Christmas Ride Home, in which a troubled family’s simmering conflicts boil over on the holiday named for the Prince of Peace.

Among our most recent acquisitions, two in particular stand out, the Pulitzer Prize–winning Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks and Edward Albee’s Tony Award–winning The Goat or, Who is Sylvia? In Topdog/Underdog, two brothers explore their family history and the bonds of blood. Written in Parks’ inimitable style, it is a fierce and rich exploration that leads to a shocking conclusion. In The Goat or, Who is Sylvia?, a seemingly traditional family confronts a most unusual infidelity when the man of the house begins an affair with a barnyard animal. While the situation lends itself to humor, Albee’s purpose is serious, and through the absurdity a provocative portrait of a family in crisis emerges. It would not seem to be coincidence that both of these major award-winning contemporary plays take family as their subject. Instead, it is revealing of the significance that the family continues to play in our dramatic literature and in our lives. When authors such as Parks and Albee turn their attention to the family, the awards committees and the rest of us take notice.

In these times of geographical dislocation, with children frequently living thousands of miles from home, these plays remind us that family remains the source of our closest relationships, our most profound conflicts and our most abiding love. They show us that modern families cannot be delimited by the manufactured imagery of a bygone era. They also show us that as comical or dysfunctional or bizarre as our own families may at times seem, no matter how far from them we are, we are far from alone. For an evening that will strike resonant chords with families everywhere, these plays present some of the finest choices our theatre has to offer.
And the play works. It needs a woman star. It’s not really an ensemble piece. *Solid Gold Cadillac* is wonderful. And if we could bring over Patricia Routledge, I think it would work here. Audiences love it. It is extremely pertinent, since it’s one woman against big business. And it’s absolutely hilarious. But it takes a star lady of a “certain age.” In the picture it was Judy Holliday, but I never saw the picture because Daddy hated what they made of his plays, so I never went to them. *(Laughs.)* As far as I’m concerned Patricia Routledge could play it forever, anywhere. I mean, her timing and her sense of what the play is about are utterly hilarious.

**CRAIG.** One thing you notice when you look through your father’s plays is that almost every one has a co-author, a collaborator. So in addition to being one of the most prolific playwrights of his time, it seems he was the most prolific collaborator. What appealed to him about that kind of writing arrangement?

**ANNE.** I think he liked the company. I mean, I think he liked saying, “What do you think about this as an idea?” He was marvelous on construction. The plays he wrote with Edna Ferber are very much Ferber-esque. They all have to do with grandiose ideas. He loved Moss. I think he would’ve gone on writing with him forever. They’re interesting because they take on the coloration of the collaborator as well. You wouldn’t mix them up. You wouldn’t say, “Oh, did Moss write *The Royal Family*?” No, you know perfectly well it was Edna. Hers are all kind of dynastic and, you know, more about women. They concentrate on women, *Stage Door* and *Royals* … I think he liked playing ideas off people, and they’re doing the same with him. He only wrote two alone.

**CRAIG.** He worked with such a wide range of collaborators. You’ve mentioned Edna Ferber and Moss Hart.

**ANNE.** And Marc Connelly, way back. Kind of before me. Ring Lardner — I guess they were writing that one with a quill pen.

**CRAIG.** Any idea what drew him to those particular people?

**ANNE.** That I don’t know. I mean, Marc Connelly, I think, was in the Algonquin Round Table. So they must’ve said, “Oh, I have an idea.” And I think Edna turned up there too. One of the few women besides Dorothy Parker.

**CRAIG.** In three years we’ll be coming up on the seventieth anniversary of *You Can’t Take It with You*, and a couple years after that *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. What do you think makes them such enduring American classics?

**ANNE.** Because they’re beautifully written and wonderfully constructed. And that really is why. I mean, the audience just sort of settles into them. *You Can’t Take It with You* is clearly about love. They all love each other. Even if Alice leaves Tony briefly. I mean, Grandpa — there’s no mention of Grandma, you realize *(Laughs.)* … but it’s all about love.

**CRAIG.** The affection between all the characters is enormous.

**ANNE.** And in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* there’s really very little affection. There it’s just funny, chic. It’s become such a classic that the audience knows exactly what it’s about and what’s going to happen. They just like seeing the Harpo character or the Noel Coward character, and they sort of get all that.

**CRAIG.** Do you think there are some plays of your father’s that get overlooked because of *You Can’t Take It with You* and such?

**ANNE.** George Washington Slept Here, I think, is overlooked. *The Butter and Egg Man* is one I adore. It’s just wonderfully fun and has marvelous acting parts in it. And it’s very innocent in a way the others aren’t. And my father wrote it by himself.

**CRAIG.** Which we’ve already remarked was a rarity.

**ANNE.** And the royalties come to me without having to share them. *(Craig laughs.)* I also love *June Moon*. There are really amazingly few I don’t like.

**CRAIG.** Do you have a flat-out favorite among his plays?

**ANNE.** I think if I had to choose one to see over and over again I would say *Once in a Lifetime*. I think that is simply marvelous. It’s just funny … smart. It’s very smart.

**CRAIG.** Did your father talk about his plays as he was writing them?

**ANNE.** Never. Not a word. And not a word afterward. No, afterward he just thought, it was wonderful, and isn’t it great, and look what happened. Or if it was a flop — and there were a few — he didn’t talk about them.

**CRAIG.** Did you ever get to go to any rehearsals? Did you ever get to see your father at work?

**ANNE.** Yes, starting when I was around twelve, I guess. And I went to see him in *Once in a Lifetime*. I was five years old, and my mother took me to see it because he was in it. He apparently was quite nervous about my being there at the age of five. And my mother took me backstage afterward, and he nervously said, “Well, darling, what did you think?” And I said, “I’d like to meet the man who made the train noises.” *(Craig laughs.)* That became a kind of family story. They thought I acquired my directness right there. And never lost it.

**CRAIG.** I can attest to that.

**ANNE.** Mm-hmm.
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ILLINOIS
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