

Review #76 : *Peter Pan* (2003)

Jeremy Sumpter and Rachel Hurd-Wood

TRAILER

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zx2skCTtZQs>



I'm not sure how to describe this *Peter Pan* to you. It's so different from what I expected ! I walked in anticipating a sweet kid fantasy and was surprised to find a film that takes its story very seriously indeed, and even allows a glimpse of underlying sadness. To be *Peter Pan* is fun for a day or a year, but can it be fun forever ?

An spell-binding adaptation of J. M. BARRIE's beloved classic

The movie has been directed by **P.J. Hogan**, best known for the **Julia Roberts** comedy *My Best Friend's Wedding*. This enchanting adaptation stays very close to the J. M. Barrie book, which is about to celebrate its centenary, and also closer to the book's buried themes, which are sidestepped by most versions of *Peter Pan*.

The sharp, sometimes **stinging emotional acuity** **P. J. Hogan** demonstrated in his previous spiky and heartfelt comedies made him an ideal interpreter of J. M. Barrie's work. The *Peter Pan* books are intended to **disturb as well as comfort** ; in seducing young readers into the pleasures of literature, they also teach them to appreciate various forms of unhappiness. They are magical and exciting, but also frightening and sad ; their beautifully balanced themes are the delights of childhood and the **pathos of leaving it behind**.

Mr. Hogan understands J. M. Barrie between the lines perfectly, and his film-making style is a perfect mixture of **wide-eyed wonder** and slightly **melancholy** sophistication.

THE THEMES

As the film narrows into its crucial themes, we realize there are two : **Wendy's desire to free Peter from eternal boyhood** and **Hook's envy of the affection they have for each other**. It is no accident that the poison made of droplets from Hooks' red eye consists of envy, malice and disappointment.

But to never grow up is unspeakably sad, and this is the first *Peter Pan* where Peter's final flight seems **not like a victory but an escape**.

That aspect of the movie may bring a **lump to adult throats**, but in the meantime there are the sturdy delights of swordplay, wonderful creatures and Neverland flight. Director **P. J. Hogan**, production designer **Roger Ford** and the cinematographer **Donald M. McAlpine** (*Moulin Rouge*) conjure a Neverland of **lurid purple shadows and thick, brightly coloured foliage**.

Imagination is dangerous, but the loss of imagination is deadly. Being a child is frightening – there are certainly scenes here that will jolt the **sensitivities** of young children – but growing up is painful. Like J. M. Barrie in his book, P. J. Hogan grasps these difficult truths, and knows how to spin them into **utter, uncomplicated delight**. The result is an outstanding and magical fairytale.

Peter Pan is rated PG. It has swordplay and gunplay and a few violent deaths.

THE CAST

This expensive new production, **shot in Australia** and unveiling a young unknown as the beautiful Wendy, is aware of the latent sexuality between the two characters, and Peter is a little scared of that. Peter and Wendy are at precisely the age when it is time to share their first real kiss – and they do so, astonishing the other characters, as they've never seen that before – not in the cartoon, not on the stage – never ! It's not that the movie is overtly sexual or even sensual ; yet the **attraction is *there***, while the other versions pretended that it was not...



While Peter, played by an appropriately **dashing and adventurous** 15-year-old (**Jeremy Sumpter**, who was so effective in Bill Paxton's *Frailty*), face to Tink (**Ludivine Sagnier**) as cute and naughty as anyone could wish, the movie actually belongs to **Rachel Hurd-Wood** as Wendy Darling, who was selected at an open casting call and is delightful in her first role...

Rachel Hurd-Wood, a 13-year-old British actress making her professional debut, was born for the role, which calls on her to be a **precocious child, an action heroine, the surrogate mother** of a tribe of Lost Boys and the romantic lead. Her soft, sensitive features display her childlike eagerness and her incipient wisdom without overdoing either trait, and she and Jeremy remind us that *Peter Pan*, beyond all the swashbuckling and fantasy, is a **love story**, which ends on a poignant Jamesian note of **renunciation**.

They're attractive young people in roles that in the past have been played by such sexless actors as **Robin Williams** and **Mary Martin** : there have a *true* chemistry on the screen.

Any fantasy story, and especially *Peter Pan*, depends on the **vitality of its villain**, here played by **Jason Isaacs**, who also plays the timid John Darling, a dual role made traditional by decades of holiday pantomimes, each character being short on qualities the other has in abundance : **Captain Hook** is all gnash and bluster, while **Mr. Darling** is so shy he can hardly talk to himself in the mirror.



Also known as the reptilian Lucius Malfoy in *Harry Potter*, Jason Isaacs is excellent as the **vicious and self-pitying Captain Hook**. When Hook meets his end, as the children chant ‘*old, unwanted, alone !*’ from the decks of his creaking ship, it is hard to suppress a twinge of sympathy for the poor old pirate.



You also feel the grief of Mrs. Darling (**Olivia Williams**), mother of Wendy and her two young brothers, as she pines beside an open window, **waiting for her children to return**, or for the **loneliness of Peter**. All of this feeling is a mark of just how thoroughly P. J. Hogan has succeeded in evading the sentimentality that infects so many recent children's movies.

Wendy finds a role for herself in Neverland. It's touching, the way the Lost Boys so desperately want to be found, and crowd around Wendy, **asking her to be their mother.** *'What does a mother do ? Tell us a story!'* Later, when the Lost Boys join Wendy and her brothers John and Michael back home in their bedroom, they ask Mrs. Darling to be their mother, and she agrees, although when Smee (**Richard Briers**) arrives late and is motherless, the new character of Aunt Millicent (**Lynn Redgrave**) steps in joyfully. My Mum and I cried in the end. It is just so moving !

SPECIAL EFFECTS



The special effects range from fair enough to very good, and the movie's a riot of pretty pictures, from an overgrown and pungent Louisiana-like Neverland to a vast and gloomy castle with all sorts of paths into the darkness, and then scenes turn as delicate as *'A Midsummer Night's Dream'* with **golden and blue tones in an enchanted forest.** At a point when lesser films would be giving us swashbuckling by the numbers, Peter and Wendy dance in mid-air, emulating the fairy ballet. **Spell-binding and bitter-sweet ! +++**

