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MAT brings Peter Pan to live in third Christmas panto



By [Stephen Real](#)

Havre Daily News/Ryan Berry

Angela Murri, playing Line, gets in the ear of Rachel Dean, playing Captain Hook, during a rehearsal of the Montana Actor's Theater production of a panto of "Peter Pan" Wednesday. Along with acting, Dean choreographed the show as well.

Montana Actors' Theatre is ready to perform its latest holiday pantomime production with "Peter Pan" opening this weekend at the Little Theater in Cowan Hall on Montana State University-Northern's campus.

The play is directed by Valerie Guyant, Ph.D., and is the third play to be performed as a pantomime, or panto, by MAT.

The first panto that MAT did, two years ago, was "Hansel and Gretel," and it was a big success, Guyant said. The following year MAT produced "Robin Hood" as a panto, which was another hit.

A panto is a British Christmas tradition, Guyant said, and is designed for kids and families. A panto goes against traditional theater norms by encouraging audience participation.

"A lot of what we call 'breaking the fourth wall,'" she said, "which means that the actors themselves will ask the audience to do things. Like, they get to shout at the actors, and there's candy, and there's a lot of over-the-top silliness to it. Some specific things that are just standard for pantos."

Another aspect of the MAT production, following a panto tradition of gender changing, is that the male, lead character is portrayed by a high-school aged girl while the "older, female role that's some sort of caretaker is often played by an adult male," Guyant said.

"There's some cross-dressing going on and it's intended (as) part of the tradition," she added.

Pantos are half farce and half fairy tale or, as Guyant said, "Monty Python meets a fairy tale, mixes together and comes out with something."

Guyant said "Peter Pan" isn't a fairy tale in the traditional sense, but some scholars consider it a modern fairy tale.

Most theaters put on Christmas-themed plays such as Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," but, Guyant said, MAT decided three years ago to try something different while still keeping the theme of Christmas.

"Sitting through, like, 'A Christmas Carol,' when you're 5 is not easy. Going to a panto is way more fun," she added.

Guyant said she has directed four plays for MAT and this is the first play she has directed this year.

Guyant, an English literature professor for Montana State University-Northern, has been with MAT for three years. She moved from Wisconsin specifically for the teaching job she said. She started in MAT as a volunteer, first as a way to be able to attend the MAT productions for free because the cost of moving was so expensive.

This has been the biggest cast Guyant has worked with in her time with MAT, she said. She also had to work with kids ranging in age from 9 years old to high school and college.

“One of the things I tried to do was keep it light and fun,” she said.

Guyant said one of things that she learned about directing a panto is that it is OK to re-use a gag in the script if the audience thinks it is funny.

Guyant added that she has enjoyed watching the growth of first-time actors through the production of the play.

“Watching them develop into having more of a stage presence has been, probably, the coolest part of the whole thing,” she said.

She said she has also enjoyed the audience laughing at jokes or gags that the actors have come up with.

Auditions for “Peter Pan” started in mid-October and rehearsals started near the end of October, Guyant said.

While she considers Halloween her favorite time of year, Guyant said, she enjoys Christmas time, as well, and would love to direct another panto in the future.

“I can’t emphasize enough that this is meant to be a family show,” she said. “That means the young kids are going to have a great time. The parents are going to laugh at different jokes than the kids will.”



“Peter Pan” opens Friday at 8 p.m. and with showings scheduled at 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday. Showings are also scheduled for Friday, Dec. 14, at 8 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 15, at 2 and 8 p.m., Sunday, Dec. 16, at 2 p.m., Friday, Dec. 21, at 8 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 23, at 2 and 8 p.m. and Sunday, Dec. 23, at 2 p.m. The doors and backstage lounge open a half hour before the shows.

Tickets are \$15 for adults; \$10 for students, seniors and military, and \$5 for children K-8.

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Rachel David gives a thumbs up as she begins to fly while playing Peter Pan Wednesday in Montana State University-Northern's Little Theatre. Actors dressed in black lifted their fellow actors from behind to simulate flying.