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A trip to Niagara-on-the-Lake combines arts with activity

By Diana Ballon on July 28, 2015

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Magic “star stuff,” pirates and mermaids in coconut bras have invaded Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. Specifically, the Shaw Festival, which for the first time in its 53-year history is staging a play geared to children: Peter and the Starcatcher.



Charlie Gallant as Boy in Peter and the Starcatcher. Photo by David Cooper.

So far, it's been a success, as much for the more senior members of the audience as for the kids. While my 11-year-old daughter reported loving "the humour, magic and twist on a fairy tale," she and her 10-year-old brother at times whispered to my husband to ask what was going on. (I was occasionally tempted to do the same.)

But very soon, all the pieces come together, and we were embroiled in what is basically an origin story of how Peter Pan came to be. The story focuses on the unlikely friendship that evolves between two disparate characters on separate journeys – a privileged young girl en route to becoming a starcatcher and an orphan boy held captive on a ship. We witness the burgeoning flirtation between Peter and Molly, who will become the mother of Wendy, John and Michael Darling in J.M. Barrie's classic story.

The play, though, is based on the 2006 novel of the same name, written by Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson. It combines swashbuckling, larger-than-life characters, music and some amusing modern references. (One of the orphan boys – when presented with pail of worms for grub – asks if there are any vegetarian options.) Its first act takes place on a ship that gets overtaken by pirates and then the second takes place on land, where the magic "star stuff" dissolves out of a box.

Peter and the Starcatcher is what musical director Ryan de Souza describes as story (or poor man's) theatre, in which one actor can play multiple characters, and take on many different roles. In this play, "there are 12 people in the show and they never stop," says deSouza. Each play multiple characters, do many of the sound effects and set pieces.

"Theatre has gone really high tech. We wanted to see how low tech we could go, and really challenge people to use their imaginations, says deSouza, speaking to us during the Creating a Soundscape workshop, part of the Festival's education program.

"Everything had to be alive and acoustic. Only the theremin is electronic," he says. In addition to the orchestra, the actors play various musical instruments, and create sound effects from everyday things. For example, one actor makes the sound of rain by tapping on an empty metal bucket.

"You need to be really creative in telling the show that will cater as much to the five-year-old as the 95-year-old," he says.

A lofty goal. But judging from the standing ovation they received at the end of the show, they seem to be succeeding.

Peter and the Starcatcher is on stage until November 1. A new version of Alice in Wonderland written and directed by Peter Hinton is slated for 2016.

Where to stay: An overnight stay can be booked as part of a package through one of the Shaw Festival's partner hotels: we chose the Queen's Landing, which has an indoor pool, reciprocal privileges with sister hotels Prince of Wales and Pillar and Post, and a beautiful terrace overlooking yachts on the Niagara River.

Go Behind the Scenes at The Shaw

"Theatre is much like an iceberg," says docent Keith Mills. "We see about 10 percent. About 90 percent is what's holding it up." (More than 400 people support about 70 actors.)

Audiences can get a real appreciation for this in an hour-long backstage tour for a mere \$5 with ticket purchase, or \$10 without.

On our tour, we move from the wardrobe department to the actors' dressing rooms. All the while, our animated docents describe what we don't see in the theatre – from creating the set, to costumes, to lighting and sound. It's a perfect introduction for kids to appreciate the many elements of theatre, and for all of us to see what is too easy to take for granted.

Who thinks about the instruction involved in an actor learning to sip tea in the time of George Bernard Shaw, or sit

down in a tuxedo without rumpling their tails? And who knew that one minute on stage could require an hour of rehearsal time, or that the Shaw Festival has an in-house wig maker?

To learn these quirky facts and more, join a backstage tour offered Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays at 11 a.m. from June to October.

Combine Biking With Culture

For us, a perfect family trip to Niagara-on-the-Lake combined culture with putting our pedals to the metal. The Niagara River Recreation Trail is ideal for kids: this designated bike lane is paved, mostly flat, and extends 58 kilometres along the length of the peninsula, from Fort George in Niagara-on-the-Lake to the town of Fort Erie.

The trail is divided into four scenic routes: we chose the section from Niagara-on-the-Lake to Queenston because it was a manageable 13.5 kilometres and the Queenston Heights Restaurant at the finish line – a perfect incentive.

To get there, we biked along a path with a view of the Niagara River to our left, and vineyards on our right. We passed many historical landmarks: the Laura Secord Homestead, the Riverbrink Art Museum and the Mackenzie Printery and Newspaper Museum. The last leg of the trip is uphill. But we get a reward: the Queenston Heights Restaurant is set high on a cliff with a beautiful view of the water below. Built in 1940, it was erected on the War of 1812 battlefield where Sir Isaac Brock was killed.

At our window seat, in a mood of nostalgia, we dine on Atlantic salmon and ribs, with delicious deep fried caramel apple cheesecake spring rolls for dessert. Then with full bellies, we get back on our bikes. Thank goodness it's downhill.

Bikes can be rented through [ZOOM Leisure Bikes](#) for as little as \$20 for a half day, and \$30 for a full day.

For more information on the Niagara River Recreation Trail, go to www.niagaragreenbelt.com

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