Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

A world you can believe in

Vienna Volksopera, 27.11.2025 [ENA]

Vesna Orlic's Peter Pan at the Volksoper is one of those rare family ballets that manages to charm children, move adults, and satisfy seasoned ballet-goers all at once. Revived for the Vienna State Ballet and framed explicitly as a production "for the whole family," it returns to the stage with all the buoyant energy and visual magic that made its earlier runs so beloved.

What strikes you first is how clearly and confidently Orlic tells J. M. Barrie's story through movement alone. The two-act structure follows the familiar arc: the Darling nursery in Edwardian London, the flight to Neverland, clashes with pirates, rescue of Tiger Lily, and the bittersweet return home. The Volksoper synopsis could almost double as a storyboard; every narrative beat it describes is rendered with choreographic precision onstage. In the opening nursery scene, the choreography is delightfully character-driven. Wendy, John and Michael rehearse their imagined adventures with small, skipping motifs and mock sword-fights that already contain the vocabulary of later battles, a clever foreshadowing that helps children follow the plot.

Peter's entrance—swinging in through the window, his shadow in hot pursuit—is both an aerial coup de théâtre and a neat choreographic joke, as Keisuke Nejime's Peter and Robert Weithas as the Shadow mirror and then distort one another's steps. Throughout the evening Orlic uses a hybrid language of classical ballet, acrobatic elements and mime, but the mime is never static; it flows naturally from the dancing. Tinker Bell's jealous outbursts, Wendy's story-telling, Hook's preening vanity—each is carried as much by musical phrasing and physical rhythm as by gesture. The result is that even very young audience members can read the story instantly, without feeling "talked down to."

As a ballet specialist, I was genuinely impressed by how intelligently Orlic balances pure dance with theatrical effect. The Lost Children's material is brisk and springy, full of parallel jumps and grounded turns that convey their perpetual readiness for adventure. Tiger Lily and the islanders are given more sinuous, attack-driven choreography, with low pliés and sweeping arms that carve bold shapes in space; Tainá Ferreira Luiz makes the most of this, investing every phrase with earthy authority. Peter's own vocabulary is cleverly pitched between the weightlessness of a boy who refuses to grow up and the stamina of a fully-fledged classical soloist.

Nejime's Peter darts between ballon and off-balance skids, often landing on unexpected counts, a

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choreographic embodiment of Peter's refusal to obey conventional rules—physical or social. Wendy, by contrast, is given sweeping adagios and circular port de bras, emphasising her role as the emotional centre of the piece; Mila Schmidt partners Peter with a gentle, unforced lyricism that never tips into sentimentality. And then there is Captain Hook. László Benedek's Hook is a small masterpiece of comic villainy: one leg on pointe, which both parodies and honours classical bravura, and a series of flamboyant, flamenco-tinged phrases that turn his entrances into events in themselves.

Alexandra Burgstaller's stage and costume designs are crucial to the ballet's success. The initial image of the Darling nursery—with its twin beds, oversized toys and the London rooftops framed in a great arched window—anchors the production in a recognisable, almost storybook realism. From there, we quite literally fly out into fantasy. Andreas Ivancsics's video projections show London shrinking beneath the airborne children and Neverland slowly coming into view, while the dancers "fly" on wires in front of the screen; the blend of analogue stagecraft and digital imagery is handled with taste, never swamping the dancers but amplifying their movement.

Neverland itself is conjured in a series of clean, striking tableaux: the pirate ship, all planks and rigging and a billowing sail; the islanders' village, festooned with bright streamers; the underwater realm hinted at by sirens and shifting light. And then there is the crocodile—a huge, articulated creature that crawls across the stage, its mechanical jaws snapping to the beat. Children audibly gasp when it appears, yet it never tips into nightmare; the tone remains adventurous rather than dark.

Costume-wise, Burgstaller delivers a gallery of immediately legible, dance-friendly designs: Peter in a sleek green outfit; Tinker Bell in a short, shimmering dress that literally lights up; pirates in stripped-back "character" costumes that still allow full range of movement; islanders dressed in a witty blend of tribal and rock-festival aesthetics. The effect is cohesive without being cluttered, and it photographs beautifully from every angle. Wolfgang Könnyü's lighting, created in collaboration with Orlic, sculpts these environments with particular sensitivity: cool blues for nocturnal London, warm ambers and saturated greens for Neverland, and sharp, almost graphic contrasts for the big ensemble numbers on the pirate ship.

One of the most distinctive features of Peter Pan is its score: instead of a single commissioned composer, Orlic and music dramaturg Gerald Stocker have assembled a collage of largely 20th-century film and concert music—Korngold, Steiner, Waxman, Rózsa, Herrmann, Anderson, Albéniz, Mancusi and others. This could easily feel like a gimmick; in practice, it works remarkably well. The selections are thematically and atmospherically apt: Korngold's soaring romanticism underlines the children's flight and the more expansive pas de deux; Steiner and Waxman bring cinematic sweep to the large-scale set pieces; Herrmann and Rózsa provide darker colours for Hook, the crocodile and moments of real danger.

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Under the baton of Mikhail Agrest, the Volksoper orchestra plays with a punchy, narrative-driven energy that keeps younger listeners engaged while still offering plenty of detail for musically literate ears. Rather than competing with the dance, the music seems to invite it. Orlic responds with tightly musical phrasing: canons in the strings become canons in movement; sudden brass accents coincide with comic pratfalls; lyrical woodwind lines are matched with clean, extended port de bras. It's a satisfying example of choreomusical thinking in a context that could easily have become merely illustrative.

This is, above all, an ensemble piece, and the Vienna State Ballet's Volksoper contingent thrives on that. Nejime's Peter combines airborne pyrotechnics with genuine boyishness; he never overplays the hero, which makes his interactions with Wendy and the Lost Children feel disarmingly sincere. Schmidt's Wendy is as musically refined as she is dramatically poised, and Gabriele Aime's John brings a dose of understated physical comedy. Julia Köhler's Tinker Bell is a miniature star turn: sharp, staccato jumps and flicks of the wrist suggest jealousy and mischief, softening into rounder, more expansive lines in her moments of loyalty and sacrifice.

The illuminated dress, mentioned in the Volksoper's own description, becomes almost an extension of her phrasing, flashing or glowing in response to her emotional state. Weithas's Peter Pan's Shadow deserves its own paragraph. Clad in black, he is both double and demon, echo and extension; his acrobatic flourishes and sudden freezes create a striking counterpoint to Peter's more buoyant, open movement. When Shadow and Peter finally reconcile, the choreographic "re-stitching" of their bodies earns spontaneous applause.

And of course, Benedek's Captain Hook all but walks away with the show. Balancing on that single pointe shoe, he fuses comic timing with formidable technique, turning even simple walks into little études in character dancing. His scenes with Roman Chistyakov's hapless Mr Smee are pitched perfectly so that nothing feels forced; children howl with laughter, adults grin at the subtle parody of ballet clichés. Around them, the corps and children's ensemble form a wonderfully lively community, whether as Lost Children, pirates or islanders. A school class that attended described the dancers and the children's choir as "fantastic," and that sense of collective joy and commitment radiates clearly from the stage.

The Volksoper advertises Peter Pan as suitable from six years upwards, and in practice it proves to be an exemplary introduction to narrative ballet. The plot is clear, the visual world coherent and rich, the musical language accessible yet sophisticated. For parents and experienced ballet fans, there is enough choreographic invention, theatrical flair and musical interest to make the evening more than just a "children's show"; for children, it is a door opened to the possibilities of live dance theatre.

In an era when family titles can all too easily become soft-edged or condescending, Peter Pan at the Volksoper stands out as a production that respects both its young audience and its source material. It

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honours Barrie's core themes—the seduction of eternal childhood, the necessity of growing up, the power of imagination—while giving them a physical, musical and visual form that feels entirely of today. For anyone curious about contemporary story-ballet, or looking for a first live ballet experience for a child, this production is not just recommendable; it is, quite simply, a gift.

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