

Peter Pan

US : 1924 : dir. Herbert Brenon : Paramount
 prod: : scr: : dir.ph.:

Silent : 102 min

[Philippe DeLacy](#); [Jack Murphy](#)
 Betty Bronson; Mary Brian; Ernest Torrence; Cyril Chadwick; George Ali; Anna May Wong;
 Richard Frazier; Percy Barbat; Virginia Browne Faire (!); Esther Ralston

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	□	≠	Z	⊗	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
3124a	7½	5	10	2,336	3	3	-	-	-	No	unseen



Peter's the woman on the right. Wendy's the woman on the left. It's not quite what J.M. Barrie had in mind...
 Source: *Classics of the Silent Screen*

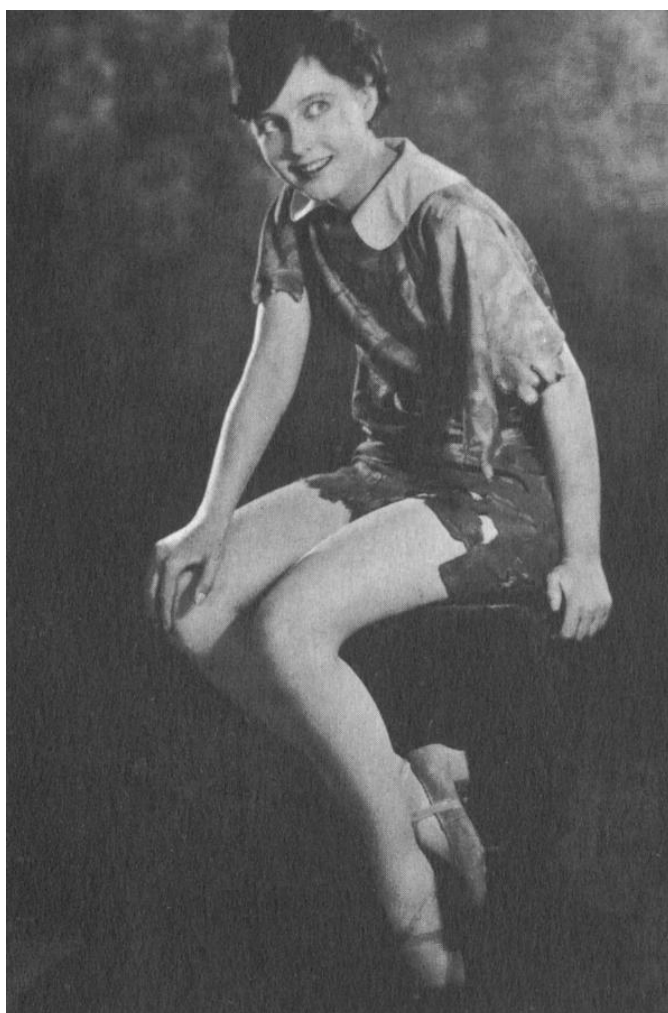
Classics of the Silent Screen review:

"Even if there had been nothing else, the mid-20's should be remembered gratefully for the many films of gentleness and quiet charm they produced. And for the very peak of the skilled application of that charm, one need look no further than two films made by Paramount. Both were adaptations of James M Barrie; both

were directed by Herbert Brenon; and both owed a tremendous debt to the sensitivity and grace of their star – petite, winsome Betty Bronson. "**PETER PAN**" was the first of these two films, released in time to be the Christmas attraction of 1924; and "**A KISS FOR CINDERELLA**"... was the second.



Tally ho! The little Darlings – Philippe DeLacy (left), Mary Brian and Jack Murphy – receive a take-off lesson from fly-boy Peter
 Source (and below right): Classics of the Silent Screen



To be fair to Betty Bronson, although she couldn't be mistaken for a boy if her life depended on it, she does cut an appropriately Puckish figure, and no doubt her leggy Peter won approval from the dads in the audience, but she looks more like a pantomime Dick Whittington.
 Source: (left) A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen

Barrie's delicate mixture of whimsy, magic and moralising had always been elusive screen material. Usually the beauty of his work has been mangled almost beyond recognition; even Disney couldn't pull off the trick. But Brenon managed it brilliantly, deftly catching every nuance of the tale of the little boy who refused to grow up, and lived in a fairyland of pirates, redskins and mermaids. It's true "**PETER PAN**" is open to a great deal of criticism. Perhaps because of a too reverent approach to the source material, Brenon failed to take full advantage of the added scope that the screen offered. Apart from a real ship, a real sea, and one lovely shot of the ship rising from the water and speeding through the clouds, little takes place in the film that could not also take place on a stage. The enchanted wood is deliberately a papier-mâché artificiality, and there is little camera movement as the scenes are played out in theatrical sets.

But the sheer joy of the whole production, the retention of so many of Barrie's wonderful lines as subtitles, and the admirable teamwork of a hand-picked cast, disarm any such criticism.

At ten reels, "**PETER PAN**" is a long film – especially for one with such a familiar story – but it is over all too quickly. Understandably, it was a huge critical success in its day, even though it wasn't quite the box office success that Paramount hoped for. It needed the enthusiasm of childish audiences to generate warmth to the adults. And in the Christmas engagements, it got that enthusiasm. As Peter Pan appealed to the audience to clap their hands if they believed in fairies (and thus save Tinker Bell's life) the youngsters never failed to respond gallantly. But once the holiday season was over, and the children were back at school, the film was at the mercy of the adults – those same adults that Barrie had been genially criticising in his play. They were more interested in seeing Clara Bow in the town's other movie house!

Betty Bronson was superb and was heartily endorsed by Barrie himself, who considered her an ideal choice for Peter. (In England pantomime tradition dictates that Peter always be played by a girl¹). Incredibly, her acting experience had been limited to just a few very minor roles. Her charm, her expressive face, her facile pantomime, and her ability to switch effortlessly from mischievous fun to abject pathos, won her a tremendous following

overnight, and for a while it seemed that she might even surpass the popularity of Mary Pickford. And she did surpass Pickford in her appeal to younger moviegoers. For once the contribution of a star was greater than that of the director.

And what an enchanting cast of players supported Miss Bronson! Mary Brian made a most appealing Wendy, and lovely Esther Ralston was the essence of grace and serenity as Wendy's mother. Cyril Chadwick made an amusing Mr Darling, and George Ali repeated his famous stage role as Nana, the dog. The Indian princess, Tiger Lily, was well played by Anna May Wong.² But despite all of these – to say nothing of a score of mermaids, and a most human crocodile, the real hit among the featured players was Ernest Torrence – a gorgeously robust Captain Hook. Nobody stood a chance against this wily old scene-stealer, and newcomer Betty Bronson was shrewd enough not to compete with him in their few scenes together. Instead she let the old scoundrel have his head, and his grimaces, eyeball-rollings, and other attention-getting gestures have to be seen to be believed.

As, in fact, does all of this enchanting film, "**PETER PAN**".

[In point of fact, it was restrictions by the Lord Chamberlain's office, which still censored and controlled the British theatre, that forbade the use of a genuine boy in the title role – added to which, no doubt, the backers were afraid to pin a major West End production on the shoulders of a child actor – so Barrie was reluctantly obliged to accept that compromise. If he applauded the choice of Betty Bronson, it would have been in the same spirit of compromise, but no woman could possibly have been his "ideal" choice! He was horrified that the play might be reduced to a thigh-slapping pantomime. As, indeed, it often is.]

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 2001 review:

"Delightful adaptation of the James M Barrie classic about the boy who can fly, and never wants to grow up, and his adventures as he flies off with Wendy Darling and her brothers to Never-Never Land. Bronson makes the role

¹ Not so, see below

² Note how he cites everybody – **except** the children, who are the whole focus of the adventure.

of Peter all her own in this charming fantasy. | *** ”



Michael Darling (DeLacy) with Nana, based on Barrie's own hound Porthos, who died before the play was first staged in London. Michael Llewellyn-Davies was Barrie's great joy and inspiration of the period, and modelled the first costume for Peter. Sources: (top) *Those Endearing Young Charms*, (bottom) *A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen*.



The only shot I've thus far located showing Ernest Torrence as Captain Hook, but the original image quality is poor.

Source: A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen

A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen incidental note:

"1925: The industry was in the doldrums. Theatre owners were worrying about their box office receipts, which showed an alarming drop. Radio, now an important part of American life, was blamed for this. That Hollywood was turning out comparatively few worthwhile pictures at this time was seldom mentioned. Films making money for the exhibitors included **"THE BIG PARADE"**, **"THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA"**, **"THE GOLD RUSH"**, **"STELLA DALLAS"** [and] the first filming of James Barrie's immortal **"PETER PAN"**..."

Those Endearing Young Charms - still caption:

"In this silent screen version of the Sir James Barrie play, Betty Bronson had the role of Peter Pan while Philippe was seen as Michael, the youngest of the three Darling children, who travels with Peter to Never-Never Land. In this scene from the film, Michael rides the family pet, Nana."

The Moving Picture Boy entry on Philippe De Lacy:

"Romantic Philippe of the curly brown hair and hazel eyes had a painfully romantic start to his life. His French mother and five brothers

and sisters having been killed by a German shell when he was two days old, he was kept alive by his grandmother in a cellar in the devastated village. There, with the old woman on the point of death, they were found by an American nurse called Edith DeLacy, who adopted Philippe and took him back with her to the U.S.A. Things now cheered up. Miss DeLacy had show-biz connections, and one day when they were in a Hollywood studio watching Geraldine Farrar filming in **"THE RIDDLE: WOMAN"**, Farrar and her director noticed the beautiful child and co-opted him into the film. He never looked back - or not for many years. Philippe in his patrician mood had something of the haughtiness of Freddie Bartholomew, and they both played Garbo's son in screen versions of **"ANNA KARENINA"** (the 1927 one was entitled **"LOVE"**). But compared with the rather inhibited Bartholomew, De Lacy is positively flirtatious with his screen mother, and there is a much warmer relationship between them. Philippe De Lacy made no more film appearances, but stayed in the entertainment business. In 1955 he directed **"CINERAMA HOLIDAY"**, and by the 1980s was director of a Hollywood TV station."

[no listing in "Silent Movies: A Picture Quiz Book", "Halliwell's Film Guide", "The Critics' Film Guide", "The Good Film and Video Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", Speelfilm Encyclopedie",

"The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]



*Peter flirts with Wendy, and vice versa. A piquant background observation is that there **were** no daughters in the Llewellyn-Davies family. Wendy is therefore George, the boy JMB first met in Kensington Gardens, and who was the animus behind "The Little White Bird". George, by the time of the play at Eton, was **not amused** to find himself transformed into a mere girl!*

Sources: (top) Silent Movies – a Picture Quiz Book; (bottom) A Pictorial History of the Silent Screen

Musical television versions were made in 1955 (US, with Mary Martin as Peter) and 1976 (UK, with Mia Farrow), and Disney's animated distant cousin of the story appeared in 1953, voiced by Bobby Driscoll, but this remains strangely the only live action film of Barrie's most famous work. When Steven Spielberg announced plans to film the story, he seemed the ideal director to handle it, and to command the kind of budget that would finally bring Barrie's fantasy to life. Early rumours that Michael Jackson was in negotiation for the title slot were worrying, and the final result – "**HOOK**" (91) was a grotesque and unwatchable travesty, by comparison with which Disney's cartoon seemed a faithful rendition. "**HOOK**" was so abysmal, and crashed so loudly at the box office, that it will be a long time before anyone tries again to film "**PETER PAN**". Many thanks, Spielberg.

Betty Bronson was 18 in 1924, almost young enough for inclusion in the archive on her own account. In a silent film her voice would not have reinforced the pantomime aesthetic, and her personality seems to have won over audiences completely. Two years later she starred again for the same director in "**A KISS FOR CINDERELLA**", also from a J.M. Barrie story.

One interesting point arises from this being a silent – thus subtitled – film. The clap-if-you-believe-in-fairies scene is pitched at very small children, so were they presumed to be able to read the subtitles? Did the producers rely on parents prompting their children at the right moment? On UK children's TV throughout the 1990's, virtually nothing was seen of the huge wealth of children's material produced elsewhere in Europe, because it was supposed English children either could not or would not read subtitles. When one sees the standard of material which does fill out their schedules, this reluctance by broadcasters to show foreign language material (undubbed) is very much to their detriment. Subtitles were no impediment in 1924.

And now I have to make my standard beef about women cast in quintessential boy roles, so skip a paragraph if you've heard this one. Bronson, even from these stills, does not look remotely boyish, and is too well groomed to boot. But Peter Pan is not just another Jim Hawkins or Little Lord Fauntleroy (both played by women in the silent era), he is – like Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn for American culture – meant to be the very embodiment of (Victorian middle class) boyhood. To cast a woman, **any** woman, in the part is equivalent to shooting "Heidi" with Mickey Rooney in the lead, or "Alice in Wonderland" starring Brad Pitt. There have always been ample competent boy actors around to fill the part. "**PETER PAN**" is not, and was never intended to be, a pantomime, and since more than a dozen films of "**HUCKLEBERRY FINN**" have been shot without ever casting a woman in the part, there's just no excuse for making "the boy who would not grow up" a girl who already has.

Well, if the eternal boy had to be recast as a hermaphrodite, at least the ephemeral flesh-and-blood boys were played by Philippe DeLacy and Jack Murphy. Murphy, 12, was the elder brother of Maurice Murphy, and had a small role in "**THE LOST WORLD**" the following year. He was seen with his brother in "**STELLA DALLAS**" (25) and alone in a couple of films besides. Philippe DeLacy was 7, and played in over twenty silent films and early talkies, among them "**BEAU GESTE**", "**MOTHER MACHREE**", "**SQUARE SHOULDERS**" and "**SARAH AND SON**".

See the other versions listed above, and particularly Andrew Birkin's superb television trilogy on Barrie and the actual genesis of the story - "**The Lost Boys**", and subject index under **BOY MEETS GIRL, DOGS, FANTASY, FLIGHT, SEAFARING / PIRATES, SILENT CINEMA** and **WOMEN-AS-BOYS / GIRLS-AS-BOYS**.



Mega-star of the day Mary Pickford – co-founder of United Artists and wife of Douglas Fairbanks Sr – visits the set. (Pickford herself often played boys' and children's roles.) Between her and Betty Bronson is director Herbert Brenon. Source: Classics of the Silent Screen
