



# WENDELL & PAN (THE SKELETON REP)

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Katelynn Kenney, Ria T. DiLullo, The Skeleton Rep, The Tank, Wendell & Pan

 49



Mother, daughter, father and son arrive at a house they haven't been to in ages. Homecoming or (in Ancient Greek) *nostos*, is often assumed (at least in American mythology) to be a warm and comforting return to the sweet, safe and familiar. But sometimes a homecoming takes years, such as the Homeric *Odyssey*. Those awaiting the long-delayed return of family, however distant or estranged, might allow supposedly unideal emotions such as upset or anger or betrayal to usurp the excitement and happy anticipation that is presumed to accompany a hero's journey home. After a certain point, deciding who is the hero and who is the villain in this specific scenario falls into murky territory – dicey, even. Is the ghost who haunts the house (all while permanently trapped in a traumatized twelve-year-old girl's body) the antagonist? Or is the eleven-year-old boy who befriends the apparition and, it should be noted, ruminates killing his already dying and likely suicidal grandfather, the more guilty of peculiar sin? Thus rocks the boat between Pan and Wendell, respectively.

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## EMPATHY-INDUCING STORY.

Loosely based off (but certainly not a continuation of) J. M. Barrie's beloved tale of Peter Pan and Wendy Darling and company, Katelynn Kenney's *Wendell & Pan* is a thoughtful, mature, and empathy-inducing story that doesn't so much inspire us to never grow up from our inner children, but rather urges us to recognize that it is only by digging deep into the past that we can ever have a real shot at remedying tensions or paving the way for a future we can get enthusiastic about and eventually feel proud of. In order to refrain from divulging and thus spoiling any major plot points, all of which felt far more mystical (awe-inspiring but with ambiguity leaving them open to interpretation) than magical, too random or kooky or gimmicky to make one want to suspend his or her disbelief, thanks in part to Ria T. DiLullo's direction and inherent trust in the audience to both activate their imaginations and not shy away when things get very #real, here is a one-sentence summary. The ghost of Pan, sometimes with an agenda and sometimes simply out of a fear of being left alone, follows half of the nuclear family (father and son), while the other half (mother and daughter) fight and search for their way out of the depression and darkness caused by so long accepting lies from their loved ones, pushing things underneath the rug and staying quiet to avoid confrontation and/or conflict despite their keen (and correct) observations that point to four simple words: "WE ARE NOT OKAY".

Indeed, we can literally hear the countdown towards the inevitable explosion in this household. In fact, the audience is treated to several emotional eruptions that are so subtly built up that it might ultimately feel surprising how complex these relationship dynamics are despite being woven into just about an hour and a half's worth of live acting. The production carries over a notable motif from Barrie's work: the intimidating passage of time via a ticking clock. It is cleverly invoked during the family's ritualistic dinner scenes, revealing so much about the core four without any need for dialogue or ostentatious choreography. Most impressively, the stage design is both ergonomic and enchanting. Dancers and actors are always encouraged to

kitchen island, light in the night-time finally reaching our human sight after certain stars have long died out, a turbulent storm at sea, and a lone firefly. The space is small and intimate but props and set are smartly placed so that it doesn't feel cramped or chaotic or confusing. There's space for the characters (and actors) to play and there's space for the audience to take in simultaneous scenes without feeling overwhelmed.

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The casting is (as always with this theatre company) charismatic and pitch-perfect. The fictional stakes always feel high and never arbitrarily so. The reconciliations between characters are immensely rewarding without feeling overly convenient or convoluted. The pacing is just right and it's such fun to watch the actors so obviously enjoying Kenney's text. As the titular Wendell, Nick Ong effortlessly masters an adolescent hunch, a perpetual scowl, and a stuttering energy that ultimately proves endearing. Here we have an introverted and sensitive preteen boy easily influenced by art, yet patient enough to slowly figure out a strong sense of self, enough to stand up to those around him when it matters most. As Wendell's big sister Kayla, Nya Noemi has a bold bounce in each of her steps. Effervescent in a bright yellow top that matches her aura and chutzpah. Of the core four, she is the most fearless in commanding and steering the ship of the family and speaking difficult truths. Her natural enthusiasm often outweighs any sense of affected eloquence in her declarations about what's right (talking things out) and what's wrong (keeping secrets), what's working (not a whole lot at the beginning of the play) and what's not (nearly nothing by the end of the show). Conveying a convincing not cliché sense of parenting was clearly a priority for this production as the relationship between Gwen and Michael is riveting to watch, ready to subvert audience expectations, and realistic in both its

a kind of Mother Earth role. Over the course of the story we see her trying to keep it together more for everyone else around her than for herself, like an Atlas keeping up the household (which is her entire world). It's exhausting watching her become (rightfully) exasperated and her unravelling indicates a need for love and support and friendship just as undeniable as her seemingly unending capacity to give those essentialities.

As Michael, Anuj Parikh offers a stunning performance as a middle-aged man only just beginning to reconcile himself with the repercussions of his distant past and the urgency of his family's foundation breaking apart by cracks that were months in the making. He is petulant when it comes to doing chores, gentle when someone he loves is in direct danger, and totally scared out of his wits (it is his alienated father who is in the hospital) but also willing to try (and really try!) to make amends as a husband, as a father, and as a son. What a breath of fresh air; this dad is didactic only through his behaviour, not so much through adages in dialogue (the latter of which can often be the case when playwrights simply don't know how to write anything but idealised parental figures). Shavana Clarke is devastating as Pan, trapped in purgatory and in the midst of judging for herself whether a young death (see James Dean) is preferable to growing older, more miserable, and no longer willing to live (so, Brando – or, in the case of this story, Michael's father). But this is a black-and-white binary way of thinking: the thinking of children and adults who refuse to grow up and move onwards, upwards, and forward. What Pan is incapable or unwilling to imagine is the middle ground, the grey area where people can sometimes love life while sometimes wanting to stop breathing for a little while, where people cherish their families but also wish they could escape and be far, far away. Pan is uninterested in the uncomfortable conversations and honest outbursts and (the most human thing of all) unending vulnerability that define healthy and stable marriages, friendships, and familial relationships. Ms. Clarke captures this tension from the get-go: the closer the core four family members get to one another the more Pan's existence is threatened. She fears being permanently forgotten, left behind and alone in this old, dusty house. Her alternative is to go to the next place in

into the ether and the unknown? At one point, she cries out, “I know I’m dead, but I don’t want to not exist.”

## “QUITE THE ADVENTURE.”

In Ancient Greek culture, singing Achilles’s name (that is to say, talking about him and continuing his legacy long after Paris’s fateful arrow) was the only way to keep the hero’s spirit alive in the afterlife. When Christians come to the altar for the Holy Eucharist, the priest may remind those about to take Communion that when Jesus broke bread with his disciples, He said, “This is My body, which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In another instalment of modern myth exploration, *The Skeleton Rep* encourages its audience members to reckon with themselves the act of remembrance, our relationships to memories, and the repercussions of purposeful forgetting. Can a teenage girl remember the kind of woman she’d dreamed of becoming and realise that the guy she’s interested in may or may not be a Prince Charming, let alone a friend, worthy of her heart-to-hearts and suggestive selfies? Will the warm memories of a couple’s beginnings propel husband and wife to break through their overcast skies and light up each other’s lives once more? Are just the memories of a best (and only) friend enough to have a little boy, with a big heart and an even bigger imagination, choose living in reality over retreating to his personal Neverland? *The Skeleton Rep* offers the answers in quite the adventure; this reviewer encourages the reader to come on board.

*Wendell & Pan* will be performed at New York City’s The Tank in Midtown Manhattan (312 West 36th Street) at 7:00pm every evening from Thursday, January 10th, to Sunday, January 20th (excluding Tuesday, January 15th). Tickets are available for purchase [HERE](#): \$16.52 for students/seniors, \$26.87 for general admission, and \$37.22 for premium seating.

Cast: Shavana Clarke as Pan, Nya Noemi as Kayla, Nick Ong as Wendell, Anuj Parikh as Father (Michael), and Margot Staub as Mother (Gwen).

Creative: Benjamin-Ernest Abraham (Producer), Olivia Hrko (Stage Manager), Caitlynn Barrett (Set Design), Sophie Costanzi (Costume Design), Miranda Poett (Lighting Design), Emily Auciello (Sound Design), Gavin Myers (Company Choreographer), Isabella Jane Schiller (Marketing), and Michelle Cage (Company Intern).

Image: Ria T. DiLullo: *Nick Ong and Shavana Clarke as the titular Wendell and Pan, respectively.*

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