



## J M Barrie's returning 'lost' play gives us an early glimpse of Peter Pan

June 26, 2015 2.42pm BST

[Valentina Bold](#)



JM Barrie in 1893. Wikimedia



James Matthew Barrie's first play, written when he was 17, was initially branded a "grossly immoral" production. Those who liked it were "the irreligious, the frivolous, the giddy", [according to](#) the Rev D L Scott, a church minister, writing in a local newspaper. Performed in 1877 at Dumfries Academy in south-west Scotland where Barrie was a pupil, other responses were more positive, to be fair.

According to the Dumfries press, the teenager who would go on to write the children's classic Peter Pan, was "excellent" in one of the leading roles. The performance "passed off very creditably" in front of a "full" house. The controversy also brought benefits: the stir that it caused in the press reached as far as London,

and drew patronage for Barrie's drama club from the actor [Sir Henry Irving](#) and the [Duke of Buccleuch](#).

For the first time since 1877, *Bandelero the Bandit* is being performed at the academy on June 26 by the [Scottish Youth Theatre](#), along with excerpts from *Peter Pan*. There will be an introduction from [Professor Ronnie Jack](#) of Edinburgh University, who discovered the text of the play at Yale. Barrie himself [had believed](#) the play to be lost.

The performance is also thanks to the tenacity of the Dumfries-based [Peter Pan Moat Brae Trust](#). The trust is currently raising money to redevelop the Moat Brae house and garden where Barrie used to play as a child into a National Centre for Children's Literature and Storytelling. It was a key inspiration for *Neverland*, in a town where Barrie spent the "happiest days of my life" as a schoolboy.



The view from Moat Brae house Moat Brae House Trust

## Not just for little ones

Barrie is much more than a children's writer. In his lifetime, his novels [were seen](#) as comparable to [Thomas Hardy](#), while his plays were ground-breaking and hugely successful. This theatre work was challenging and strikingly modern, whether addressing the question of women's place in society; engaging with the [New Drama](#), with its social conscience and emphasis on simplicity; or discovering the possibilities of cinema. His fiction is equally innovative – much more so than the sentimental ["Kailyard school"](#) of late 19th-century Scottish writing that it was once grouped with – whether reminiscing about the [Auld Licht Idylls](#) of old Scottish

village life or exploring supernatural themes with ease, such as in [Farewell, Miss Julie Logan](#).

The significance of *Bandelero*, too, goes beyond that of juvenilia. Without giving too much away, it is a play about a misunderstanding. *Bandelero* is captured for a murder he didn't commit, and the play tells the story of an attempt to rescue him. As Ronnie Jack [has said](#), it is "a refreshing, youthful piece which anticipates many of the key characteristics of Barrie's later dramatic art".

It is witty, direct and vivid, based in the burlesque form. It shows many of the characteristics that would be seen in the writer's later work. There is, for instance, a keen interest in stagecraft. Just as in his later work, there are very specific directions in the play's "tableaux". Here's one typical example that relates to Smike, a comic sidekick character:

*Hauls SMIKE through screen which is made of paper and they roll on floor, terrific fight, but ultimately SMIKE gets best of it and puts one foot on the prostrate body.*

The costumes, too, are described in colourful detail. Sir Richard Vernon, for instance, has a "dark green coat, red waistcoat, black knickerbockers tied with ribbons, gray hair and moustache". The future dramatist and novelist was interested in the technicalities of theatre, [he later recalled](#), from his earliest days in the audience of the [Theatre Royal, Dumfries](#) (the oldest working theatre in Scotland, which [Robert Burns](#) also once attended).





Dumfries Theatre Royal, Scotland's oldest working theatre Summonedbyfells, CC BY

## All present and correct

The “gallant outlaws” in *Bandelero* meanwhile perhaps offer a prototype for [Captain Hook](#) and his band. There is also evidence of Barrie’s humour and self awareness — in his use of Scots language, for instance, through Smike, who impersonates a priest and ends the play with a “Pax Vobiscum” (peace be with you).





Walk the plank! Wikimedia

The accomplished and knowing writer of [The Admirable Crichton](#) or [What Every Woman Knows](#) is certainly present here, even if in embryonic form. [Jack identifies](#) the influence of Shakespeare, Dickens and writers of adventure stories, like [RM Ballantyne](#). He writes that Bandelero shows Barrie as an advocate of “quintessential theatre... highlighting visual and aural effects”, offering “strong evidence that Barrie the schoolboy was naturally attracted to these effects from the outset of his career”.

Linked to the new performance, I am involved in organising [a symposium](#) on June 26 and 27 at the Dumfries campus of the University of Glasgow. Its wide-ranging topics include the birth of Scottish children’s literature in the 18th century;

[instructional chapbooks](#); young adult writers; and Scottish authors from [Allan Ramsay](#) to [George Mackay Brown](#). In effect, it contextualises Barrie as a children's writer with Scottish genealogy.

But I stress, children's literature is only part of the picture. Not only does Bandelero the Bandit richly deserve its new performance. I am confident that it will offer new insights into the work of a complex writer who deserves full and fresh recognition.



Scotland

## You might also like



**Enid Blyton's  
The Faraway  
Tree to hit the  
screen in latest  
bid to aim  
fantasy  
at grown-ups**



**A film icon  
under fire –  
does loving  
the work mean  
condoning  
the offence?**



**Blood Orange  
overplays  
Scottish far  
right at  
the Fringe**



**Haggis, neeps  
and badness:  
it's time we  
faced the dark  
side of  
Robert Burns**

## Most popular on The Conversation

[Understanding sleep paralysis: a terrifying but unique state of consciousness](#)

[Drink a glass of olive oil every day – the Mediterranean way to a long life](#)

[What your father did before you were born could influence your future](#)

[Why killing lions like Cecil may actually be good for conservation](#)

[Meteorite impact turns silica into stishovite in a billionth of a second](#)

[Our fossil find suggests humans spread to Asia way before they got to Europe](#)

[Ankara bombs: Turkey is being torn apart by bad leaders and bad neighbours](#)

[Any job isn't necessarily a good job for people out of work](#)

[Seeing double? How the EU miscounts migrants arriving at its borders](#)

[How Donald Trump trademarked the slogan 'Make America Great Again'](#)

## Events

---

Magna Carta & the Rule of Law Exhibition — London

---

DNATED — London

---

psychEye — London

---

Ian Pace (Piano) (Inside Out Festival 2015) — London

---

 **MORE EVENTS**

## Expert Database



Find experts with knowledge in:\*

Search

## Stay informed

### Subscribe to our Newsletters

Subscribe

### Follow us on social media



Copyright © 2010–2015

The Conversation Trust (UK) Limited