



[Peter Pan Goes Wrong](#) at [The Lowry](#)

by [Mischief Theatre Company](#)

Reviewed by [Paul Thompson](#) December 2014

We're waiting for it to start. Sporting a crew t-shirt and headlamp, a backstage type shoots me eye contact and makes a beeline for my seat. I'm convinced I'm to be reprimanded for taking up too much space with my personal effects – but no. The young actor hired to play Michael Darling is unable to perform, and I'm invited to take the role. "It's just a few lines," I'm reassured.

Have you guessed what's going on yet? If so, good for you. I fall for it hook, line and sinker. I politely decline on the rather flimsy basis that I'm here to review, implying that being a part of it would constitute a conflict of interests. The epiphany that I've been ensnared in pre-show ad-lib arrives later.

I've been a dummy about this whole play-within-a-play thing. When I saw in the blurb it was a production by "Cornley Polytechnic Dramatic Society", I thought: "More power to their elbows. Getting a mainstream professional play on its feet – that takes some doing. Huzzah." For goodness sake. No institution has called itself a polytechnic since the early nineties. How did I not spot that?

This nod to the fringe scene is not without its relevance though. *Peter Pan Goes Wrong* (by Mischief Theatre Company at the Lowry till January 11th 2015) is a spin off from the West End success story *The Play That Goes Wrong* – a piece that began life in a room above a pub and became a much extended big-time smash with a host of celebrity admirers. The fictional company from Cornley, however, will not be blessed with the same cocktail of talent and good fortune.

The premise and its execution are both intestine-achingly funny. The wannabe "cast" indulge in enough sin to enable farce: they are selfish, pompous, melodramatic and over-ambitious backstabbers and seducers. The fact that they take themselves way too seriously means that, bar a nicely empathy-loaded underdog landed with duff parts, we can will them all to fail. And, boy, do they fail. Epic-style. Their "traditional Christmas vignette" will define sod's law.



Every visual gag is an expertly chiselled and meticulously polished bauble. I still haven't quite recovered from the sight of a dog-costumed man stuck in a pet flap – and liberated by a circular-saw-wielding, bumcrack-displaying stage manager yelling, “We need more power!” during a hush-goodnight song. Seeds sown in the masterful dialogue are paid off at an extraordinary rate. And it's all laced with a delicious irony: like when Wendy wants to be comforted that no harm will come to her and her siblings – just as her top bunk collapses, nearly crushing her “toddler” brother a level below. Talking of whom, a little boy being portrayed last-minute by a grizzly, bushy-bearded old man is one of the best on-going jokes of the night, comparable to Bailey's at Christmas: you think you'll get sick of it, but you keep asking for more.

The revolving stage – a classy, misbehaving character in its own right – causes mayhem and allows us a peek behind-the-scenes where a love triangle engages in fist fights, paramedics treat severely injured children, and crisp-bingeing actors look up at the audience in horror.

Kings of old silent comedies reportedly inspired the writers. And that is very much apparent. I'm also reminded of Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* – which, incidentally, was the first *real* play I ever

saw. And by real I mean – without wanting to sound like a perfect snob – “not panto”.

And this brings me neatly to my final point. This is not panto. It's so much more than that. Here we have, within a brilliantly conceived and hysterical world, a pantomime created by a pretentious chancer who denies it's a pantomime. These are cutlass-honed observations. This is a comic creation dripping with ideas. Words like “silly” and “chaotic” will not cut it. The temptation to use them is there because it's all made to look so effortless. And that's why, essentially, watchers aged two to ninety-two are laughing like the drains flushed by Salford's rain outside. The humour is layered; but the profuse big guffaws land on everyone.

On the way in, I had to explain to my nine-year-old daughter what a review actually is. Intrigued, she writes her own when we get back. This critic known for her brutal honesty gives it *both* ten out of ten

*and*

five stars. She declares it the best Christmas show she's ever seen. And I'm not going to quibble much with that.