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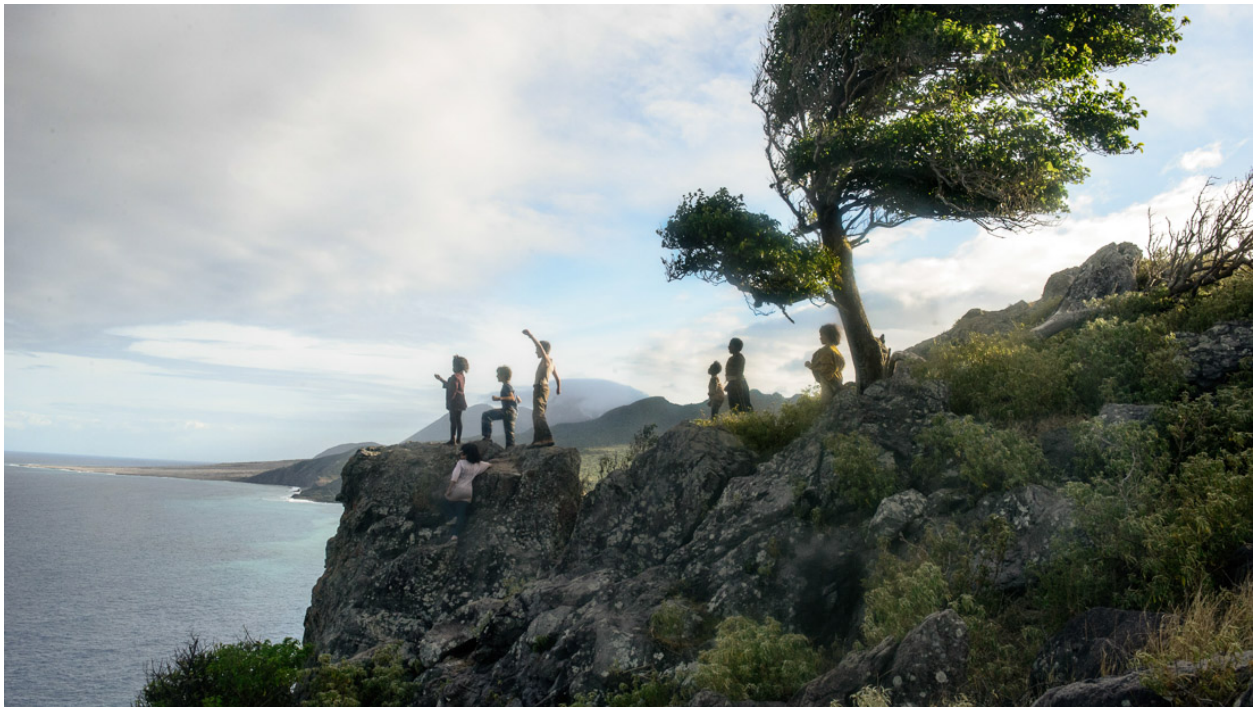
'Wendy': Film Review | Sundance 2020

Benh Zeitlin's long-awaited follow-up to 'Beasts of the Southern Wild' is a reimagining of J. M. Barrie's 'Peter Pan.'

by Todd McCarthy



The alluringly elusive Peter Pan has a knack for attracting gifted filmmakers and then biting them on the keister — Steven Spielberg's *Hook* and Joe Wright's aptly named *Pan* were both overproduced and under-imagined embarrassments. Eight years after his dazzling debut with *Beasts of the Southern Wild,* Benh Zeitlin takes what can best be described as a homemade approach to the classic tale in *Wendy,* an earthy, vibrant, at times disheveled take on the fantasy of escaping to a life without conventional rules and expectations.

Every frame of the film is excitingly alive and freshly conceived, making it something very much worth seeing on the big screen. At the same time, it's a bit rough and short on conventional satisfactions, indicating that kids in single digits accustomed to preprogrammed Disneyfied diversions might have some issues.

Beasts stands as one of the landmarks of 21st century American independent cinema, having emerged out of nowhere in 2012 to conquer Sundance and Cannes, winning prizes at both festivals, generate more than $23 million in domestic release alone and snare Oscar nominations in several top categories, including picture, director and actress. Director Zeitlin could have had his pick of Hollywood projects at that point, but instead returned to his own workshop to slowly develop his next, which shares very much the same look and feel as his debut. It was even shot on 16mm.

"The more you grow up, the less things you get to do that you wanna," sagely observes little Wendy (Devin France), who looks about 11 or 12 and lives in a ramshackle house by the train tracks in the rural South. Life centers on the charming old diner run by her mom and patronized by regulars (even if it does look like the kind of place that would be jammed with young foodies if they ever discovered it); nothing's changed around here in decades, and Wendy is not alone in realizing that nothing's going to in the future either.

Even during these table-setting scenes, Zeitlin provides far more than ordinary in terms of textures and atmosphere; you can virtually inhale the café's thick aromas, salivate over its greasy delicacies, luxuriate in the very particular accents and attitudes while absorbing the sadness of lives lived on the sidelines and the need for the kids to get out before it's too late — or, as Wendy puts it, "Before they lose the light in their eyes."

Wendy is not a youngster prone to depression or inaction, quite the contrary; seeing her mother repeating the same day every day, year in and year out, motivates the girl one night to corral her two brothers, Douglas and James (Gage and Gavin Naquin), and, like Depression vagabonds, hop a rumbling freight train to wherever it may take them.

Immediately discernible curiosity and openness were paramount prerequisites for casting the title character, and they are traits little France has in spades; she's mischievous and rambunctious, but more important, her eyes possess a hungry searching quality that defines what Wendy is all about. This is a girl who, while hardly oblivious to what's expected from her at home, cannot ignore the call of the wild to discover what the unknown holds.

Trimming anything resembling conventional exposition to the bone, the initial incident is handled in brisk shorthand fashion. Zeitlin could be described as a Terrence Malick with a very high metabolism; within his exquisitely composed shots, he's always looking for *le geste juste*, one that conveys the essence of the current onscreen action and then moves on to the next. The cinematography, by the Norwegian Sturla Brandth Grovlen (*Rams*), is prone to getting in tight with the actors, meeting them at eye level and complementing their hyperactivity with keenly energetic moves of its own, which frequently serves to viscerally compound the effect of the often unpredictable action of the kids onscreen. Some of this was doubtlessly just serendipitous, but the frequency of the dynamic synthesis of staged action and camera moves speaks highly of the filmmakers' intent to keep the actors in motion and viewers on their toes at all times.

If Zeitlin's visual style is all about youthful energy expended in the cause of capturing the essence of the unfettered life, the moment-to-moment action is at times less focused and more chaotic, as is often the case where pubescent-adjacent energies are involved. When Wendy and her brothers unceremoniously arrive at their unknown destination, they must pass through a cleansing ritual and contend with the most elemental of forces, fire and water, before passing to their new home.

The newcomers can immediately tell they're not in Louisiana anymore. Spectacularly verdant, the tropical island domain is dominated by a volcanic mountain (an active one on the Caribbean island of Montserrat). But more urgently commanding their attention is a roundish, rather androgynous-looking boy who's the ringleader of the other kids on the island. Portrayed by Yashua Mack, he is a seemingly fearless soul prone to unpredictable movements, rash action and perilous pranks. This "Peter" figure rules the roost and calls the shots in these parts. Mainly, he dares and challenges his wild charges to uphold their foremost resolution, which is to stay young and never grow old.

When you get a look at the other people on the island, it's easy to understand Peter's resolution. There's a whole community of oldsters there, all forlorn and feeling useless, who serve as a vivid warning of what lies ahead unless you dedicate yourself to staying young. At the same time, some of the "fun" the kids have doesn't actually look all that inviting, and the climax and wrap-up feel rather perfunctory and not in keeping with the churning imagination of most of what's come before.

In all events, screenwriters Benh and Eliza Zeitlin have figured out ways to use the general schemes and themes of J.M. Barrie's endlessly popular tale while

jettisoning essentially all of its period and attitudinal baggage. There are times when you can feel the film straining to deal with aspects of the original story in a so-called organic way, so that the more it exerts itself to fashion “natural” substitutes for the yarn’s thematic oppositions — wild versus tamed or resigned, determined as opposed to accepting — the less it entirely convinces. Similarly, the more explicit statement of themes — “You can’t lose hope,” “You have to use your imagination,” “Look after your loved ones” — begins to sound like admonishments regularly heard in Disney films.

Distinctly un-Disneyish is the exceptional score by Dan Romer and Zeitlin, which imparts enormous local flavor and, upon a first listen, would seem to deserve special attention on its own. Eliza Zeitlin’s production design and Stacy Jansen’s costumes are highly original and expressive of the largely untamed characters who wear them.

Wendy in every way feels like a handmade, one-of-a-kind, exceptionally fresh and — one hesitates to use the word — organic piece of work that quite quickly imparts a desire to see it again.