

Puppet Neverland premieres in feminist fashion

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Audiences were immersed into a reimagined Neverland full of whimsy and girl power at the premier of “Darling or a Guided Adventure in Dismantling the Patriarchy” at the Connecticut Repertory Theatre at the University of Connecticut on Friday, Feb. 6.

Blending puppetry and traditional acting together, “Darling” retells the classic story of

Wendy and Peter Pan, only they are a few years older and this

fascinatingly leaps from lamp to lamp; Captain Hook is a faceless head and torso and the Lost Boys are three wooden toy ducks.

“What I feel the proudest of are the Lost Boys,” Walker said. “Only because that building process felt the most out of my comfort zone.”

Walker designed all of the puppets in “Darling.” The puppets were operated entirely by Allison “Alfi” Free, Alice “Rosie” Grunzke and Amy Liou, all of whom were extremely enthusiastic and interacted with the audience at times.

There is absolutely no dialogue in the show, with the exception of a few grunts and groans from actors, as well as the quacking of the Lost Boys.

Despite no words being said, the message of the show was clear. “The patriarchy is really a part of everything,” Walker said.

One of the most memorable moments of “Darling” was a

scene where Wendy first discovered her shadow, which was depicted as a queen and was much taller than Peter’s shadow, Pan (Mariangelie Vélez). The expression on Wendy’s face when she noticed her shadow was one of awe and amazement — almost as if she saw herself in a new light or recognized her power for the first time.

“I really loved that they had shadows telling part of the story because it’s such a big part of the original story too,” Leo Boss, a sixth-semester entertainment engineering major, said.

Towards the end of the show, a battle with Hook takes place, where he is physically dismantled by Wendy and her shadow, Darling (Ian Rothausen). Hook is a direct representation of the patriarchy and even chuckles to himself when he sees Darling hand Wendy the sword, as opposed to Peter.

“Harley did a really good job of having Wendy take control of her own story,” Solace Barata, a sixth-semester pathobiology and ecology and evolutionary biology major, said.

“Darling” emphasizes rewriting the narrative and a reclamation of power for people who don’t identify as male.

“This idea of working together because we are not going to be able to do anything by ourselves [is a theme and lesson of the show],” Walker said.

“When you look at the playbill, truly every name in there in there contributed to making this happen.”

Walker shouted out the director of the show Kate Brehm, as well as Hannah Trobaugh, the technical director of the show.

“Darling” is an MFA project for Walker and Trobaugh for UConn’s Puppet Arts program.

“Darling” will be playing at Connecticut Repertory Theatre until Sunday, Feb. 15. UConn students can purchase discounted tickets for the showing on Thursday, Feb. 12.

A performance of Harley Walker’s “Darling or a Guided Adventure in Dismantling the Patriarchy” performed at the Connecticut Repertory Theatre. The show premiered on Friday, Feb. 6, 2026.

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time, Wendy is the heroine of the tale.

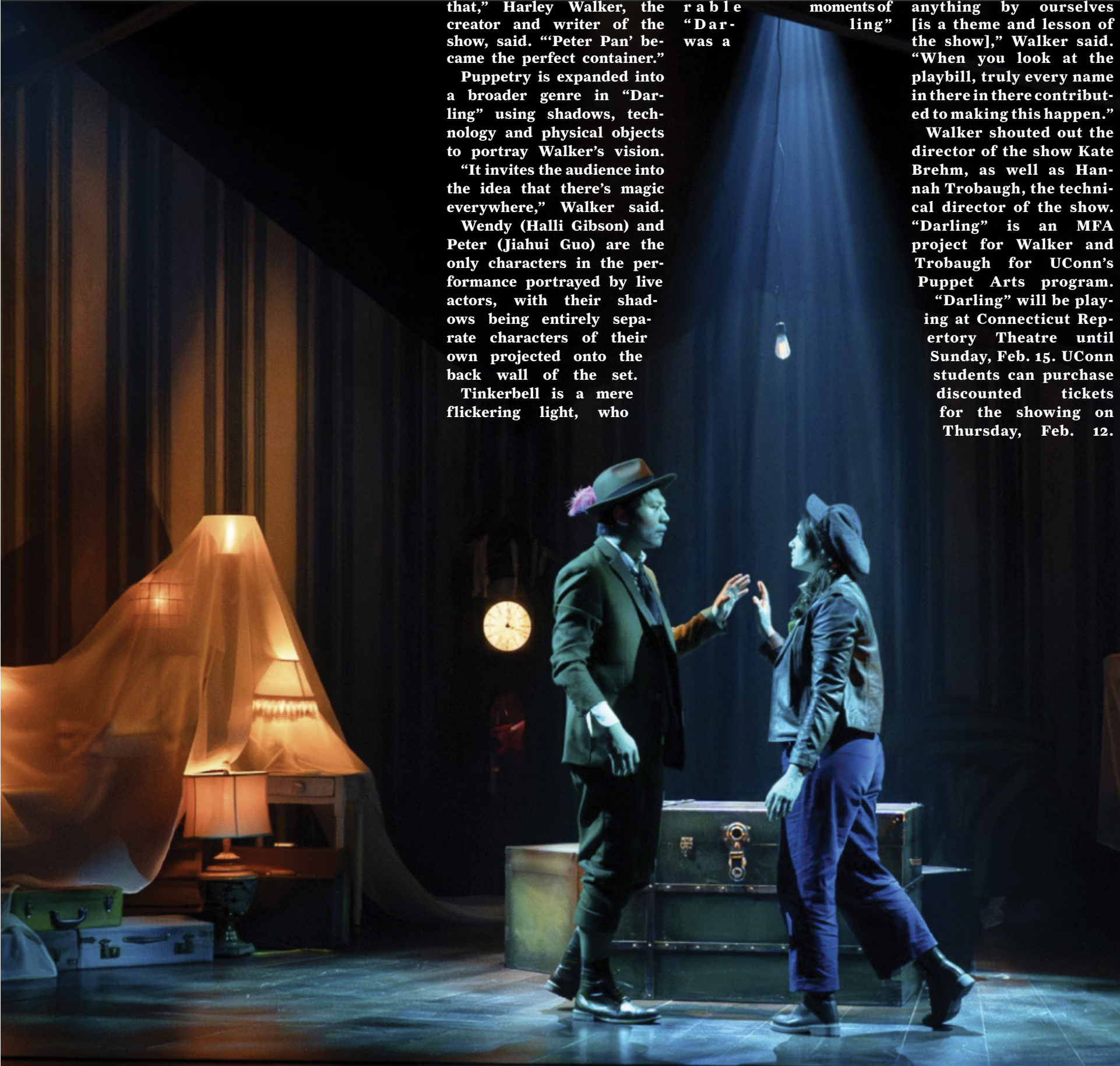
“I’ve always loved ‘Peter Pan,’ and I wanted to investigate my relationship to the patriarchy — which is a much broader idea — and I needed a container for that,” Harley Walker, the creator and writer of the show, said. “‘Peter Pan’ became the perfect container.”

Puppetry is expanded into a broader genre in “Darling” using shadows, technology and physical objects to portray Walker’s vision.

“It invites the audience into the idea that there’s magic everywhere,” Walker said.

Wendy (Halli Gibson) and Peter (Jiahui Guo) are the only characters in the performance portrayed by live actors, with their shadows being entirely separate characters of their own projected onto the back wall of the set.

Tinkerbell is a mere flickering light, who



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