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'FUN' IS THE WORD, BOYS & GIRLS: Pee-wee Herman (Paul Reubens, center) in his hilarious, nostalgic Broadway opus, *The Pee-wee Herman Show*. Photo: Jeff Vespa

Theater Review

***The Pee-wee Herman Show* is fun flashback to '80s TV icon's world**

The Pee-wee Herman Show

Written by Paul Reubens and Bill Steinkellner

Additional material by John Paragon

Through January 2, 2011

Stephen Sondheim Theatre

124 West 43rd Street

(212-239-6200), www.peewee.com/broadway/

By Scott Harrah

As the holiday season approaches, there is no better way to celebrate the festivities than spending time with Pee-wee Herman and his lovable characters. As post-election Republican fever sweeps America at the end of 2010, this is a perfect time and way to cast our minds back to the Golden Age of the GOP, the Reagan Era, via the charmingly twisted comic talents of Pee-wee Herman. Few things from the 1980s were as uniquely bizarre and surreal as Pee-wee Herman, the suit-clad, childlike alter ego of comedian Paul Reubens. Most of us remember Pee-wee from the 1985 feature film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, or the iconic, Emmy-winning Saturday morning TV show *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, which ran from 1986 to 1991. Now, Pee-wee and all his pals, including Chairry, Miss Yvonne (Lynne Marie Stewart), Cowboy Curtis (Phil LaMarr), Jambi (John Paragon), King of Cartoons (Josh Meyers), and others are all back, this time on Broadway in *The Pee-wee Herman Show*. Those expecting a glitzy musical or high drama might be disappointed, but bona fide fans will adore this show for what it is: a fun-filled, 90-minute journey back to all the corny jokes, kooky characters, crazy puppets, and colorful sets that made Pee-wee Herman and his TV friends so inimitable and unforgettable.

Pee-wee's Playhouse was a sophisticated, double-entendre-filled parallel universe of hidden meanings and candy-coated zaniness that kids, of course, loved, but it was their parents that actually got the jokes, and this show is no exception. Unlike Jim Henson's Muppets, which were lovable but saccharine characters, there was something delightfully nurturing but innovative and offbeat about Chairry the talking chair, Bear (Drew Powell), and Jambi, the fey, wish-granting genie (who was flamboyantly effeminate in the TV show but is toned down in this Broadway offering). Pee-wee's characters were purportedly teaching children something, but they did so with volumes of subversive sub text for grown-ups. The show was almost a satire of conventional kiddie "educational" TV, with sly nods to sexuality, nontraditional gender roles and tolerance of racial integration that managed to pass over the heads of TV censors and most parents. In *The Pee-wee Herman Show*, which opened last night, most of the old CBS show's cultural sedition has been replaced with nostalgia, allowing us to relive everything that made

Pee-wee's movies and the series so one-of-a-kind, and there is nothing wrong with that.

The paper-thin plot revolves around Pee-wee planning to get his colorful home wired for the Internet by Sergio (Jesse Garcia) while Miss Yvonne yearns for Cowboy Curtis to fall for her. It may sound odd that Pee-wee isn't connected to the electronic world of the 21st century, but keep in mind that he is caught in a time warp, lost in the now-innocent glow of the 1980s, long before our daily lives were dictated by computers, cell phones, Blackberries, Facebook, and Twitter. Perhaps that is why it is so natural for the audience to connect with Pee-wee in this show. Anyone who lived through the 1980s and the Pee-wee phenomenon, either as a child or adult, will find it difficult not to laugh at the silly humor.

Director Alex Timbers gives Reubens and the cast a lot of artistic autonomy, and thanks to the outstanding scenic design by David Korins, the many talented voices behind the animated flowers and the numerous anthropomorphized elements of Pee-wee's home, *The Pee-wee Herman Show* is, in essence, a crowd-pleaser and a colorful, big-stage forum for Pee-wee, one of the icons of the 1980s and its many excesses. More than anything, the show is an excuse to see this cherished pop legend be as pleasantly punch-drunk, clownish and gloriously absurd for his disciples as possible, making *The Pee-wee Herman Show* a feel-good triumph and an absolute "must see" for Pee-wee fans everywhere.

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