

Into the Woods @ Stray Dog Theatre

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by James Lapine

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As a self-proclaimed “musical theatre fanboy,” I find it very hard to definitively say what would be my favorite musical of all time. But if you were to put a gun up to my head and force me to pick a favorite, it would have to be *Into the Woods*. It’s up there as one of the few musicals that I consider perfect in every way: a timeless story, unforgettable characters, a beautiful score, and a wondrous imagination. *Into the Woods* is a musical that is of deep importance to me and to so many others. It happens to be the most accessible of Stephen Sondheim’s masterworks, often performed in schools, community theatres, and regional theatres all over the world. Even Stray Dog Theatre’s production is the first of two professional productions to be performed in St. Louis in 2023. However, *Into the Woods* is such an imaginative musical that different productions offer different interpretations of the same story that keep it fresh, and Stray Dog is no exception.

Into the Woods is a musical exploration and deconstruction of several famous fairy tale characters: Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack the Giant Slayer, and Rapunzel. The adventures of these four characters are intertwined and connected to an original story about a Baker and his Wife, both of whom are sent on a quest “into the woods” to break a curse that was placed on them by a Witch. Act I depicts the characters’ pursuits to make their various wishes come true: the Baker and his Wife to start a family, Red to be reunited with her own family, Cinderella to be respected, Jack to be rich, and Rapunzel to be free from the clutches of the same Witch that cursed the Baker and his Wife. Once their wishes do come true, Act II has the characters face the consequences of the actions they took to get their wish, actions that result in their magical kingdom being put in danger of being destroyed.

Into the Woods is a musical about the consequences of selfishness, about the importance of being responsible to your community. In Act I, every character cheats, lies, steals, abandons, and even assaults others, including their loved ones, to get what they want. But in Act II, we see in retrospect just how shamefully these characters have behaved, that they – and all of us – should be more mindful of the effects certain actions have on others. Nobody on this planet lives in a bubble, so we should always support people who are in their time of need. It’s a lesson that definitely makes the show feel preachy, almost like it’s worshiping collectivism. But this is a story that aims to insert consequences into a world that previously had none, so of course everything is going to be spelled out and in our faces. It’s all in service of making the message of “take responsibility for your actions” crystal clear. If anything, it’s a message we need now more than ever in this post-COVID world.

Stray Dog Theatre aims to make *Into the Woods* a genuine communal experience, mostly by paring down the production’s scale. Instead of placing the show in physical woods, director

Justin Been has the story unfold inside a magical library, complete with a color-changing paper tree and rotating bookcases designed by Dominic Emery, as well as an endless number of props and trinkets designed by Gary F. Bell – some of which are used very creatively, such as portraying the cow Milky White as a modified ottoman and calling a radio a golden harp (“an instrument that plays tunes without you having to touch it”). The costumes by Eileen Engel and wigs by Sarah Gene Dowling outfit the actors to look like illustrations that the library’s magic has brought to life. The arcane energy of the library vibrates the entire Tower Grove Abbey thanks to Tyler Duenow’s lights and Jacob Baxley’s sound.

The Narrator, played by Jonathan Hey, is the whimsical librarian who weaves together the various fairy tales before our very eyes, only to leave the characters to face their possible demise. The Narrator even interferes with the story directly, taking the form of a Mysterious Man that ensures everything is according to plan. The Narrator has the most direct interactions with the Witch – the character who sets everyone’s stories in motion, given a performance by Jennelle Gilreath Owens that is at turns over-the-top cynical and genuinely menacing.

Tyler Luetkenhaus gives the most fretful, insecure interpretation of the Baker I’ve ever seen, making his transition into being a leader and a father a much more emotional journey. The Baker’s anxiety contrasts well with the layer of deceit given to the Baker’s Wife by actor Margaret Stall, lending them both a very realistic onstage chemistry as a married couple with some serious issues to work out. Grace Langford and Shannon Lampkin Campbell emphasize the brattiness and spunk of Red and Jack, respectively. Campbell performs well alongside Laura Lee Kyro as Jack’s folksy yet fiery Mother. Dawn Schmid’s coloratura makes ideal casting for the demandingly manic role of Rapunzel. Maggie Nold’s Cinderella is an effective balance of wild physical comedy and understated nurturing. Drew Mizell and Sarah Polizzi are cleverly double-cast as Cinderella’s Stepsisters and the Princes that rescue Cinderella and Rapunzel, both of whom create some really funny moments when they have to switch between two completely different voices and vocal ranges.

Rounding out the cast are Madeline Black as Cinderella’s Stepmother; Michael Wells as Cinderella’s Father, the Prince’s Steward, and the Big Bad Wolf; and finally Jennifer Clodi as the Spirit of Cinderella’s Mother, Red’s Granny, and the voice of the Giant. Everyone in the cast sings the challenging score beautifully thanks to musical director Leah Schultz, who also conducts a lush 10-piece orchestra.

Stray Dog Theatre has given us an effective, resonant reinterpretation of *Into the Woods*. Theirs is a production that focuses much more on the show’s inherent theatricality than any I’ve seen, to the point of being humanist. This is an approach that works really well for *Into the Woods*, and it shines at Stray Dog. *Into the Woods* is a musical that gets better every single time I see it, and I can’t wait to see New Jewish Theatre’s production in December.