Viewer's Reflection On Into The Woods: Opinion Essay

For my live theatre production critique, I went to see Into the Woods on January 19, 2020. The production was put on by Broadway on Tour (BOT) at the historic Ebell Theater located at 718 Mortimer Street in Santa Ana. Into the Woods is the classic musical with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim based on the book by James Lapine that twists and combines popular fairy tales showing us the unforeseen consequences of wish fulfillment. Rather deep, isn't it? The version of Laurie Holden, who directed this production, was classic and creative at the same time, she managed to unlock new layers of meaning in this popular play. I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the performance of this young troupe. The acting was the first-rate, and the voices were exceptional.

Into the Woods, as written is a rather complicated musical with a lot going on, but this version was rather simplified and informal, allowing the beautiful lyrics and music to speak for itself. The first act is the powerful opening of this story - all the characters from the different classic fairy tales happened somehow to meet each other. The second act is much deeper and paints a rather dark picture of the world we live in. The director's main goal in this production was to intertwine classic Grimm fairytales to find a modern message and I believe that this challenge was successfully completed by the young actors. In the first half, a childless baker (Ari Palacio) and his wife (Samantha Butler) launch out to lift a curse placed on their house by the witch (Sofia Del Rey). She gives them the opportunity to break the curse if they collect four key ingredients to help her with a spell. During their mission, they meet Cinderella (Davis Arnold), Little Red Riding Hood (Tea Swartzon), Rapunzel (Ella Gibson) and the giant-killing Jack (Luca Boyadjan) - all of whom are in the midst of their well-known adventures and seem to have serious psychological issues. This fact makes these characters multidimensional and engaging. Little Red Riding Hood is a crashing bore and seems to be a social drinker. Jack is a kleptomaniac, plus obviously has Oedipal issues. The onstage narrator of the play (Joe Saraceni) literally stands between the audience and the fairy tale characters, drawing us into the fantastic stories while acknowledging our separation from their realities.

The acting was a huge part of selling how the character feels, their frustration, anger, sorrow and happiness to the audience to sell the play. Director Laurie Holden keeps the action moving pronto, smoothly flowing from scene to scene with no visible seams. I'm not sure if I would have enjoyed this show as much on a large stage with a giant budget. The song "Our Little World" sung a duet with Ms. Thomas and Rapunzel (played by the lovely Ella Gibson and Sean Ower) is one of the highlights of the show. Ari Palacio as The Baker has a strong voice and sympathetic nature about him. He is often hilarious, which makes the tough choices he faces throughout the play that much more heartbreaking. Luca Boyadjan is wonderful as Jack, maintaining a child-like innocence and wonder (even if not everything is not right in his head). The relationship he establishes with the cow (a wonderful prop) is hilarious, but surprisingly heartwarming as well. Finally, I want to recognize Cooper Tomasick and Gavin Huffaker as the princes. Even though these parts are inherently funny, these two play off each other so wonderfully with a sense of arrogance, charm, and brashness that their parts rise above being light, comedic moments. However, everyone in the cast is strong and should be very proud of the work they've done. There is truly not a weak link amongst the bunch, which is crucial in such a group effort, although Davis Arnold, Macaila Dorney, and Garrett Walker were the

standouts.

Tea Swartzon was perfect for the role of the Little Red Riding Hood. She did a great job of acting like she was slightly drunk. She acted ditsy and rebellious which helped to enhance her character. Tea talked loud and moved around the stage in a graceful way. Sofia Del Rey was also great as the Witch; you could tell she was very into the role. I didn't really like the part of Liv Majestic, who played Florinda. I felt that she was trying so hard to fit into the role that it didn't seem realistic. She would overdo her words and actions on most of her lines, but this could partly be the character. But overall, it couldn't spoil the general impression.

Laurie Holden, the director of this performance did a great job in directing the play. I felt that her vision for the play was very helpful in getting the point across. The stage movements were not distracting to me in the audience. Since the stage is not very big, they did a great job of keeping the movements simple.

The acting alongside the design elements really brought the audience into the fairy tale. The scene design of the play was absolutely amazing. I have been to numerous plays in my life and this is one sent over the fairy tale atmosphere very well. The decoration sets by Tony Brewer never let us forget that this trip into the woods is taking place inside a theater. At some point, I felt as if I was actually into the woods. That had a great influence on the play and enhanced the performance greatly.

Another form of design that was used were the costumes. The costumes of Kathie Benjamin in the play were great, true to the fairy tales, but with a hint of her own vision. You could tell that she spent tons of time thinking, designing, and preparing for it. Each costume fit the performer as well as their character very well. All of the chosen colors and patterns worked well with the characters and design.

In a small theatre, it is very difficult to complete various tasks without the help of other elements. Beautiful lighting (Chris Brown) creates some stunning imagery and sets the mood, and I particularly loved the innovative use of shadows to make moments with the wolf and Little Red's grandmother very outstanding and visually interesting. The way they changed the effect of the lights helped to enhance the play.

Musically, it was incredibly powerful as well, with no large orchestra to fill out the famous orchestrations, giving the songs a different sound than audience have likely heard before. In particular, the numbers like "Giants in the Sky" and the emotional "No One is Alone" became a big success of the show. I want to recognize the work of Vocal director Sarah Grandpre. The music numbers as a part of whole production managed to keep the audience engaged until the end of the play.

I am glad this was not my first experience with Into the Woods including a Disney film adaptation (2014) directed by Rob Marshall and starring Meryl Streep, Emily Blunt, and Johnny Depp because I definitely found myself paying more attention to different lines and seeing moments and even characters in a new light as a result of this staging. Telling such a complicated story in such a simple way is no easy feat, and the magic they are able to create with only bare-bones to work with is truly impressive. For any fan of Into the Woods this Broadway on the Go Theater production deserves attention and proves that "anything can indeed happen in the woods - even woods you know well". As Hailey Bachrach, theatre

columnist of Oregon Artswatch, pointed out, ”Into the Woods is a grown-up fairytale because it reminds us that the best stories are not about happy endings but about the journey”(para.8).