
LOCAL & STATE

Panitch adds indescribable magic to 'Woods'

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THEATER REVIEW

IF YOU GO

One of the concerns with "Into the Woods" is similar to that of many ensemble pieces. It can get unwieldy, burdened with an excess of plots, characters, settings, dilemmas and emotions running rampant as giants in the forest. Stephen Sondheim isn't afraid to give you your money's worth, and a little extra pocket change to go.

But Seth Panitch, director of the University of Alabama's current production, cuts clear paths, partly by infusing the show with more dance and movement than is typical, especially with the insertion of wood sprites: Bobby Becher, Kelley Brown, Ava Kelley, Renee Reinecke, Julia Simpson and Jamarious Stewart. The Pan-like, puckish creatures serve partly to move set pieces, but also to add extra spirits of energy and mischief to the witch and the woods. With choreographer Rita Snyder, he's built dimensions of movement to this show that should be studied by other directors. Such a simple adjustment, but so subtly

rewarding, as this production flows as musically as its score.

There's a fine word for those inexpressible kinds of things: ineffable. Music, at its finest, reaches into the soul in ways only the rarest of words can. And when you pair Sondheim's witty and incisive lyrics — with all its other concerns and charms, it's easy to forget how many belly-laugh moments live in "Into the Woods" — with his music, something, well, ineffable happens.

As I type "sometimes people leave you/halfway through the woods," even assuming you know the context of loss and despair, it can't come close to communicating the surge of emotion that runs through you when the late wife sings it to her grieving husband, or the mother figure to the child. It's incredibly beautiful, and this UA cast and crew brings those lovely moments home.

The Marian Gallaway Theatre often doesn't seem ideally suited for a production of this scale; it's not a wide nor particularly deep space. Previous big musicals, such as the 2003 "West Side Story," have seemed cluttered, almost claustrophobic. But designers Rick Miller and Andy Fitch managed some very nice ideas with this design, using the height of the space,

■ **What:** Stephen Sondheim's musical, performed by the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance

■ **When:** 7:30 p.m. today through Saturday, with 2 p.m. matinees Saturday and Sunday,

■ **Where:** UA's Marian Gallaway Theatre, Rowand-Johnson Hall

■ **Cost:** Tickets \$13 general, \$11 seniors, UA faculty and staff, and \$9 for students.

■ **Info:** 205-348-3400. www.as.ua.edu/theatre

and adding simple but flexible pieces to represent various levels, with cloths, color and lights — by John McDermott — to add shading and nuance. It's an effect not readily apparent on the naked set, but when the show is moving within and without, there's an interesting sense of depth and inclusion to all but the town and castle pieces, which are, by tradition, right up front and only simply suggested.

Standout performances

To begin to list the fine performances would be to probably slight someone, but just to kick things off with an undeniable favorite, I'm going to say kudos to Sarah Ondocsin, who is amazingly expressive from inside a whimsically awkward cow suit. Next time you feel like mocking a mime, remember this Milky White.

UA's musical theater program, built up by Raphael Crystal, music director for the show, has created the wealth of voices you need to make this a rich experience. It's easiest to pick out the leads — Blake McCorvey as the

Baker, Sadie Magadan as the Baker's Wife, Dianna Duffy as The Witch, Jake Boyd as Jack, Stephanie Marie Mosley as Little Red Riding Hood and Katie Burton as Cinderella — and say that each found terrific character moments to pair with sterling voices. If you had to guess if one was cast for singing or for acting, you'd vote for both.

In smaller, but no less well-refined bits, faces and voices of Jacqueline Wheeler (Jack's Mother), Kelly Ann Shamburger (Rapunzel) and DaWoyne Alexander (Wolf) stand out. And the two princes, David Cordell and Jeff Ingram, just about steal the show as very nicely turned comic jerks. So much can be done with the right gestures.

The show launches, appropriately enough, with yet another note-perfect and winning performance by graduating senior Allison Moy, as a Mother Goose-ish narrator. It's a role often double-cast with the same actor as Mysterious Man, but again, this Panitch variation not only works but adds that just-right sort of ... what am I trying to say? ... ineffable touch.

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