Into the Woods, or Making the Familiar Strange (University of Idaho, Department of Theatre Arts)

Notes Toward a Production - Jeremiah Downes

University of Idaho, Department of Theatre Arts
Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by James Lapine
Jeremiah Downes, Director
Kelly Quinett, Acting Coach
Chaz Wolcott, Choreographer
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The play begins, “Once upon a time…,” clearly conveying the author's intent to release the audience from the linear, and, our concept of time as we know it in this technological age. The aforementioned “time” can, and should, be all at once the future, present, and past. Fairytales, by their nature, are reflections of the philosophical, psychological, emotional, and ethical constructs of when they’re written (or spoken), but, when finely crafted, become timeless. The same parables at the core of each intersecting tale that make up the characters, conflict, and propulsive energy of Lapine and Sondheim’s work are just as crucial in a 2022 world as they were when they were first written. Timeless. One of the theatre’s primary objectives, holding up that metaphorical mirror to the audience, seems intentionally paramount in this work’s libretto and score. The lessons learned, unlearned, or relearned are the vehicles through which the characters and audience experience the play’s many emotional highs and lows, and ultimately, the paradigm-shifting ingredients within. Like a great symphonic masterwork, Into the Woods ends where we begin; the cyclical nature of the human experience. There remains, however, one critical distinction, the characters are not the same as when the play started (and some are even dead). “Happily ever after,” has eluded everyone, including the audience. The play ends with a warning, not with a blessing or a prayer, and we’re back again where we started.

And so it is with yet another production of Into the Woods at the University of Idaho. The roster of Into the Woods productions is long this year, and season, including a highly anticipated New York City Center revival. It seems to be no accident that this musical finds itself well represented from high schools to stock to New York in this critical moment. It turns out that a worldwide pandemic is potent enough to muster up some form of appetite for self-reflection, even in musicals, and this impulse evident even before the passing of Sondheim, America’s longtime conduit to a time when musical theatre could still be innovative, aspirational, and groundbreaking, even on Broadway. I’m not at all sure that Sondheim’s passing gives us anymore to investigate in the pages of the script and score, but if we’re lucky, it may sell a few more seats. I digress. Any revival requires of its creative team a discussion and exploration of previous notable incarnations and how/why/why they would, or should, impact the interpretation at hand. With few exceptions, Into the Woods has been heavily married to the original Broadway production, particularly in the areas of casting and design. I certainly understand the impulse, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” If the audience is the driving force behind a production, the safest and clearest route to comprehension is the use of a “traditional” fairy tale world. When the imagery and esthetic is reminiscent of the pages from a children’s illustrated collection of these tales the context, content, impact, and thesis of the play have a greater propensity for transference with its audience; it’s cultural iconography at its most effective. In setting the play in a familiar, sentimental, and comforting world, the audience can breathe a sigh of relief at each striking
analysis and condemnation of child abuse, infidelity, murder, capitalism, greed, narcissism, psychosis, and dysfunctional family dynamics as they unfold. The bumpy ride becomes even more bearable with a sweet old man in a classic single-breasted suit taking us along for the ride.

The original Broadway production of *Into the Woods* opened in the fall of 1987 on Broadway. And, while I remain an ardent fan of that production (and thank the musical theatre gods for the exceptional filming of said production), I remain now, as I was then, troubled by the lack of immediacy, urgency, and the authentic servitude of the dramatic stakes within the given circumstances of the play, specifically, through its production and design. So much so, I propose they seem on the razor’s edge of malpractice. At least, that’s how strong my feelings are now through a 2022 world view/lens. This isn’t a blow to the brilliance of Lapine and the design team, even before Disney swallowed Broadway whole in the ensuing years, commercial Broadway musicals were not a laboratory of risk-taking. And, never mind the cold sweat producers must’ve endured throughout with Sondheim penning the words and music (to be clear, none of Sondheim’s musicals except for *Sweeney Todd* would be considered a commercial success by today’s standards). That was risk enough. Alas. But I’m not interested in making theatre that isn’t dangerous. Theatre that only takes the path of least resistance is, in my mind, the most egregious offense in this, or any, art form. Especially, in musicals. To be clear, I don’t mean being risky, dangerous, or scandalous for the sake of it. Gimmick makes me wince at best and gag at its worst. I’m talking about the propensity to move a 21st-century theatre-going audience in ways no one could imagine necessary, or possible, in 1987. The medium demands it, and so do theatre-going audiences. Otherwise, why unglue your face from your iPhone? The truth is, people respond to Sondheim’s work because that exact premise/philosophy lies at the core of his creative invention and every one of his works (he was quoted saying as much in many statements, in every creative period, throughout his life). To abandon that artistic genetic code could only result in not serving the play. Which is, after all, the very first of all our many job requirements. To live truthfully under the circumstances of the play is to understand deeply that as theatre artists we embrace the malleable continuum those dramatic circumstances live in as long as a play is lucky enough to keep getting produced, staged, and performed. It’s in the possibility to bend and flex a play, to find its hidden, yet to be discovered and revealed corners, that distinguishes a historical or museum piece from a living/breathing theatrical experience.

To that end, I offer at the outset a shift in our thinking about *Into the Woods*, as it relates to style and design, and a total creative approach, in an attempt to bring the piece abruptly out of stasis and thrust into critical artistic expression and statement. Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt* was a tenant of his theatrical theories in the post-industrial/early modern era; in a time of ever-changing technology, knowledge, culture, and politic, Brecht understood the necessity for immediacy probably more than any other theatre-maker of the 20th century. Copious comparisons can be made about the state of the world then, and now. Some recent vital findings have provided clarity on the long-held misinterpretation of Brecht’s ideas about what was commonly known as the “alienation effect.” This newest body of research on the “effect” offers that the use of *verfremdungseffekt* is more about “making the familiar strange” than chipping away at the audience’s potential for emotional response or sentiment. While this new century has yet to reveal a Brecht of its own (and especially in musicals), it’s come close with theatre artists like Stew. So here’s where we begin: making the familiar strange. How do we reinvent a classic without it seeming disrespectful, indulgent, misguided, and, and its worst, a gimmick? Can you honor a classic while reimagining its purpose, power, and potential for the moment at hand? Can you imbue the concept without compromising the text? After all,
and again, each one of our ultimate responsibilities is to serve the text (and, in this case, the music). But next, and nearby, is to create the world of the play. In the theatre, there seems to be an unspoken fascination and fear, in equal part, with funneling a play through a new contextual colander and seeing what comes out on the other side. The risks are high in the commercial theatre, but we find ourselves in the academy, an entirely different beast, to be sure. Isn’t the theatre our richest expressive medium, seemingly designed for exploration and contradiction? A “turning of things on their respective head” approach? Or, as I often say, “Throwing a grenade in the fucking thing!” Art remains crucial only in service to an unchanging set of unanswerable questions, arguably the most important tenant, “If not now, when?” To take risks is to explore, to explore is to discover, and to discover is to change. It is the hero’s journey. It is the center, the axel, the yoke of this play. And, I believe, the art form. Into the Woods is so much more than has been done before and again through the music and lyrics. It demands our attention and our explosive artistic ingenuity. It can not work right now, at this moment, in any other way.

Explosive artistic ingenuity.

In the academy, my commitment to the environment in which we make art pushes directly back on preconceptions as a construct, or state of being, and going about our day to day. There exists no such axiom as, “Doing the play for the play’s sake.” Either you’re marrying yourself to the original for its pedagogical value in relation to period and style; or, you’re sinking you’re creative teeth in and lighting it all on fire. In this case, bring the matches. Our students and faculty have done a 19th century, Western European, period piece already this fall. Learning objective satisfied.

We have an opportunity to say something powerful, relevant, and critical with Into the Woods. Right now. In this moment. It’s not a musical for the musical’s sake. It’s not Anything Goes, it’s not Mamma Mia. It is more Chekhov and Albee than anything. It’s a heightened language play, a complex and dense psychological opera, some argue a masterpiece, and we acknowledge its density, urgency, and creative currency not in its 1987 world, but in our 2021 world. If we remain true to these tenants, any reimagining of the piece can not be wrong.

Where Lapine and Sondheim, and the original Broadway production, brilliantly hit the mark (that long time ago) was directing its actors to breathe life into the characters of the play with authentic modern realism. This is it. The answer. No other acting and performance style, design approach, or direction will do. It must be real, “tap the nerve,” and viscerally inject its audience with the humanity in inextricably found in its script and score. Lapine is a master at directing actors in a musical (the most inorganic, and contradictory, of the theatre’s genres). He always guides his actors to invest in their dramatic circumstances so completely that we forget they’re singing at all, with Into the Woods being no exception. Our entire approach to this production should follow closely in this vain. No aspect of production or design can deviate from our desire to tell the truth, and demand the audience listen to that truth, intently.

A modern, and real, musical tale. A production of Into the Woods that doesn’t look back, to the musicals gone by, hoping to cozily fit into a Rodgers & Hammerstein world. Instead, one that looks to Next To Normal, Passing Strange, RENT, and A Strange Loop, aspiring to live, breathe, and explode again in a new musical theatre landscape that permeates this complex art form outward - unapologetically - in this complex time. We should lean into the play’s horrors, fears, joys, and longings. Never shy away from them. We should under no circumstances, “play it safe.” The woods aren’t safe. The world isn’t safe. Ultimately, the characters who do survive the
perilous journey “into the woods” only do so as they come to realize it’s impossible to survive alone. No one is alone.

Some preliminary concepts and questions to consider:

- A modern, dark, urban world (graphic novel, Marvel, DC)
- Explosive, uncertain but brave
- Humanizing, avoiding stereotypes, inventing new archetypes
- Honoring all of the subtextual, metaphorical, philosophical, and before giving in to traditional conventions
- *Into the Woods* is modern American realism despite the stereotypes and misconceptions about its medium (“real plays”); this will only succeed if we are reverent and respectful to the play’s form without subjective criticism.
- Some recent examples of stark deviation from original concepts of “period pieces” that successfully support a concept of reimagining: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (2015, National Theatre/Young Vic, Benedict Andrews); *Ragtime* (2009, Broadway Revival, Marcia Milgrom Dodge); *Parade* (2007, Donmar Warehouse, Rob Ashford), Oklahoma! (2019, Broadway Revival, Daniel Fish); *Julius Caesar* (2019, National Theatre, Nicholas Hynter).

- How can I empower your creative vision and promote a sense of autonomy?
- What do you need from a director and a collaborator?
- How do you feel about musicals? What are your biases?
- What do you need to say right now with your craft and your art?