

Cultural Daily

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Solving a Hollywood Bowl Challenge: Add Dancers!

Ann Haskins · Wednesday, July 24th, 2019

The sing-along *Sound of Music* film musical is an uber popular feature at the Hollywood Bowl, but for fans of live musical theater, the special gem in this summer's musical jewelry box is Stephen Sondheim sending fractured fairy tales *Into the Woods*. This weekend an impressive cast will command the open air Hollywood Bowl stage, but until then, the singers and dancers are rehearsing in the cavernous basement of a nearby church where they opened a rehearsal to the press.



"Into the Woods" props at the ready. Photo by AHaskins.

As a phalanx of media armed with cameras, tape recorders and cell phones file in, the rehearsal area is framed by the show's signature props: the sad-eyed milk-white cow, "flocks" of birds suspended on hand-held wires, Cinderella's flying ball gown, and the prince's horse as he searches for the foot to fit the golden slipper. The actors are in clusters along the back. Many faces are familiar from television and movie roles that belie their serious musical theater credits, including Tony and Drama Desk nominations and awards. A few of the actors are in street clothes, but most have a prop or a costume piece definitional to their character. Sutton Foster wears the signature shawl and peasant shoes of the Baker's Wife. Skylar Astin has the Baker's cap, jacket and pouch as they set off to find the four ingredients to help them break a spell and get a child. Patina Miller dons the Witch's voluminous midnight black cape in stark contrast to Edelyn Okano's stiff white petticoat as Cinderella's stepmother.



Media at "Into the Woods" press preview. Photo by AHaskins.

At the preview press event, director/choreographer Robert Longbottom talked about how the musical speaks to today's audience and how he added dancers to solve one the challenges posed by restaging a musical theater treasure designed for a proscenium stage at the Hollywood Bowl.

"Although *Into the Woods* does not have distinct dance numbers, the split second timing and movement of multiple characters requires as much choreography as direction," Longbottom allowed. Choreography also came into play to address challenges posed by moving sets and the many props. On the open Bowl stage devoid of wings and with the orchestra visible behind the action, all set changes occur in full view of the audience. Longbottom's solution: add four dancers not in the original.



Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters with the four woodsmen. Photo by AHaskins.

The dancers—Karl Warden, Devine Harris, Rees James and Richard Biglia—appear as woodsmen and primarily are tasked with moving the four large trees that evoke the woods and other larger props. At the press preview, the four dancers managed to look innocuous until called upon to shift the trees in consort with the music as the action in the woods shifted to a scene with different characters.

Longbottom shared that in addition to providing the muscle behind the choreographed tree segments, a dance interlude has been added that brings the four woodsmen out from behind the trees and into their own moment.



Cast of "Into the Woods". Photo by AHaskins.

After the media are situated at the front of the rehearsal stage, Longbottom notes the ensemble is halfway through the brief two week rehearsal period before introducing each of three musical numbers.

"One Midnight Gone" provides shards of the main characters before segueing into Gaten Matarazzo as Jack in the Beanstalk singing "There Are Giants in the Sky." That is followed by Astin and Foster as the Baker and his wife rediscovering their romance "It Takes Two."



Skyler Astin as the Baker and Sutton Foster as the Baker's Wife in "Into the Woods". Photo by AHaskins.

Before concluding the performance portion, Longbottom explains the finale was only set that morning, but is being included in the preview because it opens with the reprise of his favorite song "Children Will Listen." "If there ever was a time when people aren't listening to each other, the song "children will listen" is more important than ever."

When the song first appears in the show, the Witch sings ruefully that "children won't listen" and "still they won't listen." As Miller begins the reprise that opens the finale, the lyrics have become "careful the things you say, children will listen...Careful the tale you tell, that is the spell. Children will listen." Miller's last note floats for an instant before the rehearsal pianist picks up the tempo and the cast begins moving. The intricate gestures and staging go smoothly as the cast assembles into a line for the final move, a canon with the two actors at either end turning simultaneously, followed by the next two, the twirling pulling the focus to the center couple who complete the move on the last musical note. The required Rockette precision move goes so smoothly, the cast spontaneously joins the assembled media in applauding themselves and hugging each other.



Patina Miller as the Witch and the cast of "Into the Woods". Photo by AHaskins.

This production brings the musical back to SoCal where it began in 1986 before moving to Broadway and nabbing three Tony awards for Best Book (James Lapine), Best Score (Sondheim), and Best Actress (Joanna Gleason as the Baker's Wife). Over the years, the show has enjoyed major revivals, become a staple of regional theaters, and in 2014, emerged as a Disney film.

The plot swizzles together characters from familiar and one semi-invented fairy tale. While the musical's introduction of the Baker (Astin) and his Wife (Foster) have been described as an invented fairy tale, the theme of a childless couple's efforts appears in various fairy tales like Tom Thumb. Most of the other characters are familiar, at least until they start going into the woods—Cinderella (Sierra Boggess) with her prince (Cheyenne Jackson), father, and stepfamily; Jack (Matarazzo), his mother (Rebecca Spencer) and those giants at the top of the beanstalk (Whoopi Goldberg voices the Giant's wife); the Witch (Miller), Rapunzel (Hailey Kilgore), and her prince (Chris Carmack); Red Riding Hood (Shanice Williams), her grandmother (Tamryra Gray), and the wolf. Sondheim archly double cast certain parts. Red Riding Hood's Wolf is also Cinderella's predatory prince and Red Riding Hood's grandmother doubles as Cinderella's mother. In the original production the Narrator also portrays the Mysterious Man (spoiler alert, he is revealed to be the Baker's presumed dead father). For the Bowl production, Longbottom decided on an alternate option with Anthony Crivello as the Mysterious Man and Edward Hibbert as the Narrator.



Director/choreographer Robert Longbottom. Photo by AHaskins.

In addition to the action onstage, the director/choreographer also is watching out for the audience members relying on the video screens that line the Bowl, plotting out the camera work that will be projected onto the video screens. “We have an experienced fellow who will be working with me, mapping out the camera moves, when to pull in for a face and when to pull out for action,” Longbottom explained, “This show is more important now than when it premiered,” Longbottom said. “I want to make sure the audience can see every scene and that every word can be heard. As the song says, children will listen.” He smiled. Hollywood Bowl, Hollywood Bowl, 2301 N. Highland Ave., Hollywood; Fri.-Sat., July 26-27, 8 p.m., Sun., July 28, \$14-\$201. <https://www.hollywoodbowl.com>.

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