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Sondheim's Woods Enchants; Nevermore Confuses

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 4th, 2015

Into the Woods has probably become the musical for which Stephen Sondheim is best known. In addition to the current [Disney film version](#) and innumerable high school, college, and community theater productions, there have been four NYC productions, including the 1987 Broadway original (which should have won the Tony Award for Best Musical over *Phantom of the Opera*). You would think with all these *Woods* growing in Gotham (the latest was just two and a half years ago in Central Park's Delacorte Theatre), another iteration of the fairy-tale mashup concocted by Sondheim and book-writer James Lapine would be repetitive. Not so. The current incarnation is a bare-bones staging from Fiasco Theatre presented off-Broadway by Roundabout Theater Company after a successful run at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, NJ. It features ten actors and the musical director playing all the roles and the instruments, in the style of John Doyle whose productions of Sondheim's *Company*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Passion* used a similar multitasking technique. Though the singing is not quite up to NYC standards, the enchanting direction by Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld, who also appear in the cast, cleverly exploits its limited means and ingeniously illuminates the show's themes of the connections between folk tales and family, community and growing up.

The small cast is like a group of enthusiastic kids gathered to relate the complicated multiple storylines on set designer Derek McLane's simple, yet evocative set. Ropes resembling piano wire suggest the ominous forest all the characters venture into in order to make their wishes come true. Simple props become magical objects. A painting serves as Cinderella's distant father, a crocheted skein of yellow yarn is transformed into Rapunzel's luxurious locks, a ladder is Jack's beanstalk. Stripped of elaborate trappings, the relationships become more intimate and believable. Even the orchestrations by Frank Galgano and music director Matt Castle, employing such wonderful instruments as a toy piano and a hotel-desk bell, are more elemental and denote character.



(Clockwise from top): Emily Young, Ben Steinfeld, Claire Karpan, Patrick Mulryan, Noah Brody, Jennifer Mudge, and Andy Grotelueschen in *Into the Woods*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

I especially enjoyed Patrick Mulryan's boyishly naïve Jack, Emily Young's doubling as the boisterous Red Ridinghood and the neurotic Rapunzel, and Jennifer Mudge's tough-as-nails Witch. Mudge also shows the tender side of this frightening enchantress. These three also possess the best voices in the company. Andy Grotelueschen steals a few scenes as the cow Milky White. His "moos" speak volumes. He and co-director Brody, two beefy guys, are a riot as Cinderella's simpering stepsisters.

Another Off-Broadway story-theater production is less successful. *Nevermore: The Imaginary Life and Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, from Canada's Catalyst Theatre and previously presented at Off-Broadway's New Victory Theatre in a brief run, also uses a small cast and scant scenery to tell its fanciful tale. While Fiasco's *Woods* is endlessly inventive, writer-director-composer Jonathan Christenson's nightmarish biography of the macabre American author strikes the same melancholy note over and over. The conceit places Poe on a riverboat amid a troupe of actors who play out the sad story of his life. He's orphaned as a child, abandoned by his adoptive parents, drunk and broke as an adult, and there's very little of Poe's actual works. We do get an atmospheric rendering of "The Raven," complete with eerie papier-mache recreations of the titular bird, but not much more. Almost all of the lengthy show is narrated by ensemble members in verse which has the same rhythm. Not only are we removed from the action, but it's repetitive. Plus the creepy music is recorded and relies too heavily on percussion. Only Bretta Gerecke's black-and-white picture-book costumes capture the imagination.



Garret Ross and Scott Shpeley in *Nevermore*
Credit: Joan Marcus

Into the Woods: Jan. 22—April 12. Roundabout Theatre Company at Laura Pels Theatre/Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre, 111 W. 46 St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Wed., Sun., Sat., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$99. (212) 719-1300 or www.roundabouttheatre.org

Nevermore: Opened Jan. 25 for an open run. New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St., NYC. Mon., 7 p.m.; Wed.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Thu., Sat., 2:30 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$75-\$95. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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