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'Into The Woods' In Pursuit Of Happily Ever After

by Julia Bartz, For *The Bulletin*

The wild success of the Broadway musical "Wicked," recent movies like "Pan's Labyrinth" and even the ubiquitous Harry Potter have now made it acceptable for adults to like fairy tales. We all retain a child-like part of us that responds to the tales of our youth - but now that we're older, we want to go beyond the usual expectations. This is what makes the annoying perkiness of Glinda the Good Witch or the bloodiness of the Labyrinth so fascinating.



Temple Theater's production of "Into the Woods" not only surpasses our expectations, but throws them out the window completely. Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the music and lyrics for the award-winning musical, used the question "happily ever after?" to explore such heavy topics as family, dissatisfaction and death through several common fairy tales. The musical debuted in 1986 and was revived on Broadway in 2002. Now, the talented Temple Theater Department, under the direction of Peter Reynolds, has

brought its own brand of Broadway to Philadelphia for a visually stunning and energetic show.

The musical's storyline focuses on a baker and his wife who must set off into the woods to collect four objects, as directed by a witch, in order to have a baby. The woods, of course, are full of fairy-tale characters, all with their own troubles and quests. One of the greatest pleasures of the musical is watching its unique take on the familiar characters: Little Red Riding Hood is not only a brat, she's also pretty tough, especially when brandishing a knife. Cinderella is deathly bored by the Prince that pursues her. And the Witch of the forest keeps her daughter Rapunzel in a tower not to punish her, but only to protect her from the world below.

Act I ends in a fairly predictable manner, leading one to wonder exactly what will happen "ever after" in Act II. The answer: death. Lots of it. This might have been interesting as a black-comedy turn, but the cheerful and exaggerated musical-style continues until the sort-of happy ending.

Bewildering storyline aside, the Temple Theater Department's adaptation is great fun. The soaring songs, flashy costumes and impressive sets provide the perfect setting for the incredibly gifted actors to show their stuff. Da'Vine Joy Randolph as the Witch commands attention the moment she steps on stage - even more so when she opens her mouth to sing. Greg Bell and Sheila Egan-Addis as the Baker and Baker's Wife are the most three-dimensional characters, as a husband-wife team willing to do anything to have a child. Sean Thompson wins the most laughs as Cinderella's self-absorbed prince, while he also nails the part of the punk Wolf, complete with green hair, mesh top and the tightest pleather pants perhaps ever to crackle onstage.

The ambitious visual style of the production is another highlight of the show. A large, moving set piece, lighting and smoke machines make the stage woods a spooky and mysterious place. The colorful costumes contrast with the dim gloom, though some are too reminiscent of '80s aerobic wear.

The storyline itself is not one for children, because of the death as well as the desolate views on marriage and family life. As the musical opens, three chalkboards fill the stage, filled with writings on magic realism and the seven deadly sins. These set the tone for an intellectual journey. Throughout, the characters spout wise sayings almost as talismans, which don't quite help them - or us. While one could try to decode the meaning behind all of Stephen Sondheim's words, perhaps it's better just to sit back and enjoy.

"Into the Woods" is playing through Nov. 4 at the Tomlinson Theater.