

## Great Lakes Theater goes *Into the Woods* (Sept. 28)

by Peter Feher



This season, Great Lakes Theater is uniquely positioned to put on a near-perfect production of Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

The regional company, in residence at the Hanna Theatre, has time and again mounted some of the most appealing shows at Playhouse Square — more intimate than the Broadway tours that

stop just down the street but no less lavishly performed.

You could say it was all for the best that the recent New York revival of *Into the Woods* — with its rotating celebrity cast paying larger-than-life tribute to Sondheim, who died in 2021 — never made it to Cleveland.

Great Lakes Theater's current production, which runs through Nov. 10, is on an altogether more human scale. Sure, the musical's fantastical fairy-tale premise involves a witch, two giants, and some magic beans. (It's several fairy tales in one, in fact.) But the moral of the story, set forth in Sondheim's razor-sharp songs and James Lapine's rhythmic dialogue, has everything to do with accepting the ordinary.

No character in *Into the Woods* learns this lesson more harshly than the Witch, the diva role that stands out amid the ensemble cast. Throughout the opening-night performance on Saturday, September 28, Jillian Kates flourished in the part, whether belting out a phrase in one of her ballads or rapping about her garden full of greens. She was charismatic at every stage of her character's transformation, from the kooky villain who instigates the plot of Act 1 to the glamorous but powerless scapegoat who departs this world midway through Act 2.

The women are the moral center of the musical, though that doesn't mean they all share the same conception of morality. Jaedynn Latter was sensational as a Little Red Riding Hood with a sadistic streak, shouting her numbers as much as singing them (as the vocal writing absolutely warrants). Tesia Dugan Benson's costume design, dotted with delightful anachronistic details, had the character trading her red hoodie for a wolfskin biker jacket after visiting her granny.



RhonniRose Mantilla, as a Cinderella who's not completely convinced she wants her prince, and Jodi Dominick, as the Baker's Wife who's prepared to manhandle and motivate her husband by any means necessary, grew into their respective roles as the evening progressed.

For their part, the men make mistakes on impulse rather than ideology. Joe Wegner hemmed and hawed as the Baker, wholly fitting Sondheim's songs for the character, which sit somewhere between speaking and singing. Nic Scott Hermick played Jack, the boy who chops down the giants' beanstalk, as something of an aloof and adolescent Dennis the Menace. Dan Hoy — in the dual role of Little Red's Wolf and Cinderella's philandering Prince, characters united in their carnal desires — commanded the stage with lecherous leading-man swagger.

Keeping so many plotlines clear and coordinated requires several pairs of skilled hands. The opening number alone — a 15-minute prologue that establishes the entire storybook of fairy tales soon to collide — is a feat of exposition that would test any production team. It speaks to the cohesion of this company that the actors never missed a beat, not in director Victoria Bussert's staging and not under music director Matthew Webb's conducting. Northeast Ohio audiences in search of stellar performance can always count on the Hanna.

*Photos courtesy of Great Lakes Theater*

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