

# entertainment/arts

## 'Into The Woods' is talented at every turn

By Dennis Thompson  
SNP Theater Critic

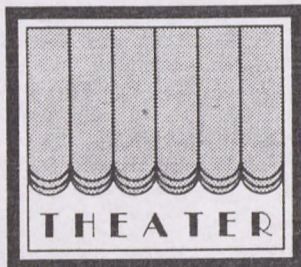
Otterbein College Theatre goes *Into The Woods* and comes out with magic.

This 1988 New York Drama Critics Circle and Drama Desk Award winner is the latest Stephen Sondheim musical (book by James Lapine). Otterbein's production is the rarest of creatures, a large scale production where all the elements work.

These elements include a large student cast with no weak links, performers who are excellent actors as well as singers, fine orchestral accompaniment, special effects, sparkling costumes and a stunning set.

The Sondheim-Lapine work is itself fascinating. *Into The Woods* is an imaginative reworking and intermingling of familiar fairy tales. The action revolves around a new tale of a childless baker and his wife mixed with the stories of *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Rapunzel*.

IN ORDER TO break a witch's spell and have a child, the baker and his wife must collect items from the



### review

familiar characters. These include Cinderella's slipper, Jack's cow, Red Riding Hood's hood, and a lock of Rapunzel's hair. Their search weaves through the other stories and the wishes and dreams of those characters.

The first act closes with the happily-ever-after ending that ends many musicals. To its credit, *Into The Woods* goes beyond that as the characters are forced to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions and find that happily ever after often involves pain and hard choices. It's a fable with modern implications.

The best singing voices are Katy Bavaro's Cinderella, Bryan Brems' Baker,

Mandy Fox's Baker's Wife, and Kristi Matson as the spirit of Cinderella's mother. An especially enjoyable number is "Agony" by Jess Hanks and Todd Crain as the two princes.

Brems, Fox and Bavaro anchor the production but there is talent at every turn. Particularly noteworthy are Katherine Smart's impish Red Riding Hood, Corey Moore's boyish Jack, and Nancy Martin's powerful witch.

**STRONG CHARACTER** performances are contributed by Keith Lorcan Weirich as the intellectually animated Narrator and the trollish Mysterious Man as well as Crain's debonair Wolf.

Director Dennis Romer has expertly shaped a complex work, paying as much attention to spectacle as to performance. He is aided in this extensive effort by Musical Director Craig Johnson, Vocal Director Stephen Monroe, and Choreographer Patricia Hiatt.

Lauren Lambie's costumes are dazzling. Rob Johnson's forest set design is awesomely beautiful and so overwhelming that it occasionally seems to swallow the actors. This is all right, though, as that is exactly what the woods is doing to the characters. The omi-

nous, yet wonder struck atmosphere is enhanced by J. Christopher Wojcieszyn's hued lighting.

*Into The Woods* is billed as a musical that will appeal to both children and adults, although admittedly on different levels. My feeling is that children of grade age will enjoy the music, scenery, the familiar characters and the basically lighthearted nature of the first act. However they may be confused by the complexities of the plot and troubled by the darker nature of Act II.

I ONCE WAS told that the test of a good musical is that you leave the theatre with at least one of the songs continually lingering in your mind. *Into The Woods* fails that, although the music is pleasant, if not memorable, and the lyrics are intriguing and clever.

What stays with you is the story and characters and the memory of a stylish and thoroughly delightful production.

Otterbein College Theatre's *Into The Woods* will continue showing at 8 p.m., Thursday through Saturday, until May 9 at Cowan Hall, 30 N. Grove St., on the Westerville campus. Tickets are \$10 and \$11. For more information call 898-1109 between 1 and 4:30 p.m. weekdays.



# Musical takes a journey into woods, life

By MARCELLA  
HOCHWALT-KING  
Westerville ThisWeek Writer

Once upon a time, there was a fairy tale that was much more than just a fairy tale.

Cinderella, Rapunzel and Little Red Riding Hood are reunited in "Into The Woods," searching for happily-ever-after endings. In their quests, however, they make discoveries more enduring than bread-crumbs trails and glass slippers.

"Into The Woods," the award-winning musical by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, is being performed by Otterbein College Theatre this Thursday through Sunday and May 7-9.

"It's more than just a fairy tale," said Dennis Romer, the musical's director. "It's not just what it appears to be."

He added, "This is a play about a journey. 'Into The Woods' is sort of a journey into life."

The musical explores the importance of family and community, and offers insight on growing up and taking responsibility for choices made.

"There's a lot of magic, but there's also a lot of wisdom," Romer said. "The work is pretty deep."

"Into The Woods" combines traditional tales with a newly-created fable of a childless couple, the baker and his wife, who are willing to go to great lengths to find a child. In fact, in exchange for a baby, they promise a witch that they will steal Cinderella's slipper, Jack's cow, Red Riding Hood's hood and Rapunzel's tresses.

While happy endings seem in sight for the characters in the first act, the outlook becomes more bleak in act two.

The play's two acts are also marked by different themes, Romer said.



Photo courtesy of Otterbein College

The witch (right), played by Nancy Martin, casts a spell over the Baker, played by Bryan Brems, and his wife, played by Mandy Fox, in Otterbein Theatre's production of "Into The Woods."

In act one, the story centers on the individual. "The characters have a lot of wishes and desires and selfish wants," Romer said.

"Act two is really about community. The characters have to come together to make the world work," Romer said.

Every year, Otterbein Theatre presents a musical as the joint venture of the college's theatre and music departments.

Craig Johnson, the music director for "Into The Woods," said

the production's music is "very tuneful and beautifully orchestrated ...

"It's very typical Sondheim. It's very melodic."

He added, "He tries to capture the magic of these various fairy tales as they start to intertwine."

Then as the mood becomes more dark and ominous in the second act, the music reflects that, too. "I think his music really expresses both emotions very well," Johnson said.

"The tunes are very memorable," he said.

Performing "Into the Woods" has proven challenging for both vocalists and actors.

"What's challenging is not to be trapped in playing your version of Little Red Riding Hood or your version of Cinderella," Romer said. Instead, the actors must work to bring human qualities to the characters.

And for the singers, Johnson said, "It's very much like an opera: the strange keys and difficult rhythms ... It goes beyond what the normal musical does."

He added, "It's a show that's even daunting to professionals, much less students."

For the first time, Otterbein Theatre is presenting the musical over two weekends. Romer and Johnson agreed that the extended run should benefit performers and patrons.

"I think there'll be some advantage for the students to perform the show more, very much like (they would in) a professional setting," Johnson said.

Romer said, "It's also good for them ... to put the show away, walk away from it, and then have to do it again."

Romer said he promoted the extended run because for the past four years, the musical has drawn overflow audiences.

"Into the Woods" won the 1988 N.Y. Drama Critics Circle Award, the 1988 Drama Desk Award for Best Musical and garnered Tony Awards from Best Score and Best Book.

"Into the Woods" will be performed at Cowan Hall, 30 N. Grove St. in Westerville. Opening night performance is 7:30 p.m. Other evening performances begin at 8 p.m.; Sunday matinee is 2 p.m. Tickets are \$10 and \$11, and can be reserved by calling 898-1109 between 1 and 4:30 p.m. weekdays. ♦



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# Otterbein's 'Woods' rewarding 39

By Frank Gabrenya

Dispatch Entertainment Reporter

Once upon a time, fairy tales were anything but bedtime stories for children. They were gruesome moral fables about human frailty harshly punished.

I suppose it was Walt Disney who took away their power, but it was Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine who have tried to restore it.

*Into the Woods*, the 1987 musical by composer-lyricist Sondheim and dramatist-director Lapine, is a funny, frightening lesson in moral responsibility, set to a deceptively singsongy score.

*Into the Woods* takes the familiar stories of Jack (of beanstalk fame), Cinderella, Little Red Ridinghood and Rapunzel (plus cameos by Snow White and Sleeping Beauty) and weaves them into a tale of a Baker and his Wife who long for the child denied them by a witch's spell.

The motif that brings them all together is a trek into the forbidding woods that contain the answers to each of their wishes, as well as dangers and temptations.

As with any Sondheim work, *Into the Woods* is not for companies with faint hearts or skimpy budgets.

## THEATER REVIEW

*Into the Woods*, Otterbein College Theatre, Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's fairy-tale musical. Directed by Dennis Romer. Cast: Witch (Nancy Martin); Baker's Wife (Mandy Fox); Baker (Bryan Brems); Cinderella (Katy Bavaro); Red Ridinghood (Katherine Smart); Jack (Corey Moore); Jack's Mother (Julie Cremean); Narrator/Man (Keith Weirich); Rapunzel's Prince (Jess Hanks); Rapunzel (Patti Knoop).

**An evening of grim fairy tales.**

Performances are at 8 tonight and 2 p.m. Sunday; and 8 p.m. Thursday; through May 9 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.

Tickets: \$10 and \$11. Call 898-1109.

Otterbein College's theater and music departments meet the show's enormous challenges in a big, broad, satisfying production.

It is hard to know where to start flinging bouquets. Rob Johnson's set design goes beyond the New York version. Costume designer Lauren K. Lambie has created a spectacular wardrobe that, in almost every case, punctuates the character. The student orchestra, under Craig John-

son's direction, handled the difficult Sondheim score impressively Thursday night.

The large cast has no weak links. Nancy Watson feasts on the showcase role of the Witch, who sets most of the action into motion. Her second-act rendition of *Last Midnight* is full of seductive doom.

Bryan Brems and Mandy Fox anchor the company as the Baker and his Wife, convincing us that these peasants have spent years together. Fox's role is the unspectacular part that won Joanna Gleason a Tony award. Whereas Gleason scored with a plain maturity, Fox charms with beaming optimism.

A particular standout was Katy Bavaro as Cinderella. Her singing, strong in the first act, went beyond that in her second-act rendition of *No One Is Alone*.

Singling out a few people is unfair, though. Suffice to say, the entire company meets the challenge, an Otterbein trademark. Kristi Matson, who has the smallest singing role as the spirit of Cinderella's dead mother, offers the loveliest voice.

Under Dennis Romer's fine, gimmick-free direction, the production fulfills Sondheim and Lapine's intent: a fairy tale for adults, full of wonderful and horrible lessons.



## COVER STORY

## Sondheim's rich 'Woods' reaches down deep

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

Fairy tales collide and blend in Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*.

Cinderella, Jack in the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, a Giant, a Witch and two princes — both "charming" — are among the familiar characters in the fractured musical fable, which opens tonight at Otterbein College.

"It's very, very clever, both lyrically and musically," said Craig Johnson, director of choral activities at Otterbein's music department. Johnson, *Woods'* music director, will conduct an 18-piece orchestra. He also conducted two of Otterbein's acclaimed spring musicals, Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* and last year's *Man of La Mancha*.

"On the surface, *Into the Woods* is about various fairy tales," he said. "Symbolically, the moral is that one has to create community — and that you can't do it alone." The show's best-known song is *No One Is Alone*.

A new fable about the Baker and his childless Wife weaves the other stories into a seamless fabric of love and loss, hope and tragedy.

## COMPLEX MUSIC

Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for his most accessible work in years. James Lapine, his collaborator on *Sunday in the Park With George*, wrote the book and directed the Broadway hit, which beat *The Phantom of the Opera* for the Tony awards for best score and book.

"The music is beautiful," Johnson said. "Sondheim's texts are always challenging to the performers — particularly so in *Into the Woods*."

Perhaps the most complex song is *Your Fault*, in which a succession of the second act's survivors point fingers to deflect any personal responsibility for the Giant's destruction of homes and families.

"It fits together like a complex jigsaw, with

## AT A GLANCE

*Into the Woods*, Otterbein College Theatre's student production of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's musical. Directed by Dennis Romer.

Baker's Wife..... Mandy Fox  
Baker..... Bryan Brems  
Witch..... Nancy Martin  
Cinderella..... Katy Bowers  
Red Riding Hood..... Katherine Smart  
Jack..... Corey Moore  
Jack's Mother..... Julie Cremean  
Narrator/Man..... Keith Weirich  
Rapunzel's Prince..... Jess Hanks  
Rapunzel..... Patti Knoop  
Performances are at 7:30 tonight 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday; and 8 p.m. next Thursday through May 9 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville.  
Tickets: \$10 and \$11. Call 898-1109.

each voice trading off with another," Johnson said. "Going 'into the woods' is venturing into life itself, with the Giant symbolizing danger. To one person, it could be nuclear war or AIDS. To others, it could represent the inherent tragedy of life."

Another important element in creating the show's fairy-tale atmosphere is the fantasy costuming.

"It's a fun show with a variety of vivid characters," said Lauren Lambe, Players Theatre Columbus' former costume designer. "*Into the Woods* is much more theatrical than some of the realistic plays I've done in the last couple of years."

Lambe has designed about 35 color-coded costumes for her first Sondheim musical. Cinderella's family is clothed in metallic golds, violets and burgundies. Jack and his Mother, the Baker and his Wife are dressed in rust, browns and olive

greens. And the Witch, Rapunzel and Rapunzel's prince shine in metallic brocades and iridescent fabrics of cobalt blue and turquoise.

"We didn't want to go for a sequined witch but an abstracted medieval silhouette," Lambe said from Buffalo, N.Y., where she is working as Studio Arena Theatre's costume designer.

"(Director) Dennis (Romer) and I have seen other productions done for the effects, the glitz and the laughs," she said. "But we decided we didn't want to get too far away from the musical drama."

Lambe shopped for most of the costume materials in New York City, visiting central Ohio twice to deliver sketches and bolts of fabric. She returned last week for technical rehearsals.

"Doing it long-distance was a challenge, but I enjoy working with Otterbein," she said.

## FOR CHILDREN OR ADULTS?

This will be the college's first spring musical with an extended, two-week run. Many previous musicals sold out, but the Cowan Hall space was not available for longer than one week until this year.

Romer and Johnson expect *Into the Woods* to break attendance records despite its elements of tragedy. With such sober themes as taking responsibility and facing mortality, can this Sondheim show safely be recommended for the younger set?

"Unlike *Sweeney Todd*, *Into the Woods* is lighter, more humorous and romantic," Johnson said. In short, yes — "with parental supervision and explanation" for pre-adolescents.

Johnson said that his 7- and 10-year-old daughters saw last year's PBS broadcast of the Broadway version "and loved it."

"Children will like it," he predicted, "but on a different level than adults will."



# Memorable performances dotted theaters

By Michael Grossberg  
Dispatch Theater Critic

A theater can have virtually everything: visionary leadership, a hard-working staff, a can-do board of directors, a high-visibility marketing campaign, a growing subscriber base, an exciting season schedule, state-of-the-art facilities and the best location in town.

However, if that theater doesn't employ capable actors in the right roles, it's nowhere.

Good acting is the foundation of live theater. It's the alpha and the omega — the *sine quo non*. In this money-conscious era of financially struggling arts groups, it's easy to overlook the real bottom line.

That's why recognition for superior acting is crucial. Here are some of the local performances that made the 1991-92 season so memorable:

**Best actress.** My favorite was Ionia Zelenka's touchingly vulnerable portrait of a stroke-stricken airplane daredevil in Contemporary American Theatre Company's surrealistic *Wings*.

Yet, there were so many other vivid actresses. Karla Burns played Hattie McDaniel in Players' Theatre Columbus' *Hi-Hat Hattie!*

Otterbein College's *Into the Woods* would not have skipped so merrily and tunefully along without Katy Bavaro's vibrant Cinderella, Katherine Smart's earthy Red Riding Hood, Mandy Fox's ambivalently adult Baker's Wife and Nancy Martin's glamorous, bitter Witch.

Nor would Ohio State University's polished revival of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* have been so convincing without Megan Freeman in the title role. Her gracious intelligence camouflaged the contradictions (to modern eyes) between *Candida*'s protofeminist strength and her polite deference to males.

Freeman also was radiant as feminist Susan B. Anthony opposite Kim Turney's feisty Joan of Arc in OSU's production of Lavonne Mueller's *Little Victories*.

I still giggle at the memory of Constance Shulman's baby-faced Edna Louise in Players' revival of Ed Graczyk's *Come Back to the 5 & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*.

Finally, all the nuns were funny, but Mandy Fox was hilarious as the

## ONSTAGE



Ionia Zelenka, best actress



Patrick Barnes, best actor

mystified Sister Mary Amnesia in Otterbein's sold-out *Nunsense*.

**Best actor.** Patrick Barnes, a major OSU discovery, stood out in practically everything this season (and last). His Marchbanks (*Candida*) was adorably shy and hilariously brash. His multiple roles in *Little Victories*, from a swaggering sheriff to a resolute officer, were solid and spirited. The young man can sing, too; his voice as well as his impish personality enlivened OSU's *Oh, Coward!* Although OSU largely chose to pander to Barnes' comic strengths rather than stretch his dramatic skills, watch out for this recent graduate. He should go far.

Runner-up: T.J. Harler, whose hugely entertaining *tour de force* as a brave, lonely drag queen almost made Reality Theatre's overlong *Torch Song Trilogy* endurable.

Also on target: Bryan Brems' fallible Baker in *Into the Woods*. Tim Ewing's manic awkwardness as an impresario's opera-mad aide in Players' *Lend Me a Tenor*. Dann E. Reese's endearingly innocent South African black in CATCO's *Sizwe Bansi Is Dead*. Geoff Callander's boyish Huck. Lloyd Lynk Jr.'s mournfully mature Jim and Ted

consistently funny vignettes as a dateless nerd helped freshen up *Personals'* dated singles scene.

And it was nice to see Linda Dorff's funny, pathetic Big Mama in Players' otherwise mediocre revival of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Not only because Dorff is one of our best comic actresses, but also because her casting is a reminder that Actors Equity Association, the national union for stage actors, does not have a monopoly on talent. New York is not the only place where Players can find suitable actors.

## ENSEMBLE ACTING

Some performances stand alone. Others triumph in tandem:

**Dynamic duos.** Cecilia deWolf's prickly, commitment-fearing waitress and John Woodson's insistent, passionate short-order cook in Players' Theatre Columbus' *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*. Runner-up: Ned and Martha Dunn as the loving, aging couple in Gallery's *On Golden Pond*.

**Thrilling trio.** Their characters never interacted directly onstage. Yet, gripping monologues by Jim Zvanut's spell-binding Irish faith-healer, Lynn Wilde's memory-steeped wife and guest actor Yaakov Sullivan's glib Cockney manager added up to exceptional theater in New World Theatre's *Faith Healer*.

**Fabulous foursomes.** Ensemble acting is a delicate art. No better local examples could be found this season than in Players' Equity cast for *The Cocktail Hour*. Warren Keith, Allen Leatherman, Betty Jinnette and Charlotte Maier empathetically and amusingly embodied the affluence and angst of a modern WASP family in A.R. Gurney's off-Broadway comedy-drama.

Also quite funny: CATCO's *Roughly Speaking*, an Alan Ayckbourn comedy of errors played with deliciously straight faces by Lynne Roth, C. Joseph Hietter, Jonathan Putnam and Tracy Graham; and Players' *Oil City Symphony*, sold largely on the mock-solemn sincerity of Emily Mikesell, Mike Craver, Klea Blackhurst and Shawn Stengel.



# Resourceful theaters overcome tough times

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Gallery Players' *Wonderful Town* ends today. Center Stage Theatre's 10th-season finale, *Carmen Jones*, opened last night (through July 12). Little Theatre Off Broadway's season finale opens July 31: *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*.

Only a few shows are left before the 1991-92 theater season draws to a nervous, cautiously optimistic close. Although summer theater is off to a rollicking start, now is a good time to look back and take stock.

Central Ohio's plucky, resourceful theater troupes deserve an award for weathering the national arts crunch.

Broadway has its Tony awards, and London's West End has the Olivier Awards. Because Columbus has no equivalent, here are some informal nods to the highs (and lows) of an unusually eventful season:

■ **Most promising debut:** Despite hard times, Greater Columbus' increasingly competitive theater scene saw the debuts of half a dozen groups: NewMarket Mall Family Theatre, Shadowbox Theatre, New World Theatre, New Venture Theatre and, most recently, Mystery Cafe Dinner Theater and Villa Milano Dinner Theater.

While it's too early to predict how many of these groups will survive — much less flourish artistically — New World's first offering in March at the Davis Discovery Center was impressive.

Mesmerizing monologues by New World co-founder Jim Zvanut, actress Lynn Wilde and guest actor Yaakov Sullivan made believers out of the audience for New World's crisp *Faith Healer*, Brian Friel's three-character Irish drama.

■ **Most disappointing debut:** New Venture Theatre's first musical, *Nothing Less Than Love*, was an embarrassing flop. Yet those are the risks of staging works-in-progress. Co-founders Karla Rothan and Beth Kattelman's desire to help playwrights develop plays and musicals remains a worthy goal.

■ **Outstanding sophomores:** Spotlight Dinner Theatre, Grandparents Living Theatre and Columbus Junior Theatre contributed much during their second public seasons. All are developing reliable reputations for well-chosen, well-directed and solidly performed entertainment.

■ **Most original programming:** Several resourceful theaters used their imaginations to make ends meet.

## ONSTAGE



File photo

From *Rocky and Bullwinkle*: Anthony McKinney (as Boris Badenov) and Amy Yates (Natalya Fatale)

Players Youth Theatre Columbus tried something different by offering adults-only performances (with pre-show cocktails) of *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, its playful musical stage version of Jay Ward's nostalgia-trendy TV cartoon series.

Shadowbox Theatre's slogan is "minimalist theater to the max." Shadowbox lived up to that with appetizingly short double bills that mixed revivals of one-act comedies and comedy-dramas with something unusual: new mini-musicals.

Spotlight continues to draw crowds to its

audience-participation whodunits. *Murder Misdirected*, by Larry Pfeil Jr., was even better than *Murder Over Dinner*, Spotlight's first original comedy-mystery. I can't wait to see Pfeil's next whodunit, *Murder on the Menu*, which premieres in the fall.

■ **Outstanding play:** Players Theatre Columbus' affecting *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* was pure poetry. Contemporary American Theatre Company's *Wings* was brilliantly staged and performed. But Players' *The Cocktail Hour*, a deft ensemble piece, edged them out.

■ **Outstanding musical:** Otterbein College topped itself this season with *Into the Woods*. Stephen Sondheim's fractured fairy tale is enormously challenging, but a first-rate team of talented students met that challenge on all fronts: lovely singing, charming acting, a lively orchestra, lustrous costumes, knockout sets and magical special effects.

■ **Best (musical) director:** Dennis Romer, for his approach to *Into the Woods*. Runner-up: Pfeil and choreographer Alice Mooney for Spotlight's ingenious, small-scale *Big River*.

■ **Best (play) director:** The runners-up: Rick Davis, *The Cocktail Hour*; Jay Raphael, *Frankie and Johnny*; Rex McGraw, Ohio State University's *Little Victories*; Dee Shepherd, Reality Theatre's surprisingly persuasive *Boys in the Band*; Lillian Strouss, Gallery Players' admirably restrained *A Shayna Maidel*.

The winner: Geoffrey Nelson, for CATCO's stylized *Wings*. Kudos to lighting designer Cynthia Stillings and sound designer Mark McKenzie for their flickering surrealism.

■ **Inspired lunacy:** Silliness sells. It's a three-way tie among Players' *Oil City Symphony*, which set records for attendance and extended performances; CATCO's *Greater Tuna*, so popular last summer that Michael Harper and Jonathan Putnam reprised their quick-changing roles this summer (their final performances are at 2 and 7 p.m. today and 8 p.m. Monday); and Otterbein's *Nonsense*, which sold out during the winter and is being revived now through July 3.

■ **Disappointments and embarrassments:** The Broadway Series' shockingly flat touring version of *City of Angels*; OSU's frivolous revivals of *The Rovers* and *Lysistrata*; and CATCO's *Revenge of the Space Pandas*, which wreaked its dull revenge on the audience.

Next Sunday: The acting awards and more.