

on into the woods from oregon shakespeare festival at the annenberg

My senior year in high school, the great Robin Bennett took me and a group of enthusiastic Thespians to the Big Apple to see some shows. The highlight of the trip turned out to be the original Broadway production of *Into the Woods*. I found most of the other stuff we saw, which included *Phantom of the Opera*, *Burn This*, and *Fences*, to be either tedious or incomprehensible, to be honest. But *Into the Woods* was every bit the enchanting and thought-provoking evening that the soundtrack had suggested it would be.

The show loomed large in my life for quite a while after seeing it. It looked at so many things that were so important to me at the time: sexuality, romance, ambition, social context, narrative: it seemed a virtually bottomless mine of insight. I found the songs supremely witty and sly, and I loved discovering the way they interlocked, through leitmotiv and allusion to each other. I listened to them endlessly, so that they truly emblazoned themselves on my soul.

However, time moved on, and I did as well, and neither *Into the Woods* nor Stephen Sondheim loomed as large in my personal mythology as they once did. But when a friend let me know that she had an extra ticket to a touring production of *Into the Woods* playing at the Annenberg in Beverly Hills, I leapt at the opportunity to revisit it.

The production was admirable on many scores. Its staging was inventive, eschewing any sort of pictorialism for basic ladders and platforms. The clothes were a thoughtfully-selected hodgepodge of contemporary and fairy-tale garb, and the vaudevillian “trunk-show” was the reigning conceit. It was

briskly paced, and the performers did an admirable job of bringing the fun of the script, with all its winks at the audience and ribald jokes, to entertaining and theatrical life. On all of these scores, the production was far more successful than the revival staged on Broadway a decade ago.

All of the actors could sing beautifully, but what I noticed was noticeably lacking was an awareness on the actor's part of the depth of the material. The whole idea of going into the woods has to do with facing the unknown and the frightening, particularly the fear of facing sexual maturity (Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment*, a kind of Freudian reading of Grimm's fairy tales, had been an important inspiration for the show). The songs in the first act are recountings of that process, culminating in a lesson learned. The songs were sung admirably, but totally lacking in any of the angst or tremulousness that such spring awakenings inevitably involve. The songs are melodious and clever enough that, if they are well-sung, as they were in this case, the lack of dramatic interest may be overlooked by an audience that has been successfully seduced by the many ingenious gambits of a production, as was the case here. But knowing the music and the material as well as I do, I knew what was missing, and I had a feeling that this deficiency would become more glaring in the second act.

And my suspicions were borne out. In the second act of the script of *Into the Woods*, shit goes down. Really important people die. Not what most people expect from a musical. And I knew how impactful these deaths could be, and I sat and watched them NOT hit me, in one instance after another.

The production had simply not taken the characters seriously enough, in its rush to make sure that everyone was laughing enough and things kept moving at a good clip. These characters have real, human problems, real puzzles that have to be unraveled, internally. By neglecting these elements and treating the play as a romp and a spoof, the production fails

to prepare us to accept the loss and grief of Act Two as real. I watched the audience in front of me grow progressively more fidgety as the second act wore on. Soon it was over, and many people leapt to their feet to give the production a standing ovation. In that moment, I felt myself very much to be living in the provinces. This is not how I usually feel in Los Angeles, and I didn't like it.

It was a strange evening for me. On the one hand, hearing those songs that had once been emblazoned on my soul again was incredibly powerful, and I felt tears welling up in me more than once. But I knew this was a personal reaction to the songwriting, and could see at the some time how much was being left on the table by the performers onstage. I certainly fault the director, but I also fault the actors. Somehow they had failed to SEEK the drama and the reversals in their songs; they were like tourists in Rome who sought out Starbucks for coffee and The Gap to shop for clothes. They were missing the whole point of the place. The songs in that show are not charming little diversions that periodically interrupt the forward movement of the story, they are necessary tellings by people who have snatched victory from the jaws of real danger, and can barely believe they are still alive.

Here are some examples from the original Broadway production, for which Joanna Gleason won a Tony for Best Actress in a Musical.

I'll always be grateful for that production. It taught me so much, both about the theater and about life. Whatever else I think about this new production, I can at least be grateful that it has brought all of this up for me again.

It will be interesting to see what the movie is like.