

WOODS a journey worth taking

By MEG BRANDL

On Tuesday night at the Marion Galloway Theater, we in the audience were haunted by two simple lines of dialogue as we learned the dangers of going into the woods: "Everything will work out fine in the end!" "Not always."

Stephen Sondheim's haunting and unconventional melodies and lyrics combine both witty and thought-provoking aspects in this fairy tale gone askew. In the first half of the show, familiar characters such as Jack (of the proverbial beanstalk), Cinderella, Rapunzel and Little Red Riding Hood are encountered by a childless baker and his wife on their quest to gather items for a wicked witch to have their curse lifted.

As these fairy tale characters go through the motions of their respective stories, they repeatedly encounter each — other often with hilarious results. However, when the lights go up on Act II, there is unrest in Happily Ever After, and the characters embark on a both moral and physical journey, fighting for their peace of mind and lives.

The writing, both of music and book, is superb. Lyrics are clever, sometimes punning, other times putting a twist on a familiar tale. The characters are humanized when they begin to sing, transforming from the flat storybook-types

one would expect, into men and women who are a little excited and scared, who sometimes want more even after "happily ever after," and who question what they wished for and what they've done with their lives so far.

After a point the book and lyrics become more unified as the tone of the play darkens, and overall the two components — music and dialogue — fit together nicely. True, someone who has never heard or seen Sondheim might not immediately take to the way he

chooses to juxtapose vocal and instrumental melodies, but I believe anyone will ultimately warm up to it because it is so appropriate to the context of the play.

Director Seth Panitch and choreographer Rita Snyder mean business. The actors utilize the stage in effective and sometimes surprising ways. The wood sprites, whether dancing about or moving scenery, remain in character and seem a natural (pardon the pun) part of the mysterious woods. When the cast sings, they are lively

and active. When they speak, they never stay in one place for long. The pace is appropriately balanced, speeding through witty banter and joking and putting on the brakes now and then for serious, contemplative songs and dialogue.

And certainly every part is well cast. The actors take on their roles wholeheartedly, presenting favorite old storybook characters just as one might expect them to be — and then some. If ever the witch seems over-the-top, if

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ever Rapunzel seems far too sweet, if ever the narrator seems stereotypical and far too enthusiastic, it is the nature of the character, wholly appropriate to the humor and even satire of the story.

To praise the production further, the characters' cos-

tumes are vibrant and well suited to each of them, from the highly amusing getup donned by Milky White, Jack's cow, to the standard royal finery of the princes and Cinderella. The set is an important element in the storytelling and, again, the characters play off of their surroundings well.

"Into the Woods" is not a cut-and-dried fairy tale; there

is a balance between reality and happily ever after even in this imaginary world. And one cannot help being absolutely sucked in to the tale as the baker, holding his new son, wracked by the inner turmoil of a moral dilemma and wondering what course of action he should take, is joined by his wife, who sings, "Sometimes people leave you halfway through the wood. Do not let it grieve you; no

one leaves for good ..." I was shocked to suddenly feel big fat tears welling up in the corners of my eyes.

In the end, the choice is yours. You will laugh. You will think. You might even cry, but you will never know unless you make the long, dark journey yourself.

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