



THE METAL MOLDERS

Southwest Florida artists turn metallic material into sculptures, salvaged treasures and striking works of art

BY CASEY BRADLEY GENT
Florida Weekly Correspondent

IF YOU GOOGLE SEARCH A topic like “metal artist,” Google may provide you with an answer along the lines of: Metallica or ACDC. And, if the metal you are looking for is indeed musical, this Google answer will suffice. However, for folks who are interested in the tangible arts of metal, be it burning, forming or painting metals, including steel and aluminum, then the Google search you are looking for may be a bit harder to dial in.

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Artist John Henry's Tequila Sunrise, pictured along the Baker Museum Sculpture Gardens.



CASEY BRADLEY GENT/
FLORIDA WEEKLY
A sculpture designed
by Jason Sanders.

Fairytales collide in “Into the Woods”

Players Circle Theater takes audiences beyond a ‘happily ever after’

BY JENNIFER THOMAS
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Journey into the woods for an adult-fairytale mashup of familiar and cherished childhood favorite stories, but with a twist. What happens after the happily ever after occurs? Players Circle Theater is producing “Into the Woods,” a musical with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by James Lapine.

This three-time Tony Award-winning musical premiered on Broadway in 1987. It cleverly intertwines several familiar fairy tales, including Cinderella, Little

Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel and the Baker and his Wife, into one interconnected story.

According to the show's Director and the theater's Director of Education, Kimberly Suskind, “Into the Woods explores the familiar fairy tales you know (Little Red Riding Hood, Jack & the Beanstalk, Cinderella, etc.) all happening at the same time,” she contin-



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ued. “The stories interweave and what begins light and magical turns deeper and more emotional as the characters learn what happens after they get their happily ever after.”

A North Fort Myers graduate and incoming freshman at Florida Southern College, Emma Kane portrays Cinderella.

Kane explained she approached playing the Cinderella character by focusing on her kindness toward the beginning of the show and finding the good in every character, no matter what their cruelty



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Paige Howard and Gavin Ott who play the Baker and the Baker's Wife.

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INTO THE WOODS

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toward this iconic heroine.

"As the show continues, Cinderella keeps this trait whilst also being placed in a high-stakes situation: facing a giant," Kane described. "I made sure to show her strength and independence alongside caring for the other characters that she becomes fond of."

Portraying the Baker's Wife is Paige Howard, a Fort-Myers resident who attends Florida Southern College.

"The thing that drew me to the Baker's Wife is how smart she is," she said. "In the first act she gets to be very resourceful, and quick-witted and there's a lot of comedic moments that come from that, but underneath that, all of the issues and questions that she is working through in the show feel very real, and are questions that I have asked myself like, what makes a person good, and what can we do to give life a meaning?"

Grace Duncan, a Punta Gorda resident and Florida Gulf Coast University musical theatre major, plays the Witch, who can be intimidating, funny, protective and vulnerable and at times all of these in the same scene.

"I hope audiences get to see, though she can be cruel, that the Witch is a complex woman who has been wronged in the past," Duncan said. "Due to being punished and cursed herself, it changes her perspective about the world, and she now sees it as unforgiving and something that takes innocence and good things away. The Witch wants to keep control over what she still has. She is very human and represents what it is like to be a mother that does not want to lose her child, but battles with her need for control and not letting go."

Beyond happily ever after

Audiences very well might know these fairy tales individually, but this musical turns them into something much deeper.

"At its heart, I believe 'Into the Woods' is a morality tale. It's a message to be careful what you wish for because you may have to live with the consequences,"



The cast of Players Circle's "Into the Woods."

COURTESY PHOTO

Suskind believes. "The characters learn that reaching and achieving unrealistic and extravagant wishes may not be exactly what they actually wanted, that there is no such thing as a perfect 'Happily ever after.' They start to appreciate the human, messy, yet beautiful side of life. In the song 'Children Will Listen,' 'Into the Woods' also reminds the audience that our words and actions help to shape the future generations."

The prologue sets up all of the fairytale stories and gives the audience a sense of what they are about to experience, Suskind believes.

An overarching theme of lessons for the characters to learn during their respective journeys is present.

"They (characters) learn that perfect isn't fulfilling, actions have consequences, no one is truly alone, people are not either all good or all bad, life is complicated," Suskind explained. "I think it's clear that all of these lessons are universally applicable."

Howard says the thing that she really adores about "Into the Woods" is how big the show feels. "Every character feels fully formed, and every song and scene is filled with tiny details that make the show more interesting, and it's been a really rewarding challenge to get to discover all of those details and bring them to life," she added.

As audiences will witness, the second act of this Tony Award-winning musical is very

different from Act One. Suskind described how the cast is preparing for this emotional transition during rehearsals.

"We have been talking a lot about the depth of these characters. Stephen Sondheim brilliantly writes what are usually two-dimensional characters and makes them into real people with hopes and flaws," she described. "We have been talking about the objectives of each of the individual characters and the lengths they will go to get what they want. The first act centers on the characters achieving, and the second act centers on the consequences of their choices."

In the musical, one of Cinderella's biggest struggles is deciding what she truly wants, and Kane described how she connects with her character to bring her to life on the stage.

"The moment I connect with most personally is the song 'No one is Alone' which I would consider the resolution of the show where the giant is being defeated, and Cinderella takes initiative in both facing the giant and caring for the children," she reflects. "Throughout the show, Cinderella struggles with deciding what she truly wants but what she is meant to do seems to suddenly become clear during this number. I recently had to decide what I want in terms of college and my future. The answer became clear when I started being authentically myself and doing what I love, which is musical theatre."

Synonymous with the musical theater genre, Sondheim is a legend, but with famously complex music and lyrics.

"There is nothing quite like learning a Stephen Sondheim score! These students have really stepped up to the plate and have worked very hard to learn this difficult music. Stephen Sondheim's music is not complex just to be complex; he writes in real thought patterns that mirror the character's subtext and journey," Suskind described. "We are lucky to have Roz Metcalf as our Music Director. She has meticulously gone through the score and worked with the cast members to make them feel confident and comfortable with the difficult music. The magic is what happens when the cast gets all of the rhythms, harmonies and melodies correct! They see their hard work pay off and start to understand the brilliance of Sondheim."

The most challenging musical scene for Kane to perform is "On the Steps of the Palace," as she says this number is what she would consider the most challenging musical and emotional number for her to perform.

This piece is very complex musically with all of the changes in time signatures, which match the changes in Cinderella's emotions throughout the song, Kane adds.

"Stephen Sondheim, the composer, is a genius in this aspect and loves to have the music match the character's feelings and situation, which makes the music more fun despite its difficulty," Kane believes.

"What makes this piece emotionally difficult is all of the different acting beats throughout the song. I really have to think deeply about what is being said and what leads Cinderella to say and think each thing so that my face and body language portray that."

Howard's favorite song to perform is "Maybe They're Magic" because she says, "It was such a challenge to figure out what was going on internally during that song. The Baker's Wife is questioning her own actions, while trying to convince both herself and her husband that she made the right decision," she continues. "The song is packed with sincere questions, jokes, and wordplay, and it only lasts about a minute, so it was really interesting to go in and dissect every line."

In this musical, the Witch has some of the show's most demanding songs.

"I believe the biggest challenge for these songs and performing them is to find the deeper truth within them. I have continued to work on how I can show more than just an evil, mean witch that (other) characters fear," Duncan explained. "There is a necessary focus on the questions she asks throughout her songs, especially during the song 'Stay with Me.' There are tender moments in her songs that show a vulnerability, love, and fear she shows almost only to Rapunzel. I think this level of honest acting is quite a challenge, but it is so fun and fascinating to understand and interpret."

Duncan's favorite scene in the musical is the ending song, "Finale: Children Will Listen." "This song is such a beautiful ending that brings all of the fairytales together for a gorgeous final message," she reflected. "The lyrics 'Careful the wish you make/ Wishes are children/Careful the path they take/Wishes come true, not free' always bring me to tears, even just reading the lyrics."

This production is a student-led cast, and Suskind believes selecting "Into the Woods" as part of the theater's season fortifies its overall mission.

"I wanted to pick a production that would challenge our students. Players Circle Studio is a pre-professional training program and 'Into the Woods' forces these actors to think beyond the words and lyrics. It deepens their abilities as actors and makes them ask difficult questions," she believes. "Since the first rehearsal, they have been working on character analysis sheets and discovering where and when their characters may shift tactics and objectives. None of the characters are two-dimensional, and it forces the actors to work together and push beyond their comfort zones."

Duncan describes her character development for the Witch. "My interpretation of the Witch has taken great inspiration from previous performances of this role," Duncan reflected.

"But outside of rehearsal, I have read through the script and annotated it



Emma Kane as Cinderella.

COURTESY PHOTO

throughout with my own thoughts and feelings. Thanks to our amazing director, Kimberly Suskind, we were given character analysis sheets to further dive into those objectives, the 'whys' behind it, what stands in their way, how they go about achieving their goals, and what the consequences and lessons that follow," she continues. "It helps the cast, as performers, to round out our characters and realize that each and every one of us portrays such deep, complicated characters."

A timeless story

"Into the Woods" continues to resonate with audiences nearly 40 years after it first premiered.

"I believe the brilliance of 'Into the Woods' will always feel relevant as these lessons and explorations into the human condition will forever be something that resonates with audiences of all ages. It's also one of the rare musicals that truly offers something for everyone," Suskind describes. "Children will be enchanted by the beloved fairy tale characters, magical moments, and adventurous journey through the woods. Meanwhile, teens and adults will appreciate Sondheim's brilliant wit, laugh at the clever comedy, and be deeply moved by the show's powerful themes of family, loss, love, responsibility, and hope."

For Kane, she resonates most strongly with the themes of a lack of simple morality and a happily ever after, and she believes the audience will also connect with these.

"The characters in the story don't get the same endings that they did in the fairytales," Kane explains. "Instead, their endings are more human and realistic, filled with responsibility and loss. Their motives, such as those of heroes, are not so black and white. Even Prince Charming acts selfishly. I think that this will real-



COURTESY PHOTO

Julie Bowser who plays Jack.

ly have an impact on the audience as it has left an impact on me."

The Baker's Wife character makes choices that audiences often discuss after the curtain comes down and Howard hopes post-show conversations are sparked.

"I hope those moments make people question what their definition of 'good' is, and I hope they see the decisions that

my character makes, and how she justifies them to herself, and think about the ways that they may be doing that in their own lives, and how they are really affecting other people," she added.

Duncan believes the biggest takeaways of the musical for the audience are still relevant for audiences today.

"The biggest takeaways for this musical are to be careful when trying to get what

you wish for and understand the possible outcomes and consequences that may bring, the affect these stories and lessons you have learned from in the past bring upon not just you but those younger and beginning to experience life (as beautifully said in the final song 'Children Will Listen'), and there are always going to be bumps in the road and scary obstacles, but you must bravely go through that uncertainty anyways to make progress in your own journeys," she explains.

The Players Circle Theater's production of Into the Woods features performers ages 14 through 23 in Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's beloved musical, but their work extends well beyond the spotlight.

"Students help construct scenery, build props, alter costumes, assist backstage, work as technical interns, and learn every aspect of what it takes to produce professional live theater," as noted in the press release. "The experience is designed to give them an appreciation for every role that brings a production to life."

Whether you're introducing a child to live theater or you're a lifelong musical theater fan, "Into the Woods" delivers an unforgettable experience, Suskind added. "It's the perfect show for families to enjoy together because every generation walks away entertained and every generation discovers something different to love." ■

In the KNOW

Into the Woods

- **When:** July 30 through Aug. 9
- **Where:** Players Circle Theater, 13211 McGregor Blvd., Fort Myers
- **More Info:** <http://playerscircletheater.com/> or 239-800-3292

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