

A Wow for "Into the Woods"

By [Jordan Richard-Craven](#)

Much anticipated, the Ram's Head Theatrical Society's spring musical production of "Into the Woods" opens this weekend to kick off the quarter with a lively story about all of our favorite childhood characters. Stephen Sondheim's musical brings fabled figures like Jack and his beanstalk, Cinderella and her slipper and Rapunzel with her long locks into one twisted fairytale about family, romance and magic. Running for around two hours, the musical feels like an adult's adventure through childhood fairytales, a dream from which we wake with more understanding of human relationships.

The story begins with a fun and fast-paced opening number that introduces us to the many different characters and conflicts. A baker and his wife bargain with a wicked witch in order to have a baby, Little Red Riding Hood braves the woods to visit her grandmother, poor Jack must sell his beloved yet useless cow because his mother needs the money and Cinderella needs to find a way to attend the ball. To fulfill their specific goals, the characters travel through the woods, causing problems for one another along the way. Every character builds a unique relationship with the others, creating a complex and ever-thickening plot, yet the didactic tale has the characters ultimately find common ground in their struggles and pain, uniting over motherhood and marriage, loss and love. The music, of course, mimics the plot's poignant complexity and emotional trajectory. Multiple characters sing at once, with different songs that explain their feelings and thoughts. The ensemble took to the challenge of Sondheim's layered music and its renowned difficulty, and the vocal talents of the cast truly shine in this production.

I was very impressed by the actors' vocal ability and musical direction. Although the whole production seemed vocally flawless, Laura Stampler '10, playing Cinderella, Ken Kansky '12, playing Jack, Braden Lake '10, as the Baker's wife, and Mary Beth Corbett '12, playing the witch, were particular standouts. (Stampler has written for The Daily.) The music of "Into the Woods" is beautiful and demands that the singer pay great attention to detail because so many other rhythms occur simultaneously. Although the speed jumbles their words at times, the singers showcase their vocal abilities with confidence and surely do Sondheim's songs justice. The witch has some of the most powerful and difficult songs of the musical, and Corbett rises to the challenge. I loved the "Stay With Me" scene, in which the wicked witch becomes a devoted mother, desperately fearful of the harm the woods may do to her daughter Rapunzel. Here Corbett turns the witch's insanity into sadness and pain and presents her theatrical ability in achieving the character's emotional levels. James Everett '13 and Lake, as the Baker and his wife, are also a highlight of show, especially in their scenes of quarreling and romance. Their conversations of song flow very well, as their words bounce back and forth in perfect rhythm, so that they bicker just as husband and wife would.

My only criticism would be of the set. Using three pretty brick rooftops and near leafless trees, the set feels provincial, suggesting all action is occurring in a quaint town. I would have liked to go deeper into the dark and mysterious woods, although, the provinciality does work for some scenes. The set creates that essential fairytale feel that draws the audience in to the world of childhood fables, but with more time (and perhaps more money), I felt as though the set had potential that remained untapped.

Ram's Head does a remarkable job of bringing to life Sondheim's twisted fantasy world. The group is Stanford's oldest and largest completely student-run theater organization, and to know that everything from lighting to costume design, from blocking and scoring to make-up, is done by the students leaves one in awe of the power of an ensemble. Students from all academic backgrounds, class years and social circles work together to put on this professional production. Director Liz Stark '12 praised Ram's Head, noting that its productions allow students a uniquely social experience, in which everyone comes to know one another as friends. (Stark is a staff writer for The Daily.) This tight-knit community makes the Ram's Head production process one of collaboration and personal growth, as students participate for love of performance. Their love of musical theater definitely shines through in this show. Ram's Head once again gives us a fun and exciting Spring Musical that will leave you skipping in song!

"Into the Woods" runs April 9-10 and 15-17 in Memorial Auditorium at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for students and \$15 for faculty and staff; \$20 general admission.

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