More Than the Moon: Building the World of Into The Woods

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More Than The Moon: Building the World of Into The Woods

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Stage Design at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Katherine Elaine Field
BA in Theatre University of Kentucky ‘15
MFA in Stage Design
VCU
2018

Major Director: Scott Bradley, Assistant Professor
Head of Scenic Design, VCU Theatre

Virginia Commonwealth University
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Abstract

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This thesis details the evolution of my scenic design for VCU’s 2018 production of Into The Woods. The document explains key factors for my design concept featuring a unit set instead of implementing traditional staging methods for James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim’s classic musical, based on the fairytales of the Brothers Grimm.
MORE THAN THE MOON: BUILDING THE WORLD OF INTO THE WOODS
Knowing that Into the Woods would be my thesis project, I started this year figuring out exactly how we could accomplish such a large musical in our unusual space. After working in Hodges Theatre for 3 years and seeing/designing several shows in the space, I was acutely aware of the limitations presented. The Hodges Theatre has no fly system, very little backstage space, and is a Modified ¾ Thrust layout. Therefore, it is incredibly difficult to have flying scenery or large wagons come in and out of the space, so my goal for this production was to create a largely stationary unit set, but still have the magic of the show shine through and have the concept be strong.

The concept of VCU’s 2018 production of Into the Woods was set in an abandoned, 19th century library somewhere in Europe. The Narrator, a teenage kid who breaks into the space, carries a notebook and several supplies to create the fairytales that plays out in front of him and the audience. Because we are not in a proscenium theatre, both the Director, Kikau Alvaro, and I felt it strange to have the Narrator “presenting” to the audience off to the side of the action. Instead, he is right in the middle, creating props out of the library debris to help the story move along. Examples of these items include: Jack’s Golden Harp, created out of broken stair banister pieces; the hen that lays golden eggs: created from a chicken skeleton that was displayed in what would’ve been the “Science and Anatomy” section of the library attached to a remote control car the Narrator brought: and the knife the Baker’s Wife uses, a broken piece of the stained glass window featured upstage.

I was naturally drawn to a library. If you strip away the plot, these characters of Into the Woods are the ones that we grew up hearing and watching and reading. The Brothers Grimm wrote them down, but the fairytales were long handed down tales and
all had various origins. Where else would these characters meet, but seated on the shelf right next to one another? The architectural details of the library are based in the Gothic Revival period, being the architecture period when the Brothers Grimm were documenting these tales. Hodges Theatre has a maximum height of 37’ from the zero deck and I wanted both a dramaturgically strong and grand architecture style to really take advantage of the incredible height of the theatre. The floor design is also based directly off of a tile design by one of the most prominent architects of the period, Augustus W.N. Pugin.

Because the main structure of the set didn’t “change” we needed to indicate different locations in atypical ways, typically by moving chairs around, levels, or entrances. The Narrator enters the stage from a floor grate, and is the only character, besides the Mysterious Man, that uses that entrance/exit. There was also another entrance beneath the 30” deck for the Mysterious Man to quickly disappear. Cinderella at the beginning of Act 1 is on the zero deck, when she is poorest, and rises to the 2nd deck (a total height of 11’-3” off of zero deck) to indicate her rise to power after marrying the prince. The center bookshelf on the 30” deck opens and closes to reveal and hide characters. Cinderella always entered from the 2nd deck grand staircase when running from the ball.

One of the main ways of creating “magic” within the world I created onstage was by the use of the stained glass windows featured upstage center. What was once a rose window has shattered to a point where it appears more like a crescent moon; the center tri-panel featured one tree, which was singularly lit and hit with projections (Projection Designer: Dasia Gregg) when Cinderella is speaking at the grave of her mother under a
large hazel tree; and Jack enters/exits through a side tri-panel when he is visiting the "Kingdom of the Giants" high in the sky. When the Witch meets her end in Act 2, the 2 side tri-panels fly open, a blackout, then when the lights rise she is gone and the windows are shut once more. In addition to being visually stunning, the stained glass provided many opportunities for magic to happen in the world.

The library also included various overgrowth in order to make the idea of “woods” even stronger. Vines crawled down the bookshelves and out from underneath the 30” deck, intermingling with piles of damaged books, and thin trees stretched from the deck up and out of sight. The actors were able to interact with these trees and having real trees both looked better and were less of a strain on the shop because they did not have to make them.

Simply by embracing the unusual space and limitations of Hodges Theatre and the resources that were provided, the physical world of Into the Woods became much more magical and visually stunning than if I had approached the production in the typical fashion, by attempting large moving scenery representing different locations. Instead, the magic was created onstage, right in front of the audience.
ALL PHOTOS CREDITED TO AARON SUTTEN.
List of References


Production photos taken by Aaron Sutten.
Vita

Katherine Elaine Field was born April 20th, 1993 in Ames, Iowa, and is an American citizen. She received her Bachelors of Arts in Theatre from the University of Kentucky in May 2015, and has since worked professionally in Kent, Ohio, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina, Richmond, Virginia, and Lexington, Kentucky.