

For Jamestown's Richard Martin, Directing Into the Woods is a Wish Come True



Now in his second season as artistic director of Jamestown Community Theatre (JCT), Richard Martin is not shy about his love of Sondheim/Lapine's beloved "fractured fairy tale" of a musical, *Into the Woods*. "It's my favorite musical in the whole world," he said enthusiastically. "If you're not the sort of person who loves this show, we can't be friends. Seriously, though, it's Sondheim. It's fairy tales. It's Sondheim doing fairy tales. What could be better?"

The Jamestown-based group has long made a name for themselves not only for their productions, but also for their commitment to fostering the growth of arts, culture and social awareness for the town's youth. Under the auspices of the town's Recreation Department and the watchful eye of the nonprofit's board, the group regularly casts both student and adult actors in their shows.

Their upcoming production of *Into the Woods* running March 21 - 24 is no exception, featuring a cast that includes 18 adults and 16 young actors. A 1986 Broadway hit that was turned into a star-studded Disney movie in 2014, *Into the Woods* weaves together the well-known fairy tales of "Jack and the Beanstalk," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella" and more. The second act then picks up each story *after* the supposed "happily ever afters," showing audiences that often there are harsh realities to face when everything you wish for comes true.

Into the Woods is part of the JCT's first curated season of programming, purposefully choosing shows that thematically work together. "This is the first year we announced our full season in advance," explained Martin. "This year we decided on a fractured fairy tale theme. We kicked off with a one-act summer camp play for kids, the fall show was *Shrek: The Musical*, and now the spring show is *Into the Woods*."

Martin is very proud of the "sheer talent" on display by his more seasoned cast members. "While of course we have some powerhouse singers in the lead roles (Jessica Gates as the Witch, Robert Grady as the Baker, Keri Boisclair as the Baker's Wife)," he points out that "the strength of the supporting cast is just astounding. Morgan Capodilupo as Little Red and Austin Venditelli as Jack are going to give performances that are simply not to be missed!"

Almost all of the group are from Jamestown and nearby areas. "We are not doubling any parts," Martin said proudly. "The animals - Milky White and Cinderella's Birds - are all being played by children and Cinderella's stepsisters are being played by teen actresses Isabella Rocheleau and Cora Lawson. In

keeping with JCT's mission of intergenerational collaboration, we have a number of parent-child pairs in the cast. For example, Ryan Hill is Cinderella's Prince and his daughter Rylee Hill (who was last seen in JCT as Donkey in *Shrek*) is Granny."

Martin also gave a tip of the hat to Jackson Brine, the fifth grader who is playing Milky White. "He is hysterical, truly gifted at physical comedy," stated Martin, adding "He's totally going to steal the show!" He went on to say that, "The thing that strikes me most about [Jackson] is how much he understands about the material. At the very first rehearsal, I asked each person to go around and say something about their character, and he said: 'I'm Milky White, the gender-indeterminate cow. I don't like labels.'"

As far as directorial choices, Martin admits to having a few new ideas to bring to the staging. "The most unique thing we're doing is the way we're playing the Narrator (Liam Malloy). In Act One, he's embodying his childhood self — though he looks like a grown-up — retelling the story as it's been told to him, the way children do. . . But then in Act Two, time passes in a big way — the world is more modern — the sets and some characters/costumes have adapted, though some cling to the past. In Act Two, the Narrator is grown up, and he's no longer simply telling the story, but discovering it through research. He's set in an archive, uncovering aspects of the tale as recorded in manuscripts, sharing his findings with the audience as he goes. He's realized the truth is more complicated than the tale he was told as a child."

Martin feels that the 33-year old show still holds a timely message — maybe even one *ahead* of its time, he explained, "Much of the show focuses on questions of family and parenting. In this time of tiger moms, helicopter parents, free-range parents, there's so much advice out there that tries to make the raising of children into a recipe, as if all you had to do is follow it. But the Witch makes that mistake with Rapunzel, trying to shield her from the world — as in certain versions of homeschooling — and in the process, she leaves her utterly unprepared to be an adult."

Martin also credits the play for its redefinition of what constitutes a family. "We go from classic fairytale visions of the family in Act One to the end where the Baker, Cinderella, Red and Jack find each other and form a family of their own," he said, noting, "It's not the traditional or typical version of happy ever after, but it's a life that's livable."

When not busy with his duties at JCT, Martin is an anthropologist by profession and teaches in the Harvard College Writing Program in Cambridge, Mass. "I offer a freshman writing course called "Society and the Witch," introducing students to academic writing and research in anthropology, cultural studies and folklore.

So, what is next for Martin? "I've been very lucky to have already directed my two most favorite pieces of theater — *Angels in America* and *Into the Woods*. So, I'm sort of like the characters at the start of Act Two, where I'm wondering what to do now that my wishes have come true. I've been very fortunate in my life so far. I was a first-generation college student, and I got to study — and now work — at some of the best universities in the world. When I lived in New York, I got to sing with my choir at some amazing venues, like BAM and Carnegie Hall. I have an amazing husband and two wonderful children. And, while my big debate early in my adult life was becoming an academic or pursuing theater, now I get, in some way, to do both. So, I think for me this is less a moment to wish for more and more of a moment to be grateful for all the opportunities I've been blessed with, and to hope that I'll be able to continue to find or carve a path as I journey on."

Jamestown Community Theatre presents Into The Woods, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and

book by James Lapine, directed by Richard Martin. March 21-24 at the Jamestown Community Center, 41 Conanicus Avenue, Jamestown, RI. More info: www.jamestowncommunitytheatre.com, tickets at <https://jctwoods.brownpapertickets.com>.