

MUSKET performs 'Into the Woods' like never before



Courtesy of MUSKET

By Alex Bernard, Daily Community Culture Editor
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Adam Quinn was excited. He couldn't get the words out fast enough.

“I can guarantee that in seven months of research, there is something we are doing with this show that we have revealed to no one, that no production of Into the Woods has done before. And I can guarantee that.”

That's what director Adam Quinn told me in a Starbucks on the corner of State St. and Liberty St., where dozens of students tapped away at their laptops. It was easy to imagine what they were

typing about: an economics paper, a sociology thesis, a tweet about how the barista got their name wrong on the cup – “It’s Alex, not ‘All Hecks!’” It was easy to imagine. It always is.

After all, it’s an ancient, respected practice – people-watching. Observing that old man walk his Dachshund to impress the pretty woman on the bench and guessing that the wiener dog isn’t company enough anymore. Seeing that child trip over a tree root and distantly wondering if she’ll fall in the shower when she’s 82, and will she break her hip? And who will help her?

It’s old. Old practice. Old stories.

“Into the Woods” – a musical about old tales – has become just that: Old. Fascinating, thought-provoking and important, but familiar. Like a Lifetime Achievement Award or Robert De Niro. Or gravity.

And yet, MUSKET – Michigan’s only student-run musical theater group – promises a divergence, an unprecedented approach to one of our most celebrated, most widely performed musicals.

With music by the incomparable Stephen Sondheim and a book by James Lapine, Into the Woods debuted on Broadway in 1987 to critical acclaim and 10 Tony nominations. Last December, the [Disney adaptation](#) starring Meryl Streep, Anna Kendrick and Emily Blunt, among others, opened in theaters, capturing three Oscar nominations and a handful of other accolades.

The musical follows some of our favorite fairytale characters – Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Rapunzel, Jack and his Beanstalk – as they chase after their wishes until, eventually, the wishes are granted, we break for intermission and return to find our heroes facing what happens *after* “happily ever after.”

“I really believe this is a fantastic show with a fantastic book, beautiful music, glorious lyrics that I really think are some of the best lyrics in musical theater,” Quinn said. “I truly am of the belief that ‘Moments in the Woods’ is one of the best songs ever written for musical theater, one of the most specific and intense songs.”

Director (and choreographer) Quinn explained that, long before the curtain opens tonight, he and his cast tackled these songs and stories like they would any other musical, essentially blinding themselves from previous performances for the sake of original interpretations and clean character development.

“The way we’ve kind of approached this is not that there’s a specific concept that we’re going with, or a certain style or a certain time period, but simply that I have gotten the script as if it’s a new musical,” Quinn said. “I basically have, from the beginning, encouraged the actors, ‘Don’t watch the movie, don’t watch the musical, don’t watch that PBS documentary on it ... Instead, find out what’s actually in the text.’”

From there, the cast of 23 – chosen from an audition pool of about 300 – developed their characters through table reads, experimentation and exercises. One exercise, in particular, focused on breaking free from restrictive blocking and exploring new corners of their characters’ psyches.

“We took all the props and put them in the center of the room, and we said, ‘OK, now today, we’re gonna do the show, but I want you to throw away all the blocking you’ve known,” Quinn said. “And I just want you to do the story in the round now, and it will force you out of blocking, it will force you out of choreography, and it will force you to just tell the actual story that’s being told.”

The result, according to Quinn, has been an unpredictable, vibrant rehearsal process and unexpected works of striking originality. Over time, through six-a-week rehearsals, this originality was fostered by the cast’s chemistry with one another – both off and on the stage.

“It’s been really also fun to watch people like Sam (Yabrow), who’s playing Jack, work with the actor who’s playing Milky White because they literally had never met on the first day, and now when you look at them on stage, I mean, I at least see them as best friends from childhood,” Quinn said. “And whether or not Paul (Mayer) and Sam actually feel that way about each other, the relationship that they’ve created is really just beautiful.”

And yet, it’s not just the actors’ chemistry, comedy and approach that define MUSKET’s 2015 winter show. Like the musical he directs, Quinn is striving to subvert the old stories, to dig deep into the solid, impenetrable stone of Sondheim and find something new, something to hold in front of the audience and say, “Look at this! Have you ever seen anything like this?!”

Quinn’s process began with the Narrator.

“The one big realization I had, and what I guess you could say my concept or my key for this show – I like to call it the ‘Key to the Show’ – has been the Narrator (played by Mackenzie Orr),” Quinn said. “Every single thing that happens in this show is because of the Narrator ... Everything that the characters are saying is coming as well from the Narrator, which then implied to me that everything that is happening on this stage is coming from the Narrator’s psyche.”

“Well, how’d you incorporate that realization into the show?” I asked (like a good journalist).

Quinn opened his mouth, but hesitated. A sound, the beginnings of an answer, escaped from the back of his throat before he stopped himself and said he’d rather not divulge anything, that this show has a few “secrets” that are too good to give away just yet. Yet.

“The Narrator functions in a much more present, powerful and in-your-face way than the traditional Narrator of ‘Into the Woods’ would,” Quinn said.

Post-interview and off-the-record, Quinn divulged those secrets. I had shivers – the kind that start at the base of your spine and work their way into your brain like an electric current. *It’s so simple*, I thought. *So brilliantly simple. And yet, like nothing you’ve ever seen.*

As I packed up, Quinn told me how he sat in his room last semester, with tears in his eyes, asking himself again and again, “What the hell am I gonna do with the Narrator?” until, finally, it hit him. He picked up the phone, called his producer Ryan and said, “Hey this may never work, but I wanna throw this at you.”

Since last May, Quinn has been working on this show, shaping a production that would eventually involve over 200 students, from creative teams to cast to crew to orchestra to assistants to the marketing team and so on, all with a single, unshakeable, unwavering drive to reshape what has been sculpted over countless times.

“A million actors have played the Witch, a million actors have played the Baker’s Wife, a million actors have played Jack – but no one has done it like these actors. No one has given these interpretations,” Quinn said.

From proposal to late night phone calls to production meetings to tech week, Quinn, his crew, his entire cast, have dedicated themselves to telling a story worth telling and offering something more, something real and significant. Where the craziness isn’t just craziness anymore.

“I would call Ryan (the producer) almost every week being like, ‘I have this new crazy idea!’ and then the crazy ideas became a little less crazy in January when we had auditions and then they became a little less crazy when I was going through design concept meetings and they became a little less crazy as I was rehearsing it with the cast and now those ideas aren’t crazy anymore. Those ideas are reality and those are ideas that are physically built and manufactured and created.”

At the Power Center, this weekend, for only three performances, audiences can see something crazy. A twist. A subversion. A real change. Like “Into the Woods,” MUSKET has taken an old story, unraveled its fabric and sewn something new, something that’s never been seen before, at least not outside of a director’s imagination. Until now.