OSF's actors back on stage under the stars

'Into the Woods' the fairest of them all

By Edith Decker
of the Daily Courier

No need to be scared heading "Into the Woods" at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. This production is the handsome prince of the opening shows in the outdoor Allen Elizabethan Theatre this summer.

This 1987 Stephen Sondheim hit combines such classic fairy tale characters as Little Red Riding Hood and her Wolf; Jack (of beanstalk fame); Cinderella and Rapunzel, plus a pair of dashing princes; the requisite Witch and a mysterious stranger who also serves as narrator.

The characters have gathered to seek their "Ever After" and entertainingly play out their well-known adventures in Act I. Then — more interestingly — they live with the aftermath of "happily ever after" in Act II.

The production is directed by Amanda Dehnert, also the music director, who conducts the 28-piece orchestra.

Dehnert may be a musician at heart, but she proves an exceptional theater director as well, making the most of the humor and waving a big handful of sparkle over the show with creative ideas and a dose of actual magic.

Some real magician divulged his secrets, because characters magically appear and change appearance. Add a few pyrotechnics and it kept the audience happily surprised. Actual "oooohs" and "OHs" were heard on opening night.

One of Dehnert's creative ideas: When the two princes sing "Agony," a funny duet about their plight as heroes turned husbands, they appear on adult-sized tricycles with horse heads attached, performing an impressive and hilarious choreography.

Another one? At the end of the first act, with the cast on stage finishing up their big "Ever After" number, the narrator jumps in front of the group and takes a selfie.

OK, one more: The clever special effects/video solution for the giantess, who comes into their world looking for her hubby, works beautifully.

In short, if you've seen "Into the Woods," you haven't seen this one.

If you haven't seen it, you ought to see this version of it.

Now for the cast of standouts, led by the veterans of the festival company.

Anthony Heald plays the narrator, who doubles as the mysterious stranger.

Catherine Coulson is forelorn as Milky White, Jack's elderly cow; no-nonsense as Cinderella's stepmother; and menacing as the giantess.

Miriam A. Laube was spectacular as Witch and made the most of her voice in "Lament" and "Last Midnight."

The two princes — played by John Tufts and Jeremy Peter Johnson — tried to steal the show with princely poses and dash. And they often succeeded.

Javier Muñoz and Rachael Warren play the baker and his wife, offering not-so-fairy tale insight into marriage. Warren was especially convincing as the only "everywoman" in the show.

Back at the beanstalk, Miles Fletcher was excellent as Jack and Robin Goodrin Nordli wonderful as his mother, who has a job getting that dead giant out of her backyard.

Jennie Greenberry was a beautiful Cinderella, especially in "On the Steps of the Palace" while Royer Bockus shone as the ultimate overprotected child, Rapunzel. And for the underprotected child, we have a goofy (but getting smarter every day) Red Riding Hood, played in full by Kjerstine Rose Anderson.

Howie Seago was a great Wolf, helped by Johnson as his voice and mask holder. Who else but OSF would cast a deaf actor in a musical? Gotta love that.

Of course, the show is calling out for bright and whimsical costumes and Linda Roethke came through with incredible creations both humble, for Jack and the bakers, and spectacular for Cinderella and Rapunzel, in particular.

Finally, sound designer Joshua Horvath gets a special nod — not only for making the on stage orchestra and singers perfectly clear, but for managing the many special effects.

JENNY GRAHAM/Oregon Shakespeare Festival

The fairy tale ensemble of "Into the Woods" all hope to be happy "Ever After" in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's new production at the Allen Elizabethan Theatre.

Just the ticket

- **WHAT:** Oregon Shakespeare Festival's outdoor Elizabethan Theatre offerings: "Richard III" and "Two Gentlemen of Verona" by William Shakespeare and "Into the Woods," the Stephen Sondheim musical.
- **WHERE:** The Elizabethan Theatre is the largest of the festival's three theaters, which are all on the festival's plaza on Pioneer Street in Ashland.
- **WHEN:** The plays will run on various dates through Oct. 12. See a schedule at the website or call for a schedule to be mailed to you.
- **TICKETS:** Ticket prices range from $25 to $102, depending on seat. The majority are $74. However, sign up for emails to receive last-minute deals on seats for all the shows at the festival.
- **CONTACT:** See www.osfashland.org or call 541-482-4331.

thedailycourier.com **Watch video online**

All-female 'Two Gentlemen' puts a twist in the comedy

By Kathleen Alaks
of the Daily Courier

One of Shakespeare's first comedies, "The Two Gentlemen of Verona" features many of the hallmarks of his later work: women disguised as men, bawdy humor, clever wordplay, adventure in a forest.

But as an early work, written in a different era, it can be challenging to stage for a modern audience, particularly because of strong sexist treatment of the female characters.

Oregon Shakespeare Festival director Sara Rasmussen approaches this problem from a unique angle in her crisp production, which opened Sunday at the Elizabethan. She uses an all-female cast.

Casting only female actors flips the play on its head and adds a playfully ironic twist to its gender-bending storyline. This production is a kind of reverse image of what Shakespeare's audience would have seen with men playing all the roles.

T. CHARLES ERICKSON/Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Sofia Jean Gomez, left, Christiana Clark are the "Two Gentlemen."

Unfortunately, Rasmussen doesn't do enough to exploit the conceit, missing some opportunities for wink-wink, nudge-nudge moments.

Still, the strength of the actors shines through, making this story of young love and the inconsistent nature of love an entertaining, laugh-out-loud frolic.

The production is also lifted by Moria Sine Clinton's delicious costumes, which run the gamut from lush palace chic to nouveau punk.

Sofia Jean Gomez and Christiana Clark play the two "gentlemen" of the title, Gomez as the true-blue yet slightly dim Valentine and Clark as his mercurial pal Proteus. The actors "butch" themselves up with a lot of glad-handing, man-hugging and shoulder-punching, yet neither comes off as particularly manly.

When Valentine leaves Verona for a court position in Milan, Proteus prefers to stay behind to woo his lady love Julia.

Erica Sullivan is engaging as Julia, all giddy when she gets a letter from Proteus and later coming on strong and sympathetic as the spurned lover who disguises herself to go in search of her man.

Proteus is soon ordered by his father to see the world, so he joins Valentine in Milan. There, Valentine has fallen for the duke's perky daughter, Silvia, played by Vivia Font with elegance and charisma and the flair of a woman who knows what she wants. And Silvia wants Valentine.

Silvia, however, has been promised to the duke's foppish friend Thurio (Celeste Den in slicked back hair and a stick-on mustache), so Valentine and Silvia make plans to elope.

But Proteus, who now finds himself wanting Silvia, abandons his flame Julia and double-crosses his Valentine by ratting him out to the Duke (K.T. Vogt).

Vogt doubles as Proteus' servant Launce and she sends up riotous laughter with her hilarious Melissa McCarthy-esque clowning. Launce's constant companion is her dog Crab (a Great Pyrenees named Picasso, and the only male on stage), who is unfazed by tales of his offensive behavior at — and under — the Duke's table.

The play wraps up with a jumble of love letters and rings, disguised travelers and forest outlaws, lessons in forgiveness, love and honor. It doesn't always make sense, but when does love do that?