

## Four Fairy Tales Charminglly Unite in Hollywood, Broadway Merger of ‘Into the Woods’

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Neither Hollywood nor purely Broadway, Disney’s big-screen adaptation of the Stephen Sondheim musical “Into the Woods” finds a charming home on *Hollyway*. Even if you’re not a “musical kind of person,” I challenge you not to want to sing along to the catchy tunes or laugh at the intentionally overdramatic comedy.

Meryl Streep delivers yet another memorably kooky performance as the Witch while Johnny Depp is in his wheelhouse once again as Little Red Riding Hood’s Wolf on the way to grandma’s treehouse. Anna Kendrick also plays someone you’d expect: a runaway almost bride known as Cinderella who evolves from rags to riches and wants the prince but fears the royalty.



James Corden (left), Emily Blunt (center) and Meryl Streep in “Into the Woods”.

*Image credit: Walt Disney Pictures*

But the standouts are the 13-year-old Lilla Crawford – who has played “Annie” and “Billy Elliot” on Broadway – and a surprising Chris Pine. Pine is the only non-safe casting decision – where it feels like the filmmakers took a true risk – amid an “A”-list roster of otherwise safe casting bets.

Recently playing the very non-musical role of Captain Kirk in 2013’s “Star Trek Into Darkness,” Pine transforms the *pinning* role of Cinderella’s Prince into a hilariously campy dramedy who’s clearly making fun of himself. A scene in the woods with Billy Magnussen – who’s also pining for a fair lady as Rapunzel’s Prince – is my favorite in the film. In singing the hilariously overdramatic song “Agony,” both rich boys compete with each other for their chosen lady’s affections solely to earn the audience’s laugh.

But the story centers on the Baker (James Corden) and the Baker’s Wife (Emily Blunt). An unexpected and modest couple, Corden’s character knows he has traded up to snag a catch such as Blunt. You can tell they have a past of love and adoration, but it’s evolved into a troubled present and future because of not being able to bear a child. It turns out the inability isn’t natural, though, and is the supernatural doing of a scorned Witch.



Johnny Depp (left) and Lilla Crawford in “Into the Woods”.

*Image credit: Walt Disney Pictures*

She’s got an agenda of her own – desiring Dorian Gray-like beauty – and a plan for how to get it. In order to release the no-baby curse she’s placed on the Corden/Blunt duo, they must trek *into the woods* and retrieve four items from beloved Brothers Grimm fairy tales for her beautifying witch’s brew: Rapunzel’s golden hair, Cinderella’s silver slipper, Jack and the Beanstalk’s white cow and Little Red Riding Hood’s red cape.

Thus throttles our blended fairy tale into woodsy action and effectively amalgamates them into one cohesive story. Directed by Rob Marshall (“Chicago,” “Nine”) and written for the screen by James Lapine based on his book, “Into the Woods” successfully brings Broadway to the family-friendly theatre for the holidays.

Since directing 2002’s Oscar-winning “Chicago” with Renée Zellweger, Catherine Zeta-Jones and Richard Gere, this time around you can tell that Marshall is forcibly holding back from darkness. He could have plunked “Into the Woods” down a deeper “PG-13” rabbit hole, but opted for a much more kid-friendly “PG” unlike his “PG-13”-rated “Chicago”.



Chris Pine in “Into the Woods”.

*Image credit: Walt Disney Pictures*

My loudest knock is that I wish it would have been “PG-13,” but Lapine flirted with just enough adult humor to give parents and adults alike their private moments. The film grows its darkest in its final act, but the conclusion won’t please everyone. The film’s ominous use of Jack’s giant doesn’t work for me – how does not really showing a full giant creatively add to the story? – nor can I buy how I’m supposed to feel from what happens at the end once actually thinking about it.

I was also turned off by the film’s promotional marketing that has transitioned from initially dishonest to more honest now with it opening tomorrow on Christmas. Trailers first appeared to intentionally *hide* the fact that this film is nearly entirely a musical. Even when not breaking out into Sondheim song, most of the talking dialog is sung as well – much like the 2008 film “Mamma Mia!” with ABBA’s music (also starring Meryl Streep along with Amanda Seyfried and Pierce Brosnan). The word is out now that “Into the Woods” is truly a musical film, but hiding it early on felt like a hoodwink.

Also, clocking in at the 124-minute mark feels about 20 minutes in excess. By contrast, 2008’s “Mamma Mia!” is a just-right 108 minutes and 2002’s “Chicago” is perfect at 113 minutes. You can feel the extra length resulting from an editing stalemate with Marshall and Lapine fighting over cutting a song or a sequence. But despite some imperfections, “Into the Woods” is an above-average musical film that marries beloved music with classic fairy tales the whole family can enjoy.

*“Into the Woods” stars Meryl Streep, Chris Pine, Anna Kendrick, Johnny Depp, Daniel Huttleston, James Corden, Emily Blunt, Lilla Crawford, Billy Magnussen and Mackenzie Mauzy from director Rob Marshall and writer James Lapine with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The film, which opens on Dec. 25, 2014, has a running time of 124 minutes. It is rated “PG” for thematic elements, fantasy action and peril and some suggestive material.*



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