Review: Into the Woods

A stellar cast can’t make up for a lack of narrative drive in this adaptation of Stephen Sondheim’s fairy tale musical, says Rhys Thompson

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Director: Rob Marshall
Starring: James Corden, Emily Blunt, Meryl Streep
Running time: 124 minutes
Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Film-makers have been trying to adapt Stephen Sondheim’s 1986 musical Into the Woods for the past 20 years, and under the direction of Chicago’s Rob Marshall it has finally hit the big screen. Utilising traditional Brothers Grimm fairy tales, the film follows an ordinary baker (James Corden) and his wife (Emily Blunt), who are told that the Witch’s curse of infertility will be lifted from them, if they can locate a number of specific items in the woods. Along the way, they meet characters from Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood and Rapunzel.

Unfortunately, many moments that clearly worked well on stage often fail to translate to the cinema screen. The first 15 minutes are concentrated on one song that each character takes turns to sing, in order to give their reasons for going into the woods. In a theatre, this works well because the characters share the same stage and are allowed their own moment. But the cavalcade of different film locations is disjointed and doesn’t create a consistent reality necessary for the start of a film.

The major problem with the film, and the original show, is that it’s too episodic. One minute we’re with...
Jack and his growing beanstalk, then we move to Cinderella running away. It then cuts to a ridiculously embarrassing pantomimic music number on a waterfall. The film just shifts from one set piece to another, with little connection, while the actors flail around in desperate search of a narrative thread.

What the film lacks in narrative drive is almost made up for in acting talent and gusto from the stellar cast. Streep and Blunt shine throughout, Anna Kendrick’s Cinderella is pleasingly confident, and even Corden isn’t as irritating as is often the case.

The use of many classic British character actors is also an inspired decision, and they all light up the film for their fleeting moments onscreen. Meryl Streep plays the character of the Witch with customary aplomb and, as expected, she steals every scene that she is in. The script provides her with an interesting background that adds another dimension to the traditional story. Simon Russell-Beale plays the Baker’s father, Annette Crosbie has a charming cameo appearance as Little Red Riding Hood’s Grandmother, and the brilliant Frances de la Tour hams it up beautifully as the Giant. It’s a delight to see Hollywood recognising the wealth of talent that we have in this country, beyond the usual faces.

*Into the Woods* isn’t the greatest film ever made. It could have done with a tighter edit to stop the storyline from rambling, and maybe a less conventional director -perhaps Tim Burton- to ensure a more consistent tone, as the juxtaposition between the dark and light elements is occasionally awkward. The film does show some of the world’s finest actors at the top of their game, and its unique adaption of traditional tales is highly entertaining; there are worse ways to spend two hours on a Sunday afternoon.