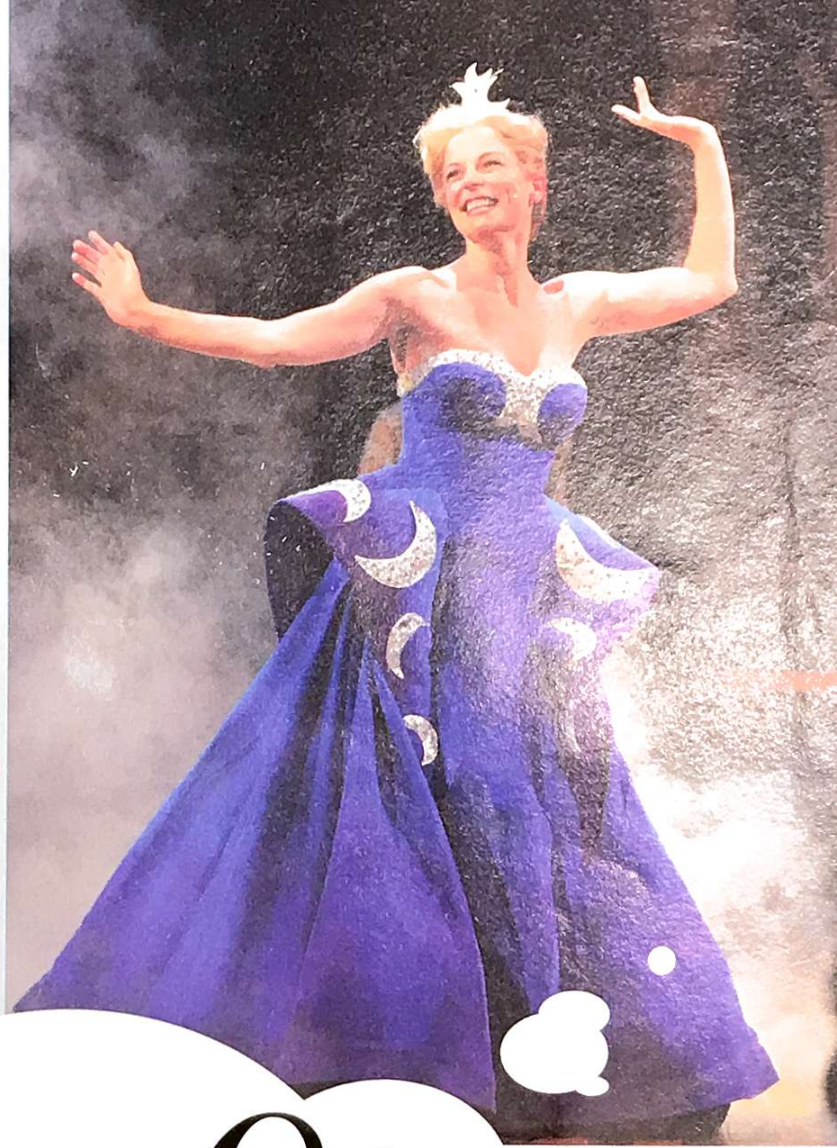


JON GARDINER



Poof!

The practical magic of
fairy-tale transformations,
conjured by the costume shop

HAVE YOU EVER wanted to be somebody else—instantly?

You could text your fairy godmother (“where u? need ball gown ASAP!”). Or swig a potion (you’ll need access to a cow as white as milk). For classical flair, you might command your fairy minion to anoint your beloved’s eyes with the nectar of a wild pansy struck by Cupid’s arrow. Boom, you’re a hottie! Warning: you might also be an ass.

Should those methods fail, you can always call on the transformation artists at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. In companion stagings this fall of *Into the Woods* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, costume designers Bill Brewer (for the Stephen Sondheim/James Lapine musical) and Katherine O’Neill (for the Shakespearean comedy) devised no fewer than half a dozen magical wardrobe shifts, turning a sad girl into a princess, a weedy crone into a femme fatale, a Mysterious Man into a scholarly Narrator, and a pugnacious female Bottom into a hot-to-trot donkey, among other stunts—all in the blink of an eye.

Dressed to impress

Quick changes are a common enough costuming feat, but *instantaneous* changes, whether executed just offstage or in full view of the audience, take a bit more doing. In most productions of *Into the Woods*, for example, Cinderella’s ball gown floats down from the rafters on a fly line, but that wasn’t going to work on the PlayMakers thrust; audiences would spot the gown up in the catwalk long before its mystical appearance. So Brewer borrowed an old magicians’

Facing page: In the musical Into the Woods, a potion restores the Witch to youth and beauty—but takes away her power. Figures. At PlayMakers Repertory Company, Bill Brewer’s inventive costumes for actor Lisa Brescia referenced the Witch’s gardening obsession and, after her transformation, classic femme fatale silhouettes from the 1950s.

an overlay built into the bodice of Cinderella’s plain housedress, accordion-folding and rigging it so that the actor, Caroline Strange, could release the sparkly fabric while twirling in place, and *voilà!* Instant princess.

Brewer also liked the symbolism of this particular mode of dolling up Cinderella, in the context of director Joseph Haj’s refreshing interpretation of *Into the Woods*: “It suggests that she’s already a princess, that it is *in* her,” the costume designer said. “We don’t see anything being added or deleted. She isn’t handed a new dress; the dress is not the thing. It’s what’s inside her.”

Making that princess emerge reliably on stage night after night, though, wasn’t easy.

“It’s a process,” summed up PlayMakers wardrobe supervisor Lucy Wakeland, who spent up to half an hour before each performance re-basting the seams that Strange would sever at the critical moment. “Every little detail of getting into (the dress) affects how it works. One wrong fold or one missed step...” Wakeland trailed off ominously. “And there’s no test run; it’s kind of a one-shot deal.”

“It was really nerve-wracking,” admitted Strange, one of several M.F.A. students at the University of North Carolina who joined a couple of undergrads and many seasoned professionals in the *Woods/Midsummer* repertory cast. She’s faced other wardrobe challenges in her young career—don’t ask about the itchy-bitsy bikini top she struggled with last season, as Miranda in *The Tempest*—but twirling herself into royalty was a technical feat like no other. “I had to talk myself into being able to do it. In previews, I was like, ‘Caroline, you’ve got this.’ But if I didn’t pull hard enough or if I forgot to do something because I was nervous, it would get stuck and I would look stupid.”

Strange finally mastered the breakaway ball gown, and the effect was wonderful, prompting gasps



Helena (Allison Altman) transforms from scrappy, lovesick puppy to pinup girl when her tear-away dress reveals sexy white lingerie, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, with costumes designed by Katherine O’Neill.

of surprise on the show's opening November weekend in Chapel Hill. There were more costuming delights to come in Brewer's 1950s-inspired design scheme for the show—some charming in their simplicity, as when actor Jeffrey Blair Cornell stepped out of his raggedy Mysterious Man getup, revealing the formal grey suit underneath, and was suddenly back in his Narrator's role, monologuing all the while. More dramatic was the Witch's potion-induced return to youth and beauty: a flash of light, a

had a job simply keeping the *Into the Woods* garments clean during the simultaneous runs. They nicknamed the play *Mudsummer*.

Designer Katherine O'Neill employed rip-away basketball pants over flesh-colored tights embellished with real animal hair, black thong undies, and kinky accoutrements to make Julie Fishell's Bottom an object of Titania's bewitched lust. Allison Altman's Helena, meanwhile, was summarily stripped to a virginal white bustier and panties, posing in a halo of light

exposure, particularly given the rugged physicality of Shana Cooper's direction. "People should be comfortable," the costume designer insisted. "It's hard to deliver a speech well when you're worried about a three-quarter-thrust audience who can suddenly see your bare tush."

Playing dress-up

We're accustomed to spectacular transformations on screen, where special effects or simple editing tricks can send Clark Kent into an ordinary



puff of smoke, and actor Lisa Brescia had shed her wizened mask and cloak, metamorphosing into an absolute knockout. "Oh my God," Brescia said, describing her character's thoughts at that moment of discovery. "I'm fabulous! All my dreams just came true!"

Well, not exactly. Cue Act 2.

Too sexy for Athens

Midsummer had its share of miraculous changes, too, although the look of that production was completely different—dark, industrial, and so dirty once the young lovers venture into the forest that Wakeland and her crew

beneath a shower of rose petals just as Demetrius and Lysander awoke to *her* otherworldly attractions.

Extreme, yes. But also relatable, O'Neill hoped—though we hope not *too* relatable yet for most under-age readers of *Dramatics*. "Ideally, you get people to see themselves a little bit, both in Bottom and in Helena," the designer said. "There's something about the woods that has empowered [these characters] sexually," which, obviously, is reflected in their undergarments.

It took time, frank communication, and some design modifications, O'Neill added, for the *Midsummer* cast to handle all that indecent

phone booth and bring him back out as Superman. For a live theatre audience, though, startling makeovers like the ones achieved at PlayMakers by Brewer, O'Neill, and their creative cohorts carry a special kind of enchantment: they take us back to all those times we stood in front of the mirror as children, restyling ourselves as ballerinas, adventurers, our parents, and other fascinating creatures we imagined becoming someday. They make us believe, if just for a moment, that we might still have the power to turn ourselves into someone more noble, more beautiful, more strong, that we might fulfill our deepest desires simply by

putting on something else.

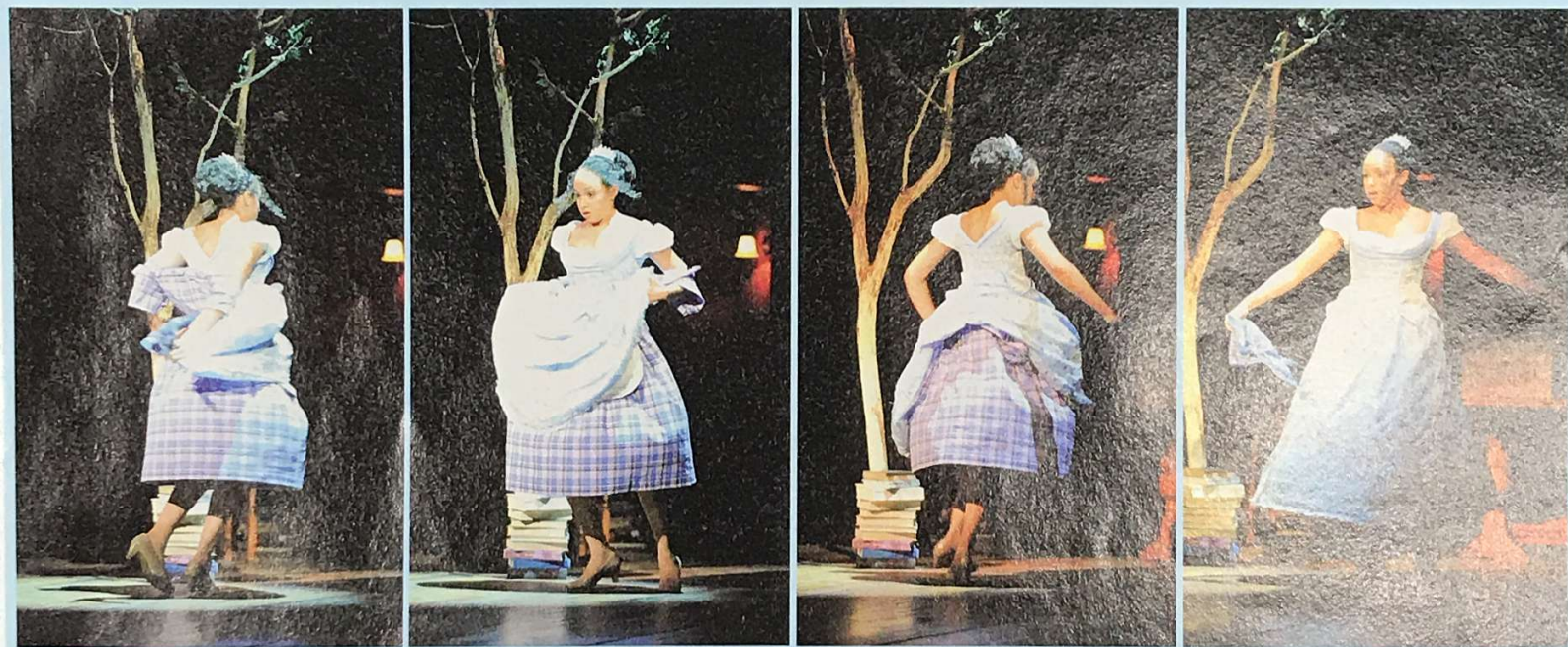
Bill Brewer grew up on that belief. "As a child I loved playing Peter Pan—he was my favorite," the designer confessed. "My mother kind of put a stop to that one day when I was in my Peter Pan costume, trying to climb out of a second-story window because I was sure I could fly." Years later, as a working actor, he added, "I understood the abilities of costumes to help me become someone else."

And now he creates that magic for others.

"The Witch actually has everything she wants, with one exception. And when she gets that, she loses her power, she loses her daughter, she loses her garden, she loses everything."

In fairy-tales as in the real world, a spellbinding new costume can only take us so far. The characters in *Into the Woods* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* explore those limits, revealing that, in the end, we are what we are.

"She thinks that having this beautiful dress is going to change her life,



"It's so much fun," said Lisa Brescia, a Broadway veteran who's also played Elphaba in *Wicked*, Amneris in *Aida*, and Donna Sheridan in *Mamma Mia!*, among other fashion-fantasy leading roles. "And it is a little funny—I mean, we play dress-up.... This is my life's work." But it goes deeper than that: as the Witch, Brescia must embody both the delight of having her beauty restored (rushing offstage to admire herself in a large mirror before the next scene helps), and the heartbreaking cost.

"When she's a crone, other than the fact that she's ugly, her life is pretty good," Brewer pointed out.

and it does," Caroline Strange said of Cinderella. As recast by Sondheim and Lapine, the princess matures in the musical's second act from a storybook cliché into a real woman ready to make her own decisions, and even to take responsibility for others when a rampaging giant leaves orphans in her wake.

"It turns out that what Cinderella is really looking for is a place to belong," Strange said. "She's accepted by people in her rags, not because she's a princess, but because they need her. She realizes she didn't need the pretty dress. She was that person all along." ▼

Magically turning Into the Woods' Cinderella into a princess at PlayMakers Rep took some ingenious design (by Bill Brewer), careful folding and rigging of the hidden ballgown before every performance, and flawless twirling execution by actor Caroline Strange.