



Meggie Siegrist as the Baker's Wife, Tre Moore as Jack, Elyssa Blondin as Little Red Ridinghood, Alyssa Chiarello as the Witch in *Into the Woods* (Photos by Billy Harzman and Brenner Russell)

Inside the Actor's Process: The Cast of *Into the Woods* on Technique and Transformation

By Theresa Kellar Tonner

Stanislawski. Misner. Method. Adler. There are many different techniques and practices that actors can learn on their own or in school to hone their craft.

Some like to use the emotional recall and sense memory of the Stanislavski method, some dig deeper and will go full Method acting, which was popularized by Lee Strasberg, encouraging actors to live as their characters to fully understand the part they are playing. The Misner technique allows actors to “live in the truth” of their characters through improvisation and repetition. The Adler technique asks performers to stay away from their own life experience and use imagination, physicality, and psychological gesture to create the inner life of their character. Then there are Chekhov, Hagen, Linklater, Viewpoints, Classical - so many different ways and methods for “dropping in” to character as a performer.

No matter what technique actors are trained in, they must take what they have learned and make it work for them.

Regardless of technique, all actors want to create a character that the audience can empathize with and craft a performance that leaves audiences moved or changed in

some way. Nowadays, protecting their mental health is also part of the process for actors. Theatre can demand a performer act out emotional scenes multiple times a week; it is the actor's job, along with their director, to create a truthful but sustainable performance.

Alyssa Chiarello, Meggie Siegrist, Tre Moore, and Elyssa Blonder answered questions about their actor's process when developing their roles in The Phoenix Theatre Company's production of *Into the Woods*.

Chiarello plays the Witch with such power and boldness that patrons may be surprised when they meet the kind, soft-spoken actress at the stage door. She attributed her love of fairy tales with finding the correct voice for her Witch.

"I weirdly feel like because of my love of fairy tales, witches and magic that time was preparing me for something like this without me even realizing it. Diving into the script and being able to bring to life all my favorite aspects of different Witch characters I love from books and television has been a dream job," Chiarello said. "The Witch is a complicated lady. I wanted to show that she can be scary, funny, vulnerable and real, both Crone and Post-Curse."

Chiarello has played many iconic roles on TPTC stages, but the Witch was one she never thought she would take on.

"I love a witchy/magical role, always. And I've been a fan of Fantasy and Grimm's Fairy Tales since I was a child. However, while this is an incredible role I always admired, I never thought it was a role I could play until my sister encouraged me," she said.

Sometimes, an actor can see themselves in the role once they have the material at callbacks, which was the case for Chiarello.

"Feeling like "this is the one" happened while preparing the callback material," she said. "That's when I fell, I really fell in love with the role. I worked extensively on creating who I believed her to be for the initial callback and it was honestly just so much fun, and probably the most fun I ever had doing a callback."

A newer face on The Phoenix Theatre Company stage is actress Meggie Siegrist. Siegrist was seen in the ensemble and as the understudy for Dawn in *Waitress* earlier this season and is now playing the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods*. The Baker and the Baker's Wife are two characters in *Into the Woods* not connected to a childhood fairytale audiences already know and love. This can be challenging for an actor in a world of well-loved characters like Cinderella, Jack, Little Red Riding Hood, and Prince Charming, but Siegrist takes it in stride.

Her character is also one of the emotional cores of the story, which presents its own challenges. Siegrist talked about what it's like to sing through those emotional songs every night.

"Those moments are Tough with a capital T. In rehearsals, there were times when I would sing through, specifically the end, and not be able to get through it without weeping. I had to build up an emotional callous, which takes time, and a ton of mental focus shifts to put the story outside of yourself," Siegrist said. "I'm not one of those incredible vocalists who can cry and sing and still sound amazing. If I'm cryin', the voice is dyin', so it's a challenge. Sometimes it still gets me, but I try to focus on the positive messaging of what I'm actually singing to get the story across as opposed to wallowing in the sadness of the situation."

Tre Moore is one of the younger performers in the show and a student at ASU studying musical theatre. His performance as Jack is filled with nuance and discovery, something he worked on a lot in rehearsal.

"We talked so much in rehearsals about "living in the discovery", he said. "Which is a good piece of advice for any actor, but has proven to be especially true when playing someone who is young and impressionable and learning new things about the world in real time. This reminds me to be present in Jack's journey, listen, and stay truthful as the story progresses. I love the way he sees the world, and I learn new things about him every time we do the show."

A known fact about *Into the Woods* and Sondheim shows in general is that words and tempos are fast and important.

Moore starts the song "Your Fault" in act 2, staying on top of the beat, and the words are integral to ensure the audience hears the magic that is a piece of Sondheim music. When asked what part of the show has stretched him the most technically, emotionally, or creatively, Moore stated: The words.

"Sondheim was a genius, and his creative use of words as storytelling and characterization devices has given us so many tools to play with. He was so intentional about everything he wrote, so trusting in the words to guide us, and ensuring that we deliver them with clarity, is very important for the show to work," Moore said. "There are many times when we are rattling off lyrics at lightning speed, and nothing is more satisfying than when the words click. The speed and particularity of Sondheim challenge both the performers and audience members to stay alert and on their toes...it's always cool to hear the audience's reactions throughout the show because we know they're right there with us!"

The story of Little Red Ridinghood is one that children have been told for ages. Elyssa Blonder was excited to play a version of Little Red that is bold and funny.

“Little Red has a fearless, unfiltered energy that’s really empowering to tap into. She says exactly what she’s thinking, which is sorta refreshing and also hilarious. Playing someone that bold gives me permission to take risks onstage and lean into her wild confidence.”

When rehearsing a well-known show like *Into the Woods*, an actor may think they know what is in store for them, but Blonder said that *Into the Woods* has emotionally and technically stretched her as a performer.

“The emotional arc of the show really sneaks up on you. It starts off playful, but then things get so real and layered. Little Red goes from being this cheeky kid to someone who’s experienced loss and fear, and showing that shift has definitely stretched me. And vocally, Sondheim doesn’t make it easy, but we love him! He’s a genius!” She said.

Blonder added that the key to doing Sondheim’s genius work is: lots of repetition.

“Sondheim’s music demands precision, so I broke things down phrase by phrase and drilled it until it lived in my body. Emotionally, it helped to really connect the lyrics to what the character is going through, so it never feels like just “fast singing” its always grounded in intention,” Blonder said.

Chiarello. Siegrist. Moore. Blonder. Perhaps these will be the techniques and skills future actors are learning about in school.

For now, they will be on stage at The Phoenix Theatre Company, bringing the Witch, the Baker’s Wife, Jack, and Little Red Ridinghood to life in *Into the Woods*, running through July 13th in the Hormel Theatre.