15 March 1996

Professor Sid Perkes, Chair
University Theatre
Utah State University
Logan, UT 84322

Re: Professor Roger Held / INTO THE WOODS

Dear Sid,

Recently, as you know, I attended the final performance of the Utah State University Theatre production of INTO THE WOODS directed by Professor Roger Held. I was requested to do so in order to present an evaluation of Professor Held as a stage director. Based upon this single experience I can report that Professor Held appears to be an excellent stage director. In the following paragraphs may I present some of my observations which have lead to this conclusion. Before doing so, however, for others who may read this letter, I should indicate something of my personal qualifications in providing this evaluation. I have been a professor of theatre for more than 40 years and have been an instructor and stage director for five universities, community and semi-professional theatres. During that time I have staged some forty musicals and more than a dozen operas.

Perhaps the single most important responsibility of the stage director is that of interpreter. In the instance of INTO THE WOODS the challenge is unique in that the script is a series of interwoven fairy tales wherein each maintains its own identity, yet there evolves an overall story. Upon initial encounter, the book seems to defy the usual and simple linear construction of ordinary musicals. The apparent "helterskelter" construction of INTO THE WOODS demands a plan which will fulfill the audience's need for order and meaning. Professor Held provided such a framework which, in my opinion, helped the script to make sense. Taking his cue from the Narrator / Character (ala Thornton Wilder's stage manager in OUR TOWN who moves in and out of the story) Held drew upon a theatrical tradition that often is identified with the German director-playwright Bertolt Brecht. Thus, the Utah State University's production employed many techniques seen in Epic Theatre and provided the production with a unique format.
By presenting the cast and members of the crew on stage some 20 minutes prior to curtain time doing various warm-up exercises and other preparations for the performance, Held allowed the audience to enter into the world of the actors who then became performers in the fairy tales of the script. In effect we, as spectators, became observers of a play-within-a-play. The establishment of the theatre world as opposed to the world of the play (the fairy tales) was further strengthened by the use of work lights on the stage which, in a sense, became the black and white world of backstage while the introduction of colored stage lights contrasted and presented the world of the fairy tales (the world of the play). The movement of scenic units and commands from the stage manager heard over the intercom system further established the differences of the two worlds as curtain time approached. This framework was maintained throughout the performance and provided an intermediate reality and, thus, a common bond between actors, crew and spectators as the script moved from one scene to another. Although I have not seen another production of INTO THE WOODS, I have to assume this approach was the result of the director's interpretation since I do not recall any such stage directions being provided in the written script.

In addition to the director's interpretive role described above, it was apparent that director Held worked closely with his designers. "Everything seemed to fit." This suggests an ideal situation. No element was out of place. The integration of scenic units, the use of "magical" effects, the realization of costumes for Make-believe characters, the implementation of lighting effects, the use of the stage and auditorium for action, and the employment of stereophonic "Giant" footsteps revealed a master hand was in control. This latter point suggests the director employed his skills and imagination well because, as I recall, the original requisites of the script suggest the Giant falls to earth. Such action apparently was beyond the staging capabilities or budget or, perhaps, a combination of the two at the Morgan Theatre. In any case, the stereophonic giant was more than an adequate solution to the problem.

The casting of characters with an ear for vocal requirements and an eye for physicalizations revealed unusual cooperation between stage and musical directors as well as the choreographer. The thrust stage makes demands
upon a stage director who must remain aware of compositions from 180 degrees of stage space coupled with meaningful and graceful movement from all vantage points. Held met these challenges. Although the overall running time of the production was a little long, the mood and tempo of the piece was sufficiently alive to solicit enthusiastic audience response.

While the acting and singing abilities of the cast were well above average, the focus of this evaluation is elsewhere. I am not certain that I can agree with the old adage in the theatre that one cannot and should not be able to discern the work of the stage director. I think that the observant theatre patron can recognize the work of a skilled and sensitive stage artist especially when all aspects of the production are meaningful, fun, and exciting. From my observation of Roger Held's production of INTO THE WOODS, there is every indication that he is a director who "knows his job."

Sincerely,

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