



Into the Woods cast members (from left) Emma Sohlberg, Hannah Miller, Dylan Stasack, Audrey Hudson and Anna Carlson

PATRICK AVERY

Out of the Darkness, Into the Woods

South Eugene honors students with Sondheim musical

The cast is heartbroken, as though the wave that swept away South Eugene High School students Jack Harnsongkram and Connor Ausland on Feb. 5 took a vital piece of each of student with it. The tragic deaths of the Mr. Axemen candidates occurred just as the theater department was preparing to open *Into the Woods*, a play that offers an eerie reflection of the road so many of South's students have traveled this past week.

I sat down with a somber cast to discuss the production with which they hope to honor their departed friends and make some sense out of their own grief.

The first half of *Into the Woods* is light and fun, with your favorite fairy tale characters mixing it up in the woods. When the curtain falls on the first act, audiences

have laughed and cheered as complicated and interwoven plots work themselves out to beautiful music. It's like sophomore year, with a soundtrack. Ironically, this is where the junior version of the script ends.

But they're not doing the junior version. This is South Eugene High School, after all.

The second act deals with the end of innocence. Relationships crumble and senseless death takes the lives of beloved friends. A woman, wicked witch that she is, grieves the death of her daughter. There are no easy answers offered, just the repeated refrain "No one is alone."

"The play is about healing after loss, not about loss itself," SEHS student actor Dylan Stasack (who plays the Baker) says.

The theater students made a difficult

'The play is about healing after loss, not about loss itself'

- Dylan Stasack, SEHS Student

but unanimous decision to postpone their opening a week. "We can barely function in our classes," Anna Carlson (*Little Red Riding Hood*) says, "let alone be emotionally prepared to fully commit to this show." Audrey Hudson (*Cinderella*) adds, "We want to do the show justice, because it is so demanding and so relevant in our lives."

While the public is aware of Connor Auslund's impact on the basketball court, what many don't realize is that both boys easily traversed both the west and east ends of the school. A Frenchie (*French Immersion* student), Ausland sat next to star performer Emma Sohlberg (*The Witch*) in four classes, and the pair presented nearly every group project as a song. Now Sohlberg comes to class everyday and takes her seat next to an empty desk. And Harnsongkram's brilliant smile flashed as easily with his closest friends in the drama department as it did with the rock-climbing athletes in the Integrated Outdoor Program courtyard.

What makes South an amazing school are popular boys like Harnsongkram and Ausland who would have no truck with the clichéd social stratification of a John Hughes film. The only way kids can make sense of their peers' deaths is by following their example. Students are now not simply tolerating their unlike-minded peers, but actively supporting them. Theater students showed up en masse to last Wednesday's basketball game; football coach Chad Kessler purchased a block of tickets so his players can attend *Into the Woods* as a team. "What Jack and Connor's death taught us too late was that everyone should come together," Sohlberg says. The very message that Sondheim leaves us with in the second act song, *No One is Alone*:

No one is alone. Truly. No one is alone. Sometimes people leave you halfway through the wood. Others may deceive you. You decide what's good. You decide alone. But no one is alone.

There is soft silence, then a breath when I ask the cast about their hopes and fears for opening night. When the students find their voices, what is echoed again and again is the hope that people will attend the play, and that the message of the show will help others as it has helped them.

If what I saw at rehearsal is any indication, this is going to be an incredible production. Yes, I do teach at South, and these are my students. I love them and am biased, but my bias does not change the fact that there happens to be a larger-than-average pack of very talented kids in the theater and music departments right now. Their directors Patrick Avery, Kimberly McConnell and Ron Black choose this difficult and mature script to challenge kids who made *West Side Story* look easy. "Jack was so excited to see it," Carlson says with a sad smile.

Like the characters they are playing, our students have emerged from this tragedy a little older, much wiser and with an ever-increasing appreciation for their community. "Our reality has fundamentally changed," Hudson says. But if innocence is lost, love and wisdom have surely taken their place.

Nearly the last words Sondheim leaves us with are: "Into the woods you have to grope, but that's the way you learn to cope. Into the woods to find their hope of getting through their journey." **EW**

Into the Woods opens at 7:30 pm Thursday, Feb. 17, and continues Feb. 18-19 and Feb. 23-26, with a 2 pm matinee Sunday, Feb. 20, at South Eugene High School, 400 E. 19th Ave.

Black History Month with Oliver Lake



Saxophonist, composer, poet and painter, Oliver Lake stands at the top of his profession, Lake emerged in the public consciousness in the 1960s as a founding member of the St. Louis collective, Black Artists Group, (documented in the book *Point from Which Creation Begins*, published by Washington University press). Lake also gained considerable notoriety as an original member of the ground-breaking World Saxophone Quartet, in 1977. Mr. Lake is at the forefront of those seeking to highlight the creative and political spirit of the African American community.

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