

The Sondheim Review

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Profile

Arthur Laurents

BY TERRI ROBERTS

Honing Skills

Year-long effort yields *Into the Woods* at California Lutheran University

Putting up a show at California Lutheran University (CLU) can take a long time.

The small liberal arts college in Thousand Oaks, Calif., is a place where, as adjunct theatre professor and director Josh Finkel puts it, “everyone does everything.” That includes him.

Originally hired to assist with getting the musical theatre department more organized and into better shape, Finkel, a classically trained actor whose Broadway and national touring credits include *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and *Les Misérables*, has added Shakespeare, dance, cold reading technique and more to his regular teaching schedule. He has also submitted a proposal to expand the curriculum to offer a minor in musical theatre. (Currently only an emphasis in the craft is available.) And he is directing — something he frequently does in the “real world” when not performing or coaching. His current effort is the most ambitious production ever attempted at CLU, *Into the Woods*.

In trying to mount a production as intricate and vocally demanding as *Woods* (which he also choreographed), Finkel began work on the show six months before its April 30, 2009, opening to allow for all of the conflicts that would inevitably arise due to classes, school events and so on.

“It is a challenge,” he admits shortly before going into tech. “It’s a long show, and we’re doing all of it, including the newer duets from the revival. I’ve had the show cast since the end of September 2008. We began once-a-week rehearsals to learn the music starting in early October. The music was learned before winter break in December, and then we started to put it on its feet in January. Rehearsals take place within the main stage production class, which allots me about 10-and-a-half hours a week.”

Many of Finkel’s students are not musical theatre devotees. Some knew Sondheim’s name and reputation when they started; others hadn’t a clue. Finkel quickly changed all that.

“I taught my ‘Acting for Musical Theatre’ course in the fall, and I centered that class on Sondheim,” he says. “We explored the psychology, the sarcasm and the richness of Sondheim; the conflict, the duality, etc. And we did a Sondheim revue at the end of the semester.”

At one point it looked like the show wasn’t going to happen at all. A Theatre League tour coming out of Kansas City included a stop in Thousand Oaks, which would have killed the CLU production. The tour was cancelled, but Music Theatre International was not notified, so the college was still being denied the rights. Many hours of detective work finally cleared up the confusion, and CLU’s rights were restored.

Then Finkel could return his attention to his students.

Most college productions are made up entirely of students. Finkel made sure this was the case for him. “A lot of times people job in for a couple of roles if they can’t find someone from the student body,” he explains. “But I felt that since these students are all paying a lot of money to go to CLU, they are the ones who should have the right to do it and not have the lead role go to somebody else. So the crew are students, the cast are students — everyone is currently enrolled at CLU. That was really important to me.

“I also wanted to give as many students an opportunity to work on the show as possible, but at the same time make it easier for someone like our costume and makeup designer, Lolita Ball. For example, I’m going to have one Wolf and one Cinderella’s Prince, so two guys get to perform that multi-tracked part, and it’s easier on the costume department. And I’m setting it in real fairytale time — medieval/Renaissance — so it really has a Bavarian Grimm Brothers feel to it.”

Finkel’s Old World vision for the show — which also includes a lot of Asian theatre elements — is as big as Broadway. But the realities of both the physical and fiscal limitations of an academic environment in a depressed economy encouraged creative adaptations.

“We don’t have the full bells and whistles of a Broadway stage,” Finkel concedes. “We don’t

As Rapunzel, CLU student actress Kayla Bailey was directed to look toward the ground to enhance the illusion of her tower’s height.

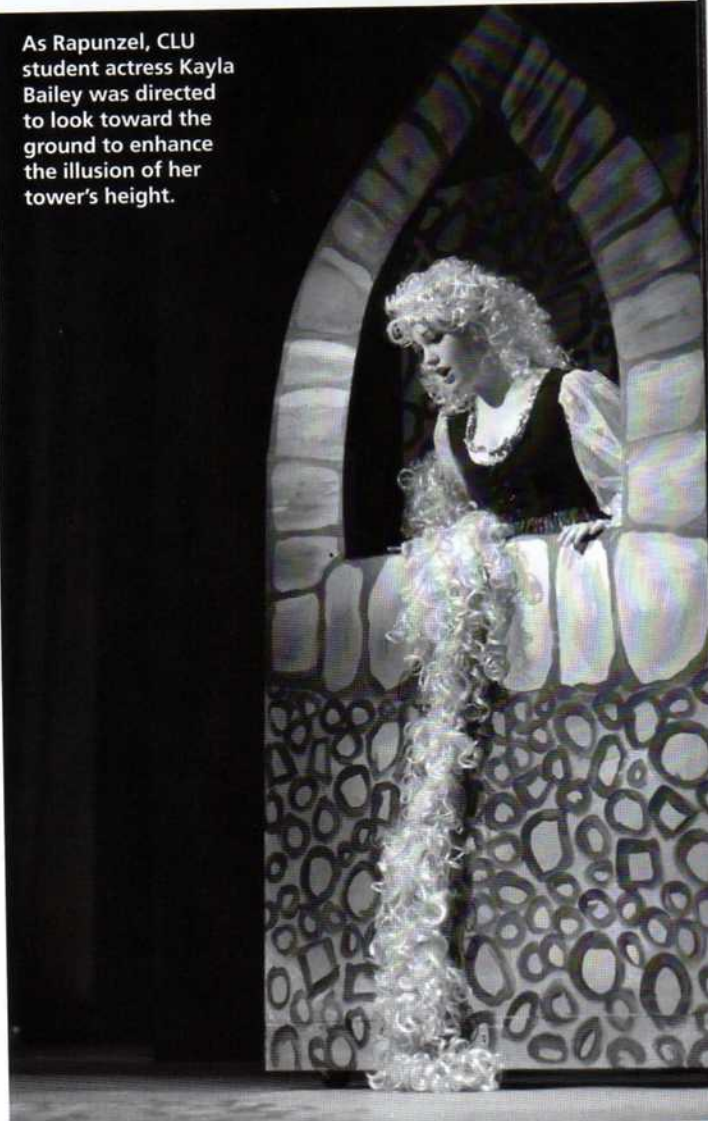


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Puppeteers created birds and leaves for the trees when CLU students (L-to-R) Kaila Hochhalter, Skyler Butenshon, Alexander Cerri, Jamie Andrikopolous and Kelly Derouin performed "No One Is Alone" in *Into the Woods*.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN CASTILLO

HONING SKILLS: FROM PAGE 21

have hydraulics or trap doors or things like that. So we had to come up with other interesting elements to build into the show. From that came a whole other conceit for many of the special effects, which worked in tandem with my Asian theatre training. I used a lot of Javanese shadow and Bunraku-style puppetry, à la Julie Taymor, to help accomplish some of the harder things, such as how to get a huge horse and carriage onstage. The Royal Family will puppet their own horses and carriage to get to the ball or carry Cinderella to the palace. Another challenge is how the witch will climb up Rapunzel's tower. The actors on the floor play to different points of focus, and there's a Kabuki split-screen effect between them to convey the height and distance.

Finkel also personified the important element of time and the various "midnights." He says, "My set designer, Torry Bend, and I created a huge clock that the characters and the wood sprites manipulate as time passes and affects the characters in the First, Second and Last Midnights."

The sprites are medieval-looking, magical forest creatures who assisted with various effects. They blended into the trees and helped manipulate some of the magic. Cinderella's birds, for example, were suspended from a long staff with birdealls voiced by the puppeteers.

Finkel explains, "Using these sprites gives the audience a sense of the magical influence that not only helps the spells along or throws a wrench into the fire — it personifies them.

"When the witch has to climb up Rapunzel's hair, at the last second a wood sprite will hand her a puppet of herself. She's singing and manipulating the puppet up the braid, stage right, as Rapunzel is feeling the pull on her hair, stage left. It's an interesting duality and a unique element that I've never heard of or seen before. If you don't have the budget or the facility to do it full out, your story can be told quite artfully and more playfully and magically."

The Witch (Amanda Wallace) grasps Rapunzel's hair, lowered from high above the stage.



PHOTO BY JONATHAN CASTILLO

Finkel continues, "I have to say that the students have really come a long way. We have some wonderful performers, and we have some people for whom performing is not their first thing. It's not like you're casting *Into the Woods* from Cap 21 at New York University, where it's the top musical theatre-bound performers in the country. People take my class, and every two years they get to do a musical. So it's fun to involve so many people and really give them information about landing comedy, how to work a comedy song with your delivery and your vocal texture and your physicality, how to land the laugh in the genre of musical theatre and at the same time sing well ... all the things that go into that. Many of these performers are either learning for the first time, or they're honing their skills a little at a time. Now they get to step up to the plate. That's really fun, and I think they're having a really good time with it." [TSR]

TERRI ROBERTS is *TSR's* West Coast correspondent. For more information about Josh Finkel and his coast-to-coast classes, coaching and performance schedule, visit cactingstudio.com.