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THEATER

THEATER; A Moo Moo Here and a Moo Moo There

By BARRY SINGER

YOU might say that the musical revival of "Into the Woods," opening on Tuesday at the Broadhurst Theater, has been re-embroidered rather than re-invented.

Though the sets and costumes are derived from the original 1987 Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine collection of classic fairy tales, they are newly conceived, as is Mr. Lapine's directorial view of certain characters.

"The attitude this time is definitely different," said Mr. Sondheim, who has reworked a lyric or two. One song, written for a later London production, has been added, "Our Little World."

"The cast makes a huge difference in terms of tone," Mr. Sondheim said, "and James has had many new ideas."

In addition to the Narrator (John McMartin), the characters are the same, among them: the Witch (Vanessa Williams), Cinderella (Laura Benanti) and her Prince (Gregg Edelman), the Baker (Stephen DeRosa), Little Red Ridinghood (Molly Ephraim) and Jack, of beanstalk fame (Adam Wylie).

Then there is the cow. Jack's pet, Milky-White, was a scrawny statue with handgrips that actors lugged around the stage like a suitcase in 1987. In 2002, Milky-White is a large puppet inhabited by a young actor named Chad Kimball. Peering out at the world through mournful cow eyes, languidly lolling, scampering or flopping in a four-legged sprawl, the cow is now a three-dimensional character.

"There have been many, many animals on stages for hundreds of years," Mr. Sondheim said, "and I can't claim to have seen all of them, but I've definitely never seen one like this."

The idea to give Milky-White life was Mr. Lapine's. "I'd caught a couple of 'Into the Woods' productions with classic two-people-in-the-cow-suit Milky-Whites," the director said, "but the gag never worked for me because it was so jokey. The costume designer, Susan Hilferty, and I wanted to make something with real personality."

Mr. Kimball, a graduate of the Boston Conservatory, is a 25-year-old actor who has no background in physical performance and who never expected to be making his Broadway debut as a puppet.

"It was just thrown at me," he said the other day. "I was hired as a stand-by for two other roles." Then, shortly before the show's out-of-town run in Los Angeles, he said, "They asked me to do the cow. I have to admit I was hesitant."

The job appears almost painfully demanding physically, though Mr. Kimball maintains it is not. He continues to fine-tune it with Andrew Benepe, who constructed the puppet, and Mr. Benepe's assistant, Paul Rice.

"The cow's back legs are my legs free-standing," Mr. Kimball said, "and the front legs are my arms on short crutches with elbow rings on them. The head is strapped to a waist harness that goes around my legs, so everything is in balance. It's like resting your elbows on a counter. My back takes none of the stress."

Mr. Kimball's gift for cowmanship is something more than muscle. "I decide when Milky-White blinks," he said, "and when she shakes her ears. I put my hands in the head to work the eyes and mouth. I've been around enough cows at state fairs; I'm from Seattle. I took what I could remember: the subtle stare, the slow move of the neck, the shifting of the weight in the back legs."

Mr. Sondheim, for one, is pleased. "I love puppetry on the stage," he said. "The original ending of 'Pacific Overtures' was intended for Bunraku puppets. I even wrote a number that I never finished because the idea got cut."

"People may not realize it," he continued, "but I've also written for a dancing cow before. The very first song Jule Styne and I wrote for 'Gypsy' was the cow song for Dainty June and her Farm Boys. It was a tune Jule had written for another show, and at first I didn't want to write the lyrics because I wanted to work only with new music. In the end, though, I relented. Let's face it, who can resist a dancing cow?"

Photos: A cow comes home: Chad Kimball and his costume. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times) Drawing: Molly Ephraim (Little Red Ridinghood), left foreground, and Vanessa Williams (Witch); Stephen DeRosa, rear left (Baker), Laura Benanti (Cinderella) and Gregg Edelman (her Prince) in "Into the Woods." (Hirschfeld)