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This Cow's a Ham; Chad Kimball, 25, moved from understudy to leading bovine and is now stealing scenes in the Broadway-bound musical revival 'Into the Woods.'; [Home Edition]

DIANE HAITHMAN. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles, Calif.: Feb 26, 2002. pg. F.1

Full Text (1988 words)

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SEE CORRECTION APPENDED; "Into the Woods"--A photo caption accompanying a story in Tuesday's Calendar about "Into the Woods" misidentified actress Kerry O'Malley. Additionally, the photo was taken during a dress rehearsal and is not a scene from the show.

In the new Broadway-bound production of "Into the Woods" at the Ahmanson Theatre, actor Chad Kimball plays a cow.

Go ahead and snicker. Kimball's already heard all the jokes: He's udderly amazing, outstanding in his field, milks the role for all it's worth, turns in a moo-ving performance.

Keeping a conversation with the 25-year-old Kimball pun-free calls for the same sort of massive restraint required of Kimball's supportive parents back home in Seattle upon discovering that the tuition money they shelled out for their son's Boston Conservatory education might as well have been spent on a trip to a dairy farm.

After all, this is not just a guy who plays a cow but a guy who, until just before the show opened, was an udderstudy--understudy, understudy--for a cow.

Kimball was the offstage "cover" actor for Milky-White, the bovine friend of the dimwitted Jack as in "Jack in the Beanstalk," one of the fairy tales twisted into the "Into the Woods" story. Now, this former understudy is on his way to becoming Broadway's first Cud Stud.

"I feel a little silly, because I come out in a cow suit [for the curtain call] and I get a huge round of applause," Kimball says humbly.

"One of the actors said: 'You know, I don't know if I can follow that cow onstage every day.' But everybody in the cast has been great."

In the 1987 Broadway production of "Into the Woods," the cow was an inanimate statue that could be carried on- and offstage. Not anymore.

The new, improved Milky-White is aged and forlorn, with melting dark eyes and sagging skin of that same ashen shade E.T. turned when it appeared he might never phone home again.

Of all the hapless characters in this fairy tale gone mad, Milky- White seems the one most truly horrified at being trapped in the emotionally complex woods of this Stephen Sondheim musical.

"I think 'stricken' is a really good word for Milky-White," muses costume designer Susan Hilferty, who created the cow's pained expression. "It's like: 'Oh my God, it's always bad news.'"

"It's almost like a dog look to the face," Hilferty continued in a telephone conversation from New York City, where she has returned to work on several new projects and where she is chairwoman of the design program at New York University. "I finally chose this cow from my herd of cows because when I did the sketch, the face was so hang-doggy, so stricken, it made your heart break."

Before settling on the look of Milky-White, Hilferty, who also designed the pigs, wolves and other animals for the production, went through multiple cow designs: two-person cows, cows on wheels, cows with no back end, cows with costumed bodies but human faces. There were so many variations that she is considering a gallery exhibition of all the sketches and mock-ups that went into the design process.

"Into the Woods" director James Lapine takes credit for the idea of bringing the formerly inanimate cow to life, though he adds that he was inspired by other "Into the Woods" productions that have presented a vaudeville-style two-person cow: one playing the head, the other starring as the hindquarters. Hilferty ran with the idea.

"I really felt that it was necessary to understand this world, this strange world where animals could talk or get possessed; they seemed to have a kind of special power," she says. "It seemed important that the animals have very distinct personalities."

Although her costumes for the fairy tale's wolves and pigs allow the human face to show, Hilferty ultimately decided that approach was inappropriate for Milky-White because, unlike the other animals, Milky-White has no songs. The plan was to have two women cast members, Jennifer Malenke and Kate Reinders, alternate as Milky- White. Both were also understudying major roles and had smaller onstage roles to play on the nights they were not on cow duty. But that proved to be a struggle for the slightly built actresses.

In the costume, the actor dons a unitard with pieces of cow "cartilage" attached to it. The performer's arms are holding crutches, with hoofs at the bottom, to simulate the cow's front legs. A loose-fitting fabric suit is then pulled on over the bits and pieces, creating a sort of droopy skin over the whole. "We were calling it the Shar-Pei cow for a time, because of this oversized suit," Hilferty says.

The cow's head and neck attach to the costume via a shoulder harness. The cow's neck is made of a coil covered in fabric, which moves like a Slinky to allow flexibility and allows the actor to see out. The actor's head is actually behind the neck and cow head, rather than inside it. To manipulate the cow's expressive face-- blink the eyes, move the ears or graze--one arm must be taken out of a front leg and moved up into the head.

During rehearsals, the women did fine with the costume. But that changed once they put on the facemask. The head and neck are lightweight, but working with the crutches, as well as balancing on one crutch while moving the face levers with the other arm, requires a certain degree of upper-body strength and stamina. The cowgirls began to get the blues. One day, during technical rehearsals, Kimball was asked to step in, and he was so immediately comfortable inside the cow he was asked to remain there on a permanent basis.

If there exists a certain ignominy to being cast as a cow, imagine this for the resume: "Fired as a cow, Ahmanson Theatre, 2002." But Lapine reports that the actresses are more relieved than distressed and have plenty to keep them busy in other onstage and understudy roles. And there's a domino effect in all the casting: Kimball is also covering the major roles of Jack and Rapunzel's Prince; if one of those actors cannot perform, Kimball takes over and the udders, others, fill in as Milky-White.

"So far, physically, it hasn't proven to be too strenuous," says Kimball, a beaming, boyish sort who appears to have the appropriately burly chest and arms for cow duty. "When you see someone fall onstage, or in a situation where they are wearing something that looks painful, you can't really let yourself enjoy it. My hope is to be able to get across that it doesn't hurt whatsoever when it's on, it's actually quite enjoyable to do and I have a lot of freedom. Thank goodness it's not a jackrabbit or something that has to move a lot. A cow usually just kind of sits and stares."

"We try to make it as seamless as possible," Kimball adds. "Obviously the audience knows that there's a person in there, but we want to try to take them to a place where they forget a little bit and are able to come away thinking, wow, that looked like a real cow." Yes, but what's his motivation? "It's virtually the same as if I didn't have a cow's head on," Kimball observes. "A lot of timing goes into playing the cow--when to turn the head is so important, the comic timing of doing a double-take as a cow. It must seem pretty funny backstage to see me pulling my cow's head off, saying: 'Oh, I'm just off tonight.'"

Despite his youth, Kimball's face has appeared on Broadway before, though audiences still may not have noticed his visage. Nine days before graduation from the Boston Conservatory in 1999, he appeared in the Broadway production of Frank Wildhorn's "The Civil War." Other credits include ensemble roles in "Sweeney Todd" in 1999 at the Signature Theatre and the 30th anniversary off-Broadway revival of "Godspell" in 2000.

Some actors might not consider playing a cow exactly a star turn. But in this production, the cow has become the talk of the town, mentioned by critics and audience members alike as a memorable part of the show--even though the actor's face is seen only briefly during the curtain call.

Though he acknowledges the mild absurdity of answering the cattle call, Kimball finds challenge in discovering the tragicomic soul of Milky-White. Some young actors might be concerned about the lack of exposure that comes from being hidden in a cow suit, especially in L.A., during pilot season. Forget that guest part on "Friends."

But Kimball remains devoted to the role. He even pays homage to the cow's femininity. "I call her Madame White," he says. "I even do a tiny curtsy-bow at the end. I actually can't bend over, because my udder is too big.

"I think the fun thing for me is to reflect Jack's personality, since they are the best of friends--as Jack says, his best friend in the whole world," Kimball continues.

"The cow obviously thinks that himself. And I'm trying to reflect his kind of dimwitted nature but at the same time--it feels really funny, talking about this--this is an old cow who has been through the ringer, who has known Jack since he was a baby. She has this kind of ... edge.

"And by edge I mean an edge with the audience. James Lapine and I have talked about a couple of moments in the show where the cow can break the fourth wall and really look out to the audience as the Narrator [John McMartin] does."

This cow describes himself as a ham, and Kimball admits he's had discussions with Lapine about how far an actor should go in the role when portraying livestock. "I was talking to him the other day, and he had given me a note not to react on a certain line. I just couldn't abide it. I said: 'Is there any way we could put in just a small reaction there?'" Kimball says. "And he said yes. So we go back and forth."

Even though he's on the other end of a telephone line, one can almost see Lapine's eyes rolling when he is asked about this.

"Oh, yeah," he says. "You never know what's going to happen, and the audience just ate up the cow, so to speak, and meanwhile, we were trying to tell a story. So I just had to be careful about where the cow lived and where the cow was just basically background.

"He's incredibly good, this kid. He's an incredibly resourceful cow. He really made it a character immediately. That was the good news. The hard news was, sometimes it was not the cow's scene."

Lapine left the cow's true character to Kimball. "It's like you would direct a dance role: You're tired here, you're gonna die there, stick your arm out and reach for him here.

"There are definitely directors who would get into sort of cow subtext, but that's not my style. I don't generally direct that way. I'm not an Actors Studio kind of guy.

"Besides, I'm from the Midwest. We know our bovines."

*

"Into the Woods," Ahmanson Theatre, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A. Tuesdays through Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. Also Feb. 24, March 3, 7:30 p.m.; March 7, 14, 21, 2 p.m., Ends March 24. \$25-\$70.(213) 628-2772.

[Reference]

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[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: "The audience just ate up the cow," says director James Lapine.; PHOTOGRAPHER: JOAN MARCUS; PHOTO: Chad Kimball, only a few years out of the Boston Conservatory, as the cow Milky-White, with Laura Benanti, center, Stephen DeRosa and Adam Wylie in "Into the Woods" at the Ahmanson Theatre.; PHOTOGRAPHER: CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: CARLOS CHAVEZ / Los Angeles Times; PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER: KEN HIVELY / Los Angeles Times

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