

THE FAMLET

MONTHLY



Dear Family,

It pains me to have to admit that I am allowing Disney+ to consume and govern my life.

I don't think it's entirely my fault. The evil geniuses over there appear to have hit on a content offering that is just the right mix of new and nostalgic to trigger my pleasure sensors in such a way that it's hard to turn away. I can't be the only one.

I haven't been a regular watcher of *The Simpsons* in nearly two decades. But those episodes from the '90s are pure gold; and having them all available on demand makes it difficult for me to be a productive and contributing member of society. Ultimately, I'm probably going to have to set some limits for myself, but I'm not there yet.

I binge watch a fair amount on my own, but I've established a family rule that no one is allowed to watch new episodes of *The Mandalorian* or *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series* without the rest of the family present. I have unilaterally determined that those two shows in particular must be experienced communally in order to be maximally enjoyed.

This is particularly true of *High School Musical: The Musical: The Series*, which deserves an Emmy for its comically clunky name, if nothing else. I wouldn't like it nearly as much if I weren't watching it with Sophie and Grace, who react audibly to every joke, twist, and awkward moment. I don't get all the references, but watching with the girls makes me feel like I do.



Into the Woods



That the show resonates with Sophie and Grace shouldn't come as any surprise given their shared experience with high school musicals. This month's performance of *Into the Woods* at Northwood High School was not just better than I expected but, I think, objectively quite good.

I may have written previously that I was not excited at the prospect of sitting through a high school production of *Into the Woods*. Something about not being fond of Sondheim music generally and not appreciating this story in particular. Watching four performances of it changed my opinion somewhat.

The music was better than I remembered. Listening to my daughters sing it (Sophie was Cinderella; Grace was the spirit of Cinderella's dead mother) may have had something to do with this, but I enjoyed most of the numbers that didn't feature them, as well. The girls in the cast were all excellent, and most of the boys (who haven't had their current voices for nearly as long as the girls have) ranged from decent to quite good, which is about as much as you can reasonably hope for in high school. There really is some good music in there that I still catch myself humming sometimes.

The story is the downer that I remembered. But I apparently needed to see it multiple times to appreciate it for what it is. Fittingly, it begins and ends with two words sung by Cinderella: "*I wish.*" In between resides a cautionary tale about becoming consumed with what we wish for and why getting it isn't always the best thing. Act I ends with all the important characters (Cinderella, the infertile baker and his wife, Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Jack (of the beanstalk), Jack's mother, and even the witch) getting everything they wish for and setting forth on life happily ever after.

(Opening night was a "family show" that ended with Act I so young children could go home believing that's how the story ends.)

Naturally (spoiler alert) the wishes granted in Act I all lead in one way or another to half the cast's getting killed in Act II (and the survivors' enduring significant personal tragedy). I don't know whether one of the story's intended morals is that marrying into a great deal of unearned, inherited wealth almost invariably leads to infidelity, but I'll go ahead and make that generalization. By the end of the fourth show, as the father of the girl playing Cinderella, I was ready to



Sophie as Cinderella



Grace as Cinderella's mom



walk onto the stage and punch Prince Charming in the nose.

Perhaps strangely, I found his dalliances to be the most upsetting part of the show—and probably the main reason I’ll never love it. This would suggest that I find marital infidelity—even in fiction—more unsettling than death. I don’t think this is as irrational as it might sound. (Death after all is ultimately inevitable; the other thing isn’t.) It may also reflect my fatigue with appeals to lazy aphorisms like “the heart wants what it wants” as justification for poor choices.

Watching the show over and over filled me with a kind of pride that allowed me to relate to how parents of children who excel at sports must feel. It was accompanied by a strange kind of pleasant emotion that made me tear up at times as I watched the girls perform. During intermissions and after the show I wished I could wear a sign informing everyone that those were *my* girls playing Cinderella and her mom. I have felt this way at one time or another about all my girls. They make me very happy.

The staggered arrival of the girls’ maternal grandparents, who flew in from Washington (state) and Idaho, combined with the local Willis grandparents, ensured that at least one grandparent attended every show and relieved me of the responsibility of having to buy flowers on any night. This worked out well for me. (It was also nice to see and spend a little time with them.)

Thanksgiving at the aforementioned Willis grandparents’ house was even bigger than usual (and it’s usually pretty big). As I recall, the 43 attendees were spread across five tables in four rooms, and I doubt anyone left hungry. The use of disposable plates and flatware (even *Mom* doesn’t have enough china for 43) took some of the pressure off and made me feel less guilty about not helping with the cleanup.

The 43 attendees did *not* include Hannah and JT, who spent Thanksgiving in Provo. Hannah seemed genuinely delighted that she was able to spend the holiday earning time and a half at the nursing home where she continues to work while she completes her undergraduate nursing degree. She graduates in April, and I continue to feel grateful (and a little jealous) that she seems to have chosen a vocation in which she actually prefers going to work over *not* going to work—even on Thanksgiving.



Sophie as Cinderella with the Baker’s wife and the “cow as white as milk”



The Baker, his wife, Cinderella, and the Prince



The Prince, Cinderella, her stepmother and stepsisters

JT reportedly spent Thanksgiving sick in bed. His parents, who moved from Williamsburg to somewhere in Utah earlier this year, brought leftovers down and allowed Hannah and JT—two hard-core introverts who would probably prefer unanesthetized dental work over a 43-person Thanksgiving gathering—to enjoy the holiday in a way that suits them just about perfectly. JT is reportedly feeling better, which makes me happy.

Speaking of dentists, for the second consecutive Thanksgiving, Matthew brought his model rocket stuff up with him from Raleigh so we could launch them on Friday.

The new tradition was nearly derailed when a police officer informed our gathering at Stonegate Park that it is illegal to fly *anything other than a kite* from a county park. If there's a single local ordinance capable of telling you everything you need to know about Montgomery County, Maryland, this might be the one.

The police officer was cool though and said he'd let us do it "this one time." But he'd have to stay and watch (ostensibly to ensure that we didn't burn down the park or any of the surrounding houses, though he did not appear to have much else to do). And so he stuck around for a little over an hour while a dozen or so young cousins took turns firing off the rockets they had built. It was awesome. Mom said the officer asked her if Matt "worked for Lockheed Martin or something." Which is funny because I remember Matt's first real job (after earning his master's in engineering) was at Lockheed—before ultimately deciding he hated engineering and going to dental school. He may have hated doing it for a living, but he'll clearly always be one at heart. I wonder what we'll do next year.

Lucy may have sustained a stress fracture from some combination of her running, dog walking, and last month's 50-mile (in 15 hours) hike. She had an MRI on the day before Thanksgiving and we're waiting for the doctor to tell her what it means. Think good thoughts for her!

We are thankful for you and hope the Christmas season brings you just the right blend of serenity, joy and whimsy. (It won't, but here's hoping.)

Love,
Tim *et al*

Matt, rockets, and resulting police activity

