



Idina Menzel as Jesse in the Broadway musical "Redwood." (Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman)



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While Pope Francis will be remembered for many things, one of his most important legacies is his attempt in "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" to cultivate an ecological imagination. The beautifully written text, so unlike the dense prose of most encyclicals, offers unexpected passages where argument gives way to poetry, like a clearing in the woods.

"The entire material universe speaks of God's love, his boundless affection for us," Francis writes in the second chapter. "Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God."

This season on Broadway, the musical "Redwood" took Francis' vision one step further by creating onstage a deeply consoling in-the-moment experience of being in a redwood forest.

Walking into the theater before the show, there's little sign of what scenic designer Jason Ardizzone-West, lighting designer Scott Zielinski and video designer Hana S. Kim are about to accomplish all around us. Pink rectangular walls of various sizes surround a bare semi-circular white stage. The story begins in New York, with Jesse — played by Broadway icon Idina Menzel — struggling with the increasing chaos of her life after an unexplained tragedy involving her son Spencer (Zachary Noah Piser). We quickly discover the walls all around her are screens. They reflect her interior tumult.

Finally, without even explaining herself to her wife Mel (De'Adre Aziza), Jesse gets in her car and drives west. At first she finds her trauma inescapable; every young man she meets looks like Spencer. But finally she arrives at the redwoods of Northern California. And the set completely transforms. The screens around her each offer a different glimpse of forest — green leaves, brown bark, blue sky and mottled beams of sunlight. The back wall also revolves to reveal the trunk of a massive redwood which ascends out of sight.



Idina Menzel (Jesse) and Khalia Wilcoxon (Becca) in the Broadway musical "Redwood." (Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman)

And somehow, you actually feel like you're in a redwood forest. There is that strange combination of stillness and presence you find amongst them. After the pandemonium of the initial sequence, which is overwhelming both visually and aurally, to be suddenly transported like this is an astonishing bit of theater magic. It's incredibly calming.

As Jesse meets two arboreal scientists, Finn and Becca, who are doing research in the upper layers of the tree before us, I found myself largely drinking in the environment around us, appreciating the quality of the light in the branches and the soothing colors all around. Even writing about it now weeks later, I am immediately back in that feeling of being nourished.

Most of the rest of "Redwood" will take place in this forest around and on this tree, as Jesse slowly convinces Finn and Becca to allow her to stay here and help them. The more she climbs, the more she is able to find release.

There are some wonderful sequences set in the air. In one built around the song "Dancing in the Leaves," we watch as Jesse sings while she throws herself via her safety cord all around the tree. It's wonderfully playful — at one point she's even singing upside down (a great wow of a moment for Menzel fans).

In another, the screens and stage together create the shocking sensation that we ourselves are lifting off the ground and soaring amongst the trees. The sense of liberation is extraordinary. Both capture well how being in the natural world can peel away our hard bark and get at the child still there underneath, eager to wonder and delight.

As someone who loves the craft of theater, I spent a lot of time during and after the show trying to understand how exactly the designers had managed to create such a realistic experience. The closer I looked, the more questions I had. The video screens, for instance, almost never offer together one image; rather each gives its own unique glimpse into the forest. And yet together they created a unified experience.

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I wrote to video designer Hana S. Kim wondering how she had gone about that. "I visited Redwood forests several times to prepare for this production," she said in an email. What ended up standing out to her above all was less the trees than the light. "Every time I visited, what struck me so deeply was the sense of lighting in the woods," she said. "Trying to emulate the sense of lighting changes in the forest turned out to be rather more successful than photographically being truthful to the image."

The tree, too, is a fascinating piece of work. Yes, it looks much like a redwood. But its power seems to lay more in its size and relative scale. Most of the show it is the only thing on stage other than the cast. But while it soars above them, set designer Jason Ardizzone-West has crafted the tree in such a way that it never dwarfs the cast or their story. Much like the real redwoods, being around the tree somehow has a way of putting life in perspective, rather than diminishing or demeaning it.

"Redwood" billed itself as a musical about a grieving mother who is healed by her time in the redwoods. As performed by its cast and written by composer Kate Diaz

and writer Tina Landau — who conceived the story with Menzel — the show did a wonderful job of telling that tale. (And I say this as someone who originally thought, "Idina Menzel singing in the trees? What?") But what made "Redwood" unique and extraordinary is the way in which as we watched Jesse's story, we, too, were afforded a taste of the ways in which nature can heal us.

There's an impulse when it comes to environmental-type stories to opt for a more issue-oriented approach — characters passionate about the environment fight for it against corrupt industrialists, government officials, etc. And those tales have their merit. But "Redwood" is a profound reminder of how much can be achieved by simply allowing an audience to have an experience of the things that such characters are fighting for.

The environmental imagination that Francis invited us into grows first and foremost not through issues or argument, but the nourishment of our senses. And no art form can offer that experience with a greater sense of immediacy and life than the theater.

"Redwood" ran on Broadway from Feb. 13, 2025 to May 18. The soundtrack comes out on June 20.