

Bell, Book, Candle and Cat: A Q&A with Amanda J. Hull

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The basement of the Brumder Mansion plays host to love and witchcraft this month as Milwaukee Entertainment Group presents *BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE*. Best known for the 1958 film adaptation starring Kim Novak, Jimmy Stewart and Jack Lemmon, it's a cozy romantic drama nestled into the basement of the Brumder this month starring Libby Amato, Randal Anderson and Michael Keiley. Co-director Amanda J. Hull took the time to answer a few questions for today's Small Stage.

The Brumder Mansion is a remarkably intimate space. Perfect for a romantic comedy with a bit of magic. Was there any specific inspiration behind choosing BELL, BOOK AND CANDLE for this particular October?

These are difficult times for humanity, every time we allow ourselves to get settled into some semblance of normalcy we seem to be thrown a terrible curve, and life has been getting very heavy to hold. Instead of something scary or gory, we wanted to bring back some light, love and humor to everyone's Halloween season. That said, it is a still a Halloween show about witches, magic spells, mischief, revenge and love and it is chalk full of all kinds of magic! The actors themselves create most of the magic on stage with their incredible acting and chemistry, but they also have the help of many ambient and very effective sound effects, period and theme appropriate music and magically moody lighting.

The cozy stage in the basement of the Brumder has a very well-defined boundaries. Productions occasionally include space offstage. How are you using the space this time around?

We have a lot of fun utilizing our existing space and imaginatively recreating where each area leads in every production. The stage area has moved around frequently to include the house, the bar area, the love seat nook and even the upstairs lobby and main staircase. This time we are contained in the subterranean theatre, using the stage itself as the boundary of the 1950's NYC Apartment. We have added a dressing on the back wall to imply the existence of a shaded window facing a busy New York street in the Murray Hill district. Tom creatively added a light down stage left to let in moonlight through a high window for dreamy transition lighting. The existing stage door acts as the main entrance to the home, and our hallway/wall façade leads to Gillian's bedroom area. We have turned the bathroom into the kitchen/back entrance where the cat Pyewacket is "put out" and his handler Brittany Curran cares for Gus, our feline actor.

One of the problems I find myself having with the story is the fact that the witch loses her power once she falls in love. Prior to that, there's a lot of sinister manipulation that centers around a woman's obsession with a man. Gillian's a strong character, but she's weak for this one man. Not very liberated. It feels very dated. You can't change the script, but there are ways to adjust how things play out dramatically. Has there been an attempt to gain more of an overall equal footing between Shep and Gillian in your production?

A typical dilemma in many period pieces is that in order to find happiness a woman has to make a sacrifice, blech. The real message should be that love takes compromise from each person. We are flawed, but capable of change when moved by another. Shep is a seemingly boring man, who forewent love in his younger years in pursuit of a career, and in midlife was drawn in by a younger, typically appealing, manipulative woman, and he is so ready for marriage that he overlooks her flaws. Gillian genuinely likes him and knows that woman's flaws and not totally unselfishly, tries to save Shep from her. We are lead to believe by the writing that he would not have been happy with her even if magic hadn't intervened. Gill is an independent, modern woman/witch who has always felt that something was missing and connects to a glimmer of something in Shep. She hasn't had human emotions since childhood and her life has been a non-stop, whirlwind search for anything that will fulfill her. She longs for a little of the mundane, some stability and comfort, and tries to get it by enchanting Shep to love her. Though she may have been wrong to interfere in someone's fate, underneath it all there are good reasons for both to do what they do. The fact that everyone is capable of love and that we find it in unlikely ways is the real message here, and I'm hoping that is clear enough that the loss of her magic isn't the focus. They each gain something greater in finding each other. The road there is very bumpy but you'll have to see the show to find out how and why!

It looks like a great cast for the show. I think this may be the second or third time that Randall T. Anderson has played a role for the stage made popular by Jimmy Stewart on the screen. Libby Amato has a great vulnerability onstage that will make for an interesting character arc. What has it been like doing character work with the actors for the show?

Working with this cast has been an absolute joy. They are all intuitive, naturally hilarious actors who are able to find the humor in the most mundane moments and also truly feel the sadness, which dips into our comedy at moments, very suddenly. Our real challenge was to find the contrast between their base characters and what they would be like with magical or other interference. Not only are these actors trying to take on another persona, they then have to be that person in love under a spell, angry out of a spell, drunk but intelligent and coherent, excited with no emotion and then upset without too much emotion. They interact with each other on stage very differently scene to scene based on what circumstances are at hand. It could be very confusing but they were each up for the challenge and their characters have become very defined and specific throughout the play.

This show also features the talents of Gus TT Doherty. I've never seen him onstage before. The promo pics for the show seem really intense, though. I could believe that he's a magical witch's familiar spirit who is hundreds of years old. It must be kind of difficult to work with a cat, though. The movie had used something like 12 cats to play the role. Here you're relying on just the one.

Gus TT Doherty is a consummate professional and a delight to work with. He is also one of the sweetest, most cuddly cats we've ever met and has won the hearts of all cast and crew. He loves to be pet and held and luckily for us Libby is the only one who handles him on stage and she is pretty much a Cat Whisperer. Once she gets him in her arms it only takes seconds for him to melt and purr. It's a great combo, I think they have the best chemistry on stage! We also have the delightful Brittany Curran keeping him company with toys and treats back stage. He is the only member of the cast with his own dressing room and assistant. Just in case, we do have a back up prop cat, but I very much doubt that we will need it. Knock on wood!

Milwaukee Entertainment Group's production of *Bell, Book and Candle* runs Oct. 13 -31 at the Brumder Mansion on 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For ticket reservations and more, visit [MEG online](#).



Gus TT Doherty (L) and Libby Amato (R)--JT Backes Photography

Russ Bickerstaff

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