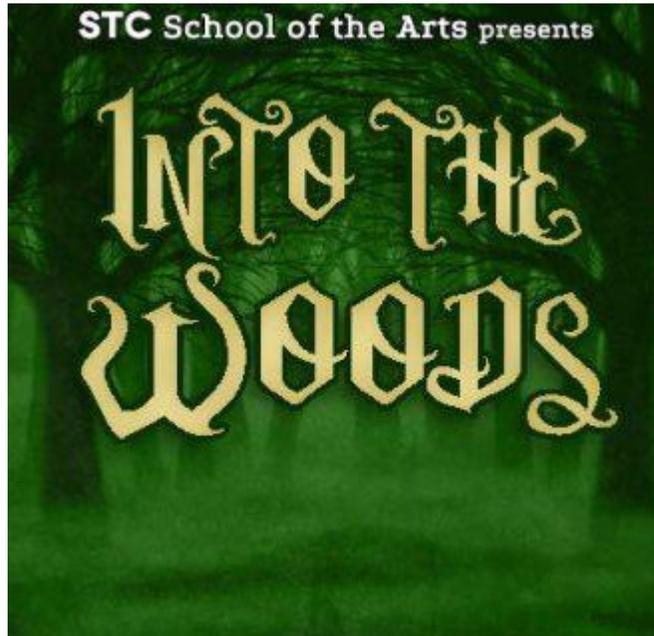


Sacramento Theatre Company

Study Guide



Into the Woods

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by James Lapine

Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles

Synopsis: *Into the Woods*

Into the Woods begins with a montage of familiar fairy tale characters and stories. Cinderella wishes to attend the Prince's festival, but her cruel stepsisters and stepmother are trying to prevent her from going. Jack (of Jack and the Beanstalk) wishes for a better life; but his mother, desperate for money, makes him take his cow, Milky White, into the woods to sell her. Little Red Riding Hood visits the Baker and the Baker's Wife to purchase bread to take to her sick grandmother in the woods.

Meanwhile, the Baker and his wife lament the fact they are childless. Soon, the Witch from next door visits and reveals she is the cause behind their infertility: in the past she placed a curse on their family because they stole from her precious garden. In order to reverse the curse, the Witch assigns them a series of tasks to complete in "three days time." During their quest to fulfill the witches' demands, they encounter Little Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Cinderella, and numerous other fairy tale figures in the woods. Each story is altered and intertwined, and most eventually work towards the same goal, but not until they each realize the repercussions of their desired "happily ever afters."

Characters: *Into the Woods*

Narrator: A gentleman who helps guide the story along, the Narrator also plays a surprising role in the show later on.

Cinderella – Even though she lives with her father, wicked stepmother, and two cruel stepsisters, Cinderella is kind and good and her only wish is to go to the Prince’s festival (a.k.a. the ball), but once she does go and the Prince pursues her, she is uncertain about how to proceed.

Jack: Young, foolhardy, and desperate for a better life, Jack sells his cow for magic beans which lead him on a journey of growing up and learning to accept consequences.

Jack’s Mother: A single mother and a fighter, Jack’s Mother is mainly concerned with not starving. When she forces Jack to sell his cow, little does she know what *big* things are in store!

Baker: The “hero” of the story (although his actions are not always heroic), the Baker feels he must “fix” he and his wife’s inability to have children and initially tries to pursue his quest without her; but he soon realizes he is much better off with her by his side.

Baker’s Wife: Badly wanting a child, the Baker’s Wife would go to any length to have one. When her husband sets off into the woods to seek the things that would enable them to remove their “curse” of infertility, her assertiveness and stubbornness eventually helps bring about a change between her and her husband.

Cinderella’s Stepmother: Greedy, selfish, and mean-spirited, Cinderella’s Stepmother wants what is best for herself and her two daughters, but not Cinderella.

Florinda and Lucinda: Cinderella’s cruel stepsisters.

Cinderella’s Father: A pushover, Cinderella’s Father is out-of-touch with his family.

Little Red Riding Hood: A sassy, spoiled girl, Little Red Riding Hood must journey from youth and innocence into adulthood and responsibility through an adventurous and scary path.

Witch: Originally portrayed as “the villain,” the witch’s story is much more complicated. She has an ulterior motive when she reveals she was the one who placed the curse of infertility on the Baker’s family.

Cinderella’s Mother: Though no longer living, Cinderella’s Mother is still pivotal in granting useful advice and helping fulfill Cinderella’s wish of going to the Prince’s ball.

Mysterious Man: A wanderer in the woods, the Mysterious Man is full of riddles and a secret.

The Wolf: Lustful, hungry creature, the Wolf represents a lot more than just a dangerous animal in the woods.

Granny: Rapunzel's grandmother who lives in the woods, Granny is feisty and vindictive towards the Wolf.

Rapunzel: Raised and locked away by the Witch, Rapunzel grew up confined to a tower in the woods; and even though she escapes to start a new life and learn her true history, she struggles to maintain her sanity after her distressing upbringing.

Cinderella's Prince: Though charming, handsome, and seemingly perfect, Cinderella's Prince thinks his royal birth entitles him to take anything, and anyone, he wants.

Rapunzel's Prince: Attractive and pompous like his brother, Cinderella's Prince, Rapunzel's Prince tries his best to help when Rapunzel starts to lose her grip on reality.

Steward: A self-important, surly servant to the royal family.

Giant: Loud, angry, and very, very big.

Snow White and Sleeping Beauty: These two catch the attention of Cinderella's and Rapunzel's princes.

The Fairy Tale in the Forest

By Ace G. Pilkington

Sondheim and Lapine's *Into the Woods* is a musical based, in part, on the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm. Jack Zipes, one of the most important and most published of contemporary folklore scholars, has said about such things, "Folk and fairy tales as products of the imagination are in danger of becoming instrumentalized and commercialized" (*Breaking the Magic Spell* [Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002], 2). With the new big-budget Disney film version looming at the end of 2014, Zipes's warning seems more than ever to apply to *Into the Woods*. However, the history of the musical suggests that the inclusion of the Brothers Grimm fairy tales had more to do with desperation than exploitation.

In "A Fairy Tale Musical Grows Up," Stephen Holden writes, "Originally the Sondheim-Lapine team attempted to create a picaresque fantasy using totally original characters." But as Sondheim himself says, "I don't know how Frank Baum invented *The Wizard of Oz* or Lewis Carroll *Alice in Wonderland*. . . . Jim [Lapine] and I were able to invent a couple of underlying structures, but nothing came to fruition. Then Jim came up with the idea of bringing together a group of established characters from different milieus into one situation and having them concatenate. Then he came up with the idea of having them be characters from fairy tales" (<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-tale.html>).

In addition, the assumption behind the notions of commercialization or exploitation is that the underlying structures and messages of fairy tales are violated or simply omitted. Instead, Lapine and Sondheim did their best to discover and foreground those structures and messages. As Sondheim told James Lipton, "If there's any outside influence, it's Jung. . . . In fact, we spoke to a Jungian analyst about fairy tales" ("The Art of the Musical" originally appeared as an episode of the television series *Inside the Actors Studio* and then was excerpted for *The Paris Review* 142 [Spring 1997], <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/1283/the-art-of-the-musical-stephen-sondheim>). Carl Jung's emphasis on deep structure, on the patterns and archetypes of myths and folktales, makes him, perhaps, the ideal guide for a passage through the dark places of fairy tales.

The main stories that Sondheim and Lapine borrowed from the Brothers Grimm were "Cinderella," "Rapunzel," and "Little Red Cap," more commonly known as "Little Red Riding Hood." There are, of course, a number of changes to the tales, but the most typical has to do with "Little Red Cape." In the Grimms' version, the wolf eats both the girl and her grandmother, but they are rescued by a passing hunter who "did not shoot but took some scissors and started cutting open the sleeping wolf's belly" (*The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes [New York: Bantam Books, 1992], 104). Both victims emerge alive, something that is unlikely to happen outside of a fairy tale (or musical). *Into the Woods* substitutes the Baker for the hunter as a means of connecting the stories but doesn't change the message. James Lapine also used the little-known ending of the story in constructing Red Riding Hood's character, "Little Red Ridinghood I thought of as Ramboette, because in the Grimm version of the story she and her grandmother go back into the woods and lure the wolf into a trough of water and drown him. What interested me was her brutality" (Holden). It is a second wolf, the grandmother lives in the woods, the drowning of the wolf is the grandmother's plan, but there's no doubt that the old woman and young girl share in the brutality.

The other folk tale that is especially important to the plot is not from the Grimms at all. "Jack and the Beanstalk" is a traditional English fairy tale, and the inclusion of "Milky-white" as the name

of the cow, plus the description of Jack as a thief and not as the son of a knight trying to retrieve what was rightfully his father's, identifies the version as that of Joseph Jacobs from *English Fairy Tales*. (The other one, by the way, can be found in Andrew Lang's *The Red Fairy Book*.) Jack is smarter and more heartless in the fairy tale, or at least he understands that bulls don't give milk, and he doesn't think of Milky-white as a friend. Finally, there are two other stories from the Brothers Grimm that receive brief mentions in the play when the two princes go looking for additional princesses. They are "Brier Rose" and "Snow White." There's even a reference to J.R.R. Tolkien and his misspelling of "dwarfs" as "dwarves" when the princes discuss why they can't reach the new princesses they've found (Libretto <http://theatre-musical.com/intothewoods/libretto2.html>).

Ironically, *Into the Woods* comes closest to the truth of folk tales when it is furthest from the actual stories. The very notion of going into the woods is at the heart of fairy tales. The forest is a dark and magical other world, filled with marvelous adventures, terrible challenges, and life or death resolutions. The witch with a house in the forest is one of the most enduring and powerful archetypes in literature. To enter her hut and garden is to enter the underworld and confront death. This is true for the Grimms, for Baba Yaga in Slavic tales (e.g. "Vassilissa the Beautiful" in Pilkington *Fairy Tales of the Russians and Other Slavs* [Forest Tsar Press, 2010]), and for Sondheim and Lapine. Often in such stories, the witch is not evil but neutral, a great power who can be placated or offended. As the witch sings in her "Last Midnight" number, "I'm not nice,/ I'm not good,/ I'm just right" (Sondheim and Lapine, *Into the Woods*, Brandman Productions Inc. 1990, DVD).

The journey into the forest is a journey to understanding. Sondheim's songs clearly mark the stages of that journey, and as the songs are repeated and altered in the course of the musical, we see how much the characters have learned and changed. We see how much they have gained and the terrible losses they have suffered, and this too is true to the nature of fairy tales, which do not all end happily, and even when they do, do not end happily for everyone. Death comes randomly and unfairly. Love appears to offer more than it can possibly deliver. Children won't listen. But fairy tales also send the message of what is arguably the central song of *Into the Woods*, "No One Is Alone." So, the grim journeys come to a warm ending—as fairy tales should. And as, more often than not, they do.

The Fairy Tale and the Fallacy

By Anna Miles

While *Into the Woods* does maintain many classic characteristics of traditional fairy tales (as demonstrated in Pilkington's article "The Fairy Tale in the Forest"), it's important also to discuss the ways in which the play subverts and critiques its source material and the themes within it. The human brain is programmed to make connections, to find meaning in everything, to make sense of the chaotic world in which we all live. In order to understand the world and our place in it, we tell stories- about witches, about princesses and bakers and little girls in red capes, but also about us, and our own experiences. This is why fairy tales have always appealed to us- every culture across time and space has engaged in some kind of storytelling tradition, usually an oral tradition in which folk tales, myths, and fables were passed down verbally from generation to generation. They allow us to make sense of the unexplainable- they put our complications (our morals, our values, our relationships, our fears) into an easily digestible, simplified narrative. The Greek myths about the gods often served to explain natural phenomena, such as the story of Persephone, who descends into the Underworld for half of the year, causing her grieving goddess mother Demeter to wither the crops in fall and winter. The fairy tales *Into the Woods* is directly based upon often ended with some kind of clear lesson, or moral. The virtuous characters always lived happily, and the bad characters always were punished. Stories turn our messy existence into something clean and tidy. Fairy tales don't represent the world as it is, but rather, how we wish it could be.

One of the most enduring motifs in *Into the Woods* are the "midnight" refrains- on each midnight, the characters break from their action, and each directly address the audience with some kind of platitude. "The prettier the flower, the farther from the path," Little Red says, while Cinderella tells us that "opportunity is not a lengthy visitor": tidy lessons the characters have picked up so far. In these "midnights," all the action and conflict we've seen so far gets reduced to one easily-understandable sentence for each character. But as the midnights keep passing and the refrains continue to be repeated throughout the show, the one liners become increasingly more complicated. "Wanting a ball is not wanting a prince," Cinderella says in the second midnight, when she starts to understand that her simple wish might not yield such simple consequences. She's getting more than she bargained for: because, after all, we always get more than we bargain for.

These refrains culminate, of course, in the Witch's "Last Midnight," sung in Act 2 long after the neatness and prettiness has worn off. "You're not good, you're not bad, you're just nice. I'm not good, I'm not bad, I'm just right. I'm the witch. You're the world," she spits at the surviving characters. Life can't be broken down into "bad" vs. "good." Lessons can't be boiled into platitudes. In this way, Sondheim uses the form of the fairy tale to critique the fairy tale's very nature.

One specific similarity Pilkington points out between *Into the Woods* and the basic fairy tale structure is the lack of a happy ending- but while it's true that many traditional fairy tales do not end happily (particularly many of the original Grimm versions of the stories), it's also true that our cultural understanding of the fairy tale extends far beyond those originals. In fact, most contemporary members of society aren't just also familiar with but in fact more familiar with fairy tales as they exist in popular culture, and in particular, Disney. Fairy tales are inextricably associated with unequivocally happy endings for the modern audience member- in this way, the unhappy (or at the very least, complicated) endings of Sondheim's fairy tales serve as a challenge to the uncomplicated ways in which we are conditioned to understand storytelling.

The first act of *Into the Woods* ends where we're used to the stories ending: at the happy endings. But the play doesn't actually end there. The play keeps going, until everyone's happy ending is turned upside down and twisted beyond recognition. The stories get jumbled up into each other (The Baker's Wife even says so with her line, "This is ridiculous, what am I doing here, I'm in the wrong story"). *Into the Woods* takes our comforting ideas of how we wish life could be and reminds us instead how life actually is- and reminds us that if we let ourselves believe real life can imitate fairy tales, we are setting ourselves up for a very rude awakening.

Be careful what you wish for. Be careful the things you say. Life doesn't work like a fairy tale- which is exactly why Sondheim leaves us with a bidding to "be careful the tale you tell, that is the spell." Because children will listen. We love to listen to happy endings; but this won't best prepare us for when the pretty refrains start to break down into something much more complicated.

Additional Resources

Into the Woods Study Guide, Music Theatre International

https://www.musikundbuehne.de/fileadmin/media/Downloads/Education_Packs/Into_the_Woods_Study_Guide.pdf

Into the Woods Study Guide, Theatre Works

<http://djohn409.tripod.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderfiles/intothewoodsstudyguide.pdf>

The Grimm Fairy Tales

<https://www.cs.cmu.edu/~spok/grimtmp/>

Into the Woods: The Real Fairy Tales Behind the Characters

<https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/articles/1066955/into-the-woods-the-real-fairy-tales-behind-the-characters/>

Why Into the Woods is Important, The New Yorker

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/why-into-the-woods-matters>

Out of the Psyche and Into the Woods

<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/out-of-the-psyche-and-int b 6324398>