Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

Into the Woods
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Deanna Ott (left) as Little Red Ridinghood and Peter Saide as Wolf in the Utah Shakespeare Festival's 2014 production of Into the Woods.
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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” his 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.
Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine

By Don Leavitt

It’s hard to imagine a more unlikely pairing in American musical theatre than Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine. When you consider some of the names that have shaped the modern American musical—Rodgers and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, Lerner and Loewe, for example—well, “Sondheim and Lapine” just doesn’t have the same ring to it.

Rarely have two people of such vastly different backgrounds, temperaments, and levels of experience joined forces so successfully, nor left such an indelible impression. There is no question that the collaboration between Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine has been successful—together, the duo created two of the most successful plays in Broadway history, and, between them, their work has been awarded more than a dozen times. Their success is that much more remarkable when considered in the context of their differences: Lapine’s Midwestern, public school upbringing compared with Sondheim’s life as the only child of wealthy parents in New York; Lapine’s personable, gregarious personality compared to the introverted Sondheim’s self-described melancholic nature; Lapine’s almost accidental foray into theatre compared to Sondheim’s position as a master of the genre.

The way the two met is something of a Broadway legend. It was 1982, and Sondheim had just suffered a failure with his musical Merrily We Roll Along, a sixteen-performance flop that greatly affected the composer. Sondheim has said he was ready to quit theatre and create video games or write mysteries: “I wanted to find something to satisfy myself that does not involve Broadway,” Sondheim said (Gottfried, Martin, Sondheim [New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993] 153).

Sondheim attended a performance of the play Twelve Dreams, written and directed by James Lapine, at the Public Theatre in New York, and was so impressed with the production he asked to meet with Lapine after the show. “I was discouraged, and I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t discovered Twelve Dreams at the Public Theatre,” Sondheim said (Wolf, Matt, “Stephen Sondheim: An audience with a theatre legend” [The Independent, April, 2013]).

As a result of that meeting, the pair would go on to create three musicals, books by Lapine, music and lyrics by Sondheim. They first collaborated in 1984 on Sunday in the Park with George, which received fairly mixed reviews but was nonetheless a commercial success and one of the few Broadway musicals to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize. This was followed in 1987 by Into the Woods, a retelling of classic Grimms’ fairy tales that was both critically and commercially successful. Their final production together was 1994’s Passion, a critically acclaimed play that holds the distinction for having the shortest Broadway run of any other winner of the Tony Award for Best Musical. In addition, the duo’s work has spawned several revivals and countless regional performances; a big screen version of Into the Woods is currently in production and is scheduled for a December 2014 release.

Lapine is often overshadowed by the sheer depth of Sondheim’s career, and it’s a pity because his grasp of story and his taste for visually-oriented theatre is quite extraordinary. Sondheim has said that Lapine’s production of Twelve Dreams gave him a sense of “renewed hope” for theatre, and he is quick to praise Lapine for coming up with the central idea of Sunday in the Park with George. According to Time Out London writer Jane Edwardes, Sondheim and Lapine visited the Art Institute of Chicago to view the painting by Georges Seurat on which the play is based. “We discussed the fact that nobody in the painting was looking at anybody else and we started to fantasise [sic] about that and the fact that it looks like a stage set. And then James said, ‘The main character is missing,’ and I said, ‘Who?’ and he said, ‘The artist.’ Once that was spoken, it immediately became a play” (http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/stephen-sondheim-interview).

Born in Mansfield, Ohio, in 1949, Lapine attended public school before graduating from
Pennsylvania’s Franklin and Marshall College with a degree in history; he received an MFA in design from the California Institute of Arts and moved to New York City, where he worked as a freelance photographer and graphic designer. His freelance work on Yale/Theater, the magazine of the Yale School of Drama, brought him to the attention of Robert Brustein, dean of the school who offered Lapine a full-time job designing marketing materials and a faculty position teaching a course in advertising design (http://jameslapine.com/biography).

At the urging of his students, Lapine directed the Gertrude Stein play Photograph, and the director Lee Breuer helped arrange for a three-week run of the production at a small performance space in Soho; the run was wildly successful, and in 1977 Lapine won an Obie award for direction. Lapine recognized the opportunity and left graphic arts entirely to write and direct off-Broadway plays, including March of the Falsettos and Twelve Dreams; in addition to his work with Sondheim, Lapine also wrote the musical Luck, Pluck and Virtue; and the play Fran’s Bed. He has directed eighteen productions, including Sondheim on Sondheim, which he also wrote, and the 2012 revival of Annie; he also directed the 1991 film Impromptu, which was written by his wife, Sarah Kernochan. He has received four Drama Desk awards for outstanding book and outstanding direction, and three Tony awards for Best Book of a Musical; in 2010, Lapine was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame.

While Lapine discovered his theatre career late in life, Sondheim’s career was a pursuit that began at the young age of eleven. Born in New York in 1930, Sondheim was the only child of a successful dress maker and his designer wife. His father left the family when Sondheim was ten, and his mother moved them to Pennsylvania, where he became good friends with the son of Oscar Hammerstein. Looking back, Sondheim has said that Hammerstein became a mentor and surrogate father; if Hammerstein had been a geologist, “I probably would have been a geologist,” Sondheim said (Mick Brown, “Still Cutting It at 80: Stephen Sondheim Interview” [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/8022755/Still-cutting-it-at-80-Stephen-Sondheim-interview.html]).

Sondheim wrote his first play at fifteen, a musical about life at a Quaker boarding school. He studied theatre at Williams College in Massachusetts and went on to study composition with composer Milton Babbitt. While working briefly as a television scriptwriter, he composed the musical Saturday Night, which was not produced but did attract the attention of Leonard Bernstein, who hired Sondheim to write the lyrics for West Side Story in 1957; he wrote the lyrics for Gypsy (1959) and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962) before suffering his first major failure with Anyone Can Whistle (1964). In 1970, Sondheim wrote Company, and has said it was the first musical in which he “began to hear my own voice loud and clear” (Brown).

Though he has not always been a critical favorite, Sondheim has nevertheless won more awards for theatre than most people know even exist. His catalog of awards includes Grammies, Tonys and Obies; Drama Desk awards and several Laurence Olivier awards. Telegraph reporter Mick Brown writes, “He is, by universal acknowledgement, the man who revolutionised American musical theatre, and the last survivor of a form that is all but extinct, swept away in the deluge of ‘jukebox musicals’, overblown crowd pleasers and ‘theme-park’ spectacles that now dominate the Broadway stage” (Brown).

Sondheim appreciates the sentiment but recognizes that his time may have passed. He has produced only one new play in the last nineteen years, and at age eighty-three, wonders if there is a place for him in modern theater. In the Telegraph interview, Sondheim says, “I don’t know that there is an audience now for the kind of shows I would want to write. . . . The fact is if I had something I really wanted to write, I would write it. But I don’t. . . . I don’t have to prove anything to myself. I don’t have to prove anything to the world. I’m venerable now.”
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 Cap.” 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 specially 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 try-
ing 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.