

Into the Woods

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by James Lapine

Many familiar fairy tales have been transformed into countless ballets, films, and operas. From Sergei Prokofiev's *Cinderella* to Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bete* to Gioacchino Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, the magic of fairy tales have inspired myriad works for the stage and screen.

In the mid-1980's, when a Broadway musical tended to be either a widely-acclaimed hit or a failure, Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine were interested in creating a light-hearted, funny musical that would appeal to the middle group—a musical that would entertain a wide audience, but would not necessarily be a box-office smash. Lapine, who had loved fairy tales when growing up, at first conceived of a musical based on an entirely new fairy tale, but the notion of combining several already-cherished fairy tales in one work was rife with possibilities for slapstick humor and witty lyrics.

The resulting musical, *Into the Woods*, premiered on Broadway in 1987 and was heralded with three Tony Awards and nine nominations. In 1988, it was named best musical by both the Drama Desk and the New York Drama Critics Circle.

However, not all reactions to *Into the Woods* were favorable. While many enjoyed the first act of the musical, which is comprised of a mingling of plots based on several famous fairy tale characters, including Cinderella, Rapunzel, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Little Red Riding Hood, some had complaints about the second act. At the end of Act I, after each character has his/her share of misfortune, all appear to live "happily ever after." Striving to demonstrate that happy endings are unrealistic, Lapine and Sondheim thrust the characters into a dark and sinister forest, a shift in tone that did not sit well with many critics.

Sondheim dismissed criticisms of the second act, maintaining that audiences do not like to be surprised when watching musicals. Furthermore, when 18th-century German writers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm wrote down the original tales from storytellers, the endings were much more menacing than the happily-ever-after versions normally told today. Rather than continuing the tradition of fairy tales with happy endings, Lapine and Sondheim have kept true to Grimm's original versions in *Into the Woods*, exploring some of the more dark and complex elements of fairy tales, thereby exploring some of the more dark and complex elements that occur in life.

Sondheim's *Into the Woods* has been adapted for young performers in the John F. Kennedy Center Education Department's production of *Into the Woods, Jr.* Find out more about *Into the Woods, Jr.* on the Kennedy Center [Web site](#).

Synopsis:

What happens in fairy tales when the characters do not live "happily ever after"? In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim retells Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's fairy tales as several familiar characters—and some new—share the same stage. The adventures of Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk, and Rapunzel are woven together as they try to overcome obstacles in the same forest, while a Baker and his Wife attempt to reverse a family curse that prevents them from having a child.

Things to Think About:

While in the woods, the characters must resolve certain complicated situations: the Baker and his Wife must search for a potion; Rapunzel is confined to a tower, etc. In the process of overcoming these obstacles, each character learns something important. Discuss the morals revealed in the fairy tales and share how they relate to their own life experiences.

The Grimm brothers were not the only authors to write about the woods in their fairy tales. Many fairy tales use forests as a major component of the theme or plot of the story. What characteristics of forests make it a fitting setting for fairy tales? Compare and contrast various tales and the way the woods are used as symbolism.

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