Into the Woods
Into the Woods
music and lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM
book by JAMES LAPINE
directed by SARNA LAPINE
June 17 – August 13, 2023
Wurtele Thrust Stage

THE PLAY
Synopsis, Setting and Characters • 4
Scenes and Songs • 5
Responses to Into the Woods • 6

THE AUTHORS
A Musical Dream Team • 9
Sondheim and Lapine: It Takes Two • 11
In Their Own Words • 13

CULTURAL CONTEXT
Literary Terms and Categories • 15
About Fairy Tales • 16
The Quest! • 18
Selected Glossary of Terms • 20

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
For Further Reading and Understanding • 21
About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Thanks for your interest in Into the Woods. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
### Synopsis

“Once upon a time, in a far-off kingdom,” Cinderella pines to go to the king’s festival, impoverished Jack tends to his pet cow, Little Red Riding Hood sets out to visit her grandmother, Rapunzel longs to see the world and a Baker and his wife learn they can’t have children because the Witch from next door put a curse on them. All these characters — and more — go into the woods to make their wishes come true.

Magic beans from the Witch’s garden enable Jack to visit a kingdom in the sky, steal gold and slay a giant; Cinderella and Rapunzel meet their charming princes; Little Red has a meaningful encounter with a Wolf; and the Baker and Baker’s Wife succeed in gathering the items needed to undo their curse.

Just when everyone thinks they will live happily ever after, a forgotten magic bean sprouts a second stalk, and a giant’s wife in search of revenge upends the proverbial fairy-tale ending as they learn that actions have consequences and they discover the value of community.
Scenes and Songs

ACT ONE

Scene One
Prologue: “Into the Woods” .................................................. COMPANY

Scene Two
“Cinderella at the Grave” .......................................... CINDERELLA, CINDERELLA’S MOTHER
“Hello, Little Girl” .................................................. WOLF, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD
“I Guess This Is Goodbye” ........................................... JACK
“Maybe They’re Magic” ................................................... BAKER’S WIFE, BAKER
“Baker’s Reprise” ........................................................... BAKER
“I Know Things Now” .................................................. LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD
“A Very Nice Prince” ................................................... CINDERELLA, BAKER’S WIFE
“First Midnight” ............................................................ COMPANY

Scene Three
“Giants in the Sky” .................................................. JACK
“Agony” ................................................................. CINDERELLA’S PRINCE, RAPUNZEL’S PRINCE
“A Very Nice Prince” (reprise) ...................................... CINDERELLA, BAKER’S WIFE
“It Takes Two” .......................................................... BAKER’S WIFE, BAKER
“Second Midnight” ........................................................ COMPANY

Scene Four
“Stay With Me” .......................................................... WITCH, RAPUNZEL
“On the Steps of the Palace” ........................................... CINDERELLA

Scene Five
Finale: “Ever After” .................................................. COMPANY

ACT TWO

Scene One
Prologue: “So Happy” .......................................................... COMPANY

Scene Two
“Agony” (reprise) .......................................................... CINDERELLA’S PRINCE, RAPUNZEL’S PRINCE
“Witch’s Lament” ............................................................. WITCH
“Any Moment” ........................................................... CINDERELLA’S PRINCE, BAKER’S WIFE
“Moments in the Woods” ................................................ BAKER’S WIFE
“Your Fault” ................................................................. JACK, BAKER, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD, WITCH, CINDERELLA
“Last Midnight” ............................................................. WITCH
“No More” ................................................................. BAKER, MYSTERIOUS MAN
“No One Is Alone” ................................................... CINDERELLA, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD, BAKER, JACK
Finale: “Children Will Listen” ................................................ COMPANY
Responses to *Into the Woods*

**TIME**

As funny as Sondheim's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, as musical as his *A Little Night Music*, as morally inflamed as his *Sweeney Todd*, yet more forgiving and affirmative than anything he has written before, *Into the Woods* is the best show yet from the most creative mind in the musical theater today. It is also that joyous rarity, a work of sophisticated artistic ambition and deep political purpose that affords nonstop pleasure. ...

What *Into the Woods* does, gloriously, is make the case for what musicals might be, blending innovation and old-fashioned storytelling into an elixir of delight. It makes audiences think of Freud and Jung, of dark psychological thickets and sudden clearings of enlightenment, even as they roar with laughter. Its basic insight, plainly influenced by the revisionist scholarship of Bruno Bettelheim, is that at heart, most fairy tales are about the loving yet embattled relationship between parents and children. Almost everything that goes wrong — which is to say, almost everything that can — arises from a failure of parental or filial duty, despite the best intentions. ...

By the end of the first act, the fairy-tale figures have bonded into a community and sing and dance about living happily ever after. But they don't. The widow of a giant slain by Jack shows up to exact revenge and drives everyone back into the woods. ... The threat she poses has been likened by some critics to nuclear war or AIDS; the rampant selfishness that soon erupts in the face of trouble, the producers admit, meant as a subtle protest against the self-congratulatory individualism of the Reagan era. But with or without allusive implications, the story jolts its passive characters — and spectators — into a world where every action has its moral consequences. ...

*Into the Woods* aspires to nothing less than explaining the nature of growing up and taking responsibility.

William Henry III

“Some Enchanted Evening *Into the Woods*,” *Time*, November 16, 1987

**The New York Times**

When Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood and their fairy-tale friends venture into the woods in the new Stephen Sondheim-James Lapine musical, you can be sure that they won’t miss the subconscious forest for the picturesque trees. The characters of *Into the Woods* may be figures of children’s literature, but their journey is the same existential one taken by so many adults in Sondheim musicals past. ...

Like the middle-aged showbiz cynics who return to their haunted youths in *Follies* and *Merrily We Roll Along*, or the contemporary descendant who revisits Georges Seurat’s hallowed park in *Sunday in the Park With George*, or the lovers who court in a nocturnal Scandinavian birch forest in *A Little Night Music*, Cinderella and company travel into a dark, enchanted wilderness to discover who they are and how they might grow up and overcome the eternal, terrifying plight of being alone. To hear “No One Is Alone,” the cathartic and beautiful final song of *Into the Woods*, is to be overwhelmed once more by the continuity of one of the American theater’s most extraordinary songwriting careers.

Frank Rich

Divided into two distinct halves, *Into the Woods* begins as farce, with the familiar characters struggling to find their happy endings. But the second half, while still hilarious, gets darker as the characters pay the price for their wishes. That shift is best summed up in [the Baker’s Wife’s] soaring and lovely “Moments in the Woods,” in which we realize that a character who has seemed practical, uncomplicated and funny … has no idea where life is taking her. …

Whoever we are, we share the same basic needs, and wherever we come from, there is a metaphoric “woods” where we learn that growing up is no picnic. “Happily ever after” is not guaranteed for any of us.

**Chris Hewitt**

“Mu’s take on *Into the Woods* lively, fresh and full of highlights,” Pioneer Press, July 20, 2012

For the past year or so, a certain segment of the population … has experienced a punishing range of emotions about the new [Disney] movie *Into the Woods*, based on the Stephen Sondheim-James Lapine musical of the same name. The emotions include anxiety, rage, anticipation, possessiveness, nostalgia, suspicion, denial and dread. …

As a member of this small but fervent demographic, I’d like to explain why we’ve been so tense. Part of it is that *Into the Woods* is easy to get wrong. …

More than plot, what’s tricky about *Into the Woods* is tone. Lapine’s book tacks between farce and tragedy, winking at the absurdities of the original tales (How the heck does Little Red Riding Hood climb out of the Wolf’s belly intact?) and then guiding their characters through calamity and heartache. Sondheim’s score is a puzzle-master’s trove of overlapping motifs, internal rhymes, wordplay (“We’ve no time to sit and dither/while her withers wither with her”) and psychological nuance. …

I certainly didn’t comprehend all the musical’s resonances [when I saw it circa fifth grade], among them the communal solidarity during the AIDS crisis, which at the time was stomping around the theater world like an angry giant. (Sondheim has downplayed the AIDS connection, but it’s unavoidable.) Still, the show was a psychological bait and switch, a gateway to adolescence and its complicated truths. Act One had magic beans. Act Two had disillusionment, responsibility and loss. You got from one to the other through the woods, as good a metaphor as any for the big, brutal world. Even the shifts in tone were a lesson: amid despair, a dry one-liner (“I was raised to be charming, not sincere”); after an act of courage, ethical revisionism.

What I learned from *Into the Woods*, most of all, was ambivalence. It’s in every song, undermining prepackaged morals. (“Isn’t it nice to know a lot?” Little Red sings to herself. “And a little bit not.”) No one in musical theater does ambivalence like Sondheim, and usually no one tells you what it is until after you’ve experienced it. Cinderella’s hemming and hawing on the palace steps is worlds away from “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes” in Disney’s cartoon version. What if your heart doesn’t have a goddamn clue?

**Michael Schulman**

The texture of *Into the Woods* resembles that of a through-composed work, since the show for long stretches eschews the customary alternation of dialogue and numbers, thereby broadening the scope of traditional Broadway entertainment. A testament to the close collaboration of book writer and song writer, the libretto interweaves spoken and sung word in a carefully devised montage that creates a world where characters do not start to sing only when their emotions are too strong to be expressed in dialogue, as they do in the classical book musical ala Rodgers and Hammerstein. Here song is just as much a means of expression as talk is.

Olaf Jubin  
*Sondheim and Lapine’s Into the Woods*, Routledge, 2018

Sondheim and Lapine concocted a tangled plot for the 1987 show, framed by the idea of a passel of fantasy characters forced to face the dire consequences of their actions. It’s both the pleasure and the challenge of mounting the musical, because as people die off in Act Two, the need for tying things up in digestible morals — the way fairy tales tend to — proves tricky. Life doesn’t work out the way one wishes, even for make-believe characters. The show ends with several beautiful ballads — “No More,” “No One Is Alone,” “Children Will Listen” — that offer words to the wise and some other words with more ambiguous meaning. Who lives, who dies; who suffers, who prospers: The world is a riddle.

Peter Marks  
“Broadway’s *Into the Woods*, now at The Kennedy Center, still enchants.” *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2023
A Musical Dream Team

STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Stephen Sondheim was born on March 22, 1930, in Manhattan to Etta Janet “Foxy” and Herbert Sondheim, who worked in the fashion industry. His parents divorced when Sondheim was 10, and Foxy and Stephen moved to Pennsylvania, not far from a designer friend of Foxy — the wife of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. Sondheim befriended the Hammersteins’ son James and began to spend more of his time away from his mother and with the Hammersteins. Estranged from both his parents, Sondheim found a father figure in Hammerstein, who brought Sondheim with his family to see Broadway shows. Hammerstein became both teacher and inspiration.

In his teens, Sondheim wrote a musical called By George, proudly presented it to Hammerstein, and asked him to critique it as though Sondheim was another professional. Hammerstein bluntly told him it was terrible, then offered to help him understand why. “In that afternoon, I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime,” Sondheim said later. Another great influence was Sondheim’s first music teacher at Williams College, Robert Barrow, who taught Sondheim the logic behind music.

In 1957, Sondheim was asked to write the lyrics for a new musical reworking of Romeo and Juliet, which would become West Side Story. In his artistic introduction to the Broadway stage, Sondheim worked alongside composer Leonard Bernstein to write the show’s lyrics despite their vastly different approaches.

1962’s A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum was the first show for which Sondheim wrote both music and lyrics. The musical won many Tony Awards, including Best Musical, but Sondheim’s score was not well received. This has been a recurring theme for many of Sondheim’s musicals: He’s received consistent criticism that his lyrics are too dark, his tunes are not “hummable” and the subject matter is “wrong” for a musical. Sondheim’s response to those who think his work inaccessible is this: “What I write has to be listened to more than once.” His shows would often close after an initial short run with little profit, only to receive critical acclaim later. Sondheim’s many awards (including an Academy Award, eight Grammys, eight Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize) are testament to that critical acclaim. His body of work for the theater includes Anyone Can Whistle (1964), Company (1970), Follies (1971), Sweeney Todd (1979), Merrily We Roll Along (1981), Sunday in the Park With George (1984), Into the Woods (1987), Passion (1994), Road Show (2008; formerly titled Bounce) and Here We Are (2021).

Sondheim didn’t write for the approval of his audience: “If they don’t like it because they don’t understand it, that’s bad. That is the writer’s fault. If you write it and it’s clear and they don’t like it, that’s not your fault. That’s what art is about.” His unconventionality greatly changed the face of American theater. He stated that he did not set out to change the genre; rather, he kept innovating because he didn’t want to get bored. “Does it ever occur to me that I am developing any new kind of musical? ... Never!”

Sondheim died on November 26, 2021, at age 91.
James Lapine was born on January 10, 1949, in Mansfield, Ohio, to Lillian and David Sanford Lapine. When Lapine was in his teens, the family moved to Stamford, Connecticut. Throughout college and graduate school, Lapine’s focus was not theater — his undergraduate degree was in history and his M.F.A. in design. After finishing graduate school in California, Lapine moved to New York and created freelance designs for Yale School of Drama. Impressed with Lapine’s work, Dean Robert Brustein asked him to design in a full-time capacity and gave him a part-time faculty position teaching advertisement design.

During an annual January term at Yale, in which faculty and students were encouraged to undertake a project outside their comfort zone, Lapine’s students persuaded him to direct a show. Lapine chose to adapt Gertrude Stein’s Photograph, a three-page play that consists of five acts. The production was well received and, after it moved to a small, Off-Broadway performance space in Soho, was positively reviewed by The New York Times and earned Lapine an Obie Award.

In 1978, his play Twelve Dreams was produced as a work-in-progress by Music-Theatre Group, and two years later, Table Settings, his comedy about three generations of a Jewish family, was produced at Playwrights Horizons. In 1982 at The Public Theater, Lapine directed a more complete version of Twelve Dreams, a work based on a case history by Carl Jung. (He revisited the play once more in 1995, directing it for Lincoln Center Theater.)

In 1982, Stephen Sondheim saw Twelve Dreams at The Public Theater and was impressed by the young writer-director. A few months later, the two men were introduced and a partnership was formed. Lapine’s directorial approach was always visual due to his design background and tended toward the avant-garde, which attracted Sondheim. Sondheim and Lapine created Sunday in the Park With George (1984), Into the Woods (1987) and Passion (1994), with Sondheim composing and writing lyrics and Lapine writing the books and directing each show.

After success on Broadway, winning a Pulitzer for Sunday in the Park With George and several Best Book and Best Director Tony Awards for George, Passion and William Finn’s Falsettos, Lapine tried his hand at film directing. His first project was Impromptu (1991), with a screenplay written by his wife, Sarah Kernochan. He went on to direct or write other film projects, including Life With Mikey (1993), Earthly Possessions (1999), Custody (2016) and the 2014 screenplay for the movie adaptation of Into the Woods. He has also continued to direct on Broadway, including The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee (2005), Sondheim on Sondheim (2010), the 2012 revival of Annie and his play Act One (2014), based on the memoir of Moss Hart, and the 2021 musical Flying Over Sunset, for which he wrote the book, in collaboration with composer Tom Kitt and lyricist Michael Korie.

In 2013, he directed an Emmy-nominated Stephen Sondheim documentary, Six by Sondheim, for HBO. And in 2021, he published Putting it Together: How Stephen Sondheim and I Created Sunday in the Park With George — a behind-the-scenes look at the project that brought Lapine and Sondheim together.
Sondheim and Lapine: It Takes Two

By Carla Steen
Resident Dramaturg

*Into the Woods* is the second of three collaborations between composer Stephen Sondheim and playwright/director James Lapine. The theatermakers first met in the early 1980s, shortly after Sondheim, as he’s written, was “in a morass of despair after the joyful public slaughter of *Merrily We Roll Along*” in 1981. The next year, Lapine’s play *Twelve Dreams* was produced at The Public Theater, where Sondheim was in attendance and impressed enough that he wanted to meet the young playwright and suggest they collaborate.

But he didn’t follow up. Fortunately for us, a few months later, a producer contacted Sondheim and asked if he would meet with Lapine, who had a project to propose. On paper, they seemed a mismatched pair: A generation apart, Lapine came from nonprofit, Off-Broadway theater whereas Sondheim’s career was based on the commercial theater of Broadway. But they found they had similar tastes, and although that initial project didn’t pan out, the pair decided to find one that would. “I’m sort of the go-getter,” said Lapine. “I’ll throw anything on a piece of paper. ... And he’s like ... everything’s so meticulous. It’s hard for him to let go of things. We’re a good combo that way.”

After a series of conversations, they landed on the idea that would eventually become *Sunday in the Park*...
**With George**, a musical centered on the French painter Georges Seurat’s masterwork. The musical first had a workshop Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons before moving to Broadway in 1984, where it received several awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. (Guthrie audiences will remember that we staged Sunday in 2017.)

On the heels of Sunday, Sondheim proposed they write a quest musical. Lapine suggested inventing a fairy tale, but they realized the succinct plots of such tales didn’t lend themselves well to crafting a two-hour theater piece. But they applied an earlier idea they’d discussed to the fairy-tale conundrum: “We would write a story in which the lives of famous fairy-tale characters would collide and intertwine in a mutual meeting ground, and where else but the woods, where so many of the stories take place?” wrote Sondheim.

Lapine created the story of a Baker and Baker’s Wife whose journey would bind the other stories together. Sondheim described the new story as an American fairy tale. “[T]he Baker and his wife are merely trying to earn a living and have a baby,” he wrote. “Their concerns are quotidian, their attitudes prototypically urban: impatient, sarcastic, bickering, resigned — prototypical except that they speak in stilted fairy-tale language and are surrounded by witches and princesses and eventually giants.” The writers’ interest was in the consequences of characters’ actions — including and perhaps especially the dishonesties undertaken to achieve their happy endings.

“The first act is the fairy tale. The second act is the myth,” said Lapine in 1987. “People keep writing about the second act as if it’s a continuation of what happens after the happily ever after. But it’s really about growing up and real life and understanding the differences between reality and fantasy. There’s a part of all of us that expects somebody else to take care of important issues. And it’s crucial to say that there comes a time when you can’t expect your friends to come up to the door and grab you. You have to go out and find a friend.” Sondheim noted the first act’s style is farce while the second act’s style is melodrama.

With James, detachment was replaced by a measure of compassion. When I think of songs like ‘Sunday’ or ‘Move On’ [from Sunday in the Park With George] or ‘No One Is Alone’ (from Into the Woods), I realize that by having to express the straightforward, unembarrassed goodness of James’ characters, I discovered the Hammerstein in myself — and I was the better for it.”

Three workshops of Into the Woods between the falls of 1985 and 1986 were followed by a six-week tryout at The Old Globe in San Diego, California, at the end of the year. The musical began previews on Broadway in September 1987, where it continued to undergo changes until its opening in November, including cuts and added songs. In one aspect, they reverted to the San Diego version where a character had been killed off. “I was very concerned that only the women were being killed,” said Lapine. “I was upset about one character in particular because people were reading it that her death was punishment for something she did wrong. That was never my intention, but I understood how someone could misconstrue it. When I realized that only the women were dying, I went back to my original concept and killed off a certain male character. That’s what my instincts had told me to do from the start, and I think I was right."

Into the Woods ran nearly two years in its initial Broadway run and received three Tony Awards, including Best Original Score and Best Book of a Musical for its authors. It has since received two Broadway revivals and countless professional, community, college, high school and even elementary school productions across the country.

The pair’s final collaboration was Passion, based on the film Passione d’Amore and its source novel Fosca. Like their previous collaborations, Lapine again wrote the book and directed, and Sondheim wrote a score he described as “somewhere between aria and recitative.” Passion received Tony Awards for Best Musical, Best Book of a Musical and Best Original Score in 1994.

Lapine’s subsequent work on Broadway included writing the comedy Table Settings and the books for Falsettos and Flying Over Sunset as well as directing Dirty Blonde and The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee and writing and directing Act One, a play based on the memoir of Moss Hart.

Sondheim wrote a musical with John Weidman that went through a series of iterations and titles, and he worked with playwright David Ives to create Here We Are, which will have an Off-Broadway production this September. Sondheim passed away on November 26, 2021, at the age of 91.

In his lyrics and essay collection Look, I Made a Hat, as Sondheim evaluates the work he did before and after collaborating with Lapine, he notes: “It seems clear to me that a quality of detachment suffuses the first set, whereas a current of vulnerability, of longing, informs the second. …”

With James, detachment was replaced by a measure of compassion. When I think of songs like ‘Sunday’ or ‘Move On’ [from Sunday in the Park With George] or ‘No One Is Alone’ (from Into the Woods), I realize that by having to express the straightforward, unembarrassed goodness of James’ characters, I discovered the Hammerstein in myself — and I was the better for it.”

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12 / GUTHRIE THEATER PLAY GUIDE

INTO THE WOODS
Because I was interested in how contemporary personalities might be compared to fairy-tale personalities, I consulted a psychologist. Little Red Riding Hood 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.

Cinderella is a girl who has been sheltered but who has a wild imagination. She doesn’t go to the ball to find a prince but to have the thrill of dressing up in pretty dresses to see how the other half lives.

Jack is a dreamer and someone who’s not involved like the rest of us in literal day-to-day existence. He’s much more intrigued by the notion of magic beans and adventure than in going out and making a buck.

Where Cinderella talks to birds and Jack climbs a beanstalk, I think of the baker and his wife as an ordinary rooted couple from Brooklyn who get drawn into a magic world and get stuck there.

James Lapine

All fairy tales are parables about steps to maturity. The final step is when you become responsible for the people around you, when you feel connected to the rest of the world. For Jim Lapine, the second act is very much about the legacy of what our parents teach us and how, even if we’ve rebelled against them, we hand that down to our children. For me, it isn’t just parents and children, but everybody who teaches or who is an artist. “No One Is Alone” is about how we are all interconnected.

Stephen Sondheim
The first act is such a romp that, on a certain level, audiences don’t want to see what goes on in the second act. They don’t want to deal with people dying, and that’s what the second act is about. We’ve even heard the same question we heard with *Sunday in the Park With George*: “Why do you have a second act?” But that’s the part of the show that really intrigues me. …

Even though fairy tales use flowery language, they are essentially underwritten in terms of plot. So we thought it was best to keep it sounding light and simple. Steve and I both enjoy creating certain resonances throughout a show, in terms of language and themes. And we try to reinforce it in each other’s work. …

[O]ne of the things I want to get across in the show is that it’s also okay not to have kids. That line [by Jack’s Mother] always gets a big laugh, but the truth is you have to take responsibility for your own sake, not just for your children. …

Fairy tales generally have more women characters than men, and the men tend to be weak or princelike cutouts. The women are usually stronger in those stories, so we made them stronger as well. That was a given.

*James Lapine*

Quoted in “Into the Woods is a Cautionary Fairy Tale for the ’80s,” *Playbill*, December 1987

I must add that at one point in the collaborative joy of our early discussions, I brashly predicted that if the piece worked, it would spawn innumerable productions for many years to come since it dealt with world myths and fables and would therefore never feel dated. Moreover, it would appeal to schools and amateur theaters as well as professional ones, especially in conservative parts of the country which are hesitant to support shows that deal with contemporary themes in contemporary ways and use four-letter words (there are none in the show). I predicted that *Into the Woods* could be a modest annuity for us, and I’m surprised to say I was right.

*Stephen Sondheim*


I had figured that since so many years had passed since I had had anything to do with *Into the Woods* that I would be a little bit more dispassionate about [writing the screenplay]. And the irony was, Rob [Marshall, the director] was very wed to the original material. So I started arguing, “Well, let’s do another opening number.” He was going, “Whoa.” We were an interesting balance with one another that way. I knew as a writer what I couldn’t do in the original because of the limitations of what you can do onstage. So for me to have the opportunity to open it up was just a delight. And then I learned kind of a little bit more about what I had written then and who I am now, so that was interesting.

*James Lapine*


I don’t think the theater is about converting people to new ideas. I think it’s about confirming ideas you have by dramatizing them and making them human. As opposed to novels which, as Tolstoy proves, can teach you things. [Theater] is about how you combine song and dance and libretto to make a whole. That’s what it’s about; it’s an exercise in style.

*Stephen Sondheim*

During the 2022–2023 Season, the Guthrie has presented plays based on history and biography (Sally & Tom, Vietgone, Born With Teeth), fable (The Little Prince) and legend (Hamlet). Into the Woods is built on fairy tales. Below are some literary terms and broad definitions to help put Into the Woods in context with its literary siblings (the categories aren’t mutually exclusive).

**Fairy Tale**
A story of wonder, often with fantastic elements like magic or fictional creatures (but not always fairies). Sometimes from a literary origin; sometimes evolving from folk tales. Examples include the stories on which Into the Woods is built: “Cinderella,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Jack and the Beanstalk” (also sometimes considered a legend) and “Rapunzel.”

**Folk Tale**
A story within an oral tradition, often capturing and passing along knowledge and beliefs of its culture and representing the experiences of ordinary people. Frequently, the stories will show the person (or animal) protagonist learning a lesson. Examples include “The Pied Piper of Hamelin,” “The Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor,” Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox, and the Coyote stories of the Sahaptin people.

**Fable**
A story, usually featuring animals that behave like people, that conveys a lesson or moral. Aesop’s Fables are among the most popular in Western tradition; others include stories by Lewis Carroll, Beatrix Potter and Rudyard Kipling.

**Myth**
Myths are narratives created within a specific culture to explain ourselves to ourselves by offering explanations for certain phenomena. Myths usually have symbolic elements and are of unknown origin; they are sometimes connected with actual events and often have religious connotations. Myths tell the stories of supernatural beings, often gods, and occur in an unspecified time. In Greek mythology, for example, a god’s behavior explains natural phenomena (the sun is the chariot of Apollo or Helios) and provides a religious framework (each god had their own sphere of influence and answered prayers).

**Legend**
A traditional story told about a particular place or person and presented as fact or history (but can’t be proven to be true). The stories of King Arthur are among the most famous legends, as are the legend of Robin Hood, the legend of a flood that almost destroyed the world and the founding of Rome by Romulus and Remus.

**Allegory**
A fictional story filled with symbols that provide a second narrative understanding that may not be explicitly stated in the text. The story may be understood on multiple levels with multiple meanings. Examples include Dante’s Divine Comedy, George Orwell’s Animal Farm and Toni Morrison’s Beloved.

**Parable**
Similar to a fable but with human characters. In the Bible’s New Testament, Jesus told several parables, including the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan, to illustrate a religious moral.

“Folklore means the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming. The problem of the fairy tale is — what will a healthy man do with a fantastic world? The problem of the modern novel is — what will a madman do with a dull world? In the fairy tale, the cosmos goes mad; but the hero does not go mad.”

G.K. Chesterton
About Fairy Tales

Compelling in their simplicity and poignant in their emotional appeal, fairy tales have the power to stir long-dormant childhood feelings and to quicken our sympathies for the downtrodden. They also offer wit and wisdom in the trenchant formulations of the folk. There is something in them for every age and generation. ...

Folklorists are quick to point out that fairy tales were never really meant for children’s ears alone. Originally told at fireside gatherings or in spinning circles by adults to adult audiences, fairy tales joined the canon of children’s literature (which is itself of recent vintage) only in the last two or three centuries. Yet the hold these stories have on the imagination of children is so compelling that it becomes difficult to conceive of a childhood without them. Growing up without fairy tales implies spiritual impoverishment, as one writer after another has warned. ...

[F]airy tales, for all their naturalistic details, concern themselves with inner realities. In our time, Bruno Bettelheim has emerged as the most eloquent spokesman for psychological readings of fairy tales. “In a fairy tale,” he writes, “internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events.” By meditating on the conflicts acted out in fairy tales, he emphasizes, children can find solutions to their own specific problems and thus stand to gain powerful therapeutic benefits from the stories. ...

“It was like a fairy tale.” Our everyday language reflects the conventional wisdom that fairy tales signify wishes fulfilled and dreams come true. But no one can read through Grimms’ *Nursery and Household Tales* without pausing to reflect on the contrast between the happy endings of fairy tales and the hard facts of fairy-tale life. The melodramatic plot begins with an account of helplessness and victimization, rehearses the conflicts between hero and villain, and concludes with detailed descriptions of reprisals taken against the villain and a report on the hero’s marriage or accession to power.

Maria Tatar

Fairy tales are the purest and simplest expression of [the] collective unconscious psychic process. Therefore, their value for the scientific investigation of the unconscious exceeds that of all other material. They represent the archetypes in their simplest, barest and most concise form. In this pure form, the archetypal images afford us the best clues to the understanding of the processes going on in the collective psyche. In myths or legends, or any other more elaborate mythological material, we get at the basic patterns of the human psyche through an overlay of cultural material. But in fairy tales, there is much less specific conscious cultural material, and therefore they mirror the basic patterns of the psyche more clearly.

Marie-Louise von Franz
_The Interpretation of Fairy Tales_, 1970
There is no such thing as the fairy tale; however, there are hundreds of thousands of fairy tales. And these fairy tales have been defined in so many different ways that it boggles the mind to think that they can be categorized as a genre. ... There is even a strong general tendency among many readers in the West to resist defining the fairy tale. It is as though one should not tamper with sacred material. By dissecting the fairy tale, one might destroy its magic, and it appears that this magic has something to do with the blessed realm of childhood and innocence.

On the other hand, almost every reader of fairy tales, young and old, is curious about their magic. What is it that endows fairy tales with such enchantment? Where do these tales come from? Why do they have such a grip on us? ... We want to know more about ourselves by knowing something more about fairy tales. We want to fathom their mysterious hold on us. ...

During its long evolution, the literary fairy tale distinguished itself as genre by “appropriating” many motifs, signs and drawings from folklore, embellishing them and combining them with elements from other literary genres, for it became gradually necessary in the modern world to adapt a certain kind of oral storytelling called the wonder tale to standards of literacy and make it acceptable for diffusion in the public sphere. ... As more and more wonder tales were written down in the 14th, 15th, 16th and 17th centuries — often in Latin — they constituted the genre of the literary fairy tale that began establishing its own conventions, motifs, topoi, characters and plots, based to a large extent on those developed in the oral tradition but altered to address a reading public formed by the aristocracy, clergy and middle classes. Though the peasants were marginalized and excluded in the formation of this literary tradition, their material, voices, style and beliefs were incorporated into the new genre during this period.

Typically, the hero of the fairy tale achieves a domestic, microcosmic triumph, and the hero of myth a world-historical, macrocosmic triumph. Whereas the former — the youngest or despised child who becomes the master of extraordinary powers — prevails over his personal oppressors, the latter brings back from his adventure the means for the regeneration of his society as a whole.

Put simply, the dominant feeling a myth conveys is: this is absolutely unique; it could not have happened to any other person or in any other setting; such events are grandiose, awe-inspiring and could not possibly happen to an ordinary mortal like you or me. The reason is not so much that what takes place is miraculous, but that it is described as such. By contrast, although the events which occur in fairy tales are often unusual and most improbable, they are always presented as ordinary, something that could happen to you or me or the person next door when out on a walk in the woods. Even the most remarkable encounters are related in casual, everyday ways in fairy tales.

Fairy tales are loved by the child not because the imagery he finds in them conforms to what goes on within him, but because — despite all the angry, anxious thoughts in his mind to which the fairy tale gives body and specific content — these stories always result in a happy outcome, which the child cannot imagine on his own.

Joseph Campbell
“Prologue: The Monomyth,” The Hero With a Thousand Faces, 1949

Bruno Bettelheim
“Fairy Tale Versus Myth” and “Fears of Fantasy,” The Uses of Enchantment, 1975

Jack Zipes
“Towards a Definition of the Literary Fairy Tale,” introduction to The Oxford Companion to Fairy Tales, Oxford University Press, 2000
Stephen Sondheim has written that the authors’ initial idea for what would become *Into the Woods* was to create an original quest story like *The Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum. While that idea evolved into the mashup of several fairy-tale stories, the characters spend the first act of the musical journeying to the woods to pursue various goals — to visit Granny, to sell the cow, to break a curse, to go to a festival — in what can be described as a classic quest narrative. Below are other figures from literature with famous quests of various durations.

**ODYSSEUS**

*King of Ithaca, Greek hero of The Odyssey composed by Homer (ca. 8th century B.C.)*

A clever, resourceful and courageous man, Odysseus angered Poseidon during the Trojan War, so the god made Odysseus’ return home last a decade (after the war itself lasted 10 years). His crew becomes enchanted by both the Lotus-Eaters and the witch Circe, they battle the Cyclops, Odysseus goes to Hades to consult the seer Tiresias and encounters the Sirens, the Scylla and the Charybdis, among other adventures. With frequent help from Athena, Odysseus alone survives the 10-year trip. In Ithaca, his faithful wife, Penelope, and his now-grown son, Telemachus, have struggled to maintain authority in the country during his absence. Odysseus slays the suitors of Penelope and reasserts his position as king.

**PERCIVAL**

*Character from Arthurian legend and romance; appears in, among others, Chrétien de Troyes’s Perceval (ca. 12th century A.D.) and Wolfram von Eschenbach’s Parzival (ca. 1200–1210 A.D.)*

Having been warned about the impropriety of asking too many questions, the guileless country knight Percival witnesses a grail procession but doesn’t ask the question that could heal the injured Fisher King. In restraining himself, Percival misses the chance to understand the significance of the procession. To rectify this mistake, Percival set out to seek the Grail and, in the course of his adventures, becomes a responsible, faithful and wise adult. He is eventually rewarded with the position of Grail Keeper.

**DANTE ALIGHIERI**

*Author and protagonist of the allegorical poem The Divine Comedy (ca. 1308–1321)*

In his three-part *The Divine Comedy*, Dante writes of his spiritual journey through hell and purgatory to reach paradise; his guide at first is the Roman poet Virgil, then later his beloved Beatrice. Along the way, he witnesses the terrifying punishments for different varieties of sinners and converses with some of the damned. At the end of his journey, he is permitted a glimpse of God and comes to understand the nature of divine goodness and grace.
DON QUIXOTE
Hero of the novel (1605 and 1615) by Miguel de Cervantes

Originally conceived as a satire of chivalric romances then in vogue, the novel describes the adventures of elderly Don Quixote, a bemused knight driven by the vision of his beloved Dulcinea to go on chivalric quests. He is accompanied by his trusty squire, Sancho Panza, and his old steed, Rosinante. Among his adventures, he helps young lovers run away together and attacks a windmill, mistaking it for a giant endangering Dulcinea.

PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE
Hero and title character of a play (1607–1608) by William Shakespeare

Pericles narrowly escapes death in Antioch, which launches his travels to stay ahead of assassins during which he saves Tarsus from famine, survives a shipwreck, marries Thaisa in Pentapolis and then loses her in childbirth during another storm. He leaves his daughter Marina in others’ care for 14 years and is misled about her death when he comes back for her. By chance, he and his daughter are reunited in Mytilene, Diana reveals in a dream that Thaisa also lives and the family is reunited in Ephesus.

GULLIVER
Hero of Gulliver’s Travels (1726) by satirist Jonathan Swift

During several voyages, ship’s doctor Lemuel Gulliver encounters unusual people when he lands in unknown ports and islands including Lilliput, where the inhabitants are six inches tall; a land of giants; a Flying Island, whose inhabitants are fascinated with music and math; and the land of the Yahoos, with humans who are kept in pens by horses (Houyhnhms). Upon his final return to England, he finds himself unable to live with “civilized” Yahoos and retires to the country with a couple of horses. Gulliver’s Travels is both a delightful children’s story and a satire on Swift’s contemporary society.

CANDIDE
Protagonist of Voltaire’s satirical novel Candide (1759)

Thanks to his ever-optimistic tutor Pangloss, young Candide believes that he lives in “the best of all possible worlds.” Forced from his uncle’s home for falling in love with his cousin, Cunegonde, Candide begins a series of globetrotting misadventures from which he barely escapes alive and which repeatedly undermine his early lessons. In pursuit of his beloved Cunegonde, he witnesses, suffers and perpetrates terrible acts of brutality, but he is eventually able to retire with Cunegonde to a simple, hardworking farm life that leaves no time for philosophical worries.

PEER GYNT
Dreamer, storyteller and sometime troublemaker in Henrik Ibsen’s poetic drama (1867)

A young man accused by his mother of being lazy, Peer disrupts a wedding and runs away with the bride, which gets him banished from the village, but he wins the loyalty of farmer’s daughter Solveig. Peer faces tests by the king of the mountain and the Great Boyg, pretends he’s a prince, hides out in the forest, tells stories to his dying mother and eventually takes off for the sea. In Morocco, an older, successful Peer still tells stories and exaggerations. Even as Solveig waits for him, Peer continues to wander and, as an old man, leaves Africa for his native Norway. He finally must account for his life and understand his selfish ways, and he is reunited with Solveig.

HUCK FINN
Protagonist of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) by Mark Twain

To escape beatings from his father, Huck Finn fakes his own murder and heads down the Mississippi River, where he is joined shortly by Jim, a runaway enslaved man from Huck’s hometown. Huck struggles with his conscience, breaking society’s rules yet continuing with Jim as he seeks his freedom. The two run into a band of robbers, a few feuding families and scam artists who eventually sell Jim back into slavery. Despite an elaborate escape orchestrated by Huck’s friend Tom Sawyer, Jim is recaptured. In the end, it is revealed Jim’s owner, Miss Watson, has died and freed Jim in her will, of which Tom had been aware the whole time.

FRODO BAGGINS

Because of his Hobbit purity, young Frodo is entrusted with the task of journeying to destroy the evil ring of Sauron. He is protected along the way by a brotherhood of men, elves, dwarves and hobbits but faces relentless pursuit by various terrifying agents of Sauron, who will have destructive power if he repossesses the ring. Frodo must fight against his own growing weakness and possessiveness toward the ring, which slowly saps the goodness from every owner. Frodo succeeds in his task, but the injuries he sustains over the course of the quest eventually take his life.
Selected Glossary of Terms

PLANTS AND ANIMALS

arugula — Mediterranean herb in the mustard family, the leaves of which are used in salads

dugs — Udders

fiddleferns — Presumably fiddlehead ferns, the coiled tips of fern shoots foraged in the early spring

hazel tree — A tree found in Europe and parts of Asia and North Africa, with flexible branches that can be twisted or knotted. Its fruit is the hazelnut. Symbolically, it’s reputedly a magical tree — a hazel rod can ward off evil spirits, be used for water divining or as a wand. It has been a symbol of fertility and a remedy for rheumatism, and it was known as the Tree of Knowledge in Ireland. In the Grimms’ version of the tale, Cinderella’s father went to a fair and asked each of the girls what they wanted as a gift. Cinderella asked for “the first branch that brushes against your hat on your way home,” while the stepsisters asked for dresses and jewels. A hazel branch knocked his hat off, and he brought it to Cinderella. Cinderella plants the branch and, watered with her tears, a hazel tree grows from it.

oak tree — A tree sacred to Zeus, Jupiter and Celtic Dagda, who also ruled over thunder and lightning (oak often is the tallest tree and therefore lightning-prone). Kings and Roman emperors wore oak leaf crowns, and the oak is a symbol of strength in Britain.

rampion — Edible root of the rampion bellflower often used in salads. Rapunzel is named after the German word for rampion (Latin name: Campanula rampunculus).

rutabaga — Root vegetable of Swedish origin resembling a turnip

watercress — Leafy green vegetable in the cabbage/Brussels sprout/kale family and mustard genus that can be eaten raw or cooked. Its small, round leaves have a nutty and peppery taste.

withers — Ridge between the shoulder bones

CREATURES AND PEOPLE

dwarves/dwarfs — J.R.R. Tolkien popularized “dwarves” as a variant plural form of dwarf (at least in fantasy fiction). The standard plural is dwarfs. Tolkien used dwarves “only when speaking of the ancient people to whom Thorin Oakenshield and his companions belonged” in The Hobbit.

Griffin — Legendary creature with the body of a lion (with or without wings) and the head of a bird (usually an eagle). Dates to 1000s B.C.E. in the Middle East.

Manticore — Legendary creature with the body of a lion, the head of a man (with or without horns), porcupine quills and the tail of a scorpion (or dragon). Dates to Ancient Greece.

ogre — Man-eating monster, usually depicted as a hideous giant

steward — Court official who manages the domestic affairs the royal household (food, servants, budget)

MISCELLANEOUS

biers — Stands on which coffins or corpses are placed before burial and carried to the grave, with a pun on “cry in one’s beer” to complain in a maudlin and/or self-pitying way

deleterious — Harmful, damaging, having an adverse effect

league — Measure of distance that varies but is generally thought to be approximately three miles

pitch — Dark, sticky residue created from distilling wood tar or turpentine, usually from pine trees

stew — State of excitement, alarm or anxiety
WORKS FOR THE STAGE BY SONDHEIM AND LAPINE

Twelve Dreams by James Lapine.
Table Settings by James Lapine.
Sunday in the Park With George by James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim.
Into the Woods by James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim.
Passion by James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim.

WRITINGS ABOUT THE STAGE BY SONDHEIM AND LAPINE


BOOKS ABOUT FAIRY TALES


BOOKS ABOUT SONDHEIM