



Victorian  
Opera

*Stephen Sondheim & James Lapine*

# INTO THE WOODS

Education Resource  
Music



## INTO THE WOODS - MUSIC RESOURCE

### INTRODUCTION



*“A gem of a fairy tale with a soundscape of soaring melodies, shimmering colours and extraordinarily witty and moving lyrics.”– Richard Mills*

From the creators of *Sunday in the Park with George* comes *Into the Woods*, a darkly enchanting story about life after the ‘happily ever after’. Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine reimagine the magical world of fairy tales as the classic stories of Jack and the Beanstalk, Cinderella, Little Red Ridinghood and Rapunzel collide with the lives of a childless baker and his wife. A brand new production of an unforgettable Tony award-winning musical.

Into the Woods | Stephen Sondheim & James Lapine.  
19 – 26 July 2014 | Arts Centre Melbourne, Playhouse

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim  
Book by James Lapine

Originally Directed on Broadway by James Lapine  
By arrangement with Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd Exclusive agent for Music  
Theatre International (NY)

2 hours and 50 minutes including one interval.



## BACKGROUND



Figure 1: Stephen Sondheim

- Broadway Musical
- Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
- Book and Direction by James Lapine
- Orchestration: Jonathan Tunick
- Opened in San Diego on the 4th of December 1986 and premiered in Broadway on the 5th of November, 1987
- Won 3 Tony Awards in 1988
- Drama Desk for Best Musical
- Laurence Olivier Award for Best Revival

## Performances

*Into the Woods* has been produced several times including revivals, outdoor performances in parks, a junior version, and has been adapted for a Walt Disney film which will be released at the end of 2014.

## Stephen Sondheim (1930)

Stephen Joshua Sondheim is one of the greatest composers and lyricists in American Theatre. His career spans almost 60 years and he has collaborated in 19 musicals, many which have been performed globally. Sondheim's accolades include eight Tony Awards including the Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre, an Academy Award, many Grammy Awards, a Pulitzer Prize and the Laurence Olivier Award.

## James Lapine (1949)

Three time Tony Award recipient, James Lapine is a stage director and librettist. His major collaborations have been with Sondheim and William Finn (1952).

## Sondheim and Lapine Collaboration

This is the second collaboration of Sondheim and Lapine after *Sunday in the Park with George* in 1984. After *Into the Woods* they went on to create two more musicals – *Assassins* in 1990 and *Passion* in 1994. Their collaboration was viewed as being odd as Lapine was primarily a set designer with little experience as a director.



## NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR



Figure 2: Stuart Maunder AM

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales ... the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking”. Albert Einstein.

In a fairy tale the characters are not known for their subtlety; their motives are transparent. The morals are black and white. If the characters are good, they are good, and vice versa. Most of the characters don't have names (Rapunzel is the obvious exception...and who thought of that?!), more often than not they are known by their trade (Baker) or duties (Cinder-ella) or birthright (Prince) or clothing (Little Red Ridinghood). Histories are assumed, the tales are quickly told and equally quickly grasped. And so the fairy tale, without details, becomes universal.

When those magical words ‘Once upon a time’ are uttered we know we are in for a ride, possibly a ride with a moral, maybe a bloodthirsty or magical ride but certainly a ride where all end up ‘happily ever after’. And no matter how old, how experienced, how jaded one has become the frisson created by those words remains.

But what happens after ‘happily ever after’?

In theatre and in opera we usually don't question what happens after the curtain descends. Who cares what happens to Rodolfo after Mimi dies so melodically? Or will Kate Pinkerton adopt Trouble and watch him grow up as a Eurasian in Middle America? Will Danny and Sandy have a tribe of Rockers? Will the Montagues and the Capulets bury the hatchet?

But in Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine's brilliant ‘mash-up’ of classic fairy tales *Into the Woods* we are asked to examine what happens after those three safe, neat words: ‘happily ever after’.

Cinderella starts the night with the statement “I wish”. Every character wishes for something: a child, some milk from a barren cow, to go to the Prince's Festival, to be a good mother, to be lucky in love, to have a good meal, to go see Granny, to see one's daughter's married into royalty. And all the characters lie, cheat and do whatever is necessary to get their desire.

But what happens once their wishes are granted? One must deal with the consequences of getting one's wish, and what is more, deal with it as part of a society. We must all be responsible for our actions.

In Act 2 all of the characters are sent back to the Woods. In Sondheim's words ‘Ah, the woods. The all-purpose symbol of the unconscious, the womb, the past, the dark place where we face our trials and emerge wiser or destroyed.’ But by losing themselves in the darkness they find strengths and talents they never knew they had. Everyone's decisions and actions affect everybody else.



When Red Ridinghood bemoans the fact that she strayed from the path the Baker corrects her: 'The path has strayed from you'.

The wood is the place you can find yourself, realise your mistakes, make your own decisions: You decide what's right, you decide what's good. But it's not an end in itself; one can't live free from society's rules, you have to rejoin and embrace the Human Race. Ultimately, 'No one is Alone'. As the characters pick up the pieces of their lives, they realise it's the duty of the older generation to teach the young. But we must be careful, for those "Children will Listen" and even though they may not obey us, they will see, look, listen and will, ultimately, grow up to be exactly like us. They, too must make the same mistakes, discover truths, learn and prove themselves. It seems the indomitable human spirit triumphs. Or does it?

As Cinderella says in the final statement of the night, I wish.



## PRE-VISIT EXPLORATION

### WHAT TO EXPECT BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE

To gain the most from your opera experience it is highly recommended to study the work, discover its inspiration, learn about the composers and explore the main themes. The following educational resources will provide you with information about the work, what to expect during your opera experience and offers post-opera reflection. Most of the information is included here in the pre-visit exploration section, which of course can be revisited during and after the opera experience.

### SUMMARY OF THE MUSICAL

Sondheim has based the musical on four of the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm. Before attending the musical, read different interpretations of Red Ridinghood, Cinderella, Rapunzel and Jack and the Beanstalk. The Baker and his wife were specifically constructed for the musical and represent a more Realist quest –being able to bear a child. Listen to the recordings of the musical and performances on YouTube. Themes of growing up, ethical choices, community and responsibility are explored through the lens of the darker side of the woods. The woods represent shadows and evil, a place in which to explore darker, subconscious issues. Fairy tales invariably end with a ‘happily ever after’, and through the use of magic spells, wishes can come true.

### SYNOPSIS

#### Act 1

The first act of *Into the Woods* focuses on the ‘happily ever after’ in the fairy tales. Four well-known fairy tale characters are introduced and go on their quests. Cinderella goes to the ball to meet her Prince Charming, Jack climbs the beanstalk to discover a land of giants, Red Ridinghood encounters a Wolf disguised as her Grandmother, and Rapunzel escapes from the tower through the aid of a Prince and her

own long, golden hair. Two additional, yet central characters, the Baker and the Baker’s Wife, have a simple quest of having a family. The Baker and his wife discover that the Witch has placed a curse on their house and the only way to lift the curse and to bear a child is to journey ‘Into the Woods’ and mess up everybody else’s story. Their quest is to obtain: ‘a cape as red as blood’ from ‘Little Red Ridinghood; a ‘slipper as pure as gold’ from Cinderella; ‘a cow as white as milk’ which is exchanged for magic beans by Jack; and ‘hair as yellow as corn’ from Rapunzel. In order to get what they want they have to ‘cheat a little, or lie a little, or huckster a little’. At the end of the act one, they retrieve the items and all live ‘happily ever after’.

#### Act 2

The second act is darker, and the characters have to take responsibility and deal with the consequences of their actions. Does a marriage to a prince result in a happy life? What does one do with a slain giant in one’s backyard? Are characters purely good or purely evil? They learn to work together as a community rather than resorting to a culture of blaming others. Through adversity, they undergo a transformation and attempt to solve the problems to create their own version of a ‘happily ever after’.



## CHARACTERS



Figure 3: Jack and the beanstalk

The basis of the musical is the intermingling of fairy tale plots in which we are already familiar with the characters. Cinderella, Rapunzel, Red Ridinghood and Jack from Jack and the Beanstalk form the plot. Sondheim and Lapine have added the Baker and his Wife who serve as the central characters. There is also the Narrator, a wicked Witch who has a virtuosic role, two Princes, the Wolf, Cinderella's sisters, Grandmother, the Giant's Wife and the Mysterious Man whose role is revealed within the musical.

## STYLE

*Into the Woods* as described by Sondheim is a fairy tale quest musical. There is spoken dialogue as well as songs - Sondheim uses these for more in-depth character interpretation and reflection. The Narrator is employed in a pantomimic style but through the progression of the musical, this role becomes both an external observer and a character.

*Into the Woods* is a breakaway of the large scale musicals of the 1980s. *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sondheim's earlier musical in which he collaborated with Lapine, is more intimate, employing a small cast and orchestra. The chamber opera style is reminiscent of Sullivan, and some of the chamber works of Stravinsky, Richard Strauss and Benjamin Britten. Each performer utilises an important role in the plot, and the orchestral parts are intricately linked with a performer on stage. Through this technique of economy, Sondheim displays his creative brilliance.

## THEMES

### Light and darkness

A recurring theme is light and darkness. The title *Into the Woods* implies that the characters are venturing into the darkness, a world of evil. It is hoped that when they emerge through the other side and are transformed, they will be able to see the light. Darkness can also be interpreted as misunderstanding the truth, or looking inwards when undergoing a transformation. The items collected by the Baker and his Wife include a 'milky white' cow signifying purity and light. The Baker represents light whereas the Witch is a creature of darkness and is lurking in the shadows. Both worlds coexist like two sides of a coin. There are many references to light and darkness in the musical.



## Fairy tales

The theme of fairy tales forms the basis of the musical. Their appeal is their instantaneous connection with the audience through memories of childhood and innocence. Moreover, they also provide a form of escapism from everyday life. Fairy tales are widely used in films, most notably in Walt Disney productions as well as modern takes of classic stories targeted at both children and adults. The use of fairy tales provides the comfort and predictability in which Sondheim and Lapine can manipulate the plots to drive forward the story.

A paradox of *Into the Woods* is how we associate fairy tale characters with childlike youth and innocence yet they are confronted with responsibilities, choices and growing up. Just like child stars in the media and child prodigies, it is unsettling for an audience when these characters are forced to grow up, lose their innocent magic sparkle, and face reality and moral decisions like mere mortals. They have become one of us. The Baker and the Baker's Wife are additional characters who are the central axis of the plot. Grounded in reality, their purpose is to link the audience with the worlds of fantasy and reality.

## Numbers

As in most fairy tales, numbers and repetition are significant in *Into the Woods*. There are five magic beans, four fairy tales, four items to retrieve, three visits to the ball by Cinderella, three climbs up the beanstalk by Jack, three occasions when eyes are poked out, and two Princes. Repetition is also used throughout the musical. Many of the melodies and motifs are repeated or varied to provide musical coherence.

## Sight

Sight or lack of sight is a recurring theme in the musical. The very title *Into the Woods* implies that the characters are venturing into darkness. Characters are punished by having their eyes poked out. This occurs three times in the musical. One of the Princes is blinded in Act One, though his sight is later restored. The two ugly sisters are blinded, and finally, when plotting to kill the Giant's Wife, they choose to blind her as a way of disorienting her. Blinding can be interpreted in many ways. It occurs in the Greek myth Oedipus where he pokes out his eyes to have insight into the situation. It can be interpreted as only seeing the dark or light, or seeing the truth, or seeing the situation through rose-coloured glasses.

## Gender

The roles of women are important in this musical. They are on the whole the strong characters who reveal their inner strength through adversity. Red Ridinghood displays her resilience when she rescues Jack – she undergoes a transformation from a dependent to a responsible child. Cinderella is the epitome of good, whereas the Witch represents evil. Interestingly, the Witch is the only character who is consistently honest and reveals the truth of the situation. In an imaginary world where characters are created, the Witch, who is a fictional character found in many different stories, provides an uncomfortable yet necessary reality check. With the exception of the Baker, the male characters are childlike or indecisive. Jack has been kept dependent by his possessive mother and consequently finds it easier to relate to animals than other humans. As a result of being pampered and spoiled, the two Princes lack emotional depth, which is displayed in their duet 'Agony'.



## LISTENING ACTIVITIES

### MOTIFS

The use of motifs is a device used throughout the musical as a unifying thread. They signify important points in a fairy tale driven by the use of magic.

#### Spell Chords

The spell chords, which are Wagnerian in style, are used as the Witch's motif. Highly chromatic and dissonant, the five note pitch collection is based on a diminished triad. They chords are also used when the Witch zaps the Baker, Mysterious Man and Rapunzel. The spell chords are also symbolic of when the Witch loses her magic powers.

#### Bean Motif

The bean motif comprises five notes. Used whenever the beans appear, they are composed to sound incomplete. It isn't until the second act in the song *No One is Alone* when the motif is resolved harmonically and the tension is relieved in the plot. Sondheim achieves this by inverting the bean motif.

### TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- Review the four fairy tales *Cinderella*, *Little Red Ridinghood*, *Rapunzel* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Compare variations of the same story such as Grimm's fairy tale. How do they differ? What would be the consequence of a different outcome for each fairy tale?
- *Into the Woods* has been inspired by musical styles. Listen to *The Last Midnight* and compare this to the romanticism in Ravel's *La Valse*.
- Can fairy tales be relevant to teenagers and adults?
- Sondheim has used different compositional approaches with each of his musicals. Listen to his musicals written prior to and after *Into the Woods*. Recommended songs include "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" from *Sweeney Todd* (1979), "Not a Day Goes By" from *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) and his other collaboration with Lapine "Finishing the Hat" from *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984). Compare the range of topics selected for the musicals from the dark tale of *Sweeney Todd*, to the story of friendships in *Merrily We Roll Along*, and a musical based on a painting in *Sunday in the Park with George*.

### Further Study

- Watch live performances on YouTube and compare how the songs are interpreted. Look at the set, costumes and lighting, and how they contributes to the musical overall.



## OPENING SCENE

The overture is one of the most important parts in the musical. It has a dual use of setting the scene by introducing the characters, and establishing where they are in the plot. It is one of the longest overtures and uses several sections in one number. After an introduction from the Narrator, the musical commences with 'I wish' exclaimed by Cinderella, which is then interrupted by the orchestra with syncopated chords and a bright, bouncy theme. This interruption sets the precedent for a show full of surprises. The characters all have a wish in the show. The phrase by Cinderella 'I wish' acts as a bookend for the show. The rollicking main theme "Into the Woods" in the opening number is sung by each character. Sondheim expertly tailors the melody as each character is introduced through the use of key, harmony and tempo.

## Questions



Figure 4: Cinderella (Lucy Maunder) © Martin Philbey

- Listen to the overture. How does Sondheim vary the motifs when each character is introduced? What devices does he use to achieve this?
- The phrase 'I wish' occurs several times in the overture. Sondheim has used the same motif of an interval of an ascending major second, as they go off in their own direction. Why do you think he selected this interval?
- How do their wishes coincide with the storylines in their traditional fairy tales?
- How does Sondheim weave the different plots together? Which instruments represent each character?

The Witch's dialogue in the overture is 'rap-like' in style. However, this was not Sondheim's intended result. Rather, there was so much dialogue for the Witch to communicate with the audience, the most effective way was to talk quickly to keep the audience's attention. Here, he is displaying his virtuosic command of language.

- Rap or hip hop music was a popular style of music in USA in the late 1980s. Do you consider the Witch's dialogue as this style of music? Why or why not?
- Musical theatre is often written to reflect the trends of the time. Is this a musical of the 1980s, or are the themes relevant to any time period?

Sondheim likes to play with words. Towards the end of the overture the lyrics sung by Cinderella, the Baker's Wife, Little Red Ridinghood, Jack's Mother, Jack and the Baker are as follows:

*The way is clear/The light is good  
I have no fear, nor no one should  
The woods are just trees/The trees are just wood  
No need to be afraid there/There's  
something in the glade there*

- How are these reminiscent of nursery rhymes or children's games?





Figure 5: Little Red Ridinghood (Josie Lane) © Martin Philbey

## NO ONE IS ALONE

The song raises themes of growing up, the role of family and the role of community. The song is significant as it is the point of the musical where much tension is released. The five note bean motif used earlier in the musical is now resolved by inverting the melody.

- Listen to the song *No One is Alone*. What are the main themes raised?
- Do you think there is a connection between darkness and loneliness?
- The lines 'Hard to see the light now/Don't let it go'. How does this fit into the notion of darkness and light?



Figure 6: Witch (Queenie van der Zandt) © Martin Philbey

## LAST MIDNIGHT

Listen to the song *Last Midnight* sung by the Witch. The song occurs immediately after "Your Fault" where the characters are blaming each other for their predicament. The lyrics provide insight into the Witch's interpretation of the situation. Sondheim selected the dark timbre of G Flat major, and has styled it akin to *La Valse* by Ravel.

- Listen to both "Last Midnight" and *La Valse*. What are their similarities and differences?
- The theme of darkness has occurred here again. Besides the key of G Flat major, how else has Sondheim made the song dark? Explore the instrumentation, lyrics and character.
- Compare Last Midnight with some of the songs in Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* which also utilise triple timing.



## DURING YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE

During the performance, reflect on how the fairy tale characters are represented. Can you recognise each character through their traditional dress and mannerisms, or have they been modernised? Has this production followed the conventional costumes, lighting and scenery you viewed prior to attending? Listen to the music and how it blends with the singers. Take note of the audience's reaction around you, which emotions they are sharing with the performers, and how the performers respond to the audience. Most importantly, enjoy the performance and all it has to offer.

## POST-VISIT REFLECTION

Visit the *Into the Woods* 'Wall' to explore the behind-the-scenes, read the blogs and watch the timelapse videos of the design online [victorianopera.com.au/intothewoods](http://victorianopera.com.au/intothewoods)

The Wall

### PROGRAMME

Immerse yourself in the world of opera with our *Into the Woods* programme! Director Stuart Maunder shares his thoughts on the magical words 'Once upon a time', Conductor Benjamin Northey writes about the connection between text and music, and you can view the beautiful costume illustrations by designer Harrier Oxley and more! [VIEW PROGRAMME ONLINE >](#)

### ON THE RADIO

So what does Granny sound like? She made a guest appearance on SYN with host Jeremy Kleeman and his fellow *Into the Woods* cast members Noni McCallum, Josie Lane and Rowan Witt. [Listen to the podcast!](#)

### SNEAK PEEK

Who lives here?! We couldn't resist a little sneak peek of the *Into the Woods* set (designed by Adam Gardnir).

### IN THE PRESS

"(STEPHEN SONDHEIM) IS MY FAVOURITE COMPOSER. THE RIGHT NOTE SITES ON THE RIGHT PHRASE - IT'S JUST SO CLEVER" - QUEENIE VAN DE ZANDT (THE WITCH).

### TIS' THE SEASON FOR HATS!

Some of the beautiful hats created by milliner Phillip Rhodes for the *Into the Woods* production.



After the performance, reflect on what you have experienced. Also discuss this with your peers. What did you like best about the performance? Who was the most memorable performer? Who was your favourite character and was this different to your expectation? What surprised you? Read the reviews of the production that will be available on the Victorian Opera website after opening night of *Into the Woods*. If you were a critic for a newspaper, what would you write? Remember that this was premiered over a quarter of a century ago. Do you think their responses would be different if it was premiered in 2014? Read the critics' responses and review the questions below.

## CRITIC'S RESPONSE

### Reviews

The reviews of *Into the Woods* were on-the-whole positive. On the opening night of the London production in 1990, the critic Benedict Nightingale described Sondheim's compositional style in *Into the Woods* as 'predictable in his unpredictability' (Banfield, 1993, p.213). This shows how Sondheim was paving his way with a unique and creative approach to musical theatre. Various theatre companies have interpreted their musicals in their own ways. Sondheim commented on Richard Jones's production in London:

*"One of the best things I ever saw in my life. And, as you probably know, it took place in a room...and it was wonderful. He had a real idea. And it's completely unlike the original. And you know Lapine and I have both said, 'If you're going to take something we've done, make it entirely different. Give us something-for our purposes-give us something fresh. Something Woo!' (Horowitz, 2010, p.234)*

- Has the critics' responses altered your perception of the work?
- What is the role of a music or art critic? How influential are they?
- Has the work broken new ground in musical theatre?
- Would you expect an opera company to approach the work differently to a theatrical group?
- Has the performance you have just seen reinterpreted the musical differently? How?



## EXTEND YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE

Visit our website to explore behind-the-scenes, sign up to workshops and browse through our resources online [victorianopera.com.au/education](http://victorianopera.com.au/education).

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- [youtube.com/victorianoperapage](https://youtube.com/victorianoperapage)
- [victorianopera.com.au/education](http://victorianopera.com.au/education)
- [victorianopera.com.au/blog](https://victorianopera.com.au/blog)

## CONTACT US

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