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# DREAMS SOUND DIFFERENT IN THE WOODS: JAMES LAPINE AND STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S DRAMATIZATION OF FAIRY TALES IN INTO THE WOODS

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**Abstract**

Postmodern times were noted for an increase in revisionist writings. Men of letters started to rewrite traditional works of folklore, fiction, and drama, approaching them from different perspectives to make these works adequate means to deliver their implied messages, whether social or political. Dramatists, like Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, made use of this new style of writing. Previous studies on Into the Woods focus on the style of the playwrights, their use of songs and music in the play, and the audience's response to the play following the September attacks on the two towers in New York. This research deals with Sondheim and Lapine's rewriting of fairy tales in their collaborated 1987 Epic play Into the Woods. It sheds light on the playwright's social and political themes and their ability to present an original masterpiece from the fairy tales they adapted. It also examines the challenge the playwrights encounter in adapting these sentimental fairy tales for their anti-romantic Epic Theatre through their use of the so-called 'alienation effect.'

**Keywords:** Epic Theatre, fairy tales, Lapine, alienation effect, Sondheim

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## Introduction: Creating the Alienation Effect

Originated by Twentieth-century German playwright and director, Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the Epic Theater offers social and political critique of the eras in which the plays are written and performed. Unlike Aristotle's classical theories of drama which focus on tragedy, empathy, and purgation, Brecht's theatrical ideas aim at eliminating any emotional response on the part of the spectators. Within its extended setting and cast of characters, the audience is not expected to be emotionally involved in the events or to empathize with the characters. Instead, they are invited to observe and think objectively, using the so-called 'alienation effect.' This technique is fulfilled by the playwrights' attempt to remind the audience that what they are watching is merely a play "that it's not real" (Miller 1996, 206); their role is to think and learn from the characters' experience. According to Brecht, this is the most effective means in political drama (See Innes 1972, 200).

Other Brechtian elements of 'alienation' are the use of chorus, songs, and direct address to the audience by the characters. These techniques assist the playwrights in their efforts to break all the barriers between the actors and the audience (Cuddon 1998, 274). Sometimes, a narrator is used to tell the audience about the events that take place offstage or about other incidents that happened in the past (Barnett 2014, 71). These plays often implicitly involve social and political commentary through the behaviors of the characters and their interactions in the play (See Squiers 2016, 8-10).

*Into the Woods* (1986), a collaborated musical drama by Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021) and James Lapine (1949-), opens with the traditional opening phrase "Once upon a time," with which most fairy tales start. The spectators trust the friendly narrator, who is the guide that leads them as the characters embark on their quest into the woods. He reminds them many times that he is not involved in the events of the play and that his role is only to tell them a story:

Sorry, I tell the story

I'm not part of it

.....

That's my role

There must always be someone on the outside

.....

You need an objective observer to pass the story along.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 6)

Sondheim and Lapine make use of many traditional fairy tales like Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Ridinghood (henceforth Ridinghood), Cinderella, and Rapunzel. These fairy tales are unified by the main story of a hideous Witch who inflicts a spell on a couple, a Baker and his Wife, leaving them childless. The spectators are aware of the sentimental nature of each fairy tale and expect most of the fairy tales to end in the same romantic storyline of its source. However, as the characters enter the woods, where they meet and interact, the audience is astonished by the twist Sondheim and Lapine have made on the original plots. They realize that these classical tales, though outwardly following the mainline of the original versions, are rewritten to fit into the new context designed by the playwrights. The retelling of these tales and the mystery that surrounds the fate of

each character nourish the spectators' imagination and make them intellectually, rather than emotionally, involved in the action to see what will befall the characters in their hazardous adventure in the woods.

**The Necessity of a Unity of Action, Time, and Place**

The original story of the Baker and his Wife, who are rendered childless by the Witch, brings all the other episodes into one interrelated plot. It is the Witch's revelation about the reason behind the curse that sets the Baker and his Wife out on a journey. The curse was brought on the family by the Baker's father when he stole some vegetables and magical beans from the Witch's garden for his pregnant wife. As a result, his son, the Baker, becomes infertile and his daughter, Rapunzel, is taken by the Witch and is confined in a high tower in the woods. To help them eliminate the spell of infertility so that they will be able to have a baby, the Witch orders the Baker to bring her four ingredients within three days:

One: the cow as white as milk.

Two: the cape as red as blood.

Three: the hair as yellow as corn.

Four: the slipper is as pure as gold.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 10)

This brings all the episodes into a unity of action, time, and place, as the Baker embarks on his journey into the woods, to get Jack and the Beanstalk's cow, Ridinghood's cape, Rapunzel's yellow hair, and Cinderella's golden shoe.

**Anti-Romantic Episodes**

***A Selfish and Unfaithful Wife***

In *Into the Woods*, the relationships among the characters are not as pure and true as they are in traditional fairy tales. The Baker's wife pretends to be altruistic and devoted to her husband at the beginning when she refuses to let him go alone into the woods, though the Baker insists that she should stay home because the curse is the legacy of his family and she has nothing to do with it: "The spell is on my house./ Only I can lift the spell…" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 20). Though she is not as evil as the Machiavellian Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), she also has the same single-mindedness in fulfilling her goals even if the means are immoral and selfish. Her moral vision is different from that of her husband. She does not show any qualms as she steals, tells lies, cheats on people, and even attacks them to get what she wants. She convinces her husband to cheat Jack out of his cow by offering the beans instead of money, telling him that the beans are magical:

Do we want a child or not?…

There are rights and wrongs and in-betweens…

If the thing you do is pure in intent and it's just a little bent does it matter?

No, what matters is that everyone tells tiny lies what's important is the size…

If the end is right it justifies the [means].

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 10)

She is also ready to steal, as when she deceives Rapunzel and cuts part of her hair. She is partly responsible for the growing of the first beanstalk which leads to disastrous consequences after the Giant's murder. She is also responsible for the

growth of the second beanstalk when she tries hard to exchange it for Cinderella's golden shoe, needed to break the Witch's spell. Her Machiavellian means highlight the moral question in the play, as Stephen Sondheim clarifies in an interview with writer and musician James Lipton (1926-2020):

> [The play is] about moral responsibility—the responsibility you have in getting your wish not to cheat and step on other people's toes because it rebounds. The second act is about the consequences of not only the wishes themselves but of the methods by which the characters achieve their wishes, which are not always proper and moral. (1997, Online Interview)

The insincerity of love relationships in *Into the Woods* is exhibited by the Baker's Wife before her death when she is tempted by Cinderella's Prince. She is reawakened again with a biting sense of guilt and with a question of whether what happened is a dream:

What was that?

Was that me?

Was that him?

Did a prince really kiss me,

.....

And did I kiss him back?

Was it wrong?

Am I mad?

Was that all? ...

And I have a... A baker.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 75-76)

She is eventually punished for her unethical acts and her sexual transgression.

**A New Cinderella**

Unlike its original counterpart, the Cinderella story in *Into the Woods* is not about the expectations of a young woman to be betrothed to a handsome and daring prince who can free her from her miserable life with a cruel stepmother/sisters and a careless or absent father. The play opens with Cinderella, working hard and dreaming of attending the festival at the King's castle to be able to "dance before the Prince" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 5). It also features an unsympathetic stepmother and cruel and selfish stepsisters, Florinda and Lucinda, who make fun of her and try to thwart her dream of going to the festival:

The Festival!—
Darling, those nails!
Darling, those clothes!
Lentils are one thing but
Darling, with those
You'd make us the fools of the Festival
And mortify the Prince!

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 11)

To her dismay, on the first night of the three-day festival her stepmother, throws a pot of lentils into the ashes of the fireplace and orders her to get them back into the pot if she wants to attend the King's celebrations.

Cinderella's longing for her dead mother leaves her emotionally unstable. Besides, unlike her traditional counterpart, Cinderella does not have a godmother or a good witch to offer her a carriage, a beautiful dress, and shoes. Instead, it is her dead mother who helps her get what she needs to attend the festival when she visits her grave in the woods. However, Cinderella's uncertainty about the depth of her feelings towards the Prince, in the first place, and the necessity to go to the festival in the King's castle, in the second, are obvious in her mother's questions before she grants Cinderella her wish:

Do you know what you wish?

Are you certain what you wish

Is what you want?

If you know what you want,

Then make a wish.

Ask the tree
And you shall have your wish

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 16)

Sondheim and Lapine's Cinderella is whimsical. She does not trust her handsome Prince with whom she dances for three nights. During the festival, she escapes into the woods every midnight to test the sincerity of his emotions. The Prince is not able to find Cinderella until on the third night of his festival when he uses a sticky pitch on the stairs to entrap the evasive beauty but gets one of her golden shoes, instead, an act that is followed by the well-known shoe-test in the nearby village.

Cinderella's instincts make her suspicious of the Prince's faithfulness as a lover, which turns true when he seduces the Baker's Wife:

Foolishness can happen in the woods.

Once again, please—

Let your hesitations be hushed.

Any moment, big or small,

Is a moment, after all.

Seize the moment, skies may fall

Any moment.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 74)

Her decision to abandon the Prince because of his infidelity makes her the opposite of the original sentimental Cinderella. She does not have to depend on the Prince to rescue her from her miserable life through marriage. She does not even expect her passive father to do anything to change her life. Her journey in the woods is fundamental in changing her life and freeing her from the bounds of patriarchy as she realizes the difference between illusion and reality. Frank Rich, in his review of the play, remarks:

> 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 (qtd in Gordon 1990, 308)

As an orphan, who has lost her mother, Cinderella is passionate and sensitive enough to take care of the Baker's baby after its mother's death and its father's departure. She is also the one who consoles Ridinghood and Jack after they lose their families:

Things will come out right now.

We can make it so.

Someone is on your side

No one is alone.

… I wish

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 90)

Her last statement "I wish" suggests a better future.

**Ridinghood**

Originally, Ridinghood, has to venture into the woods to visit her sick grandmother. *Into the Woods* dramatizes a similar version of this fairy tale. However, the tale is interwoven with the other stories to fit within this symposium of fairy tales. Like her traditional counterpart, Ridinghood has to deliver some needs to her Granny and her mother also advises her to be careful:

Mother said,

"Come what may

Follow the path

And never stray.

And take extra care with strangers.

Even flowers have their dangers."

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 18)

However, she embarks on her journey into the woods full of hope and confidence, singing:

The way is clear,

The light is good,

I have no fear

Nor no one should.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 7)

Ridinghood is also pursued by a wolf who learns of her Granny's cottage in the woods, and like her original equivalent, she is lured from her path and overlooks her mother's warnings. Her adventure does not end in the wolf's stomach as she is rescued by the Baker, together with her Granny. She is a three-dimensional character, who learns from her experience in the woods. She learns never to trust strangers and to follow her mother's advice:

Mother said,

'Straight ahead'

Not to delay

Or be misled.

I should have heeded

Her advice…

But he seemed so nice.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 28)

**Rapunzel's Tragedy**

Taken from her family by the Witch when she was an infant, Rapunzel was imprisoned in a locked tower in the woods. She is not allowed to see anybody, except the Witch who visits her from time to time. Similar to the traditional fairy tale, Rapunzel has the same angelic qualities and extremely long hair, which she lowers to allow the Witch and then her beloved Prince to get to her. Though the Witch is kind to her, she isolates her from the world. Her selfishness to keep Rapunzel for herself blinds her to see Rapunzel's need for society and normal life:

This is the world I meant.

Couldn't you listen?

Couldn't you stay content,

Safe behind walls

As I could not….

Now you know what's out there in the world.

No one can prepare you for the world.

Even I.

How could I, who loved you as you were,

How could I have shielded you

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 71)

Sondheim and Lapine's Rapunzel is a tragic figure, who is exploited by the few people she meets in her life. Her Prince is similar to Cinderella's unfaithful Prince. He also fails her, though she saves him, with her pure tears, after he is blinded by the thorny thickets he enters, searching for her.

Rapunzel loses her hair, the symbol of her beauty, twice. Part of it is stolen by the Baker's Wife, who needs it for the Witch's demanded ingredients to lift the curse. Then, the Witch cuts what is left, when she discovers the reality of Rapunzel's relationship with her Prince. Rapunzel's suffering is greater than that of the other characters. She has to pay for her father's mistake when he steals from the Witch's garden. She is abused by the few individuals she meets in her life and, in the end, she loses her life for a sin that is not her own doing, when she is crushed under the Giantess's foot. The Witch's last lamenting song reveals how Rapunzel has been treated as a child—with no will to choose for her own:

No matter what you say,

Children won't listen.

No matter what you know,

Children refuse to learn.

Guide them along the way,

Still, they won't listen.

Children can only grow

From something you love

To something you lose!

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 71)

**A Wicked Jack**

Based on the folk tale of Jack and the Beanstalk, the Jack episode in *Into the Woods* is also linked to the Baker and his Wife's dream to have a baby. Jack is presented as a poor teenager who lives lonely with his mother. While Cinderella has a dysfunctional father, Jack suffers from the opposite. His father is dead and his mother is cruel and domineering. His mother does not bring him up properly; she encourages him to steal, an act that ultimately leads to tragic consequences. She is always demanding and hard to please:

I wish my son were not a fool
I wish my house was not a mess
I wish the cow was full of milk
I wish the walls were full of gold—
I wish a lot of things...

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 12)

Ironically, while Jack is unable to find maternal love in the figure of his harsh mother, he searches for a substitute in the only thing he has—his pet cow, Milky-White. But his mother forces him to go to the market to sell the cow:

Listen well, son. Milky-White must be taken to market.…

…She's been dry for a week. We've no food nor money, and no choice but to sell her while she can still command a price…

And no one keeps a cow for a friend!

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 9-11)

That is why, he has to go into the woods, where he meets and bargains with the other characters. The good-natured Baker has nothing to offer Jack as a price for his cow but the magical beans he has found in an old coat that belongs to his dead father. He feels guilty about trading the cow for the beans, believing that he has deceived Jack: "[the Baker to his Wife]: Magic beans? We've no reason to believe they're magic. Are we to dispel this curse through deceit?" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 23).

Jack's wrongdoings culminate in a climax when a magical beanstalk, that reaches the clouds, grows overnight in their garden after his mother throws the beans, angered by her son's foolish price for the cow. Jack climbs the giant beanstalk to the Giant's home and steals a magical hen that lays golden eggs to convince the Baker to sell Milky-White back to him. Then, when Ridinghood challenges him to prove that his journey to the sky is real, Jack ventures up the beanstalk again and brings a golden harp from the Giant's home. Then, he cuts the beanstalk, killing the Giant in the process. All the characters have to pay for Jack's foolhardiness

and mistakes as the Giant's widow, the Giantess, descends, seeking revenge on Jack for killing her husband:

I want the lad who climbed the beanstalk…
And who destroyed my house?

That boy asked for shelter, and then he stole our gold, our hen, and our harp.

Then he killed my husband. I must avenge the wrongdoings.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 68)

She destroys the village and kills Ridinghood's mother and Granny, the Baker's Wife, Rapunzel, and Jack's mother, who also dies accidentally, trying to protect her son. No one is safe from adversity, even the narrator dies, though he insists many times that he is not part of the events. After his death, "the characters are now terrifyingly free to make their own decisions [and] create their own endings" (Sutton 1997, 233). They do not have to depend on his authority as a storyteller.

**Misfortunes and Anti-Sentimental Ends**

To eliminate the sentimental reaction of the spectators, Sondheim and Lapine make other twists to the traditional endings of the fairy tales, which always conclude with 'they live happily ever after'. Indeed, as Brad Leithauser observes in the *New York Review of Books* (2000, 48): "The 'happily ever after' refrain closes the first but not the final act. Still to come are knives, wandering blind women, murders, and betrayals. It's a disenchanted tale of enchantment'." In the beginning, the woods represent a place where the characters can achieve their unattainable dreams. They repeat the refrain "I wish" throughout the play and believe that the journey is essential to their happiness: "Into the Woods,/ Then out of the woods…and happy ever after" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 7). Nevertheless, the woods are not, as Mark K. Fulk (1999, 43) notes, a place where the characters can fulfill their desires—"a place where one can safely journey and seemingly be 'home before dark'." Misfortunes hover over the characters, though the end of Act I suggests a happy ending as the characters apparently fulfill their dreams and wishes: The Baker and his Wife have a baby; the Witch is young and beautiful again; Cinderella and Rapunzel are married to their princes; Jack and his mother live happily and Milky-White is back home. However, their happiness does not last long and the woods eventually turn into a perilous trap:

The way is dark,

The light is dim,

But now there's you,

Me, her and him.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 76)

Still, the characters become aware of the significance of this transformative journey to their lives, relationships, and personal development, as they sing: "Into the woods, each time you go,/ There's more to learn of what you know" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 66). Robert L. McLaughlin (1991, 28) comments on the characters' development throughout the play, saying: "To bring order to these chaotic relationships, each character must not only achieve his or her quest but also mature psychologically."

The Baker's Wife's experience in the woods is necessary to her realization of her flaws and her romantic whims of having her prince, instead of being entangled in a traditional marriage with a poor baker. Initially, when she meets Cinderella she

wonders why the latter is elusive and runs from the handsome Prince. Ultimately, she acknowledges the understanding she gets from her adventure: "Now I understand—/And it's time to leave the woods" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 76). Before her death, she recognizes and applauds the change in her husband's character as well, saying:

You've changed

You're daring

You're different in the woods.

If you could see

You're not the man who started.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 40)

The Baker's decision to leave his son with Cinderella is reminiscent of the legacy of his family since he was also abandoned by his father when he was a little child. Thus, he suffers from his inability to be a good father, as he does not have "a fatherly role model" (Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 87). In a supernatural scene where he meets his father's ghost, he is encouraged by his father to be a responsible father and not to repeat his mistake when he abandoned his family. The Baker, subsequently, decides to change the life of his child by taking a different path from that of his irresponsible father. Eventually, he becomes an active individual in his community and joins forces with the other characters to kill the Giantess and save the world.

The death of the Giantess is followed by the resurrection of the dead characters, who all speak about the lessons they get from their experience in the woods. The Witch is also able to see the difference between illusion and reality. She is the one who sets the journey and brings all the tales into a unity of action, time, and place. In the end, she restores her beauty, but not without sacrifice. She realizes that she has to lose her power as a Witch to be beautiful again, a thing which she regrets since she becomes inactive in the face of the threatening powerful Giantess. When all blame the Witch for the disaster that befalls them, she rebukes them, saying that every one of them is responsible for the tragedy because they are selfish and dishonest:

Fine, if that's the thing you enjoy
Placing the blame, If that's the aim
Give me the blame…

I'm not good
I'm not nice
I'm just right
I'm the Witch
You're the world…
I'm what no one believes
…You're all liars and thieves

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 80-81)

Ridinghood is saved by the Baker and she learns the lesson from her experience in the woods. However, her tale does not end like its original equivalent. Ridinghood's mother and Granny are trampled to death by the avenging Giantess. Ridinghood ends orphan but with the hope of a better future as her community

becomes less careless and selfish. She, together with Jack, is consoled with the final song "No One Is Alone":

Mother cannot guide you.

Now you're on your own.

Only me beside you.

Still, you're not alone.

No one is alone. Truly.

No one is alone.

Sometimes people leave you.

Halfway through the wood.

Others may deceive you.

You decide what's good.

You decide alone.

But no one is alone.

(Sondheim and Lapine 2002, 87)

Typical of Epic Theater songs, "No One Is Alone" sums up the social theme of *Into the Woods*. In an Interview, Sondheim comments on the song, saying:

> I think the final step in maturity is feeling responsible for everybody…. that's what "No One Is Alone" is about. What I like about the title is it says two things. It says: no one is alone, you're not alone—I'm on your side and I love you. And the other thing is: no one is alone—you have to be careful what you do to other people. You can't just go stealing gold and selling cows for more than they worth, because it affects everybody else. (qtd. in Kakutani 1987, 30)

In *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, Jim Lovensheimer notes that the play as a whole is about outsiders and that the song "'No One Is Alone' is a benevolent anthem to outsiders—people are never completely disconnected from others in their thoughts and actions."

## Conclusion

In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim and Lapine deal with the individual's moral and social responsibilities in chaotic situations and critical times. The woods symbolize the inner psychological states of the characters. The protagonists have to confront their hidden dark sides to be able to develop. Most of the characters primarily act selfishly in the pursuit of their dreams and desires, without thinking of the consequences of their acts on the lives of others. However, they are disillusioned after their adventure in the woods. They learn how to abdicate their selfishness and to sacrifice for the well-being of others. They also discover in their journey the true meaning of love as they see the reality after they enter the dark woods.

Unlike the traditional fairy tales which end in happy endings, these tales conclude tragically. Besides, the grim atmosphere of the woods reveals that these fairy tales which have been originally written for youngsters are addressed to adult audiences. The didactic nature of these fairy tales is retained but with the twists the playwrights made, to create the Epic 'alienation effect,' they become different.

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