

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

Into the Woods

“I WISH/I KNOW”: AN ODE TO LEARNING

Into the Woods was workshopped in 1986 at Playwrights Horizons in New York City and was subsequently produced at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego, California. The musical opened on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theatre on November 5, 1987. The original Broadway production won three 1988 Tony Awards: Best Book of a Musical for James Lapine, Best Original Score for Stephen Sondheim, and Best Actress in a Musical for Joanna Gleason (Baker's Wife). Sondheim, the composer and lyricist of *Into the Woods* died in November 2021; our production serves, in part, to recognize his contributions to the American musical theatre. Sondheim's works seek to challenge audiences in times when most musical theatre seeks to comfort them. Frank Rich of *The New York Times* praised the Broadway production for the way the first-act “happy endings” of the fairytales give way to second-act “adult catastrophes.”

For *Into the Woods*, Sondheim took a suggestion from Lapine's wife, Sarah, that each familiar folktale figure should have a musical soliloquy that, instead of simply describing their adventures, should “[deal] with what the adventures *meant* to the adventurers.” Weaving together these characters' stories of maturation, *Into the Woods* stages journeys of learning, comparing a trek into the mysterious woods to the pursuit of knowledge.

Students and scholars at our dear Old State may be sensitive to the experience of such a journey. To every student who has labored on an assignment through a long night—on a couch, at the library, in bed, or in the hallway moments before class—we know the joys and pains of expanding our understanding, the challenges to assumptions that make the ground shake under our feet. Many at Penn State are learning how to be a part of a community, as the characters of *Woods* learn in the second act. In recent years, we've been forced to consider how our breath expresses not only desire but also causes danger. We learn how to obey our desires, but we also reckon with how our actions have consequences not just for ourselves, but for others.

And so, consider the lessons learned with each passing season—the verdant leaves that burst into flames, the tears that fall and float as white flakes. Consider the paths that are well-worn and the ones that are freshly-trodden. Consider how Little Red Riding Hood says, “I wish,” and Cinderella replies, consciously, “I know.”

Arushi Grover
Production Dramaturg

SOURCES

Rich, Frank. “Stage: ‘Into the Woods,’ From Sondheim.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), sec. C, 5.
Pender, Richard F. *The Stephen Sondheim Encyclopedia*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021.
Sondheim, Stephen. *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.