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**Into the Woods:
The Deeper Meaning of Fairy Tales, Then & Now**
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4 March 2018
frederickuu.org

Into the Woods premiered on Broadway in 1987. The through line is that a witch has put a curse on a baker and his wife leaving them unable to have a child. And their quest to lift the curse leads them not only into a nearby enchanted forest, but also into the plot of many different fairy tales, including “Cinderella,” “Jack and the Beanstalk,” “Little Red Riding Hood,” and “Rapunzel.” And, if you know your fairy tales, you know that this couple is not the only one with a wish that their life might be different. And so our story begins with a **wish**.

“Act 1 Opening”

So they’re off, *into the woods*. And we can begin to glimpse some of why these seemingly simple stories have endured for centuries across many cultures. If you are interested in learning more, a helpful guide is [Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tales](#) (Oxford University Press, 2014) by Marina Warner, a literature professor with an expertise in mythology. In her words, while it is true that most fairy tales are “flat” stories — “one-dimensional, abstract, and sparse” — paradoxically therein lies their power (xx).

Like the dreams that we have each night, fairy tales are “disjointed, brilliantly colored, they overlook rational cause and effect, they stage outlandish scenes of sex and violence, and they make abrupt transitions without rhyme or reason. They also contain significant repetitions and recurrent symbols” (117). Also **like dreams, fairy**

tales tend to resonate with us on an unconscious, archetypal level. The woods are *not* just woods. The trees are *not* just trees. The forest represents the liminal, risky place of transformation that our characters must pass through if there is any hope of their wishes coming true.

In some cultures, another name for fairy tales are “*wonder* tales.” By opening our imagination to how it was “once upon a time in a far off land,” we are invited to wonder about what might be possible here and now that we have never considered (xxii). Are these mere ordinary beans—good, at best, only for eating? Is this stranger a con man selling us snake oil? Maybe. Or *maybe—despite the con man’s devious intention— it turns out **maybe they are magic.***

“Maybe They’re Magic”

So far all of the characters we’ve met have negotiated, argued, or otherwise sought to advance their cause. But what if you don’t have anyone to talk to because a witch locked you in a tower? Well, perhaps you’d find yourself like poor Rapunzel spending a lot of time singing idly to yourself.

“Rapunzel”

The witch tasked the Baker and his wife with collecting four special items to lift the curse. If you found yourself in such a dilemma, what would you be willing to do to complete your quest and have your wish granted? Would you steal a beloved cape from an innocent young girl? If you know what you want, ***then what would you do to get it?***

“Baker’s Reprise”

Fairy tales have been around a long time. And the most influential collections both in general and for this musical are Charles Perrault’s *Tales of Olden Times* from the late seventeenth century and the Grimm Brothers’s *Children’s and Household Tales* from the first half to the nineteenth century (xiii). Over the years, these tales have been

not only retold countless times, but also interpreted in many different ways. I'll have time to share with you only a few of those interpretations.

To start with "Jack and the Beanstalk," one theory of why this story is enduring is that it plays with the way that, from a child's perspective, adults *are* gigantic. And as a young child, if you have ever angered one of your parents—by, for instance, trading your family's only cow for what seemed like a mere handful of beans—you can imagine how, in child's imagination, one's previously loving parent might suddenly seem to become a big, tall, terrible ***giant in the sky*** (Bettelheim 27).

"Giants in the Sky"

Because we are only presenting an excerpt from the full Broadway show, we had to leave quite a bit on the editing room floor. One of the best lines we had to cut is from Cinderella's Prince. When accused to being a cad, he retorts, "I was raised to be *charming*, not sincere." In that spirit, I invite you to hear the narcissism that can only be found from two princes in the throws of dueling love-struck ***agony***.

"Agony"

In various seasons of your life, you may find yourself lost in the proverbial woods. In such times, one temptation can be to try to find your way through the woods on your own. In our tale, the Baker tries to complete all four of the witch's tasks alone, and in failing repeatedly he is finally able to admit that he needs help—and that sometimes ***it takes two***.

"It Takes Two"

The Rapunzel story flips the script. Instead of a journey from the outside world *into the wood*, for this long-haired damsel, the woods are all she has even known. Unlike the Baker, her temptation is not to find her way through the woods alone. Rather, the witch

tries to bully Rapunzel into a different temptation: hiding from the world. She insists: you don't need friends your own age—*stay with me*.

“Stay With Me”

You can see the deep roots of the Cinderella story in the first part of her name: *cinder*, as in ashes left behind after a fire. She wished for a prince—and having come face-to-face with that reality—she must now wrestle with her self-doubt and discern if she (the one who has spent so much time cleaning up cinder, dirt, and ashes) feels worthy of love, especially the love of a prince. As it turns out, princes aren't always that great—but *shh!* She doesn't know that yet as she hesitates and lingers ***on the steps of the palace.***

"On the Steps of the Palace"

"Act 1 Finale"

Many, though not all, fairy tales end with the characters living "happily ever after." Some criticize this trope as childish "wishful thinking." Others view it as sowing the seeds of "heroic optimism" no matter what adversities may arise in life (xxiv). Accordingly, Sondheim does end Act I with the traditional "Happy ever after." But he knows that as long as we are alive, that is not the end of the story. So our second act begins with what happens *after* "happily ever after."

"Act 2 Opening"

On the other side of "happily ever after," we find the witch wrestling with the impact she has had on Rapunzel—the Baker's sister, whom the witch kidnapped and raised locked in a tower. Earlier, she rebuked Rapunzel, saying, "Children's *won't* listen." Now, she is realizing to her horror that Rapunzel has been listening to *all* the things that she has been saying over the year. Regarding all the things parents say, for both better and worse, ***children will listen.***

"Children Will Listen"

It turns out the Mysterious Man who pops up from time to time is the Baker's father—the one who stole from the witch's garden, causing the curse, and starting this whole cycle of events. So this song is about wrestling with the impact of both parenting and being parented—and coming to see that sometimes forgiving means *restoring* the

relationship. And other times forgiveness means *releasing* the relationship. Sometime it means saying ***no more***.

“No More”

At some point childhood ends. And part of growing up means that we will sometimes find ourselves lost “in the woods.” But even when we feel alone, the deeper truth is that we humans are always already *interconnected*. No one is an island. ***No one is alone***.

“No One Is Alone”

Our exploration of *Into the Woods* have been an invitation to reflect on the ways that what is possible in this life is often greater than we imagine. On the surface, fairy tales may appear to be only for children, but these wonder tales also resonate with us—throughout our lives—on a deeper level. And whether we are in—*or out*—of the woods in this season of our lives, these ancient, archetypal folk tales challenge us to explore truths that are as valid today as they were “***once upon a time***” (Bettelheim 310).

“Act 2 Finale”