

Into the Woods: Digital Dramaturgy

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by James Lapine

Directed by Mark Lamos

A co-production with Westport Country Playhouse

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What happens after Happily Ever After, after all? In Sondheim and Lapine’s beloved musical retelling of the Grimm classics, a parade of familiar folktale figures find their way “Into the Woods” and try to get home before dark—under the guidance of Mark Lamos, who dazzled us with *A Little Night Music* in 2008.



Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom, there lived two brothers who would one day grow up to collect and preserve what have come to be some of our most treasured stories. Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm, born in 1785, and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, born in 1786—remembered collectively as the Brothers Grimm—began their lives in a way not dissimilar to the heroes of the beloved tales for which they are known.

The brothers were born to an established middle class family that fell on hard times in the city of Kassel in the Kingdom of Hesse, in what is now Germany. Despite the financial hardships that contributed to the death of their father, Wilhelm and Jacob received the finest education thanks to the patronage of an aunt—first at the hands of private tutors, then at the Lyceum Fridericianum, and finally at the university at Marburg. It was here, inspired by their studies with their friend and professor Friedrich Karl von Savigny, that the intellectual curiosity the brothers had possessed since boyhood was cultivated into a respected scholarly insight, and where a passion for German language and culture would spark the journey down the fairy tale road that would secure their place in history.

Encouraged by the publication of popular folksongs by friends and fellow scholars Ludwig Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, and driven by the distress imposed upon their land by the Napoleonic wars, the Grimm brothers began collecting folk tales in 1806 as a scholarly and nationalistic endeavor. As they watched French conquerors strip their homeland of its most treasured art and culture, Jacob and Wilhelm sought a way to preserve the tales that had been told to them as children, which they felt deserved “more attention than they have been given up

to now, not only because of their poetry, which has its own special charm..., but also because they belong to our national poetic heritage.”

The brothers felt that these oral traditions revealed just as much about German language, history, and culture as historical texts or modern literature; and that “it was probably just the right time to collect these tales, since those who have been preserving them are becoming ever harder to find.... The custom of telling tales is ever on the wane,” as they shared in the preface to their collection.

The Grimm brothers spent six years gathering the tales of their childhood and of so many childhoods before, which they compiled into the two-volume *Children's and Household Tales*. Though the origin of many of the tales can be traced to Perrault's *Mother Goose* tales in France, back through the Middle Ages, and to the *Arabian Nights* stories and ancient Hindu myths, Wilhelm and Jacob did not travel far from Kassel to collect many of the most well-known of their stories, calling upon family, friends, neighbors, and people from across German society. Often compiling multiple versions of a tale to get at its essence, the Grimms were committed to preserving the accuracy of the tales from oral to written form, claiming in the preface to their first volume that “we have taken pains to record these fairy tales as untouched as was possible...No situation has been added or prettified or altered, for we hesitated to expand tales that were already so rich....”

Published in 1812 and 1814 respectively, the two volumes contained 156 tales in total, as well as extensive prefaces and footnotes. Though the collection contains tales that are still a major part of today's culture, both in the United States and throughout the world—Cinderella, Snow White & the Seven Dwarves, and Little Red Ridinghood to name a few—the brutality and violence of these stories in their original forms as published by the Brothers Grimm is often shocking to the modern reader. For example, in the Grimms' collection, Snow White's wicked queen eats the liver and lungs brought back to her by the huntsman, and is then forced to dance in red-hot iron shoes until she drops dead at Snow White's wedding as punishment for her misdeeds. Stephen

Sondheim and James Lapine's *Into the Woods* draws heavily upon these familiar stories in their Grimm forms, as with the shocking self-mutilation and eye-pecking punishment of Cinderella's stepsisters, and with Little Red Ridinghood's gruesome rescue from the bowels of the wolf and her grisly claiming of his pelt as her new cloak. With each subsequent edition and, eventually, translation, tales were added, subtracted, and even altered. The second, or classic, edition of the *Household Tales* included illustrations by Jacob and Wilhelm's younger brother, Albert Ludwig Grimm. Already accused by fellow scholars of relying more heavily upon the less sexual or brutal versions of the tales in accordance with their conservative values, the Brothers Grimm bent to the pressures of publishers to make the tales more child-friendly in later editions—though Jacob continued to insist that his book “was not written for children, though it fills a need for them and I am glad it should be so.”

Both while gathering and after completing *Children's and Household Fairy Tales*, the Grimm brothers continued to grow as scholars, publishing books on everything from German legends to German language and grammar, always working closely with one another and rarely separating for extended periods of time. Wilhelm Grimm died in 1859 while the brothers were working on

the first German dictionary, and Jacob died just four years later, before the work was finished. Though the Brothers Grimm were not the first to collect fairy and folk tales, nor would they be the last, it is theirs that we will remember and continue to mine for their riches in all forms of literature, culture, and entertainment. “There is no other collection in this manner,” as the Brothers said in the preface to that first volume of tales, “for people have almost always used the tales...in order to make larger stories out of them....”



When the Grimm brothers published their collection of traditional tales two centuries ago, in 1812, they can have had little notion of the enduring, global legacy the stories would achieve. Nor, in all likelihood, did they aim for any such result. After all, their project was in nearly every respect a local—even a parochial—one.

French arts and culture had dominated the Baroque era. French scientists and thinkers had shaped the Enlightenment. Then Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies had held Europe in their thrall, waves of chaos and conquering unleashed from post-Revolutionary France. No German nation-state yet existed to counteract these forces, though the writers, musicians, and philosophers of a nascent German Romanticism had begun to coalesce, led by Goethe. To this bid for a cohesive folk culture, Jacob and Wilhelm contributed the folk tales they had painstakingly gathered over many years.

Imagine the shock, then, when Jacob Grimm later provided an introduction to a collection of 16th-century Italian stories in a new translation, only to discover that it held parallel or alternative versions of many of the very same tales. Known as the Pentamerone, recounted by Giambattista Basile and based on traditional Neopolitan tales, the collection—coarse, violent, bawdy, very much a work of folk transmission—predated Perrault’s famous French literary versions by well over a century.

Two elements stand out about the Grimm’s collection, one witting and one probably not. First, it provided a fairly self-conscious response, an alternative even, to Perrault—German for French, folk for courtly. Second, they formed part of an extraordinary repetition of these same tale types in version after version, variant after variant—across time and national boundaries and barriers of language, class, or culture.

Transmission of Cinderella-type tales dates back further than we can measure, appearing in some forms as early as the 1st Century BC in Egypt (in which an eagle snatches up a maiden’s lost sandal and fires a nobleman’s love).

But many of these fables also link to ancient myths that go back even further in Western culture. More globally, there’s a 9th-century Chinese cognate tale for Cinderella, and one nearly as old for Little Red Ridinghood (in this case, with a devouring, shape-shifting tiger in place of the wolf). There’s a 16th-century Japanese version of the same type. Cinderella in particular

overlaps with European Cap o' Rushes, Catskin, Allerlirauh, and Donkeyskin; and versions in Zuni, Javanese, Hansa (Nigerian), Bengali, Swedish, Slavonic, Gaelic, Yiddish, Norwegian, Brazilian, and too many more to list. One compilation counted nearly 350 distinct variants of Cinderella stories.

Does this attest to an evolutionary process, the spread of a story genome over time? Is there an Ur-source that morphs; or do these tale types arise independently in far-flung locales, part of spontaneous and local responses to specific circumstances? Are they part of what Carl Jung considered a collective unconscious that we share as humans, or are they symbolic residue of ancient ritual practices? Who can say for sure, though many argue vociferously in favor of their favorite answer. Some retellings are distinctive (Perrault originates mention of a red cloak or slippers of glass, for instance). Other elements are more widespread: the stepmother, the degraded girl, the suffering beauty become scullery maid or servant, the dead mother present as nurturing tree or spirit, the clothing trial (slipper, ring, dress).

Nor does the spread end with the Grimms. The Jack tales accompanied English colonists and proved highly adaptable and appealing, spreading through Appalachia. Little Red tracks the Francophone diaspora. Cartoons, movies, teen novels, merchandising, advertising, pop-up books, pop songs, pornography, greeting cards, and of course musical theater: all have played their part in the endless retelling and reshaping of these accounts. But wherever they come from, and whether told for children or among adults, these stories have become all of ours.

While the familiar folk tales and their endless permutations provided the narrative spine for Sondheim and Lapine, another possible influence lurks in the shadows, through the figure of the Narrator. That dimly perceived force at work could look an awful lot like the short-lived but enormously influential German

Romanticist E.T.A. Hoffman.

If at first Hoffmann's name seems mysterious, his work or at least his legacy might be less so. Most famously, his story of a Nutcracker and a Mouse King helped inspire the beloved Christmas ballet known to millions—though his original offers a darker account than we're used to. The mysterious toymaker and the dolls that come to life, the intersection of reality and the supernatural or fantastical: these form a common thread through much of Hoffmann's work and its theatrical offshoots. The ballet *Coppélia*, the opera *Tales from Hoffmann*, all feature signature elements like mechanic dolls, life-like toys, transfigurations and curses and frustrated desire. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Hoffmann published his fiction at the same moment not only as the Grimm Brothers their fables, but also as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Born in Prussia in 1776 and dead in Berlin by 1822—after a career that included law, music composition, painting, criticism, and theater as well as writing fiction—Hoffmann made a lasting mark with his collections of short stories. Many have been adapted to stage and screen, but they also informed such authors as Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Hans

Christian Andersen, and countless others in the genres of fantasy, supernatural, and gothic horror—as well as the theories of Carl Jung.

For at least a portion of the journey of *Into the Woods*, the Narrator guides our way through the forest and the story, setting up the fables and conjuring them to life. And it's this conjuring—accompanied by a sense of foreboding; the recognition of painful consequences on the other side of some choices; and an appreciation for loss, longing, and bitter disappointment, that measure Hoffmann's lasting influence.



Years ago, when the National Endowment for the Arts was an organization that could truly endow our work in the theater, I was given a grant that allowed me to explore—with the theater I then headed, the Hartford Stage Company, and a team of gifted designers—a theatricalization of the works of E.T.A. Hoffmann. He is probably best known today as the protagonist of Offenbach's opera, *The Tales of Hoffmann*. A 19th-century German fabulist, he gave the world, among other delights, the story that inspired *The Nutcracker*. His tales are filled with terror and wonder, mystery and the macabre. And music.

As we began to discuss the conception of this production of *Into the Woods*, the designers and I found ourselves exploring a direction that reminded me of those tales. Hoffmann was the elegant inventor, while the Brothers Grimm were the more rough-hewn collectors of peasant folklore in the same period of German Romanticism—the period that produced Beethoven, the poet Novalis, and the painter Caspar David Friedrich. It was a period in which automatons were created—beautiful, sometimes life-like dolls that were made to move and react like real human beings. In the flickering candlelit universe of German Romanticism, the terror and sense of wonder many artists and craftsmen explored was the division between the real and the unreal. These ideas inform this production of a musical in which the characters of old German folk tales (there are actually no fairies in so-called fairy tales, only real people dealing with horror, magic, and hope) seem to find themselves, unaccountably, in each other's stories.

—Mark Lamos, Director
Westport Country Playhouse Artistic Director

http://thaumaturgy.tumblr.com/tagged/into_the_woods