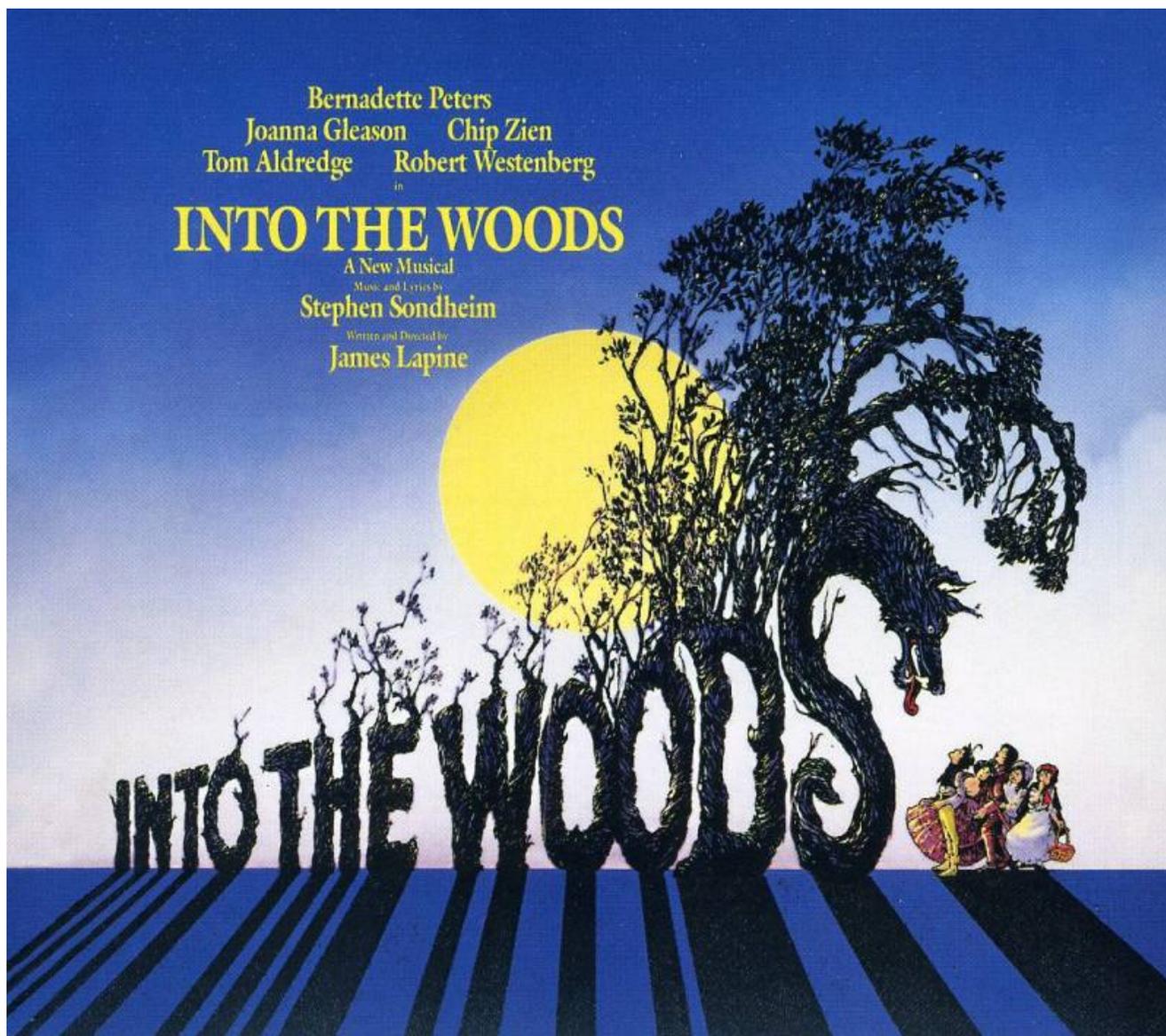


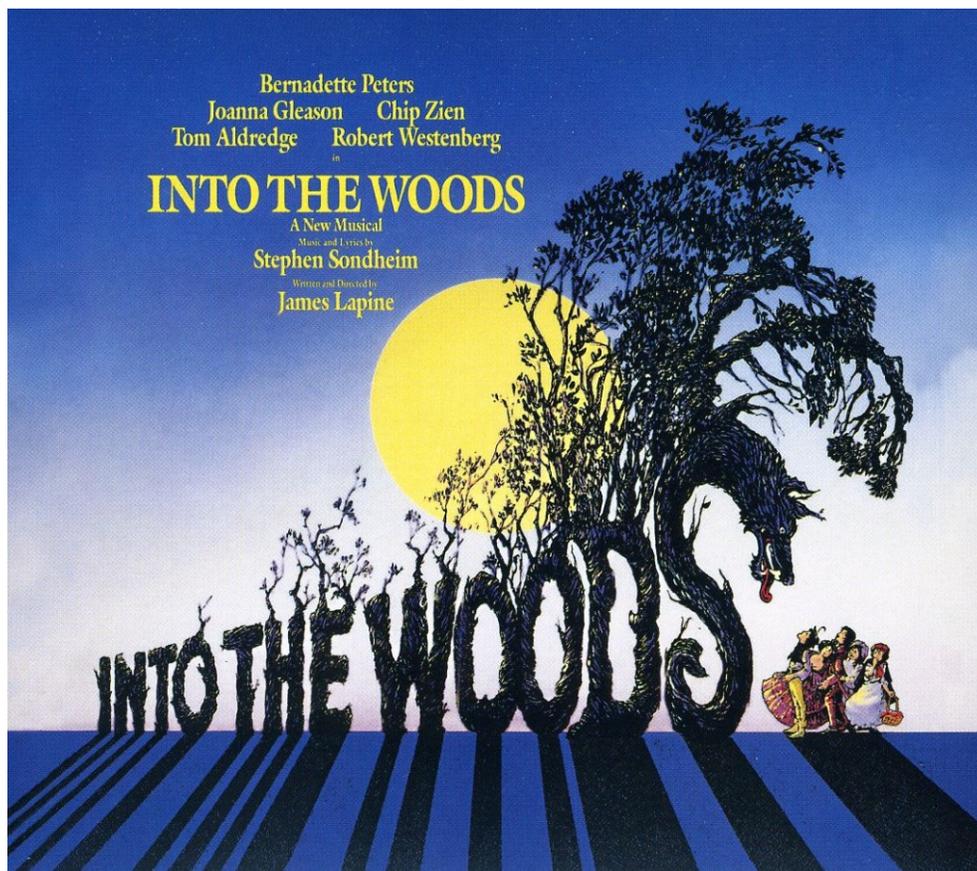
## Visiting the Witch Next Door: The *Into the Woods* Reunion

By **Kathryn Funkhouser** on July 14, 2015 in **HEROES**

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Kathryn Funkhouser's previous work for The Toast can be found [here](#).



Not every Broadway musical should have a reunion; to insist upon this would be fatal for the quality of the actors' tall tales at the bar afterwards, and deny theater the allure of something that ends. But *Into The Woods* has always been *about* what is discussed in the bar afterwards — about people coming to understand the impact of their stories, even the fables they live.

Asked at the reunion about his intent in writing the musical's climactic ballad, "No One Is Alone," composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim leaned forward and said: "What I truly mean is that no action is isolated." It's a double-edged sword that's already piercing in the song, but the extra sting it had in this moment made the reunion worthwhile. One action you can take is to write a musical, only to find yourself onstage at [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) twenty-eight years later, your impact made clear by the presence of two thousand children who listened — and came back to hear the story again.

One of them was me. I was excited — well, excited and scared — to be going to the reunion. Like most of the crowd at BAM that night, I knew the original cast album by heart and had watched and re-watched the video of the 1987 Broadway production. That video recording of *Into the Woods* gave the show an opportunity to acquire a following long after its run, one afforded only to a few shows that cut through the thicket of red tape around recordings. Watching it, you can fall in love with the full performances of characters — a different beast than listening to interpretations of songs on an album.

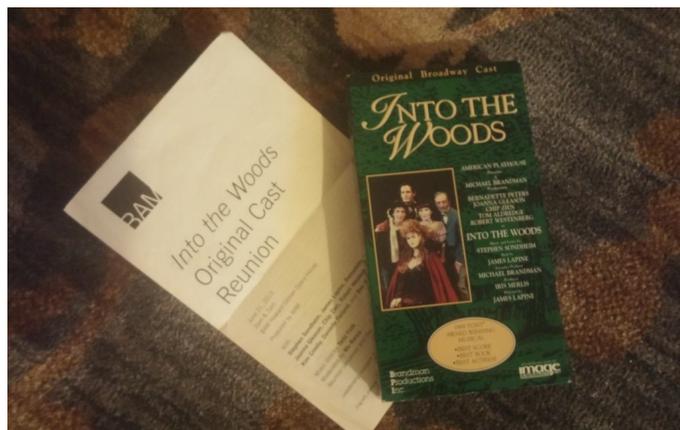
The original cast was the group reuniting that night, and I was nervous about the recognition I wanted to feel. Going back to the recordings of the show would always be safe, revisiting an old friend frozen in time who would never change. But living, breathing people were less predictable — it's that same potential for greater risk and greater reward that got me addicted to live theater in the first place. I didn't want to find flaws in these reunion conversations and performances that would undercut my devotion to *Into the Woods*. I didn't want the spell to be broken. But if I wanted to be in the room with the show as *theater*, as Sondheim and James Lapine and God intended, that was something I would simply have to risk.

Leaving behind the familiar and comfortable for something more dangerous, more exhilarating, is woven into the pattern of *Into The Woods*: Lapine ingeniously structured the libretto so that the fairy tales we know intertwine in the first act, while in the second, the consequences emerge in the uncharted territory after the fairy tales end. At the beginning, the Baker and his Wife learn that, in revenge for his father's thieving, the Witch next door has put a spell on them to prevent them from having a longed-for child — unless they bring her a peculiar list of objects from the woods that includes Cinderella's slipper, Jack's cow, Red Riding Hood's cape, and Rapunzel's hair. The couple inadvertently bring the other characters' stories to fruition as they complete their quest and rekindle their romance. At the end of the first act, the good guys are set to live happily ever after, perhaps a little wiser — except there's another beanstalk rising in the trees.

In the second act, cracks in the lives once thought settled through granted wishes begin to emerge, ranging from domestic annoyances to total disaster. The gang returns to the woods to deal with the threat of the slain Giant's wife, who demands Jack's life in retribution. The smug Narrator gets offered up instead — now the characters have to figure out the ends of their own stories — and all show their true colors. Some realize what's important to them only when it's down to the wire; some turn on each other; not everyone lives through the ordeal. The ragtag band of survivors has to decide if and how to go on, and it's a lot more complicated than “happily ever after.”

Here's my pitch for the show when I evangelize to musical theater agnostics: *Into The Woods* works in a similar fashion to a Pixar movie. You may *think* the form isn't for you, but you should make an exception for something this good; you can take a kid to it, but it's not only for kids; it puts story and character first, but there's also a lot of complex ideas to unpack if you want to; snobs like it, even though it's popular; it's genuinely funny, but you will talk about how much you cried or did not cry afterwards. I use my *Into The Woods* DVD to reel in skeptical friends the way a Scientologist tries to talk you into an auditing session, knowing they'll probably sign up for more wisdom (I have several versions of *Sweeney Todd* if you'd like to borrow any), cackling witchily as they are first charmed and then become misty on the couch beside me.

“I think it's very upbeat!” Sondheim exclaimed at the reunion. “There's a few deaths, but...y'know.” (I would not be surprised if Sondheim loves the first ten minutes of *Up*.)



The night of the reunion, I got my just desserts for all the times I've made my unsuspecting friends cry with *Into the Woods*. The evening's first number was “It Takes Two,” a sprightly duet about a couple remembering just what they like about one another. It isn't a sad song, and *Into The Woods* boasts more than its share of heartbreakers. But the Baker's Wife's first line was: “You've changed...” and that was it — I was toast. It wasn't how wonderful they looked. It wasn't that time had passed. It wasn't that they did the kiss enthusiastically. It wasn't even seeing how the performers' muscle memory still held every inflection, every note, every flourish of choreography with uncanny ease. It was realizing that *I also still knew all of it*, enough to recognize it as real.

I've always been a believer, a cast album collector, an owner of sequined top hats. My parents first met through a group of friends seeing *A Chorus Line* on Broadway, so I consider my existence mostly Michael Bennett's doing. I had a stuffed

bear named Fred Abear. My contribution to our elementary school class calendar for the month of January was an unsettling Magic Marker portrait of Mister Mistoffelees. Yes, I was *that* kid. But just as I now peddle *Into The Woods* to my friends as a Sondheim gateway drug, I know it was mine, too. My mom/enabler was playing the cast album on the stereo in our northern Virginia living room when I wandered in, flopped on the couch, and started trying to follow what was going on.

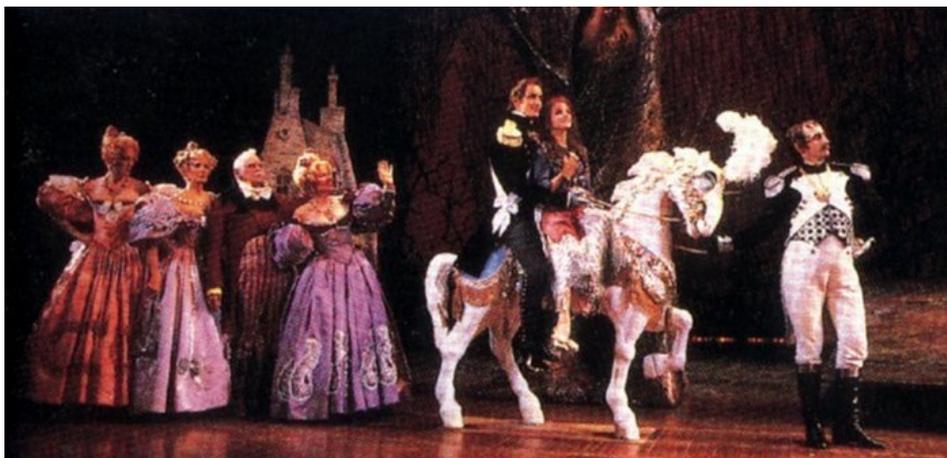


Mom had never thought to play me this one — I was hypersensitive to movies with sad or scary parts, but reading was different. So she gave me the fat pamphlet that came in the CD, with the lyrics in tiny letters. I followed along. I didn't move, from start to finish. Cinderella sang the final, ironic "I wish!" and then I asked — for the first time, of a musical — "Who wrote this?"

My mom came down from Manhattan to sit next to me at BAM fifteen years later, as I watched the answers to that question enter stage left. James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim were greeted by the crowd like actual superheroes who showed up to Comic-Con. Sondheim applauded back at us with the same wry grin he wore in the portrait I cut out of the *New Yorker* to post on my high-school bedroom wall. Throughout the night, host Mo Rocca (the incongruous-yet-genial outsider who moves things along, just like the Narrator in the original show) brought out out pairs of cast members to sit with Sondheim and Lapine for a discussion, alternated with performances of the numbers from the show.

The discussion often cast the performances in a new light. When original Baker Chip Zien began the already crushing "No More," the audience realized, in a wave, why he was addressing an empty chair: he had just told the audience a story about the late Narrator/Mysterious Man Tom Aldredge, who liked to crisp his consonants backstage by repeating "I JUST KILLED THE CAT" firmly to himself. As the song reached what should have been Aldredge's verse, Zien sang both the Baker's part and that of his absent "father" — a role that Zien himself played in a recent revival. As the Mysterious Man notes, "We disappoint, we disappear, we die, but we don't."

Things change — but they don't, when you make something that lasts. And for many of the actors, time seemed to blur as they revisited seminal songs in their careers. Ben Wright's "Giants in the Sky" sounded even richer than it did when he was a teenager, and his rediscovery of his own powers was palpable. He shared that he performs less often these days, as he has a family and four kids, and he does a great deal of advocacy work for kids with Down syndrome. Asked to name a favorite line, he looked thunderstruck: "'You think of all of those things you've seen, and you wish that you could live in between' — that's how I felt tonight."



If you closed your eyes during Robert Westenberg’s “Hello Little Girl” or Kim Crosby’s “On The Steps of The Palace,” it could have been 1987 again — except that Cinderella and her Prince just celebrated their 24th wedding anniversary in real life, because the Fates’ libretto for them was actually *more* romantic than that of *Into The Woods*. Apparently when Westenberg saw Crosby across the room on the first day of rehearsal and asked a bystander who she was, the reply — “That’s your wife!” — was prophetic. But the character of Cinderella’s Prince is just as predatory as the other character Westenberg plays, Red Riding Hood’s Wolf. The Wolf costume’s famously alarming rubber member (“the word, I believe, is...pendulous”) swung about to such hilarious effect when he leapt onstage that the costume team had to make it smaller every night. “We keep one of the old ones in the house,” said Crosby, and I truly had no idea if she was kidding.



Another fictional pair whose dynamic only proved more delightful in real life is the Baker, Chip Zien, and his Wife, Joanna Gleason. They bantered at the reunion like a seasoned vaudeville team. How was their offstage dynamic compared to their onstage marriage? “It was a very similar relationship, without the sex or the tax benefits,” wisecracked Gleason, who seems to have simply crystallized into a more perfect version of herself rather than aged. The Baker’s Wife’s droll wit and fierce sincerity are Gleason’s, too. Sondheim recounted how the two of them were discussing her character on the phone one night, and Gleason mused, “It’s like I’m in the wrong story!” “I’ll call you tomorrow,” he said, hanging up

abruptly — and that, said Sondheim, “was the only time I’ve ever taken a line from an actor.” Gleason’s deadpan reply when MoRocca said, “Probably you know that Steve paid you a very nice compliment in his book, *Look, I Made A Hat*?” “Page ninety-two.” (It is, actually!)

The line Sondheim stole from Gleason found its way into “Any Moment / Moments In The Woods”: “This is ridiculous / What am I doing here? / I’m in the wrong story!” This line represents everything that made the Baker’s Wife my favorite character. She’s the smart, funny one, unreliable on glamor. At first, she seems to be the sidekick: her character’s name literally defines her by her husband’s profession, and she acts as Cinderella’s rom-com best friend, patiently listening to her talk about her Prince problems. But the Baker’s Wife is really a protagonist, and her major conflict is deciding what she wants and what it’s worth to get it. She wants to be a mother, and does both questionable and brave things to get the Witch’s curse lifted. She’s the Baker’s Wife, but in the second act she also decides to be the Prince’s Fling for “a moment in the woods,” even though she knows she’s “in the wrong story.” Once he leaves her (after all, he was “raised to be charming, not sincere”), she digests what just happened and decides what to do next. She has mixed feelings, but being pursued doesn’t take away her instinct to pursue, and she wants everything at once: “Why not both instead?” she muses. “There’s the answer, if you’re clever / Have a child for warmth and a baker for bread / And a prince for...whatever. / Never! It’s these woods.” That’s something I recognized at the time, and it made me love her. Though some have interpreted the eleventh-hour death of the character as an intended comeuppance for her infidelity, when Lapine was asked about it during the reunion interview, he suggested that her centrality to the narrative was what sealed her doom: “I always wanted to write a character that just...died,” he replied, as suddenly and painfully as the real thing.

The Baker’s Wife often feels ambivalent about her choices, and that isn’t something commonly allowed to women we’re supposed to root for — especially in musicals. But ambivalence isn’t punished in the moral universe of *Into The Woods*, and in many ways it’s certainty and hubris that brings about one’s comeuppance. Each character who has an “aha!” moment in a song accepts some form of mixed feelings, and the fact that this includes the women has a hand in why the full ensemble of characters is so strong. Just as Jack dreams of living “in between,” Red Riding Hood lands in the same place in “I Know Things Now”: “Isn’t it nice to know a lot? ...And a little bit not.” Even the archetypical princess, Cinderella, arrives at her decision — “which is not to decide” — in the song “On The Steps of The Palace.” Sondheim praised Lapine in the interview for being “the first person in five hundred years to come up with a motivation for that character” when he fleshed out Cinderella’s story, but it’s unsurprising that the two of them would be on the same wavelength there. Sondheim is the kind of male feminist who never points out the way he quietly crafts great roles for women, gives female characters agency, and questions society’s expectations for women in his work — always in service of the story. Women in Sondheim musicals are not always nice or good, but they always have agency.

Which brings us to the Witch. In her smashing number “Last Midnight,” the Witch has *had* it. When she gets the ingredients for her potion at the end of Act I, she is restored to youth and beauty but stripped of her powers, and her adopted (really, abducted) daughter Rapunzel leaves with her own Prince despite the Witch’s dire warnings about the world’s cruelty. In Act II, a series of careless decisions by the others have brought an angry giantess into their midst, Rapunzel falls among the casualties, and everyone refuses the Witch’s suggestion to meet the giantess’ terms, to give her Jack and save themselves. “You’re so *nice*,” hisses the enchantress. “You’re not good, you’re not bad, you’re just *nice*. I’m not good, I’m not nice, I’m just right! I’m the Witch. You’re the world.”



It's a weird song for a twelve-year-old to choose to belt in the shower, but I did. I wrote that verse in careful, bad handwriting in the back of my planner, while I was pretending not to care that nobody would talk to me. While more-obvious small-girl avatar Red Riding Hood concludes that "nice is different than good" after meeting the Wolf, the Witch takes it one step further: nice *and* good can be different than right. I felt about the Witch the way some people feel about Darth Vader — she's clearly not a good guy, but she is clearly the coolest person in the room, and is undone only by her own fierce love for a child. She is powerful until she tries to play by the rules. "It's the perpetual truth-tellers who change the world, whether we like them to or not," Sondheim said at the reunion. The Witch's greatest power is that she doesn't care if anybody likes her because she's sure of herself, and if you're a middle-school girl, that alone seems like magic.

It's no less impressive to see an actress as aware of her powers as Bernadette Peters. The Witch was the role played by the Star, an equally fraught archetype, hidden under layers of prosthetics as an old crone until the transformation revealed her in all her glory. Just as Gleason's own strengths found their way into the Baker's Wife, Peters' strengths inform the Witch. As Peters swept out last at the reunion, she projected the sense of knowing *exactly* how much power she had over each quivering mortal in her presence. She had no qualms about crushing you under her exquisitely tiny ankle boots as she tossed her resplendent mane.

Onstage, Peters joked with the men in a queenly, Bette Davis sort of way. She can still sing the hell out of "Stay With Me" and "Last Midnight," today or any day. She did the vegetable rap. She briefly barked like a dog. I briefly died. She told us how the choreographer had her rehearse tied up with ropes, to simulate the witch's imprisonment in her gnarled flesh prison. Then Stephen Sondheim did his impression of Bernadette Peters drinking a cup of coffee with witch hands on. Even as I watched her swoop ferociously at her castmates, booming "Nothing but a vast midnight! Everybody smashed flat!" — her powers undiminished — I knew that afterwards I'd go back to my bedroom, stand in front of the mirror with the CD playing, and try to capture some of it for myself, as I always had.

There's a moment during the finale of *Into The Woods*, a marvel of a reprise, when a sudden tempo change hits your gut. "Careful the tale you tell, that is the spell. Children will listen," the Witch sings, and it is a promise and a warning. Then the company launches quietly and quickly into the round from the end of Act I — "Though it's fearful, though it's deep and though it's dark and though you may lose / your path / though you may encounter wolves!" — crescendoing triumphantly back to the theme where we first began: "Into the woods you go again / you have to every now and then. Into the woods, no telling when / Be ready for the journey." What seemed merely plucky and fun at the beginning has become heroic. When the cast returned to this show at the reunion, you could tell how much they loved it — how for them, and for us, singing about the woods *is* the way you go back.

I should have remembered that "the way is clear, the light is good / I have no fear, nor no one should." Sondheim was first to stride offstage after the reunion concert, because he had already left what he needed to leave. I, too, was out of the woods — but only until I got home, because I had pages of the musical I'm writing to finish the next day. "The slotted spoon *can* catch the potato." No action is isolated, and no one is alone.

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**Kathryn Funkhouser's** work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, and *the Hairpin*. She lives in Brooklyn, where she writes for theater as well as a new series for the web, **Wonder**.



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harveypenguin · 132 weeks ago

+3

I skipped the Into the Woods reunion to go to the annual Bang on a Can Marathon, because I couldn't figure out if I was more of a Sondheim nerd or a new music nerd, but now I'm really regretting that decision!



Jordan · 132 weeks ago

+13

This is just absolutely everything. Thank you for going for all of us who couldn't and for writing such a beautiful and thoughtful reflection on it.



houblonchouffe · 132 weeks ago

+25

I am only partially succeeding in not crying at my desk you guys

[2 replies](#) · active 132 weeks ago



anachronistique · 132 weeks ago

+8

I'M FAILING ENTIRELY this was wonderful



julieannaface · 132 weeks ago

+6

I made it until "And you think of all of the things you've seen...". Then crumbled.



Nicole · 132 weeks ago

+16

There are not enough words to share how I feel about Into the Woods. It changed what I thought theater and stories could do (of course I was like 12 years old when I saw it, so my opinion of what theater could do was pretty much "put helicopters and barricades on the stage").

I played Little Red in a community theater performance when I was in high school. I will play the Witch someday, if I have to buy my own theater and hire my own actors to do it.

[2 replies](#) · active 132 weeks ago



Katy · 132 weeks ago

+7

THIS!

Also I will play the Baker's Wife someday, if I have to buy my own theater and hire my own actors to do it. Let's team up!



hussified · 132 weeks ago

+7

One of the nicest compliments I ever received in high school was when a bunch of us were dream casting our ITW amongst ourselves, and after I said I'd probably have to be Jack's Mother, my drama teacher said, "Oh absolutely not, hussified. You'd be the Witch." Having made somewhat of a H.S. career of playing the best friends and the mothers due to my voluptuousness, I was floored. I've never forgotten it.



celery · 132 weeks ago

+1

This was beautiful. Thank you for sharing. I am going to have to go home and listen to the soundtrack tonight.



anon210 · 132 weeks ago

+7

It was a truly amazing experience. I had the same apprehensions about not wanting something so close to my heart to be somehow spoiled by a disappointing reunion, and then they were all, every single one of them, amazing, pitch-perfect, hitting all the beats of the original show--it was like magic. It made me a little sad that I never got to see the original show in person, but also so happy for how much *Into the Woods* has given me over the years.



Katy · 132 weeks ago

+15

I wish (more than anything, more than life) that I could have been there. It's hard to know how to even begin to describe how much this show means to me. It has been with me through good times and bad. And because I'm that person I even sang No One Is Alone at my 15-years-late Bat Mitzvah this year for various symbolic reasons. My mom actually photographed *Into the Woods* (she took those pictures you included) and my parents' first date was to see *Sunday in the Park with George* so I guess you can say Sondheim is in my blood.

And Stephen Sondheim TOTALLY enjoyed the first ten minutes of *Up*. He cackles with glee at our misery! Our tears fuel his genesis device.

Anyways, thank you for sharing this beautiful experience with us! I'm off to go sing along to the entire score while doing the dishes.



daisicles · 132 weeks ago

+3

Oh, this is just lovely. To be honest, I've long thought that I didn't care much for *Into the Woods* any more (and there are certainly other Sondheim musicals that I love much more these days), but apparently that's not true because I'm feeling awfully jealous.



runciblecat · 132 weeks ago

+5

Thank you so much--this was wonderful. I, too, grew up with *Into the Woods*--my mother used to play the cassette tape in the car, before the CD came out. I did the "vegetable rap" for a school performance in third grade (though this was before I got my hands on the libretto, so I thought Peters was saying "vinipers" instead of "fiddleferns"--don't ask me what I thought "vinipers" were). The reunion sounds amazing, and I wish I could have been there. Reading this piece almost makes up for it, though. Think it's time for a rewatch of the DVD!



NicoleCliffe · 132 weeks ago

+9

I love this.



StinglessB · 132 weeks ago

+7

I feel that if I can raise my son with the morals of "Into the Woods" and Harry Potter, I will win at parenting.



thecoppertop · 132 weeks ago

+4

I saw a production recently where the Witch fumbled "I'm not good / I'm not nice / I'm just right. / I'm the Witch / you're the world" and I nearly BURNED THE THEATER DOWN.

[1 reply](#) · active 132 weeks ago



Ayelle · 132 weeks ago

+1

Fumbled it, or sang the alternate lyrics from the revival, where the verse in question is directed to the baby? ("You're so pure/ But stay here and in time/ You'll mature/ and grow up to be them/ So let's fly/ You and I/ far away")



pitytheviolins · 132 weeks ago

+6

Just READING this gave me chills.

Unfortunately I have to wait until I get off work to listen to the soundtrack.

A friend of mine killed himself this past Christmas and he was a big theater nerd. Some of his friends sang "No One is Alone" at the funeral and now I will always cry listening to it.



neptunemars · 132 weeks ago

+1

I was there too!!! I was at the 2 pm show. I cried the whole time - too many emotions.

Thank you for this piece!



bacers · 132 weeks ago

+2

Does anyone know if a video of the reunion will be released? I can't find it online, and I'd pay good money to see it.

[2 replies](#) · active 132 weeks ago



Nikki · 132 weeks ago

+1

There was already a reunion in November 2014, and they never aired THAT, so I don't have high hopes for this one.

:/



bacers · 132 weeks ago

+1

Booo! I'll still hold out hope. I wish ...



**hussified** · 132 weeks ago

+3

"We disappoint, we disappear, we die, but we don't."

SO MANY TEARS. SO MANY. Thank you for sharing your experience.



**blunderbusst** · 132 weeks ago

+1

Just thought you should know: this piece made me cry openly as much as the show itself. A+++



**smiavs** · 132 weeks ago

+1

Your fears for the reunion sound like the fears I had when I went to see the film, but I was pleasantly surprised, too. They simplified it and removed a lot of the depth, (movies always do) but the performances were solid, I liked Jack being played by a child, and I was completely floored by Streep. I thought she was a poor choice for "Mamma Mia!"-- which I didn't really enjoy--because, at the time, she clearly wasn't capable of hitting the necessary notes and too old for the role, and don't even get me started on Brosnan's singing, but MY GOD has Meryl Streep been working on her voice since then. Nobody will ever replace Bernadette Peters' place in my heart, (I think I may have been the only ten year-old in Nashville who listed her as my favorite actress, despite having never actually SEEN her in anything at the time) but Streep does a damn fine witch, too.

I was ultimately glad I went to see the film, but I'm not sure it was the BEST choice for the first movie I'd seen since my mother died. "No One is Alone" nearly killed me....



**NotSoOldEnchantress** · 115 weeks ago

0

This is to die for. Your writing is unabashedly honest and, as I like to say (aka steal from My Cousin Vinny), dead-on-balls accurate. As a writer, a Sondheim fan, an obsessed lover of Into the Woods, and an actor about to take on the Witch, I thank you. Truly. {P.S. I cracked at "You've changed," and pretty much cried throughout the rest of the entire article.}





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