


"Urban Popular Song, the Broadway Musical, the Cabaret Revival, and the Birth Pangs of American Opera: Stephen Sondheim," from All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century.


"Everything's Coming Up Roses: Stephen Sondheim," from They're Playing Our Song.


In Christian terms, God is the artist and we are all in the infinite painting. From this point of view, life has become art.

And so we see the collaborative art of Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine as very much at one with the great collaborators and individual playwrights of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theaters, particularly Thomas Middleton and William Rowley. In great collaborations, two do become one, and Sondheim and Lapine have much in common with these playwrights, and particularly William Shakespeare, in a Jacobean theater so fascinated with the art of dramatic romance. As Sondheim put it himself in the 1992 "Sondheim: A Celebration at Carnegie Hall," the concert was ostensibly to celebrate the words and music of Stephen Sondheim, but was in fact convened to celebrate the restoration of Carnegie Hall, a "cathedral to art." The concert also linked I have tried to suggest with Sondheim and Lapine (who, in our time, are also reaching, like their predecessors in the English Renaissance, for the mystery of the link between the worlds of nature and art), art and nature.5

CHAPTER 11

"Happily . . . Ever . . ." NEVER
The Antithetical Romance of Into the Woods
S. F. Stoddart

Since 1866 the American musical comedy has illustrated the romantic, normative values of American culture.1 Broadway has appropriated the traditional values of this folk art to form an American paradigm in which the communal world of stage actors (the fictive) celebrates and mirrors the real world of the audience (the authentic) by recognizing their heterosexual, middle-class values.2 Therefore, the American musical comedy generally concludes with a romantic melody, promising eternal love in the bliss of an appropriately managed marriage. As the curtain comes down, one can almost hear the audience reciting the cliché which expresses their collective desire: "And they lived happily ever after."

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine manipulate the basic form of the American musical to defy the traditional values embodied in the romantic musical comedy. Into the Woods (1987) negates the conservative goal and virtue of marriage by challenging the audience's assumptions about both marriage and the ideology of the romantic musical narrative.3 To do this, Sondheim and Lapine interweave four familiar folk tales which combine the quest motif and the marriage motif to explore the ramifications of "Happily Ever After" creating a restyled genre that offers a liberated romance, elevating the philosophy of true community over the restricted artifice of fairy tale coupling.

The folktale's morphology, as defined by Vladimir Propp, allows Sondheim and Lapine to interconnect the four tales in recognizable and coherent ways.4 According to Propp, the quest tale paradigm speaks of protagonists in situations where obtaining goals results in episodic perils; as they achieve their wishes, they routinely remove the antagonistic forces. Ultimately, the reader measures the achievement of each goal through the resolution: in most cases, a celebratory wedding feast.5 This privileging of a heterosexist discourse becomes the paradigm from which most readers, initially children
ACT I: JOINING TO HAPPILY EVER AFTER

The romance of wicked birds,
darkly and the better and the worst,
as deep shores are to be discovered
during the course of discussion. I think myself to dwell with

In order to focus my discussion, I must myself to dwell with

Wicked minds on a burning course.

Which means clearly how the natural landscape the nature of momentum,

such as communities by altering their interaction, may come under...

In order to proceed properly, the double must reveal itself to the

Wickedness, and it has been rescued to maintain the...
“Happily... Ever...” NEVER

Robin Wood places on the musical as social criticism: the total lack of awareness on the part of the characters for one another challenges the notions of individual pursuits for selfish gains, particularly on the part of the childless couple. In order to break the spell of sterility, the Baker and his Wife compromise their values by stealing, lying, and cheating the other characters out of the possessions they need. In their first duet, “Maybe They’re Magic,” they justify swindling the simple-minded Jack by trading him “beats” for his “Milky-White” cow:

When the end’s in sight,
You’ll realize:
If the end is right,
It justifies
The beats! (30-1)

Their obsessive, compulsive behavior, and the cavalier, selfish attitude toward the possessions of others, reflects the ideological commentary desired by Lapine himself:

In the fairy tale world, the individual is liberated by his own choices and behavior; in the real world we are more dependent on each other. If you read Betelheim, or even the Jungians, they say that the issues presented in fairy tales are about individual or collective psychic development. It seems to me that the real world is about being part of the whole and what makes up the stories are your varied parts.

The actions of the childless couple illustrate the problems and entanglements that occur when the ideology of community does not figure into the actions of each individual. Their duet “It Takes Two” illustrates this point one step further, for the Baker and his Wife acknowledge the changes each has undergone for the betterment of their union: “You’re not the man who started, / And much more open-hearted / Than I knew / You to be” (54). They find within one another the very things they believed no longer existed, and they jointly sing of their rejuvenated love:

We’ve changed.
We’re strangers.
I’m meeting you in the woods.
Who minds
What dangers?
I know we’ll get past the woods.
And once we’re past.
Let’s hope the changes last. (55)
However, the results ring false to the audience, as they achieve the virtues at the expense of the other members of the community.

A second example of this selfish attitude, which questions the hetersexual value system, lies with Cinderella’s “straight” path to happiness through marital bliss. Upon visiting the grave of her mother, Cinderella wishes for the material frippery which will masquerade her true identity at the Prince’s festival, even though her mother’s spirit cautions her (“Are you certain what you wish? Is what you want?” [22]), Cinderella eagerly sees the “silver and gold” thrown down on her as the solution to her unhappy existence—in this light, marriage to the Prince will remove her from a trying domestic situation and serve to make her respectable in the eyes of those who demean her in public. 13

However, the audience does not witness her “triumph” at the Festival; instead, we experience the immediate aftermath when she encounters the Baker’s Wife in the woods. In the duet “A Very Nice Prince,” the Baker’s Wife interrogates the beautifully coiffed Cinderella, who begins to experience reservations concerning the romance paradigm. Acknowledging his “charm for a Prince,” she hesitates to develop her responses to the Baker’s Wife’s questions concerning the romance of this first meeting:

**WIFE:**

And—?

The Prince—?

**CINDERELLA:**

Oh, the Prince . . .

**WIFE:**

Yes, the Prince!

**CINDERELLA:**

Well, he’s tall.

**WIFE:**

Is that all?

Did you dance?

Is he charming? They say that he’s charming.

**CINDERELLA:**

We did nothing but dance. (38)

While the song takes on the tone of two girlfriends gossiping about a first date, the fragmented replies of Cinderella underscore her growing awareness concerning the inadequacy of marriage and its inability to live up to its romantic expectations.

This maturing hesitation underscores the end of act 1 in Cinderella’s solo “On the Steps of the Palace,” her song of wish fulfillment.14 She enters limping, having lost one of her gold slippers: “Knowing this time I’d run from him, / He spread pitch on the stairs. / I was caught unawares” (62). While
ACT 2: UNITING FOR "EVER AFTER"

Act I closes with "Ever After," a song that celebrates the joys of attaining individual goals. Its final chorus, however, presents new ironies, with increasing trepidation, as the lyrics note:

> When you know your wish,
> If you want your wish,
> You can have your wish,
> But you can't just wish—
> No, to get your wish
> You go into the woods,
> Where nothing's clear,
> Where witches, ghosts
> And wolves appear.
> Into the woods
> And through the fear,
> You have to take the journey. (77)

The irony here derives from what each character has not yet realized; consequences accrue when one selfishly pursues one's goal. And the newly formed "bliss" of the married couples quickly reveals the ideological foundations of Lapine and Sondheim's narrative.

Act 2 begins with a reprise of "Prologue: Into the Woods" that reveals the collective unhappiness each goal brings to each household. While Cinderella sings "I'm going to be a perfect wife! I'm going to see that he / Is so happy!" (86-7) in a bored tone, the Wife sings "I wish we had more room..." (85), and the Baker sings "I'm going to be a perfect father!" (87) while their child cries. Pairing these rounds with Jack's lament, "I miss my kingdom up in the sky" (85), we understand fully what the narrator cynically implies when he remarks, "But despite some minor inconveniences, they were all content..." (85). When the consequences of Jack's selfishness materialize in the form of a female Giant who desires revenge for the death of her husband, the situation provides each group of singers with a collective focus: to defend their lands.

**WIFE:**
> Into the woods,
> It's not so late,
> It's just another journey...

**CINDERELLA:**
> Into the woods,
> But not too long:
"Happily... Ever..." NEVER

The skies are strange,
The winds are strong.
Into the woods to see what's wrong...

JACK:
Into the woods to slay the giant!

WIFE:
Into the woods to shield the child...

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD:
To flee the winds...

BAKER:
To find a future...

WIFE:
To shield...

JACK:
To slay...

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD:
To flee...

BAKER:
To find...

CINDERELLA:
To fix... (94)

The song ends abruptly indicating the significant tonal difference act 2 creates as it negates the "happiness" of the previous act.

Critics readily acknowledge the tonal distinction between acts 1 and 2, but they do so under the pretense that the surface function of the musical theater form (to entertain) is antiestablishment. Joanne Gordon notes:

This communal threat, which has been interpreted by various critics to represent forces of evil as diverse as nuclear proliferation, AIDS, and the deranged individualism of Reaganomics, is a handy device that serves to re-unite the characters. 16

This hypothetical and contextual current neglects the ideological conflict implicit in the narrative. As act 2 continues, the audience senses the chaos and confusion of these now "perfect" lives, which serve to deconstruct the harmony found in the "bourgeois" materiality of their initial goals. The newly organized effort—to save the kingdom—permits the central characters to examine the implications of their supposed rewards, some with more positive results, others with further ramifications.

We learn of dissatisfaction within the walls of the castle, not only from Cinderella's initial chorus, but in the Prince's duet "Agony." Here, we listen to Cinderella's Prince sing of finding another maiden "High in a tower—/Like
yours was, but higher—/ A beauty asleep" (96), and Rapunzel’s Prince sings of finding yet another maiden: “I’ve found a casket / Entirely of glass—/ No, it’s unbreakable. Inside—don’t ask it—/ A maiden, alas, / Just as unawakeable” (96). Despite the humor of the joint lament of the Princes for Sleeping Beauty and Snow White respectively, the audience cannot deny the shallow egoism of these beastly brothers. The song ends with the Princes collaboratively resigning themselves, “Ah, well, back to my wife . . . “ (98), and we further comprehend the ideological order: Cinderella and Rapunzel serve the occupation of “Princess” adequately, until they behave as individuals; once they, especially Cinderella, find the routine of daily life boring, the blissful state of marriage becomes another form of entrapment—another tower for Rapunzel, and another domestic dirge for Cinderella.

The place of woman in the newfound order further complicates the narrative when the Baker’s Wife encounters Cinderella’s Prince in the woods. With his “charming” expressions (“Any Moment”) he seduces her; while the song, and the subsequent actions, humorously capture the fleeting affair—especially in the Prince’s quick decision to leave, the “affair” has touched the Baker’s Wife in a truly unique way. Her solo “Moments in the Woods” speaks of the angst she experiences as a result of her futile protestations:

Was it wrong?
Am I mad?
Is that all?
Does he miss me?

. . . . . . . .
There are vows, there are ties,
There are needs, there are standards,
There are shouldn’ts and shoulds.
Why not both instead?
There’s the answer, if you’re clever:
Have a child for warmth,
And a baker for bread,
And a Prince for whatever—
Never!

. . . .
Just remembering you’ve had an “and,”
When you’re back to “or,”
Makes the “or” mean more
Than it did before. (111-13)

However, more important to the ideological discussion, the Baker’s Wife realizes the double-standard established by heterosexual coupling. The Prince blithely leaves the situation he perpetrates without guilt, only the shammed “Agony” of appearing responsible in public. The Baker’s Wife, on