STUDENT MATINEE
STUDY GUIDE

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by James Lapine

Originally directed on Broadway by James Lapine
Orchestrations by Jonathan Tunick

Directed by Rudy Ramirez
Musical Direction by David Cavallin

April 28, 29, May 4, 5, 6 at 7:30 p.m.
May 6 at 2 p.m.
The Rand Theater

$20 General Admission
$10 Students and Seniors
Available through the Fine Arts Center Box Office
WORLD OF THE PLAY

*Into the Woods* is a 1987 musical with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by James Lapine. Sondheim and Lapine take all the familiar tales we read as children—Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Rapunzel, and more—and question if the lessons we have learned from them are as simple as they seem.

*Into the Woods* is a magical, imaginative adventure with a moral and political point of view. Employing sophisticated artistry and innovative craft, the show’s creators lead the audience on a journey through the darker side of fairy tales, as they explore the themes of growing up, communal responsibility, and the values we pass onto our children. As the tale unfolds, a childless baker and his wife, cursed by a witch, go off into the woods in hopes of ridding themselves of a curse she has set on them. There they encounter Cinderella, her prince, Little Red, the Wolf, Jack the Giant Killer, Rapunzel, and several other fairytale favorites.

By the end of Act 1, everything seems blissfully resolved. Unbeknownst to our characters, a destructive force looms in the woods, leading to tragic consequences.

Filled with unexpected twists and turns, *Into the Woods* is a cautionary tale. Like our fairytale characters, we end the journey aware of the moral consequences of our actions. Happily-ever-afters don’t always exist, and when we make mistakes, our children will listen.
1. Who are some of the familiar fairytale characters we see in Into the Woods? Who is unfamiliar?

2. What character do you relate to the most? Why?

3. How do the stories you have heard about these characters differ from how they are portrayed in the show?

4. What do you think the woods represent?

5. Think about what happens in each part of the musical. How does Act 1 differ from Act 2? How does Act 2 comment on the material in Act 1?
ACTIVITIES

- Draw a map of the woods in the space provided. Make sure to include important landmarks mentioned in the script, such as the Bakers’ house, Rapunzel’s tower and the castle.

- Choose a character from Into the Woods. Using the original tale written by the Brothers Grimm as a guide, rewrite the character’s tale from their perspective in Into the Woods.
OUR INTERPRETATION

When conceptualizing the UMass Amherst production of *Into the Woods*, director Rudy Ramirez took inspiration from the cartoon *Over the Garden Wall*.

Created in 2013, the Cartoon Network miniseries follows two brothers, Wirt and Greg, as they journey through a mysterious forest.

As our main characters progress through the forest, they encounter people, creatures and settings that blend different periods of American history; from glimpses of Puritan New England to Mississippi Riverboats, this show is not set in one particular time and place.

Ramirez saw a common thread between *Over the Garden Wall* and *Into the Woods* — nostalgia. Sondheim takes these tales we have known since childhood and interrogates them. Is there such a thing as happily ever after? No, and it’s dangerous to think so. Similarly, falling into the beauty of American nostalgia without addressing the country’s mistakes is a dangerous path to go down.
Because of this connection, Ramirez and our designers decided to model our version of *Into the Woods* after *Over the Garden Wall*. We also included the added layer of dimensionality.

“The story goes from two-dimensional people who have big, beautiful wishes to real people who break away from the story book drawing in order to survive,” says scenic designer Drishti Chauhan. Everything they touch and interact with is glaringly fake, but they don’t realize the world’s deceptive qualities until Act 2.
ACTIVITY
Think about different versions of Into the Woods you know of and/or think about the different themes outlined in Into the Woods. Focus on one. Using this theme, create your own design concept for the show. Think about elements such as scenery, costume, and lighting.

WISHING AND WANTING
It is no coincidence that *Into the Woods* ends with Cinderella singing “I wish.” In the opening number, the characters tell us what they wish for more than anything in the world. Cinderella wishes to go to the festival. Jack wishes that he could keep his beloved pet cow Milky White, and the Baker and his wife want a child. This seems pretty straightforward, until you think of subtext.

Subtext is a theme that is not expressly said in a piece of literature. On the surface, we believe we know what the characters want, but what do they really want?

Choose a character (It does not have to be a character in the opening number). What is this character’s wish? Trace the history of each wish: why did they want it, did they get what they wanted, were they happy about getting it?

**DISCUSSION**
1. What is Sondehim trying to communicate about wishing?
2. In the beginning of Act 2, several characters state that they will be perfect in their new roles as wife, mother, father, etc. What does the end of Into the Woods suggest about seeking perfection?
3. Why might someone be unhappy after their dream comes true?
4. Why does the show end with Cinderella saying “I wish”

ACTIVITY: Make a list of 10 things that you wish for right now. What would you do to get these wishes? Where would you draw the line?

INDIVIDUAL Vs COMMUNITY
“I was thinking of the greater good. That’s my job,” says the Steward in Act 2, after he kills Jack’s mother in fear that she would upset the Giant wrecking the kingdom. Is it morally right to sacrifice a child for the good of everyone else? The fairytale characters, who haven’t made many decisions in the past, face several of these moral dilemmas. Though it may seem far fetched, these are dilemmas we face every day when making both personal and political decisions. **Can you think of an example of a current event where this argument is in play? Write a short essay defending your position.**

1. What are some moments in the story where someone puts their individual needs over the needs of others? Does anyone account for the needs of all? What is their solution?

2. “Things are only what you need them for, what’s important is who needs them more.” What is the Baker’s Wife saying? Do you agree?

**FAMILY AND PARENTHOOD: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
Into the Woods includes several different family structures modeled after those we see in fairytales.

1. What are some patterns you notice about how families are portrayed in fairytales?

2. What different families do we see in Into the Woods? Name each of them and who is present.

3. How does each mother treat the children? Each father?

4. What message is Sondheim trying to send about parenthood?

5. “Children will not obey, but children will listen.” What does this line from the Finale mean? Why does the musical end on this?

FAIRYTALES AND ABLEISM
Where do our favorite fairy tales originate from? The true origin of many tales will never be known, but they have been passed down and altered by many over time. Religious figures, scholars, slaves and travelers have all contributed to the stories we know today.

In 1697, French author Charles Perault published several of these traditional folktales in *The Tales of Mother Goose*. The publication included stories like Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and Little Red Riding Hood. It would not be until the early 19th century that the stories would be revisited by the Grimm Brothers. They collected German tales that were passed down orally, many of them similar to Perault’s. As the years passed, the stories would be edited to be more child-friendly. The Grimm’s original collections were quite dark.

Not only are these tales macabre, but they are rooted in a history of ableism. Ableism is prejudiced behavior against people with disabilities. In many fairytales, disability is used as a punishment for characters that have been morally wicked. For example, the stepsisters in Cinderella have parts of their feet cut off to fit their feet into Cinderella’s slipper. Even after this self-inflicted punishment, the stepsisters are then swarmed by birds and have their eyes pecked out.

1. What are the consequences of these portrayals of disabled people?
2. What other moments in the script do you notice that are ableist?
3. What changes can be made to make these moments inoffensive? Can anything be done?