Once upon a time, not so very long ago, the Skylight embarked on a journey into a wonderland of fairy tales and fantasy. We travelled over the rainbow, encountered dragons, Caribbean gods and goddesses and people from different worlds. The season ends with the quintessential musical fantasy, INTO THE WOODS.

For INTO THE WOODS, Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine rewove some of the most beloved fairy tales to create a new classic. “Be careful what you wish for” is a theme in this musical inspired by the Brothers Grimm.

The story follows a Baker and his wife who wish to have a child. They are visited by a Witch, who reveals that she placed a curse on their family. When they set off into an enchanted wilderness to reverse the curse, they meet an array of familiar fairy tale characters: Cinderella, Jack and his cow, Little Red Riding Hood, the witch’s adopted daughter Rapunzel and two Princes chasing after their loves. By the end of Act I, everyone’s wish has been granted and will seemingly live happily ever after. But in Act 2, we see how their actions have consequences for the community at large, and we realize that no one is alone.

For more than half a century Stephen Sondheim has set an unsurpassed standard of brilliance and artistic integrity in the musical theater. His music, steeped in the history of the American stage, is also deeply informed by the classical tradition and the advances of modern concert music. His words, unequalled in their wit and virtuosity, have supplied profound insight into the joys and sorrows of life and love.

Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born in New York City in 1930. His father, Herbert Sondheim, was a successful dress manufacturer; his mother, Janet Fox, a fashion designer. He began piano lessons at an early age, and showed an aptitude for music, puzzles and mathematics.

When Sondheim was ten, his father (a distant figure) abandoned him and his mother. Although Herbert sought custody of Stephen, because he left his wife for another woman, with whom he had two sons, he was unsuccessful.

Sondheim detested his mother, who was said to be psychologically abusive and projected her anger from her failed marriage on her son: “When my father left her, she substituted me for him. And she used me the way she used him, to come on to and to berate.” She once wrote him a letter saying that the “only regret [she] ever had was giving him birth”. When his mother died in the spring of 1992, Sondheim did not attend her funeral.

After the divorce, Stephen, an only child, and his mother moved to a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The area had attracted a number of well-known personalities from the New York theater world; a close neighbor was the playwright, lyricist and producer Oscar Hammerstein II, whose son Jimmy was Stephen's age. They became friends, and Sondheim came to see the older Hammerstein as a role model. At the time, Hammerstein was inaugurating his historic collaboration with composer Richard Rodgers.
When Sondheim was in his teens, Rodgers and Hammerstein were enjoying unprecedented success with the shows OKLAHOMA!, CAROUSEL and SOUTH PACIFIC. Sondheim resolved that, like Hammerstein, he too would write for the theater.

Sondheim studied piano seriously through his prep school years, while Hammerstein tutored him in writing for the theater. With Hammerstein’s guidance, he wrote scripts and scores for four shows, a project that occupied Sondheim through his student years at Williams College.

Upon graduation, he was awarded a two-year scholarship to study composition. He studied with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbit, writing a piano concerto and a violin sonata while trying to break into the theater. Sondheim’s first efforts at securing a Broadway assignment fell through, but he found work writing for television, and met two playwrights who would play a significant role in his career: Arthur Laurents and Burt Shevelove.

Although Sondheim aspired to write both words and music, his first Broadway assignments called on him to write either one or the other. At age 25 he was hired to write lyrics for Leonard Bernstein’s music in the landmark musical WEST SIDE STORY. In 1957, his second Broadway musical was also as lyricist, this time with composer Jule Styne for another landmark show, GYPSY. Both shows had scripts by Arthur Laurents and were directed by Jerome Robbins.

The first time the credit, “Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim” appeared was in 1962 for A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM. It was an unqualified success, and introduced the first of Sondheim’s tunes to become a standard, Comedy Tonight. The script for FORUM was co-written by Sondheim’s friend, Burt Shevelove.

Sondheim collaborated with Arthur Laurents again on ANYONE CAN WHISTLE (1964). The show closed almost immediately, but has developed a cult following; its title song is a favorite of Sondheim’s admirers.

Sondheim returned to the role of lyricist-for-hire one more time to collaborate with Hammerstein’s old partner Richard Rodgers on DO I HEAR A WALTZ? in 1965. From then on, he would insist on writing both music and lyrics, although nearly five years would elapse before a Sondheim musical opened on Broadway.

Royalties from WEST SIDE STORY, GYPSY and FORUM, all of which were made into motion pictures, freed him to develop projects of his choosing. In the meantime, he published a remarkable series of word puzzles in New York Magazine. Many critics have related his love of puzzles and word games to the dazzling word play of his lyrics, with their intricate rhymes, puns and wide-ranging allusions.

Sondheim made a historic break-through as both composer and lyricist with COMPANY (1971), a caustic look at love and marriage in contemporary New York City. The show, an early example of the “concept musical,” established Sondheim as the most inventive and daring composer working in the musical theater.

COMPANY was Sondheim’s first collaboration with director Harold Prince, followed by FOLLIES in 1972. The show paid masterful tribute to the song styles of Broadway’s past, using them to ironic effect to comment on the challenges of middle age and the corrosive effects of self-delusion.

Sondheim’s detractors claimed that his work was too bitter and sophisticated for popular success. His next production, A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC (1973), put these doubts to rest. Its elegant, waltz-based score and humor charmed audiences, while its signature song, Send in the Clowns, became an unexpected pop standard.

Sondheim received Tony Awards for the music and lyrics of all three of these shows. In 1974, he wrote an adaptation of the classical Greek comedy THE FROGS, with a script by his old friend Burt Shevelove to be performed in the Yale University swimming pool.

He also co-wrote the screenplay for an intricate murder mystery, THE LAST OF SHEILA (1973). From 1973 to 1981, Sondheim served as President of the Dramatists Guild, the professional association of playwrights, theatrical composers and lyricists.
SEVEN PERCENT SOLUTION (1976) and DICK TRACY (1990), Sooner or Later, written for DICK TRACY, won him an Oscar for Best Song. In 1990, Sondheim spent a term as the first Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University. In his own country, he was honored with the National Medal of Arts.

One of Sondheim's most disturbing productions was ASSASSINS (1990), an examination of the motives and delusions of the men who murdered American presidents.


He has won 7 Tony Awards for Best Musical and a Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre in 2008. He is also a member of the American Theatre Hall of Fame.

Sondheim founded Young Playwrights Inc. in 1981 to introduce young people to writing for the theatre, and is the organization's executive vice-president. The Stephen Sondheim Society was established in 1993 to provide information about his work, including

The Stephen Sondheim Society was established in 1993 to provide a database, organize productions, meetings and other events and assist with publicity. Its annual Student Performer of the Year Competition awards a £1,000 prize to one of twelve musical-theatre students from UK drama schools and universities.

The Henry Miller Theatre on West 43rd Street in New York City, was renamed the Stephen Sondheim Theatre on September 15, 2010 for the composer's 80th birthday. Sondheim said in response to the honor, "I'm deeply embarrassed. Thrilled, but embarrassed. I've always hated my last name. It just doesn't sing."

According to The Daily Telegraph, Sondheim is "almost certainly" the only living composer with a quarterly journal published in his name; The Sondheim Review, founded in 1994, chronicles and promotes his work.

Regarding his personal life, Sondheim has been described as introverted and solitary. In an interview with Frank Rich he said, "The outsider feeling, somebody who people want to both kiss and kill, occurred quite early in my life". The composer is in a relationship with Jeff Romley, and lived with dramatist Peter Jones for eight years (until 1999).
Beginning with “Once upon a time,” the Narrator introduces four characters who each have a wish: Cinderella, the daughter of a rich man reduced to being a servant, wishes to attend the King’s festival; Jack wishes that his cow would give milk to avoid being sold; and a Baker and his Wife wish they could have a child.

The Witch tells the Baker and his Wife that she placed an infertility curse on their house after catching the Baker’s father in her garden stealing her “magic” beans. The Witch also took their newborn child and named her Rapunzel. The curse could be lifted if, before the third midnight, they bring her four ingredients for a potion: “the cow as white as milk, the cape as red as blood, the hair as yellow as corn and the slipper as pure as gold”.

They all go into the woods- Jack to sell his cow, Cinderella’s family goes to the Festival, Little Red meets the Wolf (Hello, Little Girl). The Baker’s Wife has followed him and together they convince Jack that the beans the Baker found in his father’s jacket are magic. Jack says goodbye to his cow (I Guess This Is Goodbye). The Baker has regrets, but his Wife reasons that their wish to have a child justifies their trickery (Maybe They’re Magic).

Little Red meets the Wolf (Hello, Little Girl). The Baker’s Wife has followed him and together they convince Jack that the beans the Baker found in his father’s jacket are magic. Jack says goodbye to his cow (I Guess This Is Goodbye). The Baker has regrets, but his Wife reasons that their wish to have a child justifies their trickery (Maybe They’re Magic).

Little Red arrives at her grandmother’s house, and is eaten by the Wolf. The Baker slays the Wolf, saving Little Red and her grandmother. Little Red reflects on her experience (I Know Things Now), then rewards the Baker with the red cape.

Meanwhile, Jack’s mother tosses the beans aside and Cinderella flees the Festival, pursued by a Prince. The Wife helps her hide and doesn’t understand Cinderella’s ambivalence about the ball (A Very Nice Prince).

As a giant beanstalk grows next to Jack’s house, the Baker’s Wife sees Cinderella’s gold slippers. She chases Cinderella and the cow escapes as the first midnight chimes (First Midnight).

Jack returns from climbing the beanstalk and stealing the Giant’s gold (Giants in the Sky). He gives the Baker five gold pieces to buy back his cow. The Baker hesitates, and Jack climbs the beanstalk to find more. The Mysterious Man taunts the Baker and steals the money.

The Baker's Wife confesses she has lost the cow, and she and the Baker split up to look for it. The Princes compare the misery of their newfound loves (Agony). The Baker’s Wife overhears Rapunzel’s Prince saying he has found a girl with “hair as yellow as corn.” She fools Rapunzel into letting down her hair and pulls out a piece of it. Meanwhile, The Mysterious Man returns Milky White to the Baker.

The Burger is reunited with three of the four items. The Baker admits that they need to work together (It Takes Two). Jack arrives with a hen that lays golden eggs and tries to buy the cow back, but it suddenly dies as midnight chimes (Second Midnight).

The Witch discovers that the Prince has been visiting Rapunzel and begs Rapunzel to stay with her (Stay with Me). When Rapunzel refuses, the Witch banishes her to a desert.

The Mysterious Man gives the Baker the money to buy another cow. Jack-brags to Little Red about his experiences in the kingdom of the Giant. She goads him into returning to the Giant’s home to steal a magic harp.

Cinderella, returning from the festival, describes how the Prince spread pitch on the stairs to prevent her from escaping. She leaves one of her slippers as a clue to her identity (On the Steps of the Palace). The Baker’s Wife offers her the sixth magic bean for her shoe. Cinderella throws the bean aside, trades shoes with the Baker’s Wife and flees, while unnoticed, a beanstalk starts to grow. The Baker arrives with another, not-quite-white cow.

A great crash is heard and Jack’s mother reports that there is a dead Giant in her backyard, killed when Jack chopped down the bean-stalk.

Meanwhile, Rapunzel has borne twins in the desert where her Prince finds her. The Witch realizes that her powers have been lost.

At Cinderella and the Prince’s wedding the stepsisters are blinded by birds as punishment for their wickedness. Everyone else feels they will live happily Ever After.

Scenic designs by Peter Dean Beck
The Narrator introduces the action again: "Once upon a time...later." All the characters seem happy but are still wishing: The Baker and his Wife have a baby boy, but wish for more room and bicker over the Baker's unwillingness to hold his child; Jack and his mother are rich, but Jack misses his kingdom in the sky; Cinderella is bored living with her Prince Charming in the Palace (So Happy).

Suddenly, there is a loud crash. The Witch reports that enormous footprints from a Giant have destroyed her garden. The Baker and his Wife decide to tell the Royal Family. The news is dismissed by the Steward.

When he returns home, Little Red arrives on her way to Granny's: her house has been destroyed and her mother is missing. The Baker and his Wife decide to escort her. Meanwhile, Jack wants to slay the Giant. Cinderella learns from her bird friends that her mother's grave was disturbed and decides to investigate, dressed in her old clothes. Once again, everyone heads into the woods. (Into the Woods Reprise).

Rapunzel has also fled to the woods, her treatment at the hands of the Witch having driven her into madness. Her Prince has followed her, but when he encounters his brother they each confess they have grown bored with their marriages and now pursue two women asleep in the woods - Snow White and Sleeping Beauty (Agony Reprise).

The Baker, his Wife and Little Red meet Cinderella's family and the Steward in the woods. They reveal that the castle was set upon by the Giant. The Witch arrives, bringing news that the village and the Baker's house have been destroyed. Suddenly, thunderous footsteps are heard. It is the Giant's widow, who has come from the second beanstalk. She wants to punish Jack for killing her husband. To satisfy the Giantess, the group realizes they must give her someone. After some debate, the Witch throws the Narrator into the Giantess' arms and he is killed. Jack's mother enters and defends her son, angering the Giantess. The Steward clubs Jack's mother to quiet her, inadvertently killing her. As the Giantess leaves to search for Jack, Rapunzel runs into her path and is killed, to the horror of the Witch (Witch's Lament).

The Royal Family flee to a hidden kingdom despite the Baker's pleas for them to stay and fight the Giantess. The Witch declares she will find Jack and sacrifice him to the Giantess, and the Baker and his Wife decide they must find him first.

The Baker's Wife meets Cinderella's Prince, and he seduces her (Any Moment). Meanwhile, the Baker discovers Cinderella at her mother's ruined grave and convinces her to join their group for safety. The Prince leaves the Baker's Wife with a few platitudes, she realizes her error and decides to return to her life with the Baker (Moments in the Woods). However, she stumbles into the path of the Giantess, and is killed.

The Baker, Little Red, and Cinderella await the return of the Baker's Wife when the Witch drags in Jack. The Baker, grief-stricken when told of his wife's death, unwittingly agrees to give Jack to the Giantess. The characters blame each other for their predicament, finally blaming the Witch for growing the beans in the first place (Your Fault). Disgusted, the Witch curses them and throws away the rest of her magic beans, reactivating her mother's curse and making her vanish (Last Midnight).

Meanwhile, the Baker tells Jack that his mother is dead. Jack vows to kill the Steward in revenge until the Baker convinces him that more killing will not benefit anyone. Cinderella comforts Little Red, while the Baker struggles to explain to Jack what is morally correct. (No One Is Alone).

The four remaining characters slay the Giantess. The survivors resolve to band together and rebuild. The spirit of the Baker's Wife appears to comfort her mourning husband, advising him to tell their child their story. The Baker begins to tell the story as told by the Narrator at the beginning of the play. The Witch appears with the final moral: "Careful the things you say, Children Will Listen. All join in, confirming that we all must venture "into the woods" (Finale). Cinderella closes the show with a final "I wish..."
The oral tradition of folk lore and fantasy came long before the written page. Tales were told or enacted dramatically and handed down from generation to generation. Although verbal transmission kept the stories alive and growing, their origin and development is often obscure. When the written word came along, it became possible to begin a chronology and make many classic stories part of our literary history. Fairy tales appear throughout written culture as in THE GOLDEN ASS, which includes the mythological tale of Cupid and Psyche (Roman, 100–200 AD).

The PANCHATANTRA is an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories, probably first composed around 300 BC. In the broader definition of the genre, the first famous Western fairy tales are those of Aesop (6th century BC) in ancient Greece. In China, Taoist philosophers such as Liezi and Zhuangzi recounted fairy tales in their philosophical works. These writings show that the fairy tale has ancient roots.

Jack Zipes writes in WHEN DREAMS CAME TRUE, “There are fairy tale elements in Chaucer’s THE CANTERBURY TALES, Edmund Spenser’s THE FAERIE QUEENE, and in many of Shakespeare plays”.

ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS, a collection of West and South Asian stories and folk tales was compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. It is often known in English as THE ARABIAN NIGHTS, from the first English language edition (1706). Some of the magical stories include ALADDIN’S WONDERFUL LAMP, ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES and THE SEVEN VOYAGES OF SINBAD THE SAILOR. While not part of Arabic versions, these stories were added into the collection by Antoine Galland and other European translators.

Fairy tales became popular among the upper class in France around 1690–1710. Among the tales told in that time were the works of La Fontaine and Charles Perrault. Perrault’s collections contain the oldest known forms of various fairy tales, SLEEPING BEAUTY, CINDERELLA, MOTHER GOOSE, PUSS IN BOOTS and RED RIDING HOOD. In creating INTO THE WOODS, Sondheim and Lapine were influenced by the works of the Brothers Grimm. Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786–1859) were German academics, linguists, cultural researchers, lexicographers and authors who worked together to collect and publish folklore during the 19th century.

They were among the best-known storytellers of folk tales, and popularized stories such as CINDERELLA, THE FROG PRINCE, THE GOOSE-GIRL, HANSEL AND GRETEL, RUMPETSTILTSKIN, SLEEPING BEAUTY and SNOW WHITE. Their first collection of folk tales, CHILDREN’S AND HOUSEHOLD TALES, was published in 1812.

The rise of romanticism during the 19th century revived interest in traditional folk stories, which to the brothers represented a pure form of national literature and culture. Between 1812 and 1857, their first collection was revised and republished many times, growing from 86 stories to more than 200. The tales are available in more than 100 languages.

Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) was one of the most important contributors to the fairy tale genre. Often compared to the works of the Brothers Grimm, but Andersen’s stories were original with a contemporary setting rather than compilations of previously unwritten stories.

Andersen was a Danish author of plays, travelogues, novels and poems, but best remembered for his fairy tales. His stories, called eventyr in Danish, or “fairy-tales” in English, express themes that transcend age and nationality. He brought this genre to a new level by writing a vast number of fairy tales that were both bold and original.

His stories, translated into more than 125 languages, are readily accessible to children and present lessons of virtue and resilience in the face of adversity for mature readers as well. Some of his fairy tales include: THE LITTLE MERMAID, THE EMPEROR’S NEW CLOTHES, THE PRINCESS AND THE PEA, THE RED SHOES, THE SNOW QUEEN, THUMBELINA and THE UGLY DUCKLING.
Creating a "New Fairy Tale"

The impetus for INTO THE WOODS came when Sondheim and Lapine decided to write a musical creating an entirely new fairy tale with a different twist. They wove the first act from existing fairy tales while the second act followed the examples of SHOW BOAT and THE FANTASTICKS in exploring what happens after "happily ever after". Familiar fairy tale characters were chosen for the main storyline -- Cinderella, Jack and the beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Prince Charm-ing and a Witch. The creators added two original characters to the mix: a childless Baker and his Wife.

Drawing on the original Grimm versions of the fairy tales, aspects were included which had been dropped in versions by Perrault and Disney. For example, the original tales were more violent, and the characters had greater challenges to overcome.

The woods are a dominant symbol. They are not the traditional pastoral forest, but are threatening, scary and perilous. While they are the place where wishes can be fulfilled, there is a cost and a consequence to every wish and action, even if not immediately obvious to the wisher.

It remains for the characters to discover the effect of their actions on others, a lesson necessary for surviving in the woods. Moreover, the woods are representative of the transition between childhood and maturity. Like adolescence, they are scary and filled with angst, emerging sexuality, self-discovery and even death.

Also incorporated into the script and the lyrics were elements of Bruno Bettelheim's THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT (1976), a psychological analysis of fairy tales and their meanings.

Sources include NO ONE IS ALONE by Don Whittaker and Missy Wigley

Bruno Bettelheim (1903 –1990) was an Austrian-born American child psychologist who gained an international reputation for his work on Freud, psychoanalysis, and emotionally disturbed children. He analyzed classic fairy tales and exposed the "true" lessons they teach children. Bettelheim delves into the Freudian definition of the id, ego and superego and asserts that "the child's unconscious processes can become clarified for him only through images which speak directly to his unconscious. The images evoked by fairy tales do this."

According to Bettelheim, HANSEL AND GRETEL, for example, helps a child get over separation anxiety when he or she comes of age and needs to discover autonomy. It also teaches not to be overcome by greed (eat bread and not sweets). SNOW WHITE is about a teenage girl who breaks away from her evil stepmother and is rescued by males, teaching the natural order of transferring attachment.

Other authorities have disputed aspects of his interpretation. Harvard professor Maria Tatar challenges Bettelheim's overly Freudian analysis of fairy tales in her book OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!: FAIRY TALES AND THE CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD. She calls his analysis "radically unjust, misleading and inaccurate...there remains something empowering and psychologically insightful in these stories that demonstrate the triumph of the small and weak over the tall and powerful."

After his suicide, Bettelheim and many of his ideas were discredited, but his book, THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT, remains one of the most quoted resources on the theory of fairy tales.

Sources include Portfolio NYU. http://journalism.nyu.edu/publishing/archives/portfolio/books/book411.html; By Carrie Hughes. From http://www.mccarter.org/
James Elliot Lapine (above) was born on January 10, 1949, in Mansfield, Ohio. When Lapine was in his early teens, his family moved to Stamford, Connecticut. He attended public schools then attended Franklin and Marshall College as a history major. Photography and graphic design captured Lapine’s imagination, and he soon moved to Valencia, California, to pursue an MFA in design at the California Institute of the Arts.

After completing his education, Lapine moved to New York City, where he held several jobs, including waiter, NBC tour guide, graphic artist and architectural preservationist. He also did freelance design work on the magazine for the Yale School of Drama.

Lapine's work impressed the school's dean, Robert Brustein, who asked him not only to design all of the school's printed material but also to join the faculty as a design teacher. In a curious melding of expertise and environment, Lapine directed a Gertrude Stein play called PHOTOGRAPH in 1977, and it was there that the seed was planted for his future. The production was innovative for its use of projections and moved to an Off-Broadway house in New York City, and earned Lapine an Obie, his first of many theater awards.

Lapine’s introduction in 1982 to composer Stephen Sondheim led him to revisit the haunting image of Georges Seurat's A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte that he had used in PHOTOGRAPH. The resulting SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE became a groundbreaking musical that won two Tony Awards and a Pulitzer Prize. New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley said of the show: “You really did believe that it was a melding of the artistic minds of Seurat, Mr. Sondheim, [and] Mr. Lapine that summoned this vision into being.”

Lapine wrote the book, with Finn composing the music for A NEW BRAIN, which premiered Off-Broadway in 1998. Lapine directed the Tony Award winning THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE (2005) with music and lyrics by Mr. Finn. The team most recently wrote a musical based on the film LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE (2011).

Lapine has written a number of plays including TABLE SETTINGS produced in 1979 at Playwrights Horizons; TWELVE DREAMS, produced in 1978 at the Public Theater; THE MOMENT WHEN, produced in 2000 at Playwrights Horizons and FRANS BED, produced in 2003 at the Long Wharf Theatre. Lapine has also directed numerous productions including DIRTY BLONDE, THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK and a recent revival of ANNIE.

Lapine has also written and/or directed other films, including EARTHLY POSSESSIONS starring Susan Sarandon, and the recent HBO documentary produced with former theater critic Frank Rich, SIX BY SONDHEIM, which features the details of the composer’s life as told through six songs.

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Lapine is married to American screenwriter Sarah Kernochian. Their daughter is food writer Phoebe Lapine.