A Supposed Happily Ever After: A Shrek and Into the Woods Analysis

As new musicals are created, playwrights often refer back to existing productions to draw inspiration and plots— a common phrase in the theatrical world known as “history repeats itself.”

In Sondheim's *Into the Woods* and Lindsay-Abaire’s *Shrek The Musical*, there are multiple similarities between the two shows. Though vastly different in execution, these productions are alike in plot content, humoristic style, and character development.

Foremost, the most prominent correlation between the two shows is the plot. In both musicals, unlikely heroes go on a quest ordered by a hierarchy (for their benefit) and unknowingly break a spell. A singular example in *Into the Woods* is the Baker and the Baker’s wife going into the woods to find items in hopes of having a child. The Witch casts them out (to help her also gain her youth), and, in a triumph, they complete the task. Similarly, in *Shrek the Musical*, when Shrek and Donkey are sent to rescue a princess by Lord Farquaad, it is the higher power who ends up unsuccessful.

Despite the contrast, the humor in each show is captivating. The writing “is extremely tight. [Meaning] that most scenes accomplish several functions simultaneously: moving the story
forward, drawing us into the characters, making us laugh or sad or both simultaneously, setting up elements which will be revisited later on, and always entertaining us with highly original lines and scenes” (Freeman). This intentionally helps the audience gain more interest in the show.

Furthermore, the fairy tale creatures in each show are tainted with adult humor, adding to audience’s interest. In *Shrek the Musical*, the Wolf is a drag queen, the Blind Mice are exquisite tap dancers, and Shrek’s parents are ironically terrible with their “Big Bright Beautiful World” advice (“Watch out for men with pitchforks!”). In *Into the Woods*, the Wolf has a hint of pedophilia to him (as he is literally a predator), characters have their eyes pecked out, and the Baker's wife commits adultery and is later stomped to death. This creates an ironic and mocking twist for the audience, invoking a captivating reaction for each show.

Continually, the point of the each story is that there are always new problems after the supposed “Happily Ever After.” The theme of each “unite these disparate stories concerning the difficulties of achieving maturity, the complex relationship between parent and child, and ultimately the necessity of recognizing human interdependence. [They] weave a magical fabric of witches, giants, and spells but never allow the audience to forgive the serious thematic underpinnings of the work” (Gordon 301-2). In both shows, Act One is the journey- finding the items for the witch, selling the cow, finding the princess(es), characters wanting to gain back their homes. In Act Two, however, the show starts to crumble. In *Into the Woods*, everything is dandy at the end of Act One (the baker family has their child, Cinderella and Rapunzel have their
men, the Witch is youthful), but they are trampled by the giants making their reappearance. In *Shrek the Musical*, Act One is similar- the hero completes the quest and is ready to continue with his life, when the spell dilemma occurs with Fiona. Each Act One leaves the audience on a cliffhanger, making them curious to where Act Two will go with its plot.

Equally important, both playwrights use well known fairytale creatures and “turn them onto their head” to make them more realistic and relatable to society. This is what makes each show unique; the use of childhood stories in adult themes creates a more interesting response from the audience. For example, In *Into the Woods*, the Princes complain later about their true loves:

*Such that Princes must weep!*

*Always in thrall most*

*To anything almost,*

*Or something asleep.*

*Agony!*

*Misery!*

*Not to know what you miss.*

*While they lie there for years-*

*And you cry on their biers-*

*What unbearable bliss!*

*Agony*

*That can cut like a knife!*

*Ah, well, back to my wife…* (Sondheim)
This shows how the alleged “perfect couple” also struggles with potential relationship problems. It is a paradox to the idea of the beloved happily ever after fairy tales strive to teach.

Contrastly, in *Shrek the Musical*, the idea of the perfect couple is non existent from the start. It is centered around the idea of the perfect “non perfect” couple; Shrek and Fiona are ogres who are apparently incapable of love. Both “believe that no one could love them. This fear is so great in both of them, that it drives many of their actions. Giving a character a powerful fear, a shame, or an emotional problem that adults can relate to will also help draw an adult audience -- as will that character's arc (his or her path of emotional growth) as circumstances in the plot force them to wrestle with this issue” (Freeman). This differs from *Into the Woods’* idea of relationships of the prince and princess being the only couple ending up together.

Additionally, the women in each of the musicals exhibit strong amounts of independence, especially when compared to their male counterparts. For example, in *Into the Woods*, both Cinderella and the Baker’s wife are known for making their own decisions. The Baker’s wife joins her husband in the woods, against his heavy protests, wanting to help find the ingredients. Cinderella, although limited by her family, makes her own decision to live with her Prince. Toward the end of Act One, she tells him to leave her after being unfaithful. Likewise, in *Shrek the Musical*, Fiona makes her own decision with men as well. After unsuccessfully explaining her curse to Shrek, she decides to marry Farquaad before sunset. Although her decision was made out of spite, it was still her own independent choice (she later commits to Shrek instead of
royalty, which ends in a happily ever after). This further proves that although the execution between the shows can be distinctly different, the actions each character effectuates in comparison to their partners drives the plot.

The value of both *Into the Woods* and *Shrek the Musical* increases with every performance because of their unique twist on beloved stories and social commentary on adulthood as a whole. They both hold an important position in Broadway history with their individual scripts, one of a kind actors, and commentary on the validity of fairytale stories.
Works Cited


*Shrek the Musical*. Based on the motion picture by DreamWorks Animation, directed by Jason Moore, performances by Sutton Foster and Brian d'Arcy James, DreamWorks Theatricals and Neal Street Productions, 4 Dec. 2008m Broadway Theatre, New York.