

## **Abstract**

Using drag performance as a tool to recuperate the meaning of queer subtext and readings, this article explores thematic intersections between staging coded queerness and the offstage queer practice of cruising in James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim's 1987 musical *Into the Woods*. Though the temporal correlation of the musical's 1987 Broadway production and the AIDS crisis raises the stakes of comparisons between cruising practices and the setting of the musical, this article does not aim to argue a subjectification of *Into the Woods* as AIDS parable; rather it asserts the necessity of performances that deliberately queer the canon.

Keywords: Sondheim, drag performance, HIV/AIDS, sexual transgression, queer studies, queer nightlife, *Into the Woods*

## **'Moments in the Woods': Gay cruising, *Into the Woods* and AIDS**

I started incorporating 'Moments in the Woods' into my drag act in 2019. While cohosting a weekly comedy variety hour in the East Village bar Bedlam, I became more curious about my personal connection to the queer themes and readings of my favourite show tunes, exploring the ways I, as a queer person, could relate to the musicals I grew up loving. *Into the Woods* was an obvious choice, as it premiered on Broadway during the height of the AIDS crisis. That year, 1987, also saw the release of the breakthrough AIDS drug AZT, the founding of ACT UP and a known death toll nearing 50,000 in the United States (Foundation for AIDS Research Website 2019). Undoubtedly, the tragic loss and shockingly cruel lack of action from the government coloured the creation, performance

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and reception of musicals at the time – especially given the link between queerness and the Broadway musical.

While I knew the creators of *Into the Woods* were reluctant to confirm any allegorical connection in the piece, I continued to explore what I felt to be an unconscious reaction to an immense tragedy. As I rehearsed to the karaoke track I had reluctantly used in lieu of the preferred full orchestra, 'Moments in the Woods' started feeling like a very different song. My drag persona, Ms Golden Delicious, has a habit of teaching me lessons, and I have come to accept these varied revelations with open arms. In particular, 'the woods' took on new meaning for me after I moved to uptown Manhattan, near Fort Tryon Park, a notorious wooded cruising spot.

Ms Golden Delicious is primarily known as a lip-sync performer from the Lypsinka school of chopping up and pasting together audio ripped from favourite pop culture moments. Despite my training as a singer-first musical theatre performer, singing did not always feel natural in drag, but something made 'Moments in the Woods' accessible in my voice. I was struck by the way the Baker's Wife questions heteronormative, monogamous relationships and by the feeling that my practice of 'dragging Sondheim' could subvert the work – not because I would alter its text into parody, but simply through a performance of radical selfness. At Bedlam, I performed the number with the lyrics unchanged, asking my (admittedly intimate and very queer) audience to consider their personal experiences with cruising in New York's parks. I invited them to wonder about the connection to AIDS, and about the way *Into the Woods* asks how members of a community might react when their spaces are no longer safe.

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In *Into the Woods* and queer culture alike, the woods represent a utopian ideal that is neither present nor tangible. Cruising – or the queer practice of looking for sex in public using discreet communication tactics – is a reaction to the violent stigmatization experienced by queer people throughout US history. Legal restrictions and social stigma meant gay men were forced by circumstance to assimilate into straight society, and only being able to indulge their taboo sexual desires in the shadows (Chauncey 1994: 172–73). When HIV/AIDS hit urban areas, indoor locations like bathhouses and public restrooms shut down or were suddenly policed so heavily that they were no longer safe for cruisers. Of course, policing did not end cruising altogether, and contemporary accounts of the time period should be considered incomplete given 'the assault on gay memory following AIDS' (Castiglia and Reed 2011: 2). Today, wooded outdoor locations are often the only physical remnant of a cruising culture that has moved increasingly into digital spaces, where effects of the ongoing HIV/AIDS pandemic remain a part of engaging in queer sex.

The following reading of 'Any Moment/Moments in the Woods' emerged from my provocations at Bedlam, recontextualized through the lens of musical theatre studies and queer theory. Several scholars provide the frameworks and insights that make this possible. Stacy Wolf, for example, analyses female duets in integrated musicals to investigate the way song-and-dance numbers employ queer strategies as they 'reside in audience doubling, in a simultaneous attraction to a person and a resistance to normalizing personhood' (Wolf 2006: 357). While the duet between Cinderella and the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods* does not fully accomplish this, the latter character's

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resistance is delayed until her Act II solo, 'Moments in the Woods'. José Esteban Muñoz's vision of queerness in *Cruising Utopia* (2009) and his analysis of queer-of-colour performance in *Disidentifications* (1999) allow me to see queerness as an 'ideality' in process and to examine my queered performance of canonical text alongside a lineage forged by queers of colour as a way of reacting to the politicization and violence leveraged against their identities (Muñoz 2009: 1). Bruce Kirle's provocations on Broadway musicals as unfinished works illuminate a deeper understanding of the interpretive potential of musicals after they enter the canon, which should be celebrated for the way it embraces enigmatic sensibilities, leaving the musical open for queering (Kirle 2005).

Reading a queer 'moments' and imagining sexual Utopia in 'the woods'

In Act II of *Into the Woods*, the Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince find themselves enthralled in a lustful encounter in the woods. In the original production, televised for *American Playhouse*, Lapine uses his position as director/author to highlight comedic elements of the encounter between the two adulterers (Lapine 1991). But it is not pure schtick; their initially polite interactions crescendo into deep extramarital lust that is coloured by the pleasure of its forbidden nature. The Prince literally sweeps the Baker's Wife off her feet and carries her offstage as their physical connection reaches a 'forte' far too loud for a fairytale musical. The action only briefly shifts to their spouses before the transgressing couple rolls back onstage, 'verklemt' in a distinctly brief post-coital bliss. Of course, the always-talking Prince waxes philosophical about how their lust is beautiful in its brevity, thereby deftly navigating both his desire to be liked and his post-climax

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instinct to leave the Baker's Wife behind. Their encounter is at once passionate, fleeting and of grave consequence. Just before he leaves, the Prince labels their time together a 'moment' – an event of importance (Lapine 1991).

Diving into soliloquy, 'Moments in the Woods' allows the Baker's Wife to process her act of betrayal in real time, while her husband is lost elsewhere in the woods with their newborn child. She seems intoxicated by the utopian possibilities of sexual liberation and wonders if it might be worth it to give up her stable, boring life with the Baker to pursue a life of debauchery in the woods or to lead a double life behind the Baker's back. She boldly wonders about the Prince: 'Is that all?/Does he miss me?/Was he suddenly/getting bored with me?' This is immediately followed by a stern self-rebuttal: 'Wake up! Stop dreaming./Stop prancing about the woods./It's not befitting'. Nevertheless, the allure of the experience lingers: 'What is it about the woods?' (Lapine and Sondheim 1989: 111). Despite her attempt to justify a compromise ('Have a child for warmth/And a baker for bread/And a prince for whatever – /Never!/ It's these woods'), the Baker's Wife, like many before her, must cope with the reality that society is not kind to sexually liberated women and that maintaining a secret sexual relationship behind her husband's back is not a reasonable means to a stable, enjoyable life. 'But if life were made of moments, then you'd never know you had one. [...] That's what woods are for, for those moments in the woods' (Lapine and Sondheim 1989: 112).

The Baker's Wife chooses to let her moment with the Prince affirm her sense of self, allowing her to remember the enjoyable aspects of her socially acceptable life with the Baker. On the surface, the 'moment' to the Baker's Wife is a simple act of infidelity.

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But more broadly, it is a sexual transgression against a monogamist ideal that she seems to find both restrictive and unavoidable given her place in society. (In fact, the Prince makes sure to remind her she is a peasant during their encounter.)

The Baker's Wife treats her own transgression with dignity, an act of self-love that can be read as solidarity with queer audiences who relate to her position of grappling with sexuality and self-perception. She never flirts with shame and instead embraces the experience as a formative moment of self-actualization. More broadly, the women in *Into the Woods* are instrumental in Sondheim and Lapine's imagination of a utopian sexuality: the two men write women (Cinderella, the Witch, the Baker's Wife) who know what they want and seek it out despite the ineptitude or indifference of their male partners. In Act II, it is the women who remain unsatisfied by their heterosexual lifestyles and who lead the charge to re-enter utopia – the woods – to find what they are missing.

Queer readings resisting assimilation

Readings of *Into the Woods* through the historical lens of the AIDS crisis are referenced, but not commonly analysed by critics and scholars of musical theatre.<sup>1</sup> The temporal correlation between the two events is obvious, and the themes of *Into the Woods* clearly reflect the melancholy and loss of innocence experienced by those with front-row tickets to the horrors of AIDS. Stories of songs from the show being performed at AIDS funerals, as well as lore about the visceral emotional reactions by gay audience members during the run of the original production are common, as BroadwayWorld user FindingNamo recalls:

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In 1987 it was not unreasonable to sit in the audience at the Martin Beck as the epicenter of the raging AIDS epidemic was right outside the walls of that theater and think that the show was a metaphorical representation of it. The creators said no, but it sure felt otherwise.

(FindingNameo 2009: 1)

While this post shows an example of the queer readings that happened live at the Martin Beck in 1987, the idea that *Into the Woods* is a direct representation of the AIDS crisis fails to address the nuance that my argument seeks. There is a paradox in reading, critiquing and staging the work of contemporary writers: one can claim the work as queer and discuss its impact, but opportunities to subvert the text of a well-known commercial property are risky and difficult to justify dramaturgically. This was certainly the case with Sondheim's decades-long denial of interpretations that the protagonist of *Company* was queer, a 'collaborative antagonism' from an audience, which largely and loudly proclaimed their belief in the queer subtext of that musical (Pribyl 2019: 180). Queer performance practices allow us to drag this point of view in front of an audience, as queers are expected to subvert and creative re-evaluation is a common practice in nightlife and cabaret performance.

Queer theorists must account for a phenomenon of strategic 'unremembering' the trauma of AIDS, a term used by Castiglia and Reed to explore the reasons why many late-twentieth-century queer minds resisted creating or consuming work surrounding the crisis (Castiglia and Reed 2011: 145–74). However, through the logic of trauma they employ, we can look back to the way *Into the Woods* was revived by its gay

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contemporaries, excavating the ghosts of AIDS through performance. I am not interested claiming any reading of *Into the Woods* as untrue or incomplete without being 'revealed' as an AIDS parable; rather, I am hoping to consider the value and meaning the piece holds for those willing to consider this specific historical and thematic context. Certainly, we can assume that if *Into the Woods* was marketed as or declared an AIDS parable by its authors, its reception by less-progressive audiences, critics and producers would have been different. Important to the legacy of *Into the Woods* is that it, like the fairy tales it takes as its source material, is accessible to young people while remaining open to interpretation. Dragging or queering musical theatre numbers allows today's queer artists to resist assimilation and exercise a privilege not afforded to previous generations.

### Dragging Sondheim

Reading Sondheim's coded queer work allows artists to show a regard for his canon as both artistically meritorious and inherently queer. Queered performances often rely on tropes like innuendo or in-jokes, but they are not gimmicks. Instead, they are queer recuperations of meaning in canonical texts that largely ignore queer stories. Thus, drag performers become storytellers, culture makers and educators. Surely, the queer readings of *Into the Woods* that linger survived the AIDS crisis because of those queers bold enough to publish, perform or pass them down orally at local gay clubs.

A queer 'Moments' positions the Baker's Wife as one of many female singers performing solidarity with the queer community in a space of erotic transgression and radical selfness. I became especially aware of these similarities when, one night after our *Bedlam* show, we were informed that the act after ours would be 'Bette, Bathhouse and



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Beyond', the cabaret artist and queer nightlife fixture Amber Martin's tribute to Bette Midler's late-1970s performances at the Continental Baths in Manhattan. Midler, who by 1987 had become an international film star, developed her diva alter ego, the Divine Miss M, in collaboration with the gay community at the baths while she performed allyship and her unique vision of sexual liberation.

In preparation for Amber Martin's tribute, I removed my makeup, wig and costume and donned the customary white towel, per the dress code. The kinship I felt that night came from two angles: one as a queer spectator enjoying the way Martin embodied Bette while maintaining her own signature quirks, and one as a fellow performer: I could see, in real time, the way radical self-actualization builds character, meaning and community from the audience-performer relationship in queer performance spaces. Martin's Midler drag was as honest and over-the-top as any queen I had seen in my years in New York nightlife.

Of course, the Baker's Wife does not get a happy ending after her 'Moment' is up. She is not given the opportunity to bask in her enlightened bliss for long. She exits the stage, heading 'back to child/back to husband', but is met by the Giant before she can find them (Lapine and Sondheim 1989: 112). Like the victims of AIDS, the Baker's Wife suffers a disproportionate consequence for her human expression of desire. Her life is cut short as a consequence of spending too much time entertaining utopian possibilities in the woods, a punishment for her transgression by forces beyond her control. Lapine spares his book of any gory descriptions of her death; Jack merely informs the Baker that his wife was found underneath a tree. The Witch impatiently interrupts the mourning process

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with the line of Sondheim and Lapine's libretto perhaps most haunted by the ghosts of AIDS: 'Wake up! People are dying all around you. You're not the only one to suffer a loss. When you're dead, you're dead' (Lapine and Sondheim 1989: 114). The Witch may be a pessimist, but the Baker is not. He is determined to keep the story of his family alive – not by continuing the journey alone, but by embodying his late wife's essence and the knowledge they generated together, to 'be father and mother' (Lapine and Sondheim 1989: 135). But the Witch, the Giant and the Baker's Wife's death in the woods are all part of the lineage that will live on in the story the Baker tells his child – he devises an oral history of the chosen family that helped both father and son out of the woods.

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## Note

1. The impact of the AIDS crisis on *Into the Woods* was frequently (and always briefly) mentioned in reviews of the 2014 Disney film adaptation (Edelstein 2014; Schulman 2014). Similarly, brief mentions also appear in scholarly work (Brown 2006: 82).

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