DOES INTO THE WOODS PUNISH A WIFE FOR ADULTERY AND NOT A HUSBAND?

If you haven’t seen Into the Woods, stop right here and go see it. Or keep reading and prepare to have a few things spoiled.

In Into the Woods, Cinderella realizes she doesn’t want to be saved by the prince. The baker learns to value his wife as a helpmeet. Little Red Riding Hood goes into the woods alone. The witch and Jack’s mom are both single mothers. Hurrah for 1980s feminism, right? So it surprised me that after her one-night-stand with Prince Charming, the baker’s wife is promptly killed off while the adulterous prince — who at this point is married to Cinderella — rides away carefree.

If I am a princess, this is my pea. Because otherwise, I loved the show and the film.

So, at a recent screening of Into the Woods, I asked James Lapine, the show’s book writer and the film’s screenwriter, why he killed off the baker’s wife in Act 2. I wondered if Lapine’s motivation was plot-driven, moralistic or something else entirely. He responded that it was realism. He wanted someone to die just because, because that’s what happens in life. As the show’s lyric goes, “Sometimes people leave you halfway through the woods.”

As a motivation, his reasoning is excellent. What makes Into the Woods so brilliant is that Lapine and songwriter Stephen Sondheim took fairy tales past the “happily ever after” and instead of just dealing with the little lessons — don’t lie, don’t steal, don’t stray — dealt with greater questions of life, including the ethics of killing in self defense, the importance of what you teach children, that a family is what you make it and whether it takes a village.

At the same time, there are many characters in Into the Woods, and it’s hard to ignore the fact that the person who dies just because happens to be the married woman who just had an affair. Moreover, she doesn’t die through a misunderstanding, or by falling off a cliff. She dies right after her tryst with the prince, when a giant from the sky stomps her out. It does seem like it’s begging to be a moralistic plot point.

Lapine said my inquiring wasn’t the first time he’s been asked the question — and that it’s always women who interpret the show that way. That isn’t surprising. I can’t say whether men would feel the same way if it were a man that got trampled after committing adultery. Although, if an adulterous man getting trampled by a giant were a plot point in a show written by a woman, I’d imagine someone would ask about it. “How come women only write this man-hating feminist shlock?!”

I wonder if a woman would’ve written the baker’s wife getting trampled after her tryst with Prince Charming. Especially with the characterization Lapine gives her. She’s so sympathetic. She’s just a peasant. And the prince is flattering her, kissing
her, seducing her. Let's be honest, even if you don't want to marry a prince (or princess), you'd probably enjoy being able to say you got with one once. If they had the concept of a "celebrity free pass" once upon a time, I'm sure Prince Charming would've been on many a list.

One of Lapine and Sondheim's great successes is making us understand the baker's wife and where she's coming from when she gives in to temptation. She's doing something we would all agree is wrong, but we feel for her. And while she cheated, it's not that she doesn't care about her husband or child. But she found herself with a chance to experience a life she never thought she would... and she took it. Is that so wrong? It's a question she struggles with:

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!
It's these woods.

Her "Never!" pulls her back to reality and propriety. She continues singing and comes to a realization:

Just remembering you've had an "and"
When you're back to "or"
Makes the "or" mean more
Than it did before.
Now I understand —
And it's time to leave the woods.
In straying, the baker's wife learned a lesson. And so, one might ask — as about a child who repents after breaking something — does she need to be punished? Perhaps not. And perhaps we give Lapine and Sondheim the benefit of the doubt here. If she doesn't need to be punished, perhaps she really is killed off just because.

Though I can't help wondering if Lapine instinctively chose the baker's wife to die precisely because she's learned her lesson. Her story is over. Prince Charming can't die. He still has plenty to learn. Cinderella can't die. She has to learn to live between extremes. Red Riding Hood can't die. She has to wrestle with the ethics of revenge. Jack can't die. He needs to learn not to be so selfish and short-sighted.

So who can die? Jack's mother can die... for standing up for the son that she earlier dismissed as dumb and worthless. The witch can die... after learning she'd rather
have power over beauty, and that being right isn’t enough. And the baker’s wife, too, having learned from her mistakes, can die. And they all do.

After all, is living really a reward?

In fairy tales it is. Evil is punished and good wins out. But Into the Woods isn’t really a fairy tale. It starts out with several fairy tales we know but also includes the “real world” tale of the baker and his wife. At a recent Into the Woods reunion at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Orange County, Sondheim and Lapine revealed that the baker and his wife, living in this seedy "woods," are actually supposed to be a sheltered couple living in the Bronx. (The show opened on Broadway in 1987, before the Giuliani-era drop in crime).

Since their story is told alongside fairytales, it makes sense that audiences would assume that the baker and his wife are also part of that moralizing and pedagogic genre and interpret the death of the baker’s wife as imparting a lesson. But it seems that ultimately, Lapine and Sondheim are bringing characters out of the woods and allowing them to live — not happily ever after, but just live life. And in life, the baker’s wife dies “just because.” Interestingly, it is only because of her random death that the baker begins his journey of learning what he needs to learn: that he can be a father to his child. Fairy tales end with “The End,” but in real life, where one story ends, another one begins.

And in Into the Woods, it’s the real-life of it all that’s so powerful. Whoever you are, whatever your age, wherever you live, whatever you’re going through, there’s a storyline you can relate to. And while the show doesn’t give you all the answers, it lets you know that in struggling with life’s questions — as Lapine informed me when I asked my question — "you are not alone, no one is alone."


I know this article is from LA Weekly, but I found it interesting and informative. One of my main questions focused on the length and necessity of the second act this help give me some understanding it’s purpose. It’s not just about “what happens after happily ever after”, it’s about the real lessons in life. Fairytales teach fundamental life lessons, but they don’t touch heavy issues this play’s second act deals with such theme. The focus in this article was the death of the Baker’s wife, the writer questioned if she died because she cheated, though the real answer isn’t that straightforward. The second act is about real life and how no matter how much you believe your living in a fairytale life and its troubles always come back.