

We're in the last week of our 7-week sermon series on theological and spiritual themes in some Broadway musicals. Today I want to talk about two plays that deal with some pretty dark themes, *Into the Woods* and *Rent*.

If you haven't seen *Rent*, I have to say up front that this musical is not for children—it is definitely for mature audiences. And it can be raunchy at times. So if you're easily offended, don't see it.

Having said that, *Rent* is nonetheless a powerful musical.

If you're not familiar with it, *Rent* is a 1996 rock remake of Puccini's 1896 opera, *La bohème*. *La bohème* centers on a group of young starving artists living a bohemian lifestyle in 1830's Paris in the midst of deadly tuberculosis epidemics. *Rent* changes the setting to New York in 1989 at the height of the AIDS epidemic. And the characters are lifted right from Puccini's opera:

Mimi is still named Mimi, Rodolfo becomes Rodger, Colline becomes Collins, Marcello becomes Mark, Musetta becomes Maureen, and so on.

In *La bohème*, Mimi comes to Rodolfo toward the beginning of the opera because she has no matches to light her candle. In *Rent*, Mimi comes to Rodger in the beginning of the musical because she has no matches to light her candle. You get the idea.

And there are musical echoes of themes from *La bohème* that carry over into the music of *Rent*. If you want more information on that, ask Dr. Hollins—he's our opera expert.

*Rent* centers on a group of 7 friends, most of whom are artists of various kinds. And 4 of these 7 have contracted AIDS. And that puts a strain on their interactions with each other. For many of them the clock is ticking. They're staring their mortality squarely in the face.

The big hit song from the musical is "Seasons of Love." The song is about measuring the passage of time:

*Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure -- measure a year?*

*In daylights -- In sunsets  
In midnights -- In cups of coffee  
In inches -- In miles  
In laughter -- In strife*

*In -- Five hundred twenty-five thousand six hundred minutes  
How do you measure a year in the life?*

But then they answer the question:  
*How about love?  
Measure in love...*

*Remember the love*

It's a powerful theme. What's most important in life? What's especially most important when impending death means that time is short? The answer is love. Relationships with others.

The theme is classic *carpe diem*, seize the day. Love one another while you can.

In the finale, the cast sings,  
*There's only us*  
*There's only this*  
*Forget regret or life is yours to miss*

*There's only now*  
*There's only here*  
*Give in to love*  
*Or live in fear*  
*No other path*  
*No other way*  
*No day but today*

This message of *carpe diem* gained special poignancy the morning *Rent* was going to open. Its composer and writer, Jonathan Larson, dropped dead unexpectedly at age 35 from an undiscovered congenital heart defect. He was still living in poor conditions much like his characters, but had he lived, he would have had great financial success, since *Rent* would run for 13 years. Larson posthumously won the Pulitzer Prize and 3 Tony Awards.

*Rent* was enormously popular. And I'm sure that part of the reason is that its basic message resonated with people.

The truth is, we are all mortal. And most of us don't know when the end of our lives will come. It might be years from now, or decades from now. Or it might be today. In a real way we are all walking through the valley of the shadow of death.

The message of *Rent* reminds us to love others while we still have the opportunity to love others. Today. No day but today. God has placed us here for a limited time. We need to make the most of our time, to love and serve God, to love and serve others.

In John's Gospel, the final thing Jesus says in his public ministry is this:

"The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you... While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."<sup>1</sup>

And that theme is also found in the 1989 musical, *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine.

The play centers on a number of fairy tale stories woven together: Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, Rapunzel, Jack and the Beanstalk, Snow White. And the

---

<sup>1</sup> John 12:35-36

musical also adds in new characters: a baker, his wife and eventually their child, along with the witch who lives next door to them.

For various reasons, all of the characters find themselves needing to journey into the woods. The woods are an archetypal place for these characters to go on various quests. The woods here are a place of darkness and even danger, a realm of the unknown. And yet paradoxically, by travelling into the woods, the characters make new discoveries about who they are as people.

In particular, the baker and his wife have gone into the woods separately on a quest to break the witch's curse on their family and to be able to conceive a child. And as they're in the woods, they fall more deeply in love with each other as they find each other blossoming as people.

The first act is rather light and comical. And in the Finale of Act I, the cast sings that they have come

*Into the woods  
Then out of the woods  
And happy ever after.*

And it seems like the play has wrapped up nicely at the end of Act I. But the narrator offers a final line:

"To be continued..."

Which leads to a rather dark second act. It's so dark that when high schools and youth theater companies stage *Into the Woods*, they usually only perform Act I. It's about 60% of the play, and things wrap up nicely with a happy ever after.

But Act II explores what happens after "happy ever after." Because life is not always happy ever after. In fact, life can be quite tough. The characters have to go back into the woods to deal with very difficult issues.

The baker and his wife who worked so hard in Act I to have a child now have one. And yet, their life isn't perfect. In fact, the baker's wife will sleep with a prince. Later she will be crushed by a giant. And there are other betrayals. And there are other killings.

And some characters find out that the things they thought they wanted most in Act I really aren't so spiffy after all when you're stuck with them in Act II.

Many of the characters start to blame each other. Many of them had cut moral corners in Act I to get their supposed happy ending. But now they're paying for it in Act II. And there's bitterness. And there's plenty of recrimination that's hurled around.

But eventually the characters learn that they truly need each other. They need to rely upon each other and help each other to get through the darkness and out the other side. But once they have come through, there is still the question of what next? The baker in particular is worried about how he can possibly raise his child alone since his wife has been killed.

But her spirit appears to him and offers words of comfort, life, and hope.  
*Sometimes people leave you  
Halfway through the wood  
Do not let it grieve you  
No one leaves for good  
You are not alone  
No one is alone*

And then she sings to her husband about what he should do for their son. She sings,  
*Hold him to the light now  
Let him see the glow  
Things will be all right now  
Tell him what you know.*

And this is an important extension to the themes of *Rent*. Yes, *carpe diem*, seize the day, make the most of the gift of life while you can.

But there's also the important work of leaving a legacy, making the world a better place for those who come after us. It's not just about us loving others while we're here. It's also about how we can make a loving and lasting impact after we're gone.

As the witch sings at the end,  
*Children will look to you  
For which way to turn  
To learn what to be*

It's a call to live life fully and engage life fully. To go into the woods and confront those things we must confront. But also, when and if we come out on the other side, we have a responsibility to help others, to help future generations.

Life is not always easy. And life on this earth is finite. God calls us to be good stewards of the gift of this life. To use our time to love and serve him. To use our time to love and serve others, including those who will come after us.

And if we live long enough, we will not only face our own mortality. But we will also have to deal with the mortality of those we love.

*Sometimes people leave you  
Halfway through the wood  
Do not let it grieve you  
No one leaves for good*

Yes, we are people who walk in the darkness of the shadow of death.  
But we also follow Jesus, the light of the world.  
Thus we live in the light of his resurrection. And we live in the promise that he gives.

"We believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."

With that hope, and with that assurance, seize the day, and live life to the fullest.