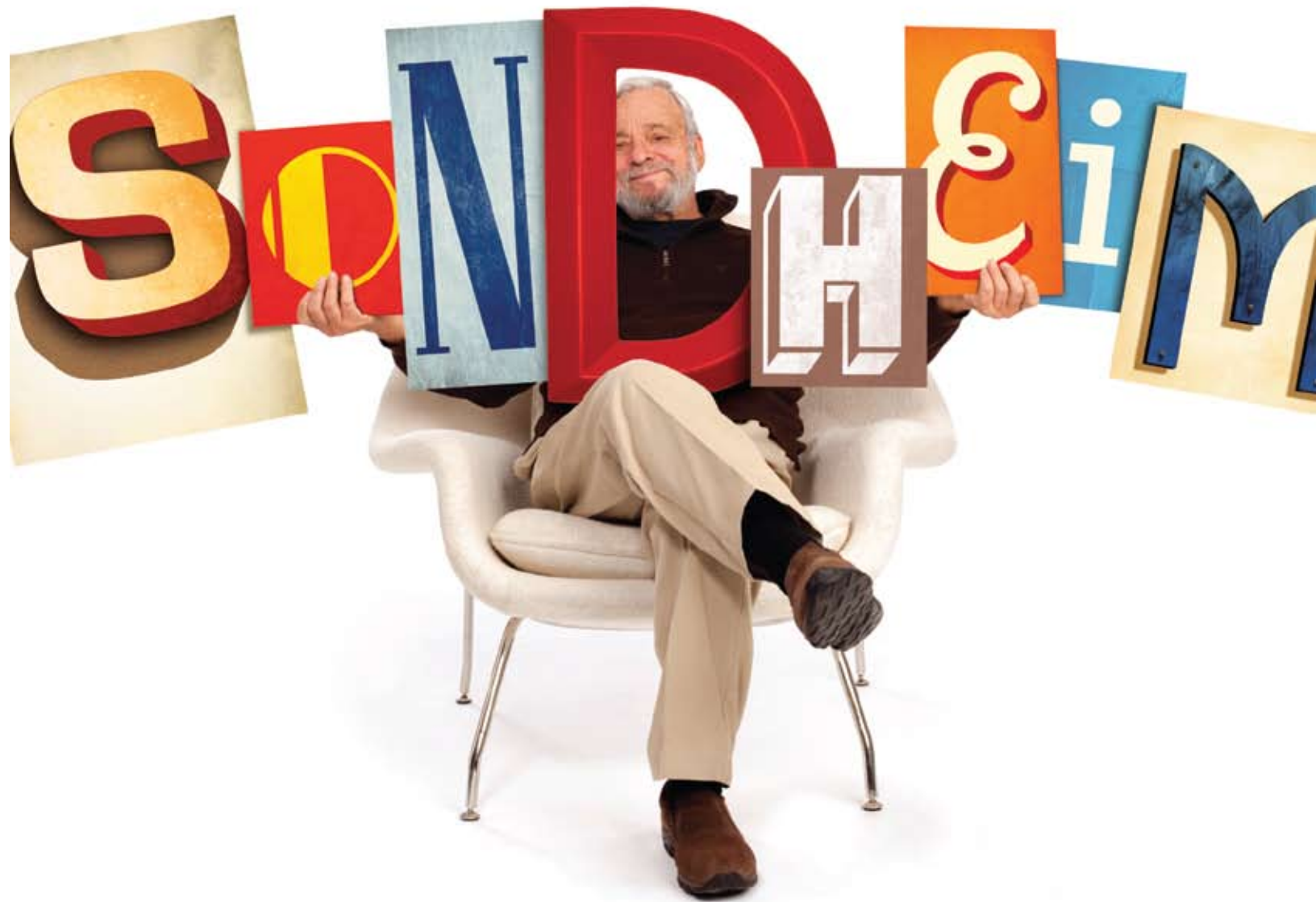


SONDHEIM

on



UPSTAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE EDUCATION DEPARTMENT AT **ROUNABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY**  SPRING 2010



What does music reveal about the human condition?

“He is nothing less than the Shakespeare of our time. He has an uncanny connection to the human condition and can translate that understanding into the simplest form. He is able to turn darkness into light.”

—Mandy Patinkin

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HOW TO MAKE (ANOTHER) SONDHEIM REVUE

In 1983 I attended a revue called *A Sondheim Evening*: eight wonderful singers, a six-piece band and twenty-four Sondheim songs. It was an evening I have never forgotten and one I feel lucky to have seen, as it was only presented for two nights. I was probably the only one in the audience who had not seen the shows from which these songs had been plucked, and though there was the simplest of introductions it didn't matter because each song painted a self-contained picture—a complete expression of character and emotion and story.

I had just met Stephen Sondheim six months prior, having been introduced by a producer to discuss a project I was interested in developing. New to the world of the theater—I had been a photographer and graphic designer and had only just directed my first musical—the only Sondheim show I had seen was *Sweeney Todd*. Though Steve ultimately decided not to pursue the project I had in mind, he did leave the door open to our finding another subject to work on together. Over the next several months, he also began to introduce me to his work by giving me cassette tapes of his various cast albums and then inviting me to this concert of his work, which was sponsored by the Whitney Museum and directed by Paul Lazarus.

In 1997, having since had the thrill of writing three shows with Steve and working on a revival of another, I thought it would be fun to see if I could create a new Sondheim revue. I brought the idea to Todd Haimes at the Roundabout, and he provided me the opportunity of a three-week workshop. With a cast of four, led by the amazing Barbara Cook, we managed to assemble one-act that I half-seriously called *The Existential Sondheim Revue*. The promise of a wonderful new show was there, but another revue called *Putting It Together* was heading to Broadway, and we ended up shelving our project in deference to theirs.

In 2002, another Sondheim revue out of London called *Opening Doors* had a short run at Zankel Hall. (I know, so many Sondheim revues.) Created by David Kernan, *Opening Doors* included a voice over of Steve talking about various topics related to his life in New York. By now it had been over 15 years since Steve and I had worked together on a new show, not that we didn't discuss possible projects on a regular basis. The *Opening Doors* revue came and went, but the idea of not only hearing from Steve on stage, but also actually seeing him struck me a unique and intriguing possibility for a different kind of revue. I have spent countless hours working with Steve and observing first hand his creative process; and we have also spent a great deal of time just schmoozing and hanging out together—there is no one more fun to shoot the breeze with. Wouldn't it be an exciting idea to share a little of that experience with others? When I proposed interviewing Steve on film and creating a show that attempted to let an

audience share his company and gain some insight into his life and working process, he thought about it for a long moment and then replied: “Well, I would have loved to have spent an evening with the Gershwins, or Cole Porter or Harold Arlen.” With his endorsement, I began to build the show that has become *Sondheim on Sondheim*.

First, I spent a considerable amount of time going through the voluminous Sondheim song files familiarizing myself with both the well known and the obscure. Having culled a list of songs (far too many) and hours of archival video and film footage, I began to assemble a structure that would lend the show a narrative arc. Once these puzzle pieces were mapped out, we began putting Steve on camera, having him address the subjects that would connect the linear and emotional dots.

It's been a great joy working on this show—though far more complicated and time-consuming than I ever had imagined. And I owe a great debt to our musical director David Loud, and also Peter Jones, Sondheim's archivist. What I hope we have accomplished is an evening with Sondheim for those who know him and his work well; for those who are simply familiar with his work and know little of the man; and for those now and in the future who know nothing of Sondheim or even the artistic process that's involved in the writing of a musical. If I'm lucky, the thrill I had being introduced to the work of Stephen Sondheim at that 1983 revue will now be shared by others, and not just for two nights. And in some small way, I also hope that I have created an evening of theater that reflects my great appreciation and love for the man and his music.



INTERVIEW WITH THE MUSIC DIRECTOR: DAVID LOUD

What does a musical director and arranger do?

Well, in this case, it was a lot of different jobs. It was consulting with the director, James Lapine, about the musical content of the show. Sondheim has written many shows and many wonderful songs, and if you did a show of the best of Sondheim's music, it would last about 600 hours. So, it was the process of going through the songs and seeing which were best suited to this evening, which is an examination, not only of his work, but of his life and how the songs from his shows reflect interestingly on his life and his philosophy. My job was finding songs that matched the interviews or historical clips. I am also the arranger for this show, which means I am figuring out how to adapt these songs for this context. We have eight singers, and we don't have a chorus. We're doing different takes of some of the songs and very traditional takes of others. It's about figuring out when and how to best adapt the songs to serve this piece. Then, as vocal arranger, my job is to figure out the harmonies people are going to sing when they are singing together and arrange vocally for these eight singers. In rehearsal, I coach the singers, teach them the music, and work with them on how they are going to sing it. I generally work on every musical aspect of the show, including making sure that the orchestrations are going to fit our singers and our arrangements. It's a lot of different hats, and this show is one I've been doing for a long time.

Were you around for the workshop in the '90s?

No, I was not. James brought me on board for what we thought was going to be a production in Atlanta. It was called *iSondheim* at that point. We did readings and workshops that prepared us for that production which actually never happened. It was a wonderful process we went through to arrive where we are now. We wrote down all the songs that we liked, that we wanted to do. Of course, it was too many, but we recorded a lot of them. We had a week of a sort of Sondheim camp. We had great singers, and we recorded them all. Then James sort of edited it down and saw what matched his video choices. He essentially wrote the show from that Camp Sondheim week.

It seems like the interview portion definitely had an impact on what songs went into the show.

And the availability of archival material. We see Sondheim speaking now, and we see him speaking in the '60s and '70s, and you get a sense of his whole life. You can always tell what year it is by his beard.

Were there songs you wanted to advocate for, but just couldn't because of the interviews? Can you give us some examples of what you were not able to include?

There are many, many songs of his that I love that we don't include. There's a song called "Someone in a Tree" from *Pacific Overtures* that Sondheim often lists as one of his favorite songs that he has ever written. It's a fantastic piece, but it is about nine minutes long. So, that would involve cutting three other numbers. There are certain songs of his that didn't end up in the show that are iconic that everybody knows, like "Another Hundred People." That is not in this show, but it has been in every other Sondheim



Conductor Andy Einhorn, musical director David Loud, Vanessa Williams and director James Lapine

revue in existence. I love that song because it is like no other song in the world. There's a brilliant song called "Getting Married Today" from *Company*. Actually what we do in the show is a rough draft of that song, which is called "The Wedding is Off." It's a song that not many people will have ever heard before, but it is a very good song with an interesting lyric. It's an alternate look at that spot in the play.

So there are songs that were cut from Sondheim's shows that made it into this piece?

Yes, we do include some songs that we cut from various shows. For instance, the three songs that were written for the beginning of *Forum*, two of which were cut and one of which is now the opening, are all performed in the show. It gives you a sense of the process Sondheim went through in coming up with what is the perfect opening to *Forum*. He wrote a very serious military sounding piece, and that was cut. Then he wrote a delightful little foxtrot called "Love is in the Air," and that was cut. Then he came up with "Comedy Tonight," which of course tells you exactly what the show is about. Similarly we go through the songs that preceded "Being Alive," the finale of *Company*. There was a song called "Multitudes of Amy" which was cut and replaced with a song called "Happily Ever After," which was a very negative song. He ended up with "Being Alive," which is a very positive song.

How many songs do you anticipate being in this show?

It's between thirty and forty.

Will each performer get to do an equal amount?

They all get to do a lot, but we have three above-the-title stars, and they are carrying the burden most of the night. But all the performers are featured in beautiful ways. Sometimes they are supporting each other, and sometimes there are just solo turns.

Were you involved in the casting process in any way?

Absolutely. We had lots and lots of auditions because we wanted a very varied group of performers. The work of Sondheim isn't generic, and it requires performers who are smart and incisive and who can give you clarity of character while delivering difficult music and complicated lyrics. It is a very sophisticated performer who can do Sondheim's work well. It took a long time to come up with this group because it is a very varied, very interesting, very individual group. Nobody is like anybody else in the show. It is not a uniform look of tall, beautiful chorus girls or anything like that.

It ranges in age too.

Yes. We sort of based the casting of the show on a number that both James and I love called "Waiting for the Girls Upstairs" from *Follies*, where you have four older characters singing at the same time as their younger selves do. So, in a way we cast four people who are at a very mature place in their careers and four people who are at a very young, fresh place.

You talked a little bit about what it takes to perform Sondheim. Is this your first time working on Sondheim?

No. When I was eighteen I was cast in the original company of *Merrily We Roll Along* as an actor. I played the pianist on stage. The whole cast of *Merrily* was sixteen to twenty-six years old, and a lot of us were making our Broadway debuts. Certainly I was. Tonya Pinkins was in it and Jason Alexander was in it. It was a wonderful experience, but it was ultimately a heartbreaking experience because we only ran for two weeks. But at the age of eighteen, to be working with Sondheim, Hal Prince and Paul Gemignani was the most extraordinary learning experience you could ever have in the theatre. We watched them wrestle with a show that clearly wasn't working and come in with ideas to make it better. We did five weeks of previews on that show, with a different show every single night. We rehearsed on our days off, we rehearsed in the afternoons. We put material in the show that night that had been written that morning and orchestrated that afternoon. It was an amazing experience to go through. During that production I was happy to be on stage singing, dancing and playing the piano, but it occurred to me that the person I really wanted to be in the room was Paul Gemignani, because he is a magnificent conductor and was magnificent with us. We were very young and very inexperienced, and he sort of showed us how to interact with a conductor of a Broadway show. The last thing we were thinking about was interacting with the conductor because we were having so much fun, and we were memorizing our lines, and just doing the show. But you have to have a connection with the conductor, and he taught us that. It is something I have

used in my career as a music director, establishing a strong connection between the person leading the orchestra and the cast onstage. After *Merrily*, I turned more towards music direction. I have actually done a couple of other Sondheim shows. I worked on the 1985 revival of *Pacific Overtures* that was off-Broadway. I music directed the Roundabout revival of *Company* in 1995. And I worked on the John Doyle revival of *Sweeney Todd* as a music director. The cast played the instruments, and it was the hardest job I have ever had. Getting actors to play that score was quite a challenge. So, I've been in the Sondheim world since *Merrily*, and even before that Sondheim's music caught my ear like no other music had. What he was writing was so fresh and so challenging and varied. The variety in the scores is amazing. Six or seven of them easily could be written by completely different people. Look at the beautiful waltzes of *A Little Night Music*, the Asian-influenced sound of *Pacific Overtures*, the very modern New York sound to *Company*, the horror movie-set-as-an-opera feeling of *Sweeney Todd*, and the wonderfully open and accessible almost pop score with a heart of *Merrily*. Then there are shows that sound like no other show in the world, like *Sunday in the Park*. Sondheim is an extraordinary chameleon who finds a new language for every show that he creates. He's never copying; he's never saying, "We had a hit doing that." He's always coming up with something new. I have extraordinary respect for him as a composer, and as a lyricist there is no equal. He can be simple, he can be complicated, he can be funny, and he can give you four internal rhymes that you don't even notice. He clearly has been an inspiration to a lot of people who compose now, but one trap that they fall into is trying to sound like him, and his genius is that he never sounds like himself.

Do you get intimidated if Sondheim is in the room with you?

Everybody is a little intimidated, but he is great to have in the room. He is a wonderful coach of his own material. He is very actor-friendly and knows how to talk to actors. Actors love being coached by him because he'll tell you what he was thinking when he wrote a lyric or why he wanted a word longer or stressed. His music is very specifically written, and for singers the best choice is usually to do it exactly as he has written it because a lot of thought has gone into it. He also has a real knack for setting his lyrics in a very conversational way so that it is almost like you are talking, but it is in rhythm and you are singing a melody that is not always the easiest in the world.

When you say you are doing a different take on a song, do you vet it through Sondheim first?

Actually the way we have worked on this project is that we have done readings and presentations, and Sondheim, rather than go through the whole process, will come and see a more finished version and say, "That didn't work" or "That's a great idea. Let's keep that in the show." We have some new ideas in the show that he hasn't seen yet, so we'll see what his reaction is to that.

I remember reading that there were four shows that Hammerstein assigned Sondheim to write. One was, I believe, a musical version of *Mary Poppins*.

We explored a wonderful song from that called “The Moon is Blue,” where Mary is talking to the children and saying, “The moon is blue and I don’t love you.” She means, of course, that the moon isn’t blue and that she loves the children. It is a wonderful little upside down lyric. As I said, the show could be forty hours long.

Is there something from every show in this piece?

Well, we didn’t really construct it with that as the goal. Right now, there isn’t anything from *Pacific Overtures*, but I’ll probably put something in the overture that quotes it.

What about shows like *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, *West Side Story*, and *Gypsy*?

All of them are included. We do two songs that were cut from *Gypsy*, actually, which most people haven’t heard, and one song that was cut from *West Side Story* that most people haven’t heard. So, there are many treasures to be discovered here.

Do you feel any loss in not conducting the show? Do you feel like you have to be symbiotic with the conductor?

I actually feel like I am symbiotic with the conductor. I have a wonderful assistant who conducts from the piano beautifully. I like to conduct big orchestras, and we have a smallish orchestra for this. Also, because my job on this show is arranger as well as music director, I think it is going to be better that I am out in the house making sure that the show is working the way we want it to work. Because the orchestra is behind the cast in this case, instead of in the pit, I think it was the better choice to be the supervisor on this. I have great trust in the gentleman who will be conducting the show; he will be conducting it the way I would be conducting it.

Are there any medleys in the show?

I would say no, although there are times when songs flow into each other. Medleys, to me, don’t necessarily explore what’s individual and unique about a song. If it is just sort of “Here’s some songs he wrote about foreign countries,” that’s less interesting to me than finding a couple of songs that reflect more surprisingly on each other. What we have is more like sequences of songs that are somehow related.

Do you already have a sense of how it is all going to fit together?

It’s very carefully planned out. James has done a great job organizing the video. We have these huge bulletin boards of songs and what order they could be in. We’ve been playing around with that and with assigning the songs to different people to create balance and flow for the performers as well. It’s basically an enormous jigsaw puzzle, and we are just hoping we get all the pieces in the right place.

I wanted to ask you about your education. Did you start by playing piano?

Absolutely. I started as a pianist at six years old. I always played piano, and I started music directing shows in seventh grade. We did Gilbert & Sullivan shows that I

would teach everyone the parts for and force everyone to sing. I had a wonderful teacher named John Rand who wrote musicals for us in 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade. If there was a girl who reminded him of Cleopatra, he would write a little musical about Cleopatra. They were very inspiring and funny. It was a wonderful introduction to how clever musical theatre can be. I used to save up all my money and come to New York, sleep on my grandmother’s couch, see eight shows in a week, and go to Sardi’s at the end of the week. She was a real theatre nut too. So, I saw as much as I could as a kid. Then I went to Yale and majored in music. I didn’t go to graduate school, because at that time graduate schools were not focusing on musical theatre conducting at all. I just went and did summer stock. You learn by doing theatre, and you learn from the people around you.

Usually I would ask, what advice would you give to young people who want to do what you do, but I think you just nailed it.

Well, one thing that I feel that it is very important for people to focus on is to learn the past. Learn the history of musical theatre. Musical theatre didn’t start with *Les Miz*. I’ve done a lot of study and research on old musical theatre. You should know the greats. You should know Kurt Weill, Lerner and Lowe, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Rogers & Hammerstein, and Rogers & Hart. Once you know that, then you can go off on your own. That’s for composers, but also for music directors and pianists as well as actors. Anyone in the theatre should know our history. There are so many programs now that teach musical theatre that were not around when I was going to school. I hope that they focus on the history of musical theatre in addition to preparing people to be in pop shows and rock shows, which is essential now.

Do you ever have a sense of how you want the audience to respond to a show or how they may respond to a show?

My goal is to serve the music and to present the music in an interesting, polished and accessible way. We have many audiences for this show. We have people who have never heard of Sondheim and we have people who know every single lyric and every single note and will be criticizing every choice. I respect that because his work inspires people to be obsessed with it because it is so interesting. You can lose yourself in his scores. I remember that when I saw *Sweeney Todd*, ten minutes in, I just wanted to see it again. And every time I had thirty dollars I went and saw *Sweeney Todd*. Every time you see it, you notice something else or hear a lyric in a new way. You’d see something you’d never seen before in the set. The material is so rich that I understand why people get upset. So that’s one part our audience. As James said the first day, “Stephen Sondheim is eighty and has been around a long time, and people his age will be coming to the show and hopefully young people will be coming to the show.” There are many audiences, and we have to serve them all. I think what, hopefully, they will all come away with is a sense of what it means to be an artist in the musical theatre, and how one’s life ends up being one’s art.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Revolutionizing Musical Theatre

1927: Oscar Hammerstein II and Jerome Kern's *Showboat* opens on Broadway. This marks the first fully realized book musical, in which the songs help carry the plot forward. Up until this point, Broadway shows had mostly taken the form of the revue, in which unrelated songs or skits were strung together to form a show.

1930: Stephen Joshua Sondheim is born in New York City to Janet "Foxy" and Herbert Sondheim.

1942: Sondheim moves to rural Pennsylvania, where he befriends James Hammerstein, Oscar's son; the Hammerstein's soon become a surrogate family for the young man.

1943: Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rogers' first musical *Oklahoma!*, a show about the struggles and loves of American "territory folk" in the 19th century, premieres on Broadway. This is one of the first "integrated musicals" in which dialogue, songs and dance all serve the plot of the show.

1944-60: Rogers & Hammerstein dominate Broadway with *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King & I*, *Flower Drum Song*, the TV musical *Cinderella*, and *The Sound of Music*, cementing the Hammerstein linear book-musical as the norm for the Great White Way.

1957: Sondheim writes lyrics to *West Side Story*, which brings the issues of racism and gang violence to the musical theatre stage. However, that theatrical season is dominated by a singing music teacher, a prissy librarian and a boys marching band as *The Music Man* takes Broadway by storm.

1959: Sondheim writes the lyrics for *Gypsy*, a show that ends with an 11 o'clock number that doubles as a nervous breakdown. The Broadway spotlight, though, is on a singing nun and the Von Trapp family singers, as Rogers & Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* is the hit of the year.

1962: The rare Sondheim show to make money on its investment, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a Roman farce, opens on Broadway. The show's star, Zero Mostel, and most of its creative team are honored with Tony nominations, but Sondheim's contribution is ignored completely.

1969: By this time, the era of hippies, protests and the Summer of Love was almost over, but Broadway was only starting to realize that it was no longer the 1950s. The season was dominated by the opening of the musical *Hair*, which used rock n' roll's musical vocabulary, was populated by hippies and featured an acid-trip as the climax of Act II.

1970: Sondheim and director Hal Prince explore the marriages of middle class Manhattanites in a new musical, *Company*, which takes the Hammerstein formula and twists it in new ways: the songs are no longer integral to moving the plot ahead. Instead, as Sondheim explains, they "are inserted into the show like nuts in a fruit cake." This effort wins Sondheim his first pair of Tony Awards.

1971: Spending a record-breaking \$750,000 to create haunting ghosts of follies girls past, Sondheim creates a non-linear "memory musical," *Follies*, in which aging follies girls and their husbands conjure up younger versions of themselves as they lament the mistakes they have made in their lives. The score is unique, with each song an homage to different composer.

1972: In a season that features Charlie Brown and *Grease*'s Pink Ladies & T-Birds, Sondheim is still clearly working in counterpoint to mainstream Broadway taste when he opens *A Little Night Music*, a bittersweet, romantic operetta set in Sweden that is scored nearly entirely in waltz time. The show produces "Send in the Clowns," the most recorded song in Sondheim's catalogue.

1976: For the US's bicentennial, Sondheim adapts John Weidman's play about Admiral Perry's mission to open Japan to the West into a kabuki musical called *Pacific Overtures*. He uses the Asian pentatonic (5-note) scale and casts Perry as the traditional kabuki villain. The attentions of Broadway, however, are focused on a show biz tale: the crowd-pleaser, *A Chorus Line*, in which Michael Bennet (a former Sondheim collaborator) revitalizes Broadway and builds upon Sondheim's expansion of musical plot structures to create his own brand of non-linear musical.

1979: Twenty years after his Broadway debut, Sondheim steps fully into Broadway's center stage with the bloody masterpiece, *Sweeney Todd*. Once and for all establishing that in his world no subject matter is off limits for a musical, Sondheim transforms a play by Christopher Bond into an epic-scale musical about a serial killer barber and his cheerfully demented downstairs neighbor who takes the bodies and grinds them into meat pies. The show is a hit with the critics and reigns supreme at the Tony Awards.

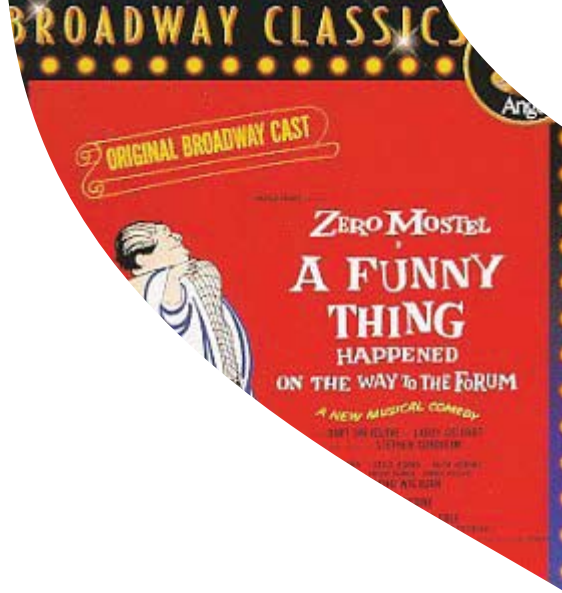
1984: Taking the musical into new territory yet again, Sondheim and new collaborator James Lapine write a musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*, inspired by Georges Seurat's massive, pointillist painting "Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte". The show casts the artist, his mistress, and the figures from the painting as the musical's characters and explores the painstaking process of creating art. *La Cage Aux Folles*, a show about drag queens that is breaking boundaries of its own, is the hit of the season and is heralded as the representative of the good old fashioned musical comedy.

1988: Just as they had done in pop music over twenty-five years earlier, the British now invade Broadway. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* opens on Broadway, and the age of spectacular stage effects is heralded in as the famous chandelier comes crashing to the ground for the first time. At the same time, Sondheim and Lapine bring *Into the Woods*, a dark amalgam of twisted fairy tales, to Broadway, paving the way for a show like *Wicked* to emerge sixteen years later.

1994: Sondheim and Lapine open the tragic romance *Passion* on Broadway. During this season, the Brits import *Joseph and the Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Also, a new player on the Great White Way – Disney – launches its first show, the theatrical version of *Beauty and the Beast*.

2004: After more than a decade, Weidman and Sondheim's *Assassins*, an exploration of the those individuals who attempted to or succeeded in assassinating U.S. presidents, opens on Broadway at Roundabout's Studio 54.

2010: Sondheim turns 80 and celebrates with the Roundabout at the Sondheim 80 Gala on March 22.



“What the audience came to a musical to avoid, they suddenly find facing them on the stage.”

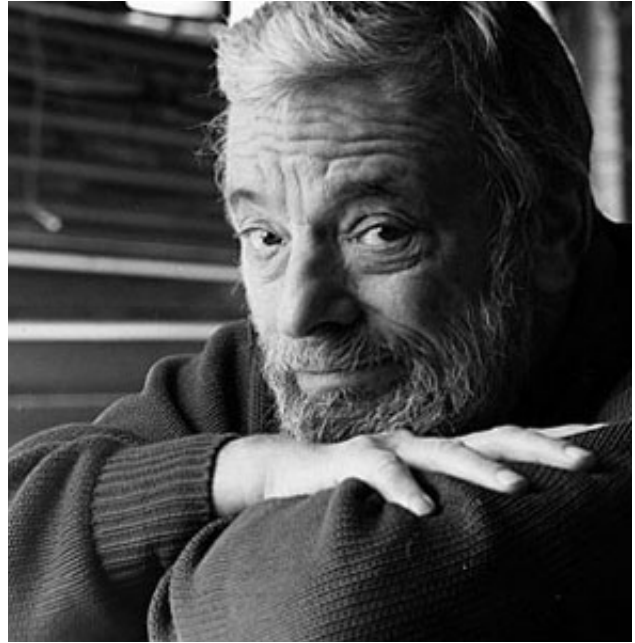
—Stephen Sondheim

Charles
Donna McRae
Charles Braswell
Susan Browning
Steve Elmore
Beth Howland
Pamela Myers
Merle Louise
Elaine Stritch

by
HAROLD
COMPANY
A MUSICAL COMEDY



THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: STEPHEN SONDHEIM



Learning the Art of Making Art: Oscar Hammerstein's Influence on Sondheim

Sondheim's works for the musical theatre were influenced by British operettas, classical music, as well as many of the Broadway composers and lyricists who came before him. Most directly, however, it was lyricist and book-writer Oscar Hammerstein II who had an impact on the young Stephen Sondheim. The teenaged Sondheim's parents had divorced, and his mother Janet moved with her son to rural Pennsylvania, close to the Hammerstein farm. Sondheim became friends with James Hammerstein and grew close to Oscar and Dorothy, who served as surrogate parents for the young man. "I wanted to be whatever Oscar was," Sondheim has said. "I think if Oscar had been a geologist, I would have become one too."

At age fifteen, Sondheim penned a musical spoof for the high school he attended, George School, called *By George!* The budding musical theatre artist thought the show was brilliant and brought the piece to Hammerstein, thinking, Sondheim later said, that he would "be the youngest composer to ever make it onto Broadway." Oscar was less impressed with the piece than Sondheim had hoped, but saw real talent in the writing. He spent the day going through the script with the young artist, showing him every spot, from the first stage direction to the final curtain, where he had stumbled. He then schooled him in the foundations of the book musical, including how songs had to come out of the scene preceding them and how they had to move the plot and take the character from point

A to point B. Sondheim later said, "I learned more about musical theatre in an afternoon with Hammerstein than most people do in a lifetime."

Oscar then laid out an ambitious plan to give the young Sondheim a full education in musical theatre writing: the young man had to write a series of four different musicals. The first show had to be based on a well written play. The second musical was to be adapted from a badly constructed play. The third piece had to be taken from non-musical source material (Sondheim chose to adapt *Mary Poppins*). The fourth musical was to be entirely original.

Sondheim spent over four years on Hammerstein's assigned "curriculum" in musical theatre writing. During that time, Oscar also gave Sondheim his first opportunity to experience a Broadway musical up close and personal: he gave him a summer job as a gofer on the musical *Allegro*. Within a few years of completing the fourth musical on Hammerstein's list, Sondheim, who thought of himself primarily as a composer, was offered the job of writing lyrics for *West Side Story*. Sondheim wanted to turn it down, but Oscar advised him to take the gig, telling him that it would be invaluable to work with Arthur Laurence, Jerry Robbins, and, most of all, composer Leonard Bernstein. The next year Oscar gave Sondheim what proved to be more sage advice when he counseled him to again take a job as a lyricist, this time for *Gypsy*. With two Broadway credits under his belt, Sondheim was then able to go on to do what he really wanted: to write music *and* lyrics for his own Broadway shows.



Jonathan Larson



Duncan Sheik



Stew



Adam Gwon



Jason Robert Brown

Children Will Listen: Broadway Artists Inspired by Sondheim

“STEPHEN SONDHEIM IS THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL THEATRE.” —JOHN LAHR

Sondheim’s innovative shows, written over a span of forty years, have dramatically affected the lyricists and composers of musical theatre that came after him. Sondheim’s expansion of the musical allowed the form to sport deconstructed plot lines, darker subject matter and more ambiguous endings. Perhaps most importantly, however, Sondheim allowed the artists who came after him to feel they could bring *anything* to the musical stage. Composer-lyricist Jason Robert Brown was clearly inspired by Sondheim’s darker work when he created *Parade*, which tells the story of a Jewish man living in the South who is wrongly accused of murdering and raping a young girl who works in his factory; the show ends with a mob lynching the man. Jason Robert Brown later took a cue from Sondheim’s various unconventional plot structures in writing *The Last Five Years*, in which one character goes forward while the other goes backward in time.

Another composer-lyricist, Jonathan Larson, was not only influenced by Sondheim’s work – Sondheim actually served as his mentor. *Rent*, Larson’s one major work before his untimely death, would never have been possible without Sondheim’s legacy. Sondheim had brought a dark, gritty milieu to the musical stage, particularly in *Sweeney Todd*, allowing Larson to later bring a group of impoverished artists living in the grip of the AIDS epidemic on the Lower East Side into a Broadway musical. Also, Larson chose a rock sound for his show, a style Sondheim himself would never work in, but that he nonetheless made a possibility for the composers of the 1990s and 2000s. Many shows from the last few years, including Duncan Sheik & Steven Sater’s *Spring Awakening*, Stew’s *Passing Strange* and Adam Gwon’s *Ordinary Days*, all owe a debt to Sondheim’s unparalleled work in advancing the musical form.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ACTOR: VANESSA WILLIAMS



UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH *SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM* ACTRESS VANESSA WILLIAMS ABOUT HER ROLE IN THIS PRODUCTION, JUGGLING A BUSY TELEVISION CAREER, AND THE CHALLENGES OF PERFORMING MUSIC BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM.

When did you first realize you wanted to be a dancer/singer/ actor?

Well, I grew up in a musical family, so I always knew that performing and music were something that I felt very comfortable with. I was always exposed to the arts. I would probably say it was when we went to see Stephanie Mills in *The Wiz* on Broadway. Performing seemed like a job that I would enjoy. It seemed like it was just an audition away. I was 11 or so.

Did you go right into classes? What kind of training did you have?

I danced from the age of 4 and wanted to be an Alvin Ailey dancer because I danced modern. My first play was in fourth grade when I was nine. At that point I knew the theatre was something that I loved. The second role that I did was in junior high school. In high school we had a theatre department, and our acting teacher was the head of

it. We did productions every year. Then I joined Sawmill, which is a local community theatre in Chappaqua, until I started doing professional theatre.

Can you tell us a little bit about why you wanted to do this project – *Sondheim on Sondheim*?

James Lapine called me, and when James calls, I say yes. I had a great time working with him on *Into the Woods*. We had a ball. I respect him, and he's got a great approach to theatre and a great sense of humor. I was honored to get the call. I'm so glad he wanted to work with me again.

Can you tell us a little bit about performing *Sondheim*? You've done it before. What are the challenges of his music?

One challenge is articulation because he has so many interesting phrases within one line, so it is easy to run away and get off the track. You really have to concentrate and articulate because his lyrics are very tricky. And the second catch is to pay attention to the intervals he uses. He writes

beautiful melodies, which are not what your ear would normally go to; this makes them hard to sing. That's the other challenge to mastering Sondheim.

Do you find that his work is something that you gravitate to emotionally?

I think some of his work is very moving. It is hard to not approach it with emotion. His material lends itself to telling stories and setting the mood. You have to be invested as an actor to perform his songs.

I would imagine that you have some solos in this. Is that true?

Yes. There are solos, duets, company numbers, one that's just the boys. He's got such a body of work – it is James' unfortunate job to pair it down.

Can you tell us a little bit about solo work? Is it like doing a monologue? Do you focus on telling a story in that way?

I think that is my approach always.

How do you think audiences will respond to Sondheim on Sondheim? Do you have a sense of what's going to happen? Or is that not something you think about?

The show is featuring Sondheim in a way that I think will make audiences feel like they had an evening with the man. James put the show together amazingly. Sondheim is talking about his life, so they will get a chance to hear the origins of the ideas for songs and for shows, and they will understand what was going on in his life while he was writing them. It will be an open door into the mind that thought up such phenomenally creative work. The audience will not only enjoy the performances, but they will also understand and appreciate the genius of Sondheim.

Can you talk to us a little bit about the difference between working in other mediums and working on stage? You've been doing a lot of television work, of course. We all love you on Ugly Betty.

I always feel like I'm going back to school when I sit down in front of a music stand with new material. I love it. You get a new lease with each new project –that's the wonderful thing about doing different shows. There are new ensembles, new friends, and new experiences. I love challenges, and it's like going back home for me. I'm really excited.

Can you talk to us a little bit about roles that you would like to play onstage if you had the opportunity?

I love being able to create new characters, which I did on *Ugly Betty*. I've also stepped into the roles of the Spiderwoman in *Kiss Of The Spiderwoman*, the Witch from *Into the Woods*, and I did *Saint Louis Woman* at Encores!

I'd really love to create a role, though. I would like to play something with a little bit of an edge, with some darkness and some mystery. Probably in the vein of what I did in *Spiderwoman* –that was so wonderful because I got to act and sing; something like that would be phenomenal.

What advice would you give to a young person who might want to do the kind of work you are doing?

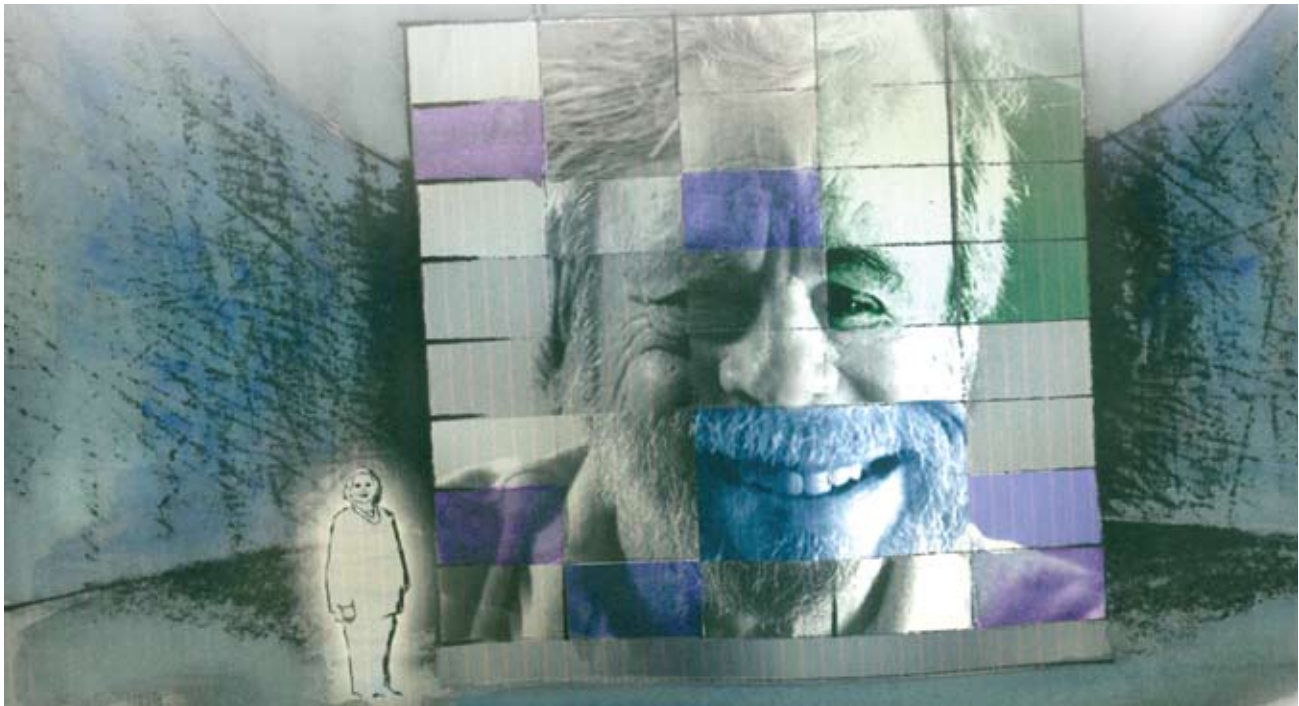
Get as much experience as you can. It was great for me to have two parents who valued the arts. I run into so many people who are in my business whose parents told them to get a "real job," who told them there was no real value to the arts. That's crushing when you are a creative person and you have talent. I would encourage students who don't have the support that I did to take programs that do give them the support. And don't stop working. There's theater in schools, there's theatre in the community. Apply to any scholarship programs that help open doors for your aspirations. Every time you do a project there are connections to be made with the people you are working with. Those are relationships that will help you for the rest of your life if you stay in the business.

Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?

No, just that I'm doing double duty with this show. I'm rehearsing the show and I'm filming *Ugly Betty*. This is the one show where I haven't had the luxury to rehearse every day from 10-6, six days a week. We've been rehearsing on my days off and shooting most weekdays, so I've just been praying for good health, keeping my voice rested and getting through my double duty. *Sondheim on Sondheim* is so special that I knew I would have to sacrifice sleep and time to do both. I love that I get to do two things that I love.

INTERVIEW WITH THE PROJECTIONS DESIGNER: PETER FLAHERTY

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED PROJECTIONS DESIGNER PETER FLAHERTY ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM* THROUGH VIDEO AND PROJECTION DESIGN.



Set Sketch by Beowulf Boritt

How did you start doing video and projection design?

When I was in college, I started as a theatre and film director creating performance projects that incorporated a lot of video. To the extent that there were computers that could handle it, I began doing a lot of video and projection installations. I worked as an assistant designer with the Wooster Group. I had an internship with them after college. After that, I did more and more work of my own.

Tell us about your process on *Sondheim on Sondheim*?

We started with the idea that we wanted to use imagery that looked different than LED projections that you typically see in large scale productions. We started to find some new technology on the market that worked the same as the LCD technology you use when you are looking at your computer screen. It's bright and it's high resolution. LED is lower resolution – it's what you see a lot in concerts and Broadway shows. LCD offers us the opportunity to really showcase the interviews with Stephen Sondheim and produce them at a high resolution using cinematic image power. Before these LCD walls came around, the only way we could really do that was through projection. There are really no projections in this show, in the sense that there are no video projectors that have a light bulb that projects onto a surface. In fact, all of our video is displayed on these liquid crystal displays (LCD).

When you say walls, are you referring to the projection surface?

Yes, they are like gigantic TV screens. What's really incredible is that they have a very, very tiny edge. A TV at home has a rather thick edge around it that might be 2 or 3 inches wide. These screens have almost no edge, so you can put a whole bunch of them together into a grid or a tile wall. We can put 35 of them in a grid to make a 16-foot-wide and 13-foot-tall surface that is almost seamless.

So there is a solid surface that you will be showing video on, correct?

Yes. In fact, there is a wall that starts the show that is able to break apart into more panels. The surfaces are able to recompose themselves over the course of the evening.

Are we going to see multiple versions of the same image?

Well, the technology allows us to stretch a single image over all of the monitors but, at the same time, I can also duplicate the same image multiple times if that was what we wanted to do aesthetically.

How are you finding the content? It is going to cover different times throughout Sondheim's life, is that true?

Yes, there's a mixture of past and present. There are a couple of different sources for the material. We've conducted three interviews with him, interviews during which he discusses topics that range from his biography to his choices in writing a particular show; there's a whole variety of topics that he covers. There's the interview material that we've shot in the last year and half, and then there's also archival video material that ranges from

television interviews that he did over the last 50 years or so to photos from his archives of him with collaborators or during the opening of a new show. So, the content ranges widely over his life, his choices, his motivation, his artistic output. It's a real full biography of his life, career and artistic work.

How is the content decided? Do you collaborate with director James Lapine on what is going to go where, or does James pretty much dictate that?

It varies, of course, like anything, so I can't describe it in absolute terms. For the most part, though, James is conducting the interviews during the shoots, so he's the one who is in conversation with Sondheim. He's also pulling a lot of the archival clips that deal with topics he wants to tackle in the script, as it were. The content is being created as we go. The script has been evolving. It's a really close collaboration. We figure out how to edit the material. I give my thoughts about how a segment might fit together with the script. James also has lots of aesthetic input about how the images work and how the pieces fit together.

When you did the filming of Sondheim in the past year or so, did you light it and did you operate the camera?

I was more active as a cinematographer. There is a director of photography who is hands on with the crew and the lighting and all that. James and I are figuring out how it works so we can keep our eyes open and make changes as we go. We've worked with a couple of different directors of photography for the different interview shoots. I think the first shoot was around 2 years ago. Then we did a shoot last March or April. We are doing another shoot a week from today, which will be the third one.

What about the archival footage? Where does that come from?

Peter Jones, who works as Sondheim's archivist, had a lot of video material from over the years. He has a variety of analog and digital media. He was the one who really put his hands on a lot of that stuff and gave us the source material that James then culled down. We've also been in the process of trying to get the rights and get the images at a higher quality. I actually love a lot of the texture of old video footage and old photos. A photo might have scratches or be bent or have a piece torn. Or a video might have those colors we associate with the '70s, '80s, or '90s. So, besides seeing Steve age over the course of the piece, we see eras go by and see technology change. I think that's kind of beautiful.

I love that too, especially in films where they mix film, video and Super 8.

It's beautiful. We have some old footage that was shot on Super 8. You mix a little clip of that with him being interviewed and talking about his life now and it just makes it very touching. It's getting to be a really interesting portrait at this point.

What's challenging for you doing a project like this?

There's the huge amount of material we are trying to put together in a logical, interesting, emotional way. There's the technological and logistical challenge of bringing this technology to the stage. I don't believe I've seen anything like this employed in this type of venue. The biggest challenge is getting those problems solved and then having the head space to step back and think about the piece as a whole and figure out how you can tell someone's story. It's sort of the documentarian's challenge of making sure you are making choices to the best of your ability to show someone's life and spirit. It's like a portrait painter trying to figure out what the right angle is, what the right material is, and what the right texture is. You have to be able to move the microscope to be able to look close up and wide angle at the same time. We don't want this thing to feel like a big whiz-bang, sleek, technological, cold experience. We don't want this to feel like an incredibly sophisticated trade show or something. We want it to feel warm, inviting, and sensitive.

Is the technology dictating some of your aesthetic choices?

What's so exciting about some of this technology is that it can speak to the way we process information in this age. There's a sense that we are looking at something kind of similar to our computers – dealing with life in multiple windows simultaneously is very much a guiding principle. Interestingly, one of the things that inspired the design and the way it works was that Sondheim is an avid collector of puzzles and games, and so the way these screens fit together is sort of like a puzzle in that it is one unit and many separate units. It is a mixed metaphor for the digital age. It speaks to the organization of the computer or the i-phone or i-pad, but it also speaks to the 19th century board game and chess game, which are all over Sondheim's house and are featured visually in the show.

Talk a little bit about how the technology works with live singers? Is it a challenge to not have the technology upstage them?

Yes, it's a big challenge. One of the things that is really interesting about performance is that you want moments when the media takes center stage and is allowed to do something exciting for a moment and really capture the audience's attention visually, but then it has to be able to recede. We've been working on a lot of material where we allow that to happen, where we take a moment where we have interviews mixed with archival footage. We are getting very into that, and then we calm it way down and move into a song. Sometimes there's a watercolor effect on the monitors, so there's this slightly washy sensibility that we are developing in some clips that just works to tie all the pieces together. So, if Barbara Cook is in a number and we want to zero in on her, we just pull way down. We darken the color, zero right in on her, and work to make the video blend into the background. The audience's eyes can check

the image and go right back to the singer. It's always about making sure you don't distract, while at the same time making sure that you are keeping it interesting.

It sounds to me like the technical rehearsal is going to be really long. Is that true?

Yes, it will be really long. We have two weeks of dry tech before any actors arrive. It's so long because of the media stuff and because of the automated screens. There's no question it will be an intensive period. Then we have two weeks of actual tech. There's really a month long period between February 22nd, which is when dry tech begins officially, and the Gala on March 22nd. We open the 23rd of April. We're going to be working overtime for the next few months.

Can you explain to us how the moving screens and the images work technically?

Well, there's a large system of computers that run the show. The main system is eleven computers with one computer that is kind of the timeline computer that tells the other ten what images to display. The ten computers are feeding the different parts of the wall. We do it with a theatrical display that's called "Watchout".

Do you have any advice for a young person who might want to do the kind of work you are doing?

I basically come from a theatrical design background. I have tended to make work that you would see at BAM or at the Lincoln Center Festival. I think that is how I developed my aesthetic and how I established my working processes in this multi-media theatre world. You really get to stretch your legs with the technology and image-making as a tool. Working with a team of collaborators that are used to working with video has been invaluable. I think that people who want to get involved in this kind of stuff should just start making it. Don't worry about the big budgets or the fancy gear –that stuff starts to come naturally if you have good ideas. All the tools that are available now for the individual, like desktop computers and Final Cut Pro are becoming more ubiquitous. There is even software that allows you to work with this kind of stuff for free. I remember it was ten years ago that I was figuring out how to work with the first video projector that I had ever played with. It was one of those projectors with the three colored lamps. I remember messing around with that stuff in college, and just figuring it out. That's my advice – the tools are there, just start creating.

Were you surprised, coming from a Next Wave Festival background, that you were asked to do this?

I did a benefit for the Public Theater with James Lapine and that's how I got to know him. I found him to be really adventurous and intelligent. It felt very natural to me for us to collaborate because I respect him. Was it a surprise

to be asked to do it? On some level, maybe it was. I had honestly never thought about it. James just started talking about the project, and off we went. It's been a long time in development now. We probably talked for the first time about three years ago.

Originally it was called iSondheim, and it was going to be done in Atlanta. Is that true?

Yes, it was originally called iSondheim, and it was supposed to start off in Atlanta and then come up to Broadway. That was when we were working with the Frankel Group as producers and with the Alliance Theatre.

Was Sondheim someone whose works you were familiar with, or did you have a steep learning curve?

I had to learn a lot because I'm not that into musical theatre in general, but I remember in college I was the technical director for a production of *Sweeney Todd*. I was always kind of amazed by that show. I didn't think there could be a piece that had such an interesting narrative and was so dark and so beautiful. Musical theatre is still a form that I have not spent a lot of my life trafficking in, but I'm really interested to learn about it. Steve's story and contribution to the artistic process are always more interesting than I expect them to be

Do you sense that he is a genius?

I don't know, but I think so. He certainly transformed the form. He has made an incredible contribution.

Is there a question I should have asked about the project or your work on it that I didn't?

Even though we are making this project that is tightly focused, I hope that some of the ideas and technologies that I employ in other worlds come through in this, because I think that there is a place for them in Steve's life story. I hope that the work is heartwarming, but also challenging at certain moments. I hope you feel like you've never seen anything like this before.

MUSICAL THEATRE VOCABULARY

Below are selected terms that are specific to Stephen Sondheim musicals.

11 o'clock Number : A emotional powerhouse of a number that comes at the end of a show, which originally fell right around 11 o'clock in the early decades of musical theatre

[Click here](#) to view one of Sondheim's 11 o'clock numbers, "Rose's Turn", from the movie version of *Gypsy*

Ballad: A song that tells a fairly strict narrative, typically of one particular character. One example of a ballad is "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" from the musical *Sweeney Todd*.

[Click here](#) to view to another Sondheim ballad, "The Ballad of Booth" from *Assassins*

Book: All the words the performers say, rather than sing, in a musical.

Chorus: A line or group of lines repeated at intervals in a song.

Curtain raiser: A big number that opens a musical, such as Sondheim's famous "Comedy Tonight."

Ensemble: The performers who fill out big production numbers in a musical.

Lyrics: All the words performers sing in a musical.

Overture: A compilation of tunes from the show that the orchestra plays before the musical starts to give the audience a taste of what the piece will be like.

Patter song: A song in which a character sings extremely rapidly. "The Worst Pies in London" or "Gee, Officer Krupke" are examples from Sondheim's work.

Show-stopper: A huge or emotionally powerful song to which the audience responds so positively that their applause temporarily stops the show.

Verse: metrical or rhymed composition as distinct from prose that forms part of a song.



Cast of *Follies* Photo: Joan Marcus

ACTIVITIES

PRE SHOW ACTIVITIES:

- 1.) Stephen Sondheim is known for drawing his inspiration from a variety of sources (examples include: fairy tales, works of art, as well as the artists' life, historical figures and current events). How can you create lyrics to a song inspired by people, real or imagined? ([click here for activity 1](#))
- 2.) Primary elements of music include tempo, pitch, dynamics, rhythm and instrumentation. How can these elements of music help a composer evoke a mood? ([click here for activity 2](#))
- 3.) The book of a musical is the words that are not sung. These include the character's lines and stage directions. How does the book of a musical inspire the lyrics of a song? ([click here for activity 3](#))



Stephen Sondheim, James Lapine 1985

POST SHOW ACTIVITIES:

- 4.) As 2010 marks Stephen Sondheim's 80th Birthday, *Sondheim on Sondheim* is being produced as a celebration of his career as one of the leading musical theatre composer/lyricists. Write the lyrics to a song inspired by your experience of the show. You can address these lyrics to, about, or from the point of view of Stephen Sondheim. ([click here for activity 4](#))
- 5.) From the wide variety of music and lyrics Stephen Sondheim has written, "Send in the Clowns" from *A Little Night Music* most notably crossed the threshold of musical theatre into popular music on the radio. Think about a current song from popular music (possibly a song you've recently heard on the radio) that has similar elements to a song from *Sondheim on Sondheim* you particularly liked and remembered. ([click here for activity 5](#))
- 6.) The lyrics are a set of words that make up a song. How can the lyrics of a song inspire the book of a musical? ([click here for activity 6](#))

RESOURCES

[The Stephen Sondheim Society](#)

[The Sondheim Review Official Website](#)

[The Official Vanessa Williams Website](#)

The Sondheim Review. Chicago: Sondheim Review, 1994-2010

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Kantor, Michael and Maslon, Laurence. *Broadway: The American Musical*. New York: Bulfinch Press, 2004.

Broadway: The American Musical. Ghost Light Films/WNET New York, 2004.

Secrest, Meryle. *Sondheim: A Life*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

Zaden, Craig. *Sondheim & Co*. London: Hern Books, 1990.

[The Official Website for Playwright & Director James Lapine](#)

[Official Website for Sondheim on Sondheim](#)



Stephen Sondheim 1972

When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

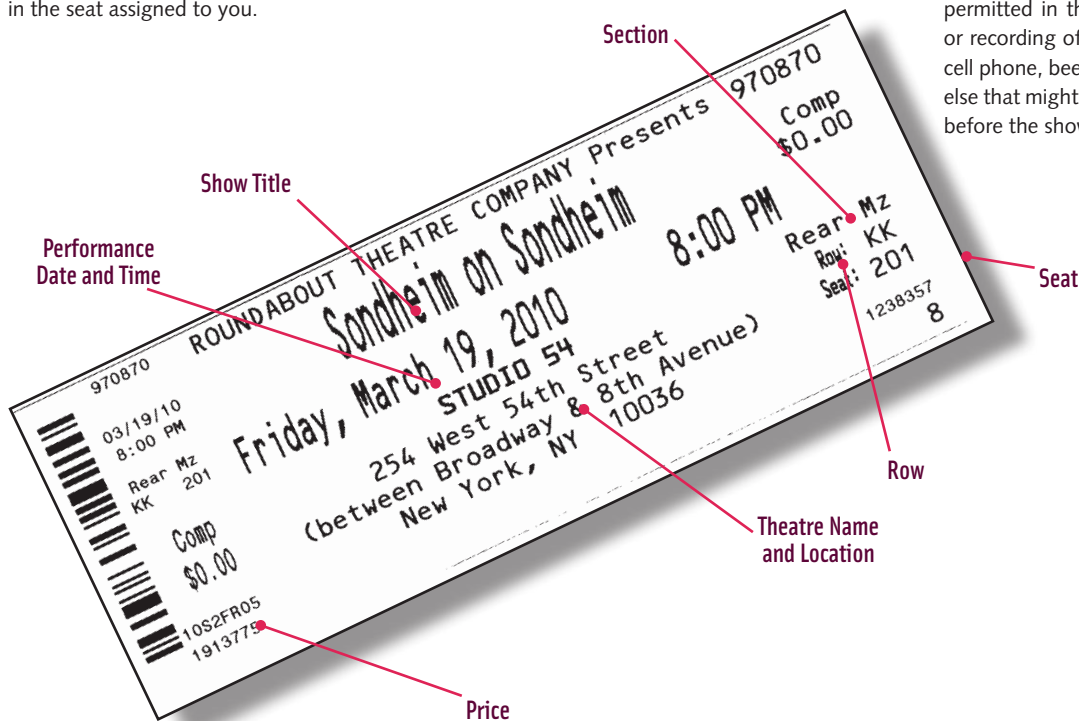
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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