



## Sondheim, Stephen (b. 1930)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Stephen Sondheim's seventieth birthday on March 22, 2000 was marked by a gala fete at the Library of Congress and proved the occasion for numerous retrospectives of his remarkable career.

The only child of a mother who designed clothing for his father's company, Sondheim grew up in an environment of wealth, talent, and refined sensibility. His parents divorced when he was ten years old. When his mother moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Stephen became a friend of a neighbor boy, Jimmy Hammerstein, son of presiding Broadway genius Oscar Hammerstein II, who encouraged Sondheim in his earliest efforts.

Sondheim studied music at Williams College with avant garde composer Milton Babbitt. After graduating, he wrote scripts for the television series "Topper."

One of the most innovative careers in Broadway history was launched when, at age 26, Sondheim was asked to write the lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* and, the following year, for Jule Styne's songs for *Gypsy*. His first score as composer-lyricist was *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962)-- one of the few successful musical farces.

Multiple Tony Awards, an Academy Award, and a Pulitzer Prize followed, as well as the bestowal of Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts honors by President Clinton in 1993.

### **A Paradoxical Place in Gay Culture**

Sondheim's musicals occupy a paradoxical place in gay culture. A gay creative artist who has never created an explicitly gay character and who, according to biographer Secrest, did not come out until his early forties or allow himself to fall in love with another man until age 61, Sondheim has nevertheless attained gay cult status.

He is recognized both as the most intelligent, witty, and musically audacious of composers and as a brilliantly ironic lyricist in the tradition of his gay predecessors Lorenz Hart, Noël Coward, and Cole Porter.

He incarnates the paradox of a highly intellectualized gay perspective that prizes ambivalence, undercuts traditional American progressivism, and rejects the musical's historically idealistic view of sex, romance, and the family; but that at the same time eschews camp, deconstructs the diva, and is apparently oblivious to AIDS, the post-Stonewall struggle for civil equality, and other socio-political issues that concern most gay men of his generation.

### **Sondheim's Remarkable Range**

At first glance, Sondheim is uncategorizable. His aesthetic mirrors that of painter Georges Seurat, the subject of Sondheim's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984): "If you know where

you're going, / You've gone. / Just keep moving on."

In each of his projects, Sondheim moves on, addressing a new creative challenge and in the process stretching the limits of one of America's most conventional dramatic forms.

His subjects or sources alone give a cursory sense of his extraordinary range: the memoirs of stripper Gypsy Rose Lee (*Gypsy*, 1959), a film by Ingmar Bergman (*A Little Night Music*, 1973), and a painting by pointillist painter Georges Seurat (*Sunday*); plays by dramatists as diverse as Kaufman and Hart (*Merrily We Roll Along*, 1981), Arthur Laurents (*Do I Hear a Waltz?*, 1965), William Shakespeare (*West Side Story*, 1957), and Plautus (*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*); nineteenth-century British grand guignol (*Sweeney Todd*, 1979) and biting sketches of contemporary American domestic life (*Company*, 1970); Grimm's fairy tales (*Into the Woods*, 1987) and a nineteenth-century Italian novel of tormented passion (*Passion*, 1994); a history of American imperialism (*Pacific Overtures*, 1976), a sociology of American political assassinations (*Assassins*, 1991), and the psychological complexities of the murder mystery (*Getting away with Murder*, 1996).

*Follies* (1971), which remains Sondheim's most brilliant effort to date, was actually inspired by a 1960s newspaper photograph of silent film star Gloria Swanson standing triumphantly amid the ruins of the demolished Roxy movie palace.

Progressing musically from show to show, Sondheim has mastered the idiom of folk music, the Strauss waltz, nineteenth-century light opera, the British music hall, every pre-rock twentieth-century American popular style, and Japanese Kabuki. His music has become standard repertoire in both cabarets and opera houses. Sondheim has proved relentless in his need to move on.

### **Queering the American Dream**

Rejecting the conventional and "pretty" (which, his Georges Seurat explains, is subject to time and change; beauty is, rather, "what the eye arranges"), Sondheim's plays represent a queering of the American dream that is traditionally inscribed in the Broadway musical.

While Rose disdainfully dismisses the passivity of "Some People" who "thrive and bloom, / Living life in a living room," her vibrant assertion that "Everything's Coming Up Roses" is shown by the conclusion of *Gypsy* to be as delusional as Willy Loman's dreams of success in *Death of a Salesman*.

Pursuit of the American dream invariably involves people selling out what they value most. "Franklin Shepard, Inc."s accomplishments as a Hollywood producer are deconstructed in *Merrily*, the play moving backwards from his most recent moment of public success to the recognition of the creative potential and the friendships that he betrayed along the way.

Juxtaposing the ghosts of hopeful young people with the middle-aged persons they have become in the reunion of Weissman Girls in *Follies*, Sondheim anatomizes the disintegration of pre-World War II American optimism into late-century cynicism and emotional emptiness.

The ultimate result of Admiral Perry's "gunboat diplomacy" in the 1850s, *Pacific Overtures* shrewdly demonstrates, is Japan's learning only too well the lessons of American economic imperialism and undercutting the American economy in the 1980s.

Joanne's toast to "The Ladies Who Lunch" in *Company* is a stinging analysis of the emptiness of their seemingly prosperous lives.

### **Consequences of Exclusion**

There is a consistent concern in Sondheim's plays with the individual or group excluded from the mainstream, and what the consequences of that exclusion are for the community as a whole.

For example, Benjamin Barker revenges himself upon the Victorian sentimentality and hypocrisy that allowed him to be falsely imprisoned and his family destroyed in *Sweeney Todd*; and *Assassins* dramatizes the devastating social consequences of the American system's exclusionary politics.

Ironically, the most rousing number in *West Side Story* is the Puerto Ricans' celebration of the "America" into which they will never be assimilated: "Life is all right in America / If you're all white in America."

The theatrically brilliant "Cookie" sequence of *Anyone Can Whistle* questions whether the self-appointed guardians of the American dream are not more insane than those who, emotionally broken by their pursuit of it, have withdrawn to the margins of society.

### **Interpersonal Relationships**

As pervasive an impulse in Sondheim's canon as the queering of the American dream is his queering of interpersonal relationships.

The men in *Company* recognize that in marriage one is "always sorry, always grateful," just as Bobby eventually accepts that "Being Alive" demands going beyond the isolation of the self even while accepting the ambivalences and compromises of a relationship.

"Send in the Clowns," like the "Soon/Now/Later" trio earlier in *A Little Night Music*, dramatizes the comedy that results because one's desires never coincide with those of one's partner.

The extraordinary "Loveland" sequence of *Follies* shows the two principal couples forced by experience to alter their naïve concept of love.

And the play *Passion* functions as alchemically as a John Donne lyric, inviting the audience initially to identify with Giorgio and Clara's soaring celebration of the happiness they've discovered in love, only to betray those assumptions by revealing the passion "implacable as stone" that the sickly and unappealing Fosca arouses in the romantic hero.

There are no absolutes and, thus, no "happily ever after" in Sondheim's world, only the struggle to live humanely after breaking through the prison of one's romantic illusions.

### **Sondheim and Popular Culture**

"I'm telling you, the only times I really feel the presence of God are when I'm having sex, and during a great Broadway musical!" the rambunctious Father Dan tells the title character in Paul Rudnick's *Jeffrey* (1994). "*Phantom*. *Starlight Express*. *Miss Saigon*! Know ye the signs of the devil: overmixing, smoke machines, trouble with Equity."

Sondheim delivers to Broadway musical queens like Father Dan what the musicals of anti-Christ Andrew Lloyd Weber cannot: psychological depth rather than special effects; witty and insightful lyrics rather than clichéd expressions; and complex, often atonal music rather than vapidly hummable melodies.

Thus, Sondheim has been absorbed by gay popular culture in the most unusual ways: the line "add 'em up, Bobby," from *Company*, is used as a refrain in James Kirkwood's *P. S. Your Cat Is Dead* (1972); William Higgins star Ben Barker fixes the Sondheimian dimension of his "nom de porn" by wearing a Sweeney Todd t-shirt in the opening scene of *The Boys of San Francisco* (1980); and the songs "Somewhere" from *West Side Story* and "Being Alive" from *Company* became the anthems of two very different generations of gay men.

Moreover, the Sondheim revue became a staple of AIDS fund-raising on both coasts in the 1990s. As Father Dan understands, the lyrics and music of Sondheim allow the heightened perception and intense feeling of being alive that are usually associated only with religious experience and sexual orgasm.

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### **About the Author**

**Raymond-Jean Frontain** is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.