

Remembering Sondheim



In *Finishing the Hat* (2010) and *Look, I Made a Hat* (2011), his two massive compendia of his own lyrics, complete with commentary thereupon, Stephen Sondheim was tough on even the greatest of his American songwriting predecessors – at least the ones who penned the words. For example, the lyrics of Alan Jay Lerner (*My Fair Lady*) “lack energy and flavor and passion”; Lorenz Hart (whose catalogue includes “There’s a Small Hotel” and “My Funny Valentine”) was cursed with “pervasive laziness”; Ira Gershwin’s lyrics are “sloppy.”

As for Sondheim’s own mentor, the universally beloved Oscar Hammerstein II, whose books and lyrics for *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma*, and *Carousel* transformed the musical theater, Sondheim felt that his lyrics are often “plodding,” his imagery baffling, and his characters forced to sing words that

don't seem likely to be in their vocabularies. Who, Sondheim asked, can seriously believe that Nellie Forbush, the self-described "hick" heroine of *South Pacific*, knows the word "bromidic" (which crops up in "I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy")?

Yet if Sondheim can seem almost cruelly harsh on his colleagues of an earlier generation, it's important to emphasize that he applied equally stringent standards to his own work, which he routinely polished to a high sheen, producing theater songs on a level rarely seen before him – even, yes, among the very best creations of the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, and Lerner and Loewe. Which is why his death, on Friday at the age of 91, can truly be said to mark the end of an era in American culture.

Sondheim won international fame in 1957 with *West Side Story*, for which he wrote the lyrics to Leonard Bernstein's music. It became an instant classic. It's been repeatedly revived, and for generations its script, bound in paperback with *Romeo and Juliet* (with which it shares a plot), has been a staple of high-school curricula. But Sondheim was fantastically tough on his own contributions to *West Side Story*. If he couldn't picture Nellie Forbush using the word "bromidic," he also thought it was a stretch to have Tony, the New York gang kid who is the hero of *West Side Story*, sing a line like "Tonight there will be no morning star." ("You don't see stars in Manhattan," Sondheim observed, "except from the Planetarium.")

Gypsy (1959), the life story of striptease performer Gypsy Rose Lee, is one of the best Broadway musicals ever, with a stirring story and great tunes like "Small World" and "Some People." The last show for which Sondheim wrote just the lyrics (the music was by Jule Styne), it was followed by *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), a hilarious farce inspired by the works of the Roman playwright Plautus. Different though these two shows were from each

other, both were solidly in the Broadway musical-comedy tradition.

In the years that followed, however, Sondheim – who said in 2009 that his major musical influences were Rachmaninoff and Ravel (as opposed to, say, Richard Rodgers or Harold Arlen) – shaped a more personal, and highly experimental, brand of musical theater. *Company* (1970), centered on Bobby, a single 35-year-old New Yorker not unlike Sondheim himself, was a plotless series of songs, by turns sunny and mordant, gentle and bitter, about loneliness, love, relationship, marriage, and disillusionment, among them “Side by Side by Side,” “Being Alive,” and “The Ladies Who Lunch.” It felt very new, very hip, very Seventies, and it pioneered the “concept musical” – but, unlike many cultural products of that era that manifestly sought to cash in on the *Zeitgeist*, it was smart, sharp, utterly sincere, and patently *sui generis*.

Follies (1971), also plotless and strikingly original, featured the memorable songs “I’m Still Here” and “Losing My Mind.” And the magnificent (and elaborately plotted) *A Little Night Music* (1973) – which, based on a 1955 Bergman film, included Sondheim’s most famous song, “Send in the Clowns” – is (in my opinion) perhaps the most nearly perfect American musical, telling stories of longing and regret from a remarkably mature and meditative perspective, and through one splendid song after another in $\frac{3}{4}$ time.

Together, these shows solidified Sondheim’s position as his generation’s most consequential creator of American theater music. He closed off the decade with the masterly *Sweeney Todd* (1979), which, containing such songs as “Not While I’m Around,” happens to be the only Sondheim show to have been adapted into a first-rate film. (The 1977 movie version of *A Little Night Music*, starring a painfully miscast Elizabeth Taylor and set, for no apparent reason, in Austria rather than Sweden, was one of the worst such adaptations of all time.)

These shows of the Seventies, all directed by Hal Prince, accustomed audiences to expecting certain things from Sondheim: wonderfully intricate (yet often hauntingly beautiful) melodies, brilliantly complex harmonies, surpassingly witty lyrics packed with ingenious internal rhymes, and moods that shifted from wistfulness to acid cynicism, from tenderness to chilling misanthropy.

Parting from Prince, Sondheim went on to collaborate with director James Lapine on *Sunday in the Park With George* (1985), about Georges Seurat; *Into the Woods* (1987), based on the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm; *Assassins* (1990), about the real-life would-be killers of U.S. presidents; and *Passion* (1994), a quasi-operatic love story set in 19th-century Italy. While reviewers mostly celebrated these shows, audience reception varied. Some felt Sondheim's lyrics had become too abstruse, his tunes too dissonant, his material too offbeat, unengaging, dark. I must confess that, generally speaking, I prefer his earlier work.

In any event, musicals were changing, the economics of Broadway were changing, the culture itself was changing, and while critics revered Sondheim more than ever, for theatergoers he was no longer the flavor of the month. During the last two decades of the 20th century, the Broadway musical theater came to be dominated by jukebox musicals, forgettable entertainments based on old movies, stuff for kids (*The Lion King*), trendy crap like *Rent*, and, above all, quasi-operatic melodramas (*Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Les Misérables*). The new king of Broadway was Andrew Lloyd Webber, whose *oeuvre*, whatever its occasional felicities, tends to be a world away from Sondheim's subtlety, intricacy, precision, and restraint. In 2009, Sondheim himself confessed that "we all become superannuated ... music changes every twenty-five years ... everybody becomes old-fashioned."

He even called himself an "old conservative" – and indeed, in many ways his work was conservative. Note his mockery, in

these lyrics sung by a gang of juvenile delinquents in *West Side Story*, of what would become the founding clichés of the Great Society: “Gee, Officer Krupke, we’re very upset; / We never had the love that ev’ry child oughta get. / We ain’t no delinquents, / We’re misunderstood. / Deep down inside us there’s good!” Although he was gay, Sondheim didn’t come out until midlife, and he did so quietly and with dignity. You can’t imagine him ever using his music to advocate for an agenda, however worthy – which is to say that you can’t imagine him coming up with anything remotely like *La Cage aux Folles* (1983), the music and lyrics to which – including the gay anthem “I Am What I Am” – were written by Jerry Herman (1931-2019), the second most gifted Broadway songwriter of their generation.

Sondheim’s last musical, which went through several different titles before ending up as *Road Show*, never made it to Broadway, and opened in New York in 2008 (fourteen years after his previous show), receiving unimpressive reviews. Since then, there have been plenty of revivals and revues, plus awards, big and small, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, as well as uncompleted work on new projects. On Broadway, where Sondheim could no longer open a show, a theater was named in his honor.

And now he’s gone. But his exquisite, towering body of work is still very much with us. A revival of *Assassins* is currently playing off-Broadway; Steven Spielberg’s remake of the 1961 movie *West Side Story* will open on December 7; a revival of *Company*, now in previews, is scheduled to have its formal Broadway opening two days later. During his lifetime, Sondheim played a major role in shaping sophisticated tastes in popular music; that precious influence won’t perish anytime soon. On Friday, hours before I found out that he had died, I happened to be listening to a playlist of Eurovision songs (don’t judge me), and when, in one line of one song, the stress fell clumsily on the word “it,” I winced, and said to the person

sitting in the room with me: "*Sondheim* would never have done that."

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