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An Exploration on Stephen Sondheim

Isaac Newton once said, "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants." Today, that is true of any working musical theatre writer, composer, actor, etc., who follows in the footsteps of those like Stephen Sondheim and Oscar Hammerstein. Sondheim's works are known by many, even those not involved in the theatrical world, with movie musicals like *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (2007) and *Into The Woods* (2014) popularizing his works. Sondheim's shows are known for their musical difficulty and darker themes that were foreign to the American musical genre during his time. He created a new sound of contemporary musical theatre which has influenced so many who came after him. Stephen Sondheim not only reinvented the genre of musical theatre, he also added a new level of musical and emotional depth never before seen in the American musical. His style and innovation can be observed in musicals such as *Into The Woods*, *Company*, and *Sunday In The Park With George*.

Stephen Sondheim was born in New York City on March 22, 1930. He began playing the piano at an early age. It is well known amongst Sondheim fans that he grew up in a troubled home. His parents divorced when he was young, and he was raised under the custody of his mother, with whom he had a rocky relationship. He was even sent to military school when he was young, which he rather enjoyed as it provided such a rigid and strict lifestyle that was so different from his home life. It was during his teenage years that Sondheim began his studies with Oscar Hammerstein II, who happened to be a family friend. Hammerstein grew to be a sort

of father figure to the young composer. When he was only 15 years old, Sondheim brought a musical he had written to Hammerstein, who had famously written the lyrics for *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, and more, and he asked him to judge it as he would judge a professional level show. Sondheim has said that on this day he learned everything that he needed to know about composing and writing lyrics for musicals, which he would apply to everything he would go on to write. Hammerstein reportedly told him, "Write for yourself. If you do, you'll be ninety percent ahead of everybody else" (*Six by Sondheim*). Sondheim studied music at Williams College in Massachusetts. After his graduation in 1950, he studied with renowned composer Milton Babbitt. However, it was through Oscar Hammerstein that Sondheim made the networking connections that would jumpstart his career. Sondheim's first major musical that he worked on was *West Side Story* in 1957, for which he wrote the lyrics and Leonard Bernstein wrote the music. He initially wanted to write both the music and lyrics, but the producers were not huge fans of his scoring. After *West Side Story*, which had limited success until a movie version was released later on, Sondheim was determined for his next project to be solely his own, unless something really special came along. Eventually, that happened. His next project was *Gypsy*, for which Sondheim wrote the lyrics and Jule Styne wrote the music. This was the first show where Sondheim was writing for a specific actress, Ethel Merman, which changed how he wrote the lyrics, as there was a full-blown character with which he could work. Sondheim's first musical for which he wrote both the music and lyrics was *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*. Forum opened in 1962 and ended up winning the Tony for best musical. Sondheim then went on to write fourteen more musicals and has won a multitude of Tony Awards, including the Lifetime Achievement Award.

There is obviously something about Sondheim that makes him stand apart from any other composer and lyricist. When it comes to writing the lyrics for a piece, Sondheim is very particular about his wording. He has stated that he writes as an actor (*Six By Sondheim*), meaning that he tries to embody the character in every line. In order to write his songs, Sondheim will take the lyrical phrase that he is working on, and he will write it out rhythmically with no designated pitches yet- just the rhythmic values of the words. This technique is almost Shakespearean in a sense, as it follows the idea of scansion and iambic pentameter-- using not only the words' meanings, but also their rhythms and emphases. In regards to actually coming up with the lyrics, Sondheim has addressed the difficulty of making the words so exact. According to him, if the words are not exactly what he wants, they stand out like a sore thumb. To be specific, he has stated, "There are so few words in a lyric that each three or four words in a lyric is the equivalent of a scene in a play or a chapter in a novel" (*Six by Sondheim*). He needs every word to be precise in order to convey the meaning while not losing the audience's interest. Sondheim's music is often criticised for not being "hummable," meaning it might not be as catchy as something like *Oklahoma!* This is understandable given the complex melodies he often uses. He likes to combat this argument by saying that anything that is singable is hummable. He also applies more of Oscar Hammerstein II's advice to every song he writes. Hammerstein told him that every song must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that every song should state an idea and develop the idea throughout the song to the finish. Sondheim uses this guideline to make sure that the characters are in a different place from where they began at the start of the song. This is one of the things that makes Sondheim's work so significant and influential. He is so precise and intentional in his music. Every note and every word has a purpose, and each note

and word helps to further the story along. There is no such thing as fluff in a Sondheim piece, whether in content or in themes.

One of Sondheim's most well known works is arguably *Into The Woods*, which opened on Broadway in 1987. For this show, Sondheim wrote the lyrics and music, and James Lapine wrote the book. *Into The Woods* is probably Sondheim's most produced shows, as it is very popular amongst high schools, colleges, and community theatres. Its familiar fairy tale characters make it easily accessible to audiences, which isn't always a trait of Sondheim's shows. *Into The Woods* takes all of the classic fairy tales that audiences love and turns their stories on their heads. The character list includes Cinderella, Rapunzel, Little Red Riding Hood, and more. What makes the show so interesting is that none of the characters get their typical happy ending. In *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*, author Robert L. McLaughlin states, "They also learn the bittersweet nature of communities: acts have far-reaching and unpredictable consequences; through our acts, we are connected to countless others; and through our stories, we are connected to the past and future." The biggest theme in *Into The Woods* is the idea of consequences. The characters have to deal with what follows their actions. For example, Little Red must deal with the events that follow her disobeying her mother. This theme of consequences is common in many of Sondheim's shows. He likes to show the real sides of life. Theatre is often said to be an escape from reality for the audience, but Sondheim likes to hold up a mirror to the spectators-- to really make them think. Joanne Gordon says:

> Though Sondheim also explores the unique joy, delight, and wonder of our time, his musicals, thus, are not as popular or readily accepted as those of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, and Loesser. They disturb and challenge. [...] Sondheim explores new territory everytime he writes a new musical. This does not lead

> to automatic acclaim and financial success: Sondheim's triumphs are of a different order. (*Art Isn't Easy: The Theatre of Stephen Sondheim*)

This idea of darker theatre was not unusual in straight theatre at this time, but it was unusual for the American musical comedy, which developed out of minstrel shows and vaudeville. The musical comedy was originally intended to entertain and to provide spectacle, but Sondheim and his collaborators wanted to spark ideas and emotions from the audiences. With a show like *Into The Woods*, Lapine and Sondheim have drawn in the audience with these familiar fairy tales, but left them thinking about life.

Company is one of Sondheim's most innovative shows, as it was one of the first concept musicals that really worked. *Musical Theatre: An Appreciation* defines a concept musical as "a show that is unified by a central idea rather than a linear plot" (McLamore). Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* (which Sondheim helped to create) is widely regarded as the first concept musical, but it was not well received by audiences, closing on Broadway after 315 performances. The structure of a concept musical is often a group of singers commenting on the actions and life of the protagonist, almost like a Greek chorus. *Company* uses this format to tell the audience about Robert, a thirty-five year old bachelor surrounded by "crazy married people." The show illustrates the idea of being single versus being married, the ups and downs of marriage, and the idea of actually living through marriage as opposed to seeing it from an outside [perspective. Robert has an idea of what marriage is like, as he sees and hears from all of his married friends about their lives, but he has no idea of what it is to be married to somebody. Sondheim actually struggled to write about marriage as he had never been married, so he spent an evening with Mary Rodgers discussing the joys and difficulties of her marriages. *Company*, which opened on Broadway in 1970, features songs such as "Getting Married Today," a patter

song that captures the high anxiety of a bride with cold feet, and "Being Alive," the ending ballad where Robert questions his own willingness to get married. *Company* once again navigates this territory of holding up a mirror to the audience. This musical focuses on the lives of upper middle class people-- the exact people that would come to see this show-- and criticises their lifestyles. *Company* was not only influential in its style and structure, but also in its content.

Out of all of his musicals, Sondheim has stated that it is *Sunday In The Park With George* that is closest to his heart. *Sunday In The Park With George* takes inspiration from painter Georges Seurat, who is known for his pointillist style. The musical specifically takes inspiration from his painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, which Sondheim and James Lapine were particularly drawn to when they noticed that there are fifty plus people in this tableau, and yet none of them are looking at each other (McLamore). He believes this show is so close to his heart because it was so ambitious. Sondheim and Lapine wanted to capture this message about artists and their work, but to do it in a two and a half hour show would be difficult. The show contains many themes, one of which of course being consequences, but another being the balance between an artist's love for his art and for his love life- his actual life. In this world, the artist must choose between love and his art. George chooses painting over Dot, the woman he loves. He is always distracted by his work, always looking at the art around him, and so she eventually leaves him for another man, even though she truly loves George. In "Finishing The Hat," the song that George sings after Dot has moved on, he sings, "But the women who won't wait for you knows that, however you live, there's a part of you always standing by, mapping out the sky, finishing a hat" (Sondheim). This lyric is a perfect example of Sondheim's lyrical practices, where these four lines pack a punch and hold such strong meaning. The words themselves also flow so well together, beginning with the alliteration of the "w's" and

ending with the three "ing" verbs. *Sunday In The Park With George* features Stephen Sondheim in his most true form, writing soaring and intricate melodies about what it means to be an artist, and therefore what it means to be human.

Nowadays, Stephen Sondheim and his collaborators' innovations in theatre are commonplace, and they can be seen both thematically and musically. The best contemporary example of Sondheim's legacy can be found in Jason Robert Brown, a musical theatre composer and lyricist who began writing in the 1990s. Brown's mentor was Harold Prince, a frequent collaborator of Sondheim's. Brown, an expert piano player, is known for his difficult scores and soaring orchestrations. Like Sondheim, the content of Jason Robert Brown's shows often include darker themes without a happy ending. Take *The Last Five Years*, for example, a concept musical that examines the failed relationship of Jamie and Cathy. Jamie tells his story from start to finish, and Cathy tells hers from finish to start. This unique structure reinvents the tragic love story. Also similar to Sondheim is Jason Robert Brown's conversational quality to his songs. In "See I'm Smiling," Cathy is reflecting on how happy she is that Jamie has come to see her performance in her summer stock show. The melody in the first half of the song is slow and lamentful, but halfway through it speeds up and becomes very staccato as she gets frustrated that he is actually not staying for the night, just as though she is actually fighting with him in a standard scene. Another example of Stephen Sondheim's influence comes with the young duo Benj Pasek and Justin Paul. Pasek and Paul's work includes *Dear Evan Hansen*, *The Greatest Showman*, and more. Pasek and Paul's writing also carries Sondheim-esque style. An example includes the number "Nothing Short of Wonderful," from their show *Dogfight*. The song is a patter song, a technical and fast paced style that Sondheim frequently used. "Nothing Short of Wonderful" shows the character Rose frantically worrying about getting ready for a date, though

every now and then she breaks from the patter sections to sing a lovely melody about the possibilities of what might happen on the date. Writers like Brown and Pasek and Paul take the innovations made by Sondheim and translate them for a modern audience, just as Sondheim did with the innovations made by Rodgers and Hammerstein for the audiences of the later twentieth century.

Without the works of Stephen Sondheim, American musical theatre would not be what it is today. Sondheim's love for humanity and the art of theatre is what makes his works so special. He shows the rollercoasters of the human experience and the consequences of choices made in everyday life. These themes remain heavily present in today's musical theatre. Not every show has a happy ending, or if they do, it's because the characters had to learn from their actions to get to their destination. His unconventional music and lyrics created a whole new genre of musical theatre, paving the way for contemporary musical theatre. There is no doubt of Stephen Sondheim's contributions to the theatrical world.

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