

Nothing can replace the exhilaration of seeing a Sondheim musical live on stage. The analytic pleasure of these essays cannot hope to duplicate that visceral experience. I trust, however, that the insights provided by these essays will give the reader a more profound respect and understanding and love of Sondheim's work and will result in an even greater appreciation and joy when the curtain rises on another Sondheim show.



Chronology

- 1930 22 March, Stephen Sondheim born to Herbert and Janet Sondheim, New York City
- 1946 Enters Williams College, Williamstown, MA; graduates in 1950
- 1948 *Phinney's Rainbow* produced, Williams College
- 1949 *All That Glitters* produced, Williams College
- 1956 *Girls of Summer** opens on Broadway, Longacre Theatre
- 1957 *West Side Story*** opens on Broadway, Winter Garden Theatre
- 1959 *Gypsy*** opens on Broadway, Broadway Theatre
- 1960 *Invitation to a March** opens on Broadway, Music Box Theatre
- 1962 *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* opens on Broadway, Alvin Theatre; film of *West Side Story* released
- 1963 *Hot Spot** opens on Broadway, Majestic Theatre; film of *Gypsy* released
- 1964 *Anyone Can Whistle* opens on Broadway, Majestic Theatre
- 1965 *Do I Hear a Waltz?*** opens on Broadway, 46th Street Theatre

- 1966 *The Mad Show**** opens off-Broadway, New Theatre
- 1967 *Evening Primrose* telecast on ABC; film of *Forum* released
- 1970 *Company* opens on Broadway, Alvin Theatre (Tony Award, Best Music and Lyrics; New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical)
- 1971 *Follies* opens on Broadway, Winter Garden Theatre (Tony Award, Best Music and Lyrics; New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical)
- 1973 *A Little Night Music* opens on Broadway, Shubert Theatre (Tony Award, Best Music and Lyrics; New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical); *The Last of Sheila* (film) released
- 1974 *Candide* (Second Version)*** opens on Broadway, Broadway Theatre; *The Frogs* produced, Yale University
- 1976 *Pacific Overtures* opens on Broadway, Winter Garden Theatre (New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical); *Side By Side By Sondheim* (revue) opens, Mermaid Theatre, London
- 1977 *Side By Side By Sondheim* opens on Broadway, Music Box Theatre
- 1978 Film of *A Little Night Music* released
- 1979 *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* opens on Broadway, Uris Theatre (Tony Award, Best Score; New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical)
- 1981 *Marry Me A Little* opens off-Broadway, Actors Playhouse; *Merrily We Roll Along* opens on Broadway, Alvin Theatre

- 1984 *Sunday in the Park with George* opens on Broadway, Booth Theatre (New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, Best Musical; 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama)
- 1987 *Into the Woods* opens on Broadway, Martin Beck Theatre (Tony Award, Best Score); revised version of *Follies* opens in London
- 1991 *Assassins* opens off-Broadway, Playwrights Horizons
- 1994 *Passion* opens on Broadway, Plymouth Theatre; revised *Merrily We Roll Along* opens off-Broadway, York Theatre
- 1996 *Getting Away With Murder* opens on Broadway, Broadhurst Theatre

*composed incidental music only

**wrote lyrics only

***assisted with lyrics and/or music

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BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born in New York City. His father, Herbert Sondheim, was a successful dress manufacturer, his mother, Janet Fox, a fashion designer. Young Stephen was given piano lessons from an early age, and showed a distinct aptitude for music, puzzles, and mathematics. His parents divorced when he was only ten, and Stephen, an only child, was taken by his mother to live on a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. The area had attracted a number of well-known personalities from the New York theater world; a close neighbor was the playwright, lyricist, and producer Oscar Hammerstein II, who had a son Stephen's age. Stephen Sondheim and Jimmy Hammerstein soon became friends, and Stephen came to see the older Hammerstein as a role model. At the time, Hammerstein was inaugurating his historic collaboration with composer Richard Rodgers. When Sondheim was in his teens, Rodgers and Hammerstein were enjoying unprecedented success with the shows *Oklahoma!* and *South Pacific*. Sondheim resolved that, like Hammerstein, he too would write for the theater.

Sondheim studied piano seriously through his prep school years, while Hammerstein tutored him in writing for the theater. With Hammerstein's guidance, he wrote scripts and scores for four shows, a project that occupied Sondheim through his student years at Williams College. On graduation, he was awarded a two-year scholarship to study composition. He studied with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt, writing a piano concerto and a violin sonata while trying to break into the theater. Sondheim's first efforts at securing a Broadway assignment fell through, but he found work writing for television, and made the acquaintance of two playwrights who were to play a significant role in his career: Arthur Laurents and Burt Shevelove.

Although Sondheim aspired to write both words and music, his first Broadway assignments called on him to write either one or the other. At age 25 he was hired to write lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's music in the landmark musical *West Side Story*. Before *West Side Story* opened, he made his Broadway debut as a composer, with incidental music to N. Richard Nash's play *The Girls of Summer*. After the success of *West Side Story* in 1957, he won a second lyric-writing assignment for the Broadway musical *Gypsy*. Both shows had scripts by Arthur Laurents and were directed by Jerome Robbins.

The credit "Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim" finally appeared on Broadway for the first time in 1962. The show *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was an unqualified success, and introduced the first of Sondheim's tunes to become a show business standard, "Comedy Tonight." The script for *Forum* was co-written by Sondheim's friend, Burt Shevelove. Sondheim collaborated with Arthur Laurents again on *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964). The show closed almost immediately, but has since become a cult favorite; its title song remains a favorite of Sondheim's admirers.

Sondheim returned to the role of lyricist-for-hire one more time to collaborate with Hammerstein's old partner Richard Rodgers on *Do I Hear a Waltz?* in 1965. From then on, he would insist on writing both music and lyrics, although nearly five years would elapse before a new Sondheim musical opened on Broadway. Royalties from *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *Forum*, all of which were made into motion pictures, freed him to

develop projects of his choosing. In the meantime, he published a remarkable series of word puzzles in *New York Magazine*. Many critics have related his love of puzzles and word games to the dazzling word play of his lyrics, with their intricate rhyme schemes, internal rhymes, puns, and wide-ranging allusions.

Sondheim made a historic breakthrough as both composer and lyricist with *Company* (1971), a caustic look at love and marriage in contemporary New York City. The show marked a sharp break with Broadway's past and established Sondheim as the most inventive and daring composer working in the musical theater. *Company* was Sondheim's first collaboration with director Harold Prince, who had produced both *West Side Story* and *Forum*. Sondheim's second collaboration with Prince as director, *Follies*, paid masterful tribute to the song styles of Broadway's past, while deploying them to ironic effect in a poignant commentary on the disappointment of middle age and the corrosive effects of nostalgia and self-delusion. While Sondheim's admirers stood in awe of his accomplishments, his detractors claimed that his work was too bitter to win wide popularity and his music too sophisticated for popular success. His next production, *A Little Night Music*, put these doubts to rest. Its elegant, waltz-based score and warm humor charmed audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, while its signature song, "Send in the Clowns," became an unexpected pop standard.

Sondheim received Tony Awards for the music and lyrics of all three of these shows. The following year, the winning composer thanked Sondheim, "for not writing a show this year." Sondheim did find time in 1974 to write a show for a performance in the Yale University swimming pool, an adaptation of the classical Greek comedy *The Frogs*, with a script by his old friend Burt Shevelove. He also co-wrote the screenplay for the fiendishly intricate murder mystery *The Last of Sheila* (1973). From 1973 to 1981, Sondheim served as President of the Dramatists Guild, the professional association of playwrights, theatrical composers, and lyricists.

Never content to continue along comfortable or familiar lines, Sondheim and Harold Prince explored further new territory with *Pacific Overtures* (1976), an imaginative account of relations between Japan and the United States from the 1850s to the present. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979) adapted an early Victorian melodrama in a combination of Grand Guignol, bitter satire, and Sondheim's most complex score yet. *Sweeney Todd* enjoyed a healthy run and brought Sondheim another Tony Award. While a number of Sondheim's shows have enjoyed successful revivals in the commercial theater, *Sweeney Todd* and *A Little Night Music* have found a second home in the opera houses of the world, where classical standards of musicianship can do justice to their soaring scores.

Sweeney Todd marked the climax of Sondheim's long collaboration with Harold Prince. *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), adapted from a bittersweet Kaufman and Hart drama of the 1930s, was the last of their shows together. Although Sondheim and Prince remained close friends, they sought renewed inspiration in collaboration with others. Sondheim embarked on a partnership with playwright and director James Lapine.

The first fruit of their collaboration was *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), a work inspired by Georges Seurat's pointillist painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The play intertwines the story of Seurat and his mistress with that of a contemporary painter and his lover. *Sunday in the Park with George* was a solid

success and brought Sondheim and Lapine the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, a rare instance of the Pulitzer committee honoring a musical play. *Into the Woods* (1987), another collaboration with Lapine, sought the meaning inside some of the most familiar childhood fairy tales, and has been produced successfully all over the United States.

Between Broadway assignments, Sondheim has written scores for the films *Stavisky* (1974) and *Reds* (1981), and contributed songs to the films *The Seven Percent Solution* (1976) and *Dick Tracy* (1990). "Sooner or Later," written for *Dick Tracy*, won him an Oscar for Best Song. In 1990, Sondheim spent a term as the first Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theater at Oxford University. In his own country, he was honored with the National Medal of Arts.

One of Sondheim's most disturbing productions was *Assassins* (1990), an examination of the motives and delusions of the persons who murdered American presidents. *Passion* (1994), another collaboration with James Lapine, took a dark, intimate story of unrequited love and set it to music of heartrending poignancy. As the Broadway theater has turned to more predictable fare, Sondheim and his collaborators have sought out new venues for his increasingly daring work. His latest original production, *Bounce*, recounting the follies of the 1920s Florida land boom, opened in Chicago and Washington in 2003. Its script, like that of *Pacific Overtures* and *Assassins*, was written by the playwright John Weidman.

In 2005, Stephen Sondheim's 75th birthday was celebrated with all-star tribute concerts in New York, London, and Los Angeles. Over the last 50 years, Sondheim has set an unsurpassed standard of brilliance and artistic integrity in the musical theater. His music, steeped in the history of the American stage, is also deeply informed by the classical tradition and the advances of modern concert music. His words, unequalled in their wit and virtuosity, have recorded a lifetime of profound, unblinking insight into the joys and sorrows of life and love.

SOURCE: Academy of Achievement: A Museum of Living History
<<http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/pagegen/index.html>>.

ark With George is ideally suited and Sondheim's own aesthetic regarding the apparent contradictory musical and its content, which er and harmony, Sondheim de-

as that, whether it's contemporary ough it might strike you or others rmed as the picture. Yet its surface

nservative. My beliefs are conser- nd of art I like.¹⁹

with George was varied. Predict- like the show. Clive Barnes of ly News, and Howard Kissel of plaints that Sondheim's music the score, and that the charac- student at Harvard had written lies, used his influential posi- This review, together with the ilar weekly magazines and— indisputable reputation, ne- ical enjoyed a successful run. cs Award, eight Drama Desk g the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

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SONDHEIM ISN'T GRIM *Into the Woods*

Sondheim's prolific output continues unabated. While the wellspring of creative talent on Broadway seems to have run dry, Sondheim continues to develop the form of the musical theater. Although there are a number of smaller shows evolving in regional theater, Sondheim is the only American composer or lyricist to both consistently have his shows produced and never cease in his exploration of the endless possibilities of the genre. His latest collaboration with James Lapine confirms his apparently limitless creativity.

As a very young man Sondheim attempted, unsuccessfully, to musicalize *Mary Poppins*. Almost forty years later he and Lapine discovered fertile ground for their imaginations by creating an original tale of their own in which the characters' quests propel them into the more familiar world of such classic fairy tales as Cinderella, Jack and the Beanstalk, Rapunzel, and Little Red Ridinghood. Influenced by the theories of Carl Jung and by the insights of Bruno Bettelheim, whose work on the significance of fairy tales, *The Uses of Enchantment*, explores the darker Freudian ramifications of these stories, Sondheim and Lapine evolved a musical that manages to be delightful, melodic, and entertaining as well as intellectually astute and psychologically complex.

The themes that unite these disparate stories concern the difficulties of achieving maturity, the complex relationship between parent and child, and ultimately the necessity of recognizing human interdependence. Like a contemporary brothers Grimm, Sondheim and Lapine weave a magical fab-

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ric of witches, giants, and spells but never allow the audience to forget the serious thematic underpinnings of the work.

Into the Woods enjoyed a gradual evolutionary birth. Beginning as a reading at Playwrights Horizons, the work went through three workshop readings in New York, and a tryout in San Diego, before opening on Broadway to generally favorable reviews and garnering for Sondheim yet another Tony Award for best music and lyrics. As with all of Sondheim's work, neither critics nor public were unanimous in their response, but judging from the general tenor of the reviews and the enthusiastic approbation at the Tony Awards ceremony, Sondheim has finally gained the respect of all. He is universally acknowledged to be the foremost American exponent of his chosen art form and is accorded a kind of awe not generally associated with either the musical or with other living artists. Some critics may not like his work, but all recognize his innovative genius. This respect is clearly evident in an article in *Time* magazine dedicated to America's best: "Sondheim has steadily pushed toward—or beyond—the limits of what the score, the narrative, the very premise of a musical can be. More than anyone else writing today, perhaps more than anyone who came before, he merges a consummate mastery of what musicals have been with a vision of what they should become."¹ While lacking the daring innovation and heartrending emotional revelation of *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods* has a charm of its own.

Into the Woods opens with Cinderella, Jack and his Mother, and the original characters the Baker and his Wife in front of their fairy tale abodes bewailing their fate. With typical Sondheim style and finesse the characters' distinct desires are blended into a complex contrapuntal composition. The central motif is established in the opening words as Cinderella sings out plaintively, "I wish." This refrain is echoed by each of the characters and as the action progresses the consequences of these apparently innocent wishes are explored. These desires and the obstacles that will need to be overcome serve as the structure for the primary action of act 1.

The naive wishes of the youthful protagonists—contrasted with the weary cynicism of Jack's Mother—are further enhanced as a young Little Red Ridinghood adds her demands. This character, perhaps the most humorous in a Sondheim musical since the zany excesses of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, has a voracious appetite, which will lead to her problematic encounter with the Wolf. Their adventure exemplifies the best

Into the Woods

combination of sagacity and wit in the show. Little Red Ridinghood's singing of the refrain of the title song sets the tone of the entire musical. She is carefree. The jaunty rhythm and simple melody reflect her optimism. The lyrics appear almost naïve, but they possess the simplicity of fairytales and a cautionary note is repeatedly sounded:

Into the woods,
It's time to go,
I hate to leave,
I have to, though.
Into the woods—
It's time, and so
I must begin my journey. . . .

Into the woods
To bring some bread
To Granny who
Is sick in bed.
Never can tell
What lies ahead.
For all that I know,
She's already dead.²

It is this combination of delightful humor and suggestive bleakness that permeates all the songs in the score.

Each of the major characters needs to enter the dark entangled wood of their inner desires and journey through an elemental rite of passage; Little Red Ridinghood, who skips blithely into the woods, blissfully stuffing buns into her mouth, must learn the thrills and terrors of indulgence. Sondheim and Lapine combine an innocence and innuendo in each encounter between the Wolf and his plump young prey that is both extremely funny and unexpectedly poignant. There is a wonderfully lascivious song for the leering Wolf as he entreats the succulent young girl:

Hello, little girl,
What's your rush?
You're missing all the flowers.
The sun won't set for hours,
Take your time.

Here the comedy is perfectly tailored to character and action.

This synthesis of humor and insight is taken one step further when Little

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Red Ridinghood sings after she has been freed from the dark confines of the Wolf's belly. The conflict between parental advice and temptation is captured in her opening lines:

Mother said,
"Straight ahead,"
Not to delay
Or be misled.
I should have heeded
Her advice ...
But he seemed so nice.

The loss of innocence is suggested but Sondheim is not didactic:

And take extra care with strangers,
Even flowers have their dangers.
And though scary is exciting,
Nice is different than good.

His characters learn, but even with experience do not lose their ambivalence: "Isn't it nice to know a lot! / And a little bit not . . ."

Jack must be taught a similar lesson. Perhaps because he is intended to be a simple lad, he lacks Little Red Ridinghood's energetic appeal and obvious comic potential. Yet in this character, too, Sondheim synthesizes humor and pain. He composes a melancholy, melodic song of farewell for Jack to croon sadly to his beloved cow but undercuts the sentimentality with the black humor of the concluding lines:

I'll see you soon again.
I hope that when I do,
It won't be on a plate.

Jack, like Little Red Ridinghood, has an experience both stimulating and terrifying, and he too has to compromise his moral code to achieve his goals. The significance of his adventure is also revealed in song; his attitude is equally ambivalent:

When you're way up high
And you look below
At the world you've left
And the things you know,
Little more than a glance

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Is enough to show
You just how small you are.

Cinderella's journey is also fraught with danger and fulfillment. Her tale of family rejection and ultimate success is humanized in Sondheim's lyrics as she describes her experience at the ball to the enraptured Baker's Wife.

Cinderella
He's a very nice Prince.

Baker's Wife
And—?

Cinderella
And—
It's a very nice Ball.

Baker's Wife
And—?

Cinderella
And—
When I entered, they trumpeted.

Baker's Wife
And—?
The Prince—?

Cinderella
Oh, the Prince ...

Baker's Wife
Yes, the Prince!

Cinderella
Well, he's tall.

The Baker and his wife have a simple wish. They want a child. They have been cursed with infertility, however, by the vengeful "witch next door." In order to break her spell they must seek out:

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One: the cow as white as milk,
Two: the cape as red as blood,
Three: the hair as yellow as corn,
Four: the slipper as pure as gold.

These items, clearly, can only be found in the lives of the other more well-known characters.

In their struggle to wrest these articles from their rightful owners, the Baker and his wife must confront certain painful choices. Initially the Baker discovers that he must shed his false male independence and recognize his need for love, understanding, and cooperation. Sondheim conveys his character's struggle to accept this in a tender duet:

Baker

It takes two of us,
I thought for so long,
It's not true.
It takes two of us,
You came through
When the journey was rough,
It took you,
It took two of us.

In the couple's overwhelming desire to obtain their wish they lie and cheat, the consequences of which they must ultimately confront.

Sondheim intentionally modifies the intellectual complexity and sophistication of his previous work in the score of *Into the Woods*. Both lyrics and music express the stylistic purity of the fairy tale libretto and much of the score has a lively nursery rhyme quality. As Sondheim reveals:

What I'm trying to do with the score is to sprinkle it with ditties; I'm trying to do little sixteen-, thirty-two-, and eight-bar tunes, almost cartoonish except in a sort of contemporary style. Morals, and travelling songs. And these little tunes start to go strange in the second act. You see, the first act is fast and funny and light and the second act is less goofy and a bit darker, so I would like the score to reflect that.³

But Sondheim's simplicity is never trite, as musical director Paul Gemignani points out:

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There is a kind of Disney thought-pattern to much of the show and I mean that in the best sense. For instance, when someone dies, you hear a little sad music. The witch has specific chords. The underscoring points out certain things. The subject matter lends itself to all of this. But it's deceptively simple. There are all kinds of colors in the score, and a complex rhythmic intensity. It's written as a chamber music piece, and the challenge is to make the sound crystalline.⁴

Sondheim originally intended identifying each of the major characters with an individual style and musical motif. Although this proved to be too schematic a limitation, many of the characters are in fact defined by their stylistic motifs. Cinderella sings her romance in a light operatic soprano, while Jack and his mother express themselves in simple folk tunes and childlike rhymes. The Wolf's lechery is translated into a soft-shoe shuffle while the Witch uses a unique rap style. This use of recurring motifs is similar to the technique used in *Merrily We Roll Along*, in which motifs are used, repeated, and transformed throughout the piece. As Sondheim explains: "The structure of the score is in a sense like *Merrily* in that it's modular again. . . . The whole prologue is a series of sixteen vignettes, each of which has a musical structure. And then there's one tune that keeps popping up, which becomes the major theme of the evening."⁵

Not all the score and lyrics depend on the spare emblematic charm of a child's tale. The music is richly melodic and Sondheim substitutes a warmth for his usual erudition. The emotional turmoil of the characters, particularly of the Baker and his wife, is perfectly conveyed in the melodic and harmonic development of the score. These two characters simultaneously inhabit the worlds of humanity and fairy tale. In their essentially middle-class aspirations and failures they most clearly exemplify the desires and limitations of the audience. Sondheim cements this fusion of audience and character by having these two express themselves in the language and rhythms of a typical urban couple. It is their moral and emotional journey that the audience must share.

The interrelationships of the characters are marvelously convoluted. The Witch, whose spell has caused the Baker's Wife's infertility, reveals that her garden was raped by the Baker's father and that she has consequently claimed his sister, Rapunzel, whom she keeps locked in a tower. Rapunzel in turn is loved by Cinderella's Prince's brother. As the various characters stumble through the woods seeking to fulfill their wishes, they encounter each other, interact, and then send the plot off in another direction. There

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are no revolving bedroom doors, but in its intricate design the plot more closely resembles French farce than the clear linear didacticism of the traditional fairy tale.

Yet the darker underside of these children's stories is the real subject of *Into the Woods*. This does not mean that the musical is overtly symbolic or that its psychological substructure intrudes. Rather, its central themes of the pain of growing up and the difficulty of parent/child relationships are carried almost subliminally in the music and lyrics, while Lapine's labyrinth of a plot keeps characters and audience constantly tumbling forward into the tangled briars. Sondheim suggests the inner struggles and personal growth of the characters with a delicate hand. His songs lightly express their essential pain and then release the characters to the forward demands of the action. (Sondheim acknowledges that in many ways he found this score the most difficult to compose since writing *Forum*, because with highly plotted shows the songs must respite from the frantic action that, nevertheless, must not slow the pace.)

The titular theme song binds the various plots and musical motifs together, as the characters march innocently into the original world of their unconscious. They begin act 1 blithely asserting "The woods are just trees. The trees are just wood" but have to learn the inevitable consequences of pursuing their desires and compromising their integrity. This metaphysical journey is a familiar one for Sondheim characters, as Frank Rich points out in his review:

Like the middle-aged showbiz cynics who return to their haunted youth in *Follies* and *Merrily We Roll Along* or the contemporary descendant who revisits Georges Seurat in *Sunday in the Park with George* or the lovers who court in a nocturnal Scandinavian birch forest in *A Little Night Music*, Cinderella and company travel into a dark, enchanted wilderness to discover who they are and how they might grow up and overcome the eternal, terrifying plight of being alone.⁶

But the conclusions drawn from the lesson of this journey differ markedly from the impact of Sondheim's earlier work. The cynicism, isolation, and alienation implicit in other works is tempered with an unfamiliar plea for commitment and communal awareness. The naivete of youth is transformed into a sober acceptance of reality. Neither Sondheim nor Lapine finds this painful process of maturation daunting. As Sondheim discloses:

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I think the final step in maturity is feeling responsible for everybody. If I could have written "no man is an island," I would have. But that's what "No One Is Alone" is about. What I like about the title is it says two things. It says: no one is lonely, you're not alone—I'm on your side and I love you. And the other thing is: no one is alone—you have to be careful what you do to other people. You can't just go stealing gold and selling cows for more than they are worth, because it affects everybody else.⁷

And in describing the difference between the characters in acts 1 and 2, Lapine adds, "When you are young, you envision happiness in such an idealized way. As you get older you realize happiness involves a lot of problems. To me, that's not an unhappy kind of ending—it's just a more informed sense of happy, a happiness that's been earned."⁸ The characters in *Into the Woods* do not mourn their loss of innocence but embrace it as a necessary ingredient to growing up. Their simplistic, unambiguous desires are relinquished as they understand the complexities of adult responsibility.

The impetus for character growth is implicit in the concluding moments of act 1. Each of the characters has apparently achieved his or her goal, but each has had to compromise integrity to do so. Consequently, although they all jubilantly sing "Happy now and happy hence / And happy ever after," there is a sense of unease. This happy-ever-after has none of the tranquillity of perfection achieved in the final moments of act 1 of *Sunday in the Park with George*. This sense of disquiet is suggested in the very superficiality of the rollicking optimism of the song. Through their excessive zeal, Sondheim hints at the ephemeral quality of the characters' joy:

Into the woods to lift the spell,
Into the woods to lose the longing,
Into the woods to have the child,
To wed the Prince,
To get the money,
To save the house,
To kill the Wolf,
To find the father,
To conquer the kingdom,
To have, to wed,
To get, to save,
To kill, to keep,
To go to the Festival!

Into the woods,
Into the woods.

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Into the woods,
Then out of the woods
And happy ever after!

This ability to clothe a serious theme in a lively rhythm and convey significance in a comic mode is one of Sondheim's achievements. Despite its serious and emotional numbers, *Into the Woods* contains some of the funniest of Sondheim's material. "Agony," for example, is a lament by the two princely brothers about the frustrations of unrequited passion:

Both

Agony!

Cinderella's Prince

Misery!

Rapunzel's Prince

Woe!

Both

Though it's different for each.

Cinderella's Prince

Always ten steps behind—

Rapunzel's Prince

Always ten feet below—

Both

And she's just out of reach.

Agony

That can cut like a knife!

I must have her to wife.

Like "Lovely" in *Forum*, this song is given greater comic resonance when in act 2 it is reprised. The princes have now grown bored with their wives and long for new, unattainable maidens:

Cinderella's Prince

High in a tower—

Like yours was, but higher—

A beauty asleep.

All 'round the tower

Into the Woods

A thicket of briar
A hundred feet deep ...

Rapunzel's Prince

I found a casket

Entirely of glass—

(As *Cinderella's Prince* starts to shrug)

No. It's unbreakable.

Inside—don't ask it—

A maiden, alas,

Just as unbreakable ...

Act 2 journeys into apparently recognizable Sondheim territory. All the characters are ready to discover what follows "happily ever after." Rather than concentrate on the characters' individual problems—although it is clear that *Cinderella's* marriage is far from perfect, that wealth has not solved Jack's problem, that a screaming infant does not bring endless joy, and that the Witch having regained her former beauty has lost both her daughter and her power—Sondheim and Lapine chose instead to sublimate the individual problems by confronting the characters with a new danger. The wife of the giant killed by Jack returns to seek revenge. This communal threat, which has been interpreted by various critics to represent forces of evil as diverse as nuclear proliferation, AIDS, and the deranged individualism of Reaganomics, is a handy device that serves to reunite the characters. In the face of almost certain annihilation they learn to accept that only through cooperation can they hope to survive. The intricacies of this new plot development are less interesting, however, than the brief insights into the personal conflicts provided in the score. Two of the finest examples of this contemporary yet timeless angst occur in the evolving relationship of the Baker and his wife.

While wandering in the woods in search of the giant, the Baker's Wife encounters *Cinderella's Prince*. After their brief liaison the conflicts of fantasy and reality, romantic escapism and practicality are dramatized.

Baker's Wife

What was that?

Was that me?

Was that him?

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Did a prince really kiss me?
And kiss me?
And kiss me?
And did I kiss him back? . . .

Back to life, back to sense,
Back to child, back to husband,
You can't live in the woods.
There are vows, there are ties,
There are needs, there are standards,
There are shouldn'ts and shoulds.

Why not both instead?
There's the answer, if you're clever;
Have a child for warmth,
And a baker for bread,
And a prince for whatever—
Never!
It's these woods.

The Baker's Wife longs to combine the wondrous ardor of the Prince with the domesticity of a husband and child. During the course of the song she grows to accept that life demands an either/or. She decides romance is ephemeral and feels compelled to return to the world of reality. She dies, however, before she can rejoin her husband. Despite certain accusations to the contrary, I do not think that this death is intended to be in retribution for her adultery.

It is the Baker who must finally confront reality and the truths of being alone. His desire to escape responsibility is expressed in one of the most impassioned sequences of the show. Sondheim's ability to translate anguish into music and expose all the ambiguity of emotional conflict is exemplified in the Baker's cry:

No more riddles.
No more jests.
No more curses you can't undo,
Left by fathers you never knew.
No more quests.

Although he is dealing with perennial human problems, Sondheim does not lose the archaic world of fairy tale in the language of his lyrics. This ability to go to the center of contemporary urban grief and yet never let go of the particular created milieu is quintessentially Sondheim.

Sondheim and Lapine experimented extensively and made a number of

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alterations in the plot after the tryout in San Diego; they eventually decided, however, to keep the structure of the piece virtually unchanged. The most extensive revisions and additions to the score involved the role of the Witch. This part was played by a number of different actresses during the musical's evolution, but it was Bernadette Peters who finally opened on Broadway. Whether it was the choice of this actress or the intrinsic demands of the musical that prompted modifications, Sondheim decided to write new and significant material for this character, whose transformations are charted in song. As an ugly old crone she describes her ravishment in a bitter but humorous rap song:

He was robbing me,
Raping me,
Rooting through my rutabaga,
Raiding my arugula and
Ripping up the rampon
(My champion! My favorite!)

The justification of her expressive dedication to her daughter, Rapunzel, is set to a tender lament:

Why could you not obey?
Children should listen.
What have I been to you?
What would you have me be?
Handsome like a prince?

Ah, but I am old.
I am ugly.
I embarrass you. . . .

You are ashamed.
You don't understand.

Finally she is transformed into a beautiful but powerless woman who mourns the loss of her child and the uncontrolled violence that now pervades her world:

This is the world I meant.
Couldn't you listen?
Couldn't you stay content,
Safe behind walls,
As I
Could not?

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In a poignant threnody the Witch describes a world destroyed and points out the havoc wrought by selfishness:

It's the last midnight,
It's the boom—
Splat!
Nothing but a vast midnight,
Everybody smashed flat!

Her frantic attempts to shield her child by walling her up in a tower are clearly symbolic and she must learn:

No matter what you say,
Children won't listen.
No matter what you know,
Children refuse
To learn.
Guide them gently the way,
Still they won't listen.
Children can only grow
From something you love
To something you lose.

This message is eventually modified in the final moments of the musical. Having clashed in a passionate orgy of accusation ("Your Fault"), the characters finally band together and conquer the giant. A quieter, more mature but tentatively optimistic group sings:

Careful the wish you make,
Wishes are children.
Careful the path they take—
Wishes come true,
Not free. . . .
Witch
Careful the tale you tell.
That is the spell.
Children will listen . . .

This mood of tranquillity may surprise audiences accustomed to Sondheim's dryer, more acerbic tone. But Sondheim's work can never be confined to rigid categorizations. With each new musical he not only reshapes the genre but redefines his own talent. Perhaps the glow of mature well-being that emanates from the stage in the final moments of *Into the Woods* may entice a larger share of the Broadway audience into the theater. But Sondheim's achievement must not be measured in box-office receipts.

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Undeniably the public is gradually learning to appreciate Sondheim's genius. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of Broadway history is that while British imports dominated the New York stage, the revised version of *Follies* played to sold-out houses in London. It took sixteen years for this masterpiece to find a producer, but finally the theatergoing public is beginning to catch up with Sondheim. Despite the decision to soften the cynicism and add a more upbeat conclusion, the message of *Follies* remains unchanged. It is the key to understanding all of Sondheim's work. This farewell to the naïf and simplistic innocence of the past is Sondheim's tribute to all that came before him. There is nostalgia but no contempt. In its iconoclastic brilliance, *Follies* is also a clear monument to Sondheim's own creativity. Sondheim knows that the old forms must die to reveal the new art form that can evolve.

Although *Into the Woods* is gentler than his earlier musicals, this does not mean that Sondheim has deviated from his path of innovative individuality. The majority of his musicals do not express the unambiguous cheer and superficial gloss of the traditional musical, but Sondheim has discovered a more profound emotional and aesthetic truth. His audiences may be disturbed, but the dramatic catharsis engendered by his work is far more valuable than the soothing platitudes of escapist entertainment. *Into the Woods* has proven to be extremely popular and is performed extensively by regional and summer theater companies. Unlike most of Sondheim's earlier work, it was almost immediately transferred to London. The British, who for so long scorned the American musical, have finally embraced Sondheim. *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* have been presented to great critical acclaim on the West End stage. Sondheim was also awarded the honor of being the first visiting professor of contemporary theater at Oxford University, an endowed chair established by the British producer Cameron Mackintosh. Sondheim's admission to these hallowed halls of academe conclusively establishes his legitimacy and that of his chosen art form.

Only two of Sondheim's musicals, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *A Little Night Music*, have been adapted to the screen. Neither film really captured the charm of the theatrical original. Sondheim is, however, currently busy on two promising movie projects. He is collaborating with the Jim Henson Company on an adaptation of *Into the Woods* and working with director Rob Reiner and screenwriter William Goldman on an original movie musical. But most of his work remains

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unknown to the general movie-going public. This ignorance is diminishing. Sondheim has scored a number of films, including Warren Beatty's *Reds*. It is, however, his contribution to Beatty's *Dick Tracy* that has finally introduced the wit, charm, and music of Stephen Sondheim to a wider audience. His songs for the pop icon Madonna were immediately successful and won an Academy Award for Sondheim.

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FROM MADONNA AND MUPPETS TO MAYHEM *Assassins*

With all this popular acclaim and apparent acceptance into the mainstream, it may seem that Sondheim's work has finally become safe accessible to Middle America. On December 18, 1990, Stephen Sondheim once again displayed courage and artistic daring and surprised his audience. At Playwrights Horizons, the tiny off-Broadway space where *Sun in the Park with George* had been workshopped, Sondheim and his collaborator John Weidman began previews on a show that shocked almost as many people as it thrilled.

America was in a frenzy of patriotic fervor. War was brewing in the Persian Gulf and yellow ribbons were sprouting up all over the country. The jingoistic ultimatums of George Bush touched a responsive chord in the American public and there was a groundswell of chauvinistic patriotism for war. This seemed an inappropriate time for a piece of theater which not only dramatized the lethal power of guns but more significantly examined the lies implicit in the American Dream. Although *Assassins* was not written in response to the conditions in the Gulf (for Sondheim and Weidman's work long predated the conflict), the composer and librettist chose to create a polemical piece that questioned the very assumptions upon which the edifice of American idealism is based. So Sondheim acknowledged that the subject would alienate people:

...that certain subjects are not