

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 ever 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>>.