

# Stephen Sondheim

How is it you sing anything?

How is it you sing?

SWEENEY TODD

... has been refurbishing  
... the middle  
...

Musicals celebrate two things: abundance and vindictive triumph. Tall tales of the urban middle class, musicals revel in the spectacle of material well-being. They cajole the audience that if you don't have a dream, how you gonna have a dream come true? In its combination of script, song, and comic turn, the musical's formula meets the restless need of the American public for action and enchantment. The musical is mythic. People don't walk, they dance. Problems exist only to be sung or hitch-kicked away.

Until the mid-sixties, the best popular songs came out of the American musical. The confections of the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Frank Loesser, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II, Harold Arlen with E. Y. Harburg were the backbeat of American progress. Their songs created a climate of confidence and promise. These songs played a dramatic part in molding the myths of modern America. For nearly half a century, the musical has been refurbishing with new words and rhythms the well-worn clichés of the middle class. Social comment is as unwelcome to most Broadway producers as syphilis is to a whore. Yet, although its creators never admit it, the musical's fierce and mischievous commitment to the status

quo has made it unwittingly the nation's most effective political theatre.

The form itself is an endangered species. In 1929, there were about eighty new musicals on Broadway; in 1978, there were fewer than fifteen. The writing is on the fourth wall. Spiraling cost is one of the culprits in killing off the art form, but economics is only an accomplice to the crime. The musical has not been able to adapt to the changing social and psychological mood of America. Over the past two decades the musical's comforting faith in the nation's goodness has been betrayed by public events; and it has found itself with nothing to sing about. Almost all the "new" hit shows (*Annie*, *Cabaret*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *My Fair Lady*, *Hello, Dolly!*, *Irene*, *Funny Girl*, et cetera) are set in the past, where the complications of contemporary life can't shake an implacable hopefulness. Most of the smash hits of the past twenty years have been nostalgic for the elegance, innocence, lavishness, and values of earlier times. As America's Dream becomes increasingly threadbare, so has the art form that best promoted it. In this, at least, the musical remains the perfect metaphor for the time.

Much of the hope for the musical's survival resides in the acerbic intelligence of Stephen Sondheim. In collaboration with his director/producer Hal Prince, Sondheim has given a sense of occasion back to the musical and moved it away from the Shubert Alley formula of "No girls, no gags, no chance." At fifty-three, he is young enough to hanker for radical reform of the musical yet old enough to have absorbed professional expertise from the master craftsmen with whom he's worked: Oscar Hammerstein, Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins, Richard Rodgers, and Jule Styne. Lyricist and composer of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Pacific Overtures*, and grudging wordsmith to such great shows as *Gypsy* and *West Side Story*, Sondheim has become the American musical: a king on a field of corpses.

Traditional musicals dramatize the triumph of hope over experience. Characteristic of their flirtation with modernism, Sondheim's shows make a cult of blasted joys and jubilant despairs. He admits that joy escapes him. "If I consciously sat down and said

I wanted to write something that would send people out of the theater *really* happy, I wouldn't know how to do it." His mature musicals sing about a new American excellence: desolation.

Very few of the great Broadway songwriters grew up poor. Except for Berlin and Harburg, the majority were middle-class kids whose sense of the good life was part of their optimism. They'd always known abundance, and their songs registered a sense of wonder and excitement at the blessings of the material world. The truth of that magical well-being was proved by their fame and astronomic royalty statements. Sondheim, heir apparent to their stardom, shares, if not their world view, then this intimacy with affluence. The differences are generational. The sense of blessing has given way to boredom, the innocence to irony.

The precocious son of a dress manufacturer, Sondheim was educated at private schools in New York City and Bucks County, Pennsylvania, where he moved with his mother at the age of ten after his parents divorced. His ambition to write musicals was fired by the friendship and tutelage of Oscar Hammerstein II, who lived nearby. Sondheim wrote his first musical at fifteen. After graduating from Williams College as a music major, he won a two-year fellowship to study modern music with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt. Sondheim's mind and his training were more sophisticated than those of many of his musical comedy mentors, but he moved in their swank milieu. In Craig Zadan's *Sondheim & Co.*, Milton Babbitt remembers: "He had a very nimble mind and he was very musical. . . . He was also constantly diverted with parties. His social world . . . was very Park Avenue. . . . He was terribly bright and one could only wonder how serious he could afford to be. He had money, he was accustomed to frivolity, he was *not* accustomed to working terribly hard in a serious composer's sense."

No wonder that Sondheim's early lyrics mined the familiar mainstream vein of hope and attainment, and gave the musical eloquent expressions of its bourgeois dream. The sense of anticipation—that peculiarly American expectation of a magical insula-

tion from life (true love, fame, money)—was superbly defined in “Something’s Coming” from Sondheim’s first Broadway show, *West Side Story* (1957):

Could it be?  
Yes, it could.  
Something’s coming,  
Something good—  
If I can wait.

On the eve of the sixties, *Gypsy* gave voice to the mythology of pluck and luck that show business acts out. With the hyperbole of Kennedy’s New Frontier about to race the heart of the nation, skepticism was as “un-American” in the theatre as it was in the society. Whatever small irony the songs gave to the characterization of Rose and her girls in their uphill battle to show-biz fame and fortune, their message was clear: “Everything’s Coming Up Roses.” Rose—wholeheartedly in the show expresses the familiar democratic longing for mobility and success: “All the sights that I gotta see yet/All the places I gotta play”—is crazed in her ambitions for her daughters. In fact, as the song’s shift of pronouns makes clear, she is a backstage mother with nowhere to go and nowhere to play. Rose assumes the “father” role to her daughters and suffers the same fate as the rejected father. Her pride and self-fulfillment depend on her daughters leaving her behind and “doing better” than she. In “Rose’s Turn,” Sondheim dramatizes the pathos of her vicarious life. Rose pretends she’s a performer on the empty stage and spews out her anger and longing:

Why did I do it?  
What did it get me?  
Scrapbooks full of me in the background.  
Give ‘em love and what does it get you?

The Broadway musical can never bring itself to deny completely the ethic that sustains it. In *Gypsy*, the end justifies the means: an attitude the star system has made irresistible. Sondheim, in 1959 a would-be star, concurs with that selfishness. “Rose’s Turn” ends with Rose nearly shouting:

This time for me,  
For me!  
For me!

Rose and her daughter Gypsy Rose Lee reach some understanding at the finale. The audience gets its happy ending, its world view very much intact. The boldness of “Rose’s Turn”—one of Sondheim’s great numbers—is compromised. The victim’s moment is show-stopping. Rose’s crazed energy is gorgeous. Success may be punishing, but on Broadway it’s never really questioned. Instead, the waste of life is justified and forgiven in the thrilling moment of vindictive triumph the song provides. Whatever loss or impoverishment Rose feels, the audience knows that this whole million-dollar enterprise, with all its creative energy and star performers, is memorializing her vain obsession, and theirs.

This spirit of aggrandizement links Sondheim emotionally and technically to the traditional musical. “I believe *Gypsy* is one of the two or three best shows ever written,” Sondheim has said. “The last good one in the Rodgers-and-Hammerstein tradition.”

After *Gypsy*, Sondheim’s next three musicals, although experimental in lyric technique, were still very much part of the Broadway mainstream. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), a smash hit, used songs as respites from hilarious action; *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) was a legendary mess that tried to make songs comment on the action; and *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965), his uninspired collaboration with the granddaddy of the traditional musical, Richard Rodgers, left Sondheim wondering why such musicals needed to be mounted and Rodgers wondering why he’d worked with Sondheim (Rodgers: “I watched him grow from an attractive little boy into a monster”).

Sondheim sat out the turmoil of the late sixties in his Manhattan townhouse, reemerging in 1970 with *Company*, a musical in tune with the new, winded, post-protest times. Sondheim had come of

age: his own diminished sense of life and guarded emotions were now shared by a nation obsessed with its despair. Sondheim's glib toughness echoed the mood of the unromantic era. He became a phenomenon new to the Broadway musical, a laureate of disillusion.

A society that feels itself irredeemably lost requires a legend of defeat. And Sondheim's shows are in the vanguard of this atmosphere of collapse. He shares both the culture's sense of impotence and its new habit of wrenching vitality from madness (*Sweeney Todd* revels in murder). Sondheim's musicals do not abandon the notion of abundance, only adapt it. They show Americans a world still big, but in death-dealing, not well-being.

Sondheim's mature scores mythologize desolation. *Company* chronicles the deadening isolation of city life. *Follies* (1971) records in pastiche the death of the musical and dramatizes the folly of aspiration by staging the theatrical "ghosts" of the past. *A Little Night Music* (1973)—more attenuated and bitter than Ingmar Bergman's film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, on which it is based—depicts love among the ruins of a decadent and rootless Swedish aristocracy. *Pacific Overtures* (1976) shows the destruction of Japanese culture through the encroachment of the West. And *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), which deals with the corruption, betrayals, and soured ambition of a successful songwriter, is a study of gloom at the top.

"All writing is autobiographical," Sondheim has said. "You find something of yourself that fits the character." Most of Sondheim's characters are numbed survivors whose songs examine fear, loss, betrayal, and anger. At the finale of *Company*, the central figure realizes he needs to make a human connection, that "alone is alone not alive":

Somebody hurt me too deep,  
Somebody sit in my chair  
And ruin my sleep  
And make me aware  
Of being alive . . .

It is a passive climax. The spirit doesn't soar, it surrenders. Life is no longer dramatized as an adventure but as a capitulation. Impotence reigns, and all that is left to man's abused freedom is to justify its debasement. Typically, "Being Alive" lets the public applaud its emptiness: "Somebody force me to care,/Somebody let me come through."

The theme of the dead heart trying to resuscitate itself dominates much of Sondheim's work. As Alexis Smith sang in *Follies*: "How can you wipe tears away/When your eyes are dry?" The heart is so well defended from hurt that little can penetrate it. Instead of celebrating the ease and spontaneity of emotion that was the stock-in-trade of the traditional musical responding to a world it insisted was benign, Sondheim's songs report the difficulty of feeling in a world where, as his song says, there's "so little to be sure of." In *Anyone Can Whistle*, he first obliquely confronted the inhibitions that give his later scores their strained and haunting sense of incompleteness:

Maybe you could show me  
How to let go,  
Lower my guard,  
Learn to be free.  
Maybe if you whistle,  
Whistle for me.

As Sondheim dramatizes again and again, commitment is something in which he has no faith. He is at a loss for compelling words about love. He has publicly denounced "I Feel Pretty" from *West Side Story*, pointing out the lie of its alliteration ("I feel fizzy and funny and fine"): "Somebody doesn't have something to say." Sondheim's judgment of his song could be leveled at the emotional impoverishment of a great deal of his work. In his large and impressive catalogue, most of the love songs are written in collaboration with other composers, such as Bernstein ("Maria," "Somewhere"), Styne ("Small World," "You'll Never Get Away from Me"), and Rodgers ("Do I Hear a Waltz?"), whose music has a melodic grace Sondheim's music lacks. Sondheim can be brilliant in his diagnosis of the failure of relationships, but never

quite believable about their success. Romance, once the bread and butter of the musical, is now only stale crumbs on Sondheim's table.

While words for passion fail him, those for rage come easily. In the loveless and faithless worlds he writes about, anger is the surest test of feeling. Sondheim's scores bristle with the bitchy irony of deep-dish journalism. (Both make profit in exploiting pain.) Sondheim uses wit to sell his anger. In a superb song like "The Ladies Who Lunch," from *Company*, he lets mockery have a field day. With her checklist of the various bourgeois pastimes, the sozzled singer uses anger to stir things up and create the illusion of movement in a stalled life:

And here's to the girls who just watch:  
Aren't they the best?  
When they get depressed, it's a bottle of Scotch  
Plus a little jest.  
Another chance to disapprove,  
Another brilliant zinger.  
Another reason not to move,  
Another vodka stinger.

Mockery is disillusion in action; but by the time Sondheim brought it to Broadway, it had been accepted in American life. For a decade Pop Art had been throwing back at the public as fine art the detritus of industrial society—soup cans, beer cans, billboards, comic books. The youth culture made mockery a "lifestyle," and *Hair* (1968) brought it into show business. Even Hollywood, sniffing the winds of change, managed *M\*A\*S\*H*, a send-up of the war effort. In literature, satirists such as Joseph Heller (*Catch-22*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five*), Tom Wolfe (*Radical Chic*), Jules Feiffer, and Lenny Bruce found a wide new audience. Their satire identified the social cancer. But Sondheim never lets his maliciousness go beyond the wisecrack. The jeers at marriage in "The Little Things You Do Together" (from *Company*) are as facile as they are smug. By making delightful his

disgust with family, Sondheim sells the sickness while others before him sold the antidote:

The concerts you enjoy together,  
Neighbors you annoy together,  
Children you destroy together  
That keep marriage intact.

The metaphor for *Company*, Sondheim wrote in *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, was New York City: "We were making a comparison between a contemporary marriage and the island of Manhattan." The traditional musical made the city into a playground, from which the characters emerged undaunted and invigorated by New York's obstacles. Manhattan, *Company* suggests, is a lethal, suffocating battlefield where survival hardens the heart and infects all contact with desperation. Now, the battle is shown as hardly worth the prize. Sondheim put it brilliantly in "Another Hundred People":

And they meet at parties  
Thru the friends of friends  
Who they never know.  
Will you pick me up,  
Or do I meet you there,  
Or shall we let it go?

This song captures New York as the contemporary middle-class audience experiences it. The answering service, the television, the intercom, the beeper—all the devices that keep urban dwellers "in touch" also help them hide. They magnify the citizens' terrifying isolation. As Sondheim's song says, New York is "a city of strangers," its frantic pace at once a distraction and a destiny. If there is no peace here, at least there is exhaustion—a state of collapse in which neither the dead heart nor a death-dealing society matters. *Company* exalts fatigue; *Follies* exploits its cultural manifestation, nostalgia.

In discussing Hal Prince's concept for staging *Follies*, Sondheim is quoted as saying: "The Roxy opened in the late '20s with

a picture called *The Loves of Sunya*, a film which starred Gloria Swanson, and when it was torn down in 1960, she posed in the ruins with her arms outstretched. And Hal said that *that's* what the show should be about—rubble in the daylight."

Conceived as a show-biz reunion on the *Follies* stage, which is soon to be demolished for a parking lot, the show sets the musical dreams of the past against the brutal actualities of the performers' present lives. It is an extravaganza of irony. In its delectation of decay, *Follies* put older stars like Gene Nelson, Alexis Smith, Fifi D'Orsay, Ethel Shutta, Dorothy Collins back on the boards. This crude juxtaposition traded on nostalgia to make a point about it, and then. But *Follies'* appetite for carrion is at once breathtaking and sinister. Ghosts of Broadway's past are symbolically as well as literally materialized on the *Follies* stage. Of course, sculptors like George Segal and Edward Kienholz have been creating brilliant and ghostly environments since the early sixties. Their worlds are unrelenting and silent. In making death the subject of story and song, *Follies* also makes it spectacular. The audience is asked not only to watch decay, but to *love* it. Sondheim's "I'm Still Here," sung by Yvonne De Carlo (!), turns devastation into delight:

I've been through Reno,  
I've been through Beverly Hills,  
And I'm here.  
Reefers and vino,  
Rest cures, religion, and pills,  
And I'm here.

The show is full of Sondheim's smart pastiche numbers, which convey the dreams of fulfillment and success. At the finale—when, as the record notes report, "The cacophony becomes a fever and all the stops are let out as the nightmare fills the stage"—a character in white tie and tails tries to put over the old Broadway bravado. He can't finish the song.

What's the point of shovin' your way to the top?  
Live 'n' laugh 'n' you're never a flop. . . .

*Follies'* disenchantment isn't convincing because it hungers for traditional success. The show's numbers take their energy not from what they ironically reveal about their characters, but from their vision of the old mythic forms dusted off and lovingly put before an audience. "It's a schizophrenic piece," Sondheim said. "And it's supposed to be." But the split in the show's consciousness is deeper than he realizes. *Follies* is paralyzed by the nostalgia it wants to expose. "Hope doesn't grow on trees," a character says at the end. "You make your own." That's what the musical has always believed. *Follies* wants to detach itself from the form and content of the traditional musical, but manages only to return to the status quo ante.

In *Merrily We Roll Along*, Sondheim rages at success while enjoying the benefits of it. In Sondheim's fable of irony-ever-after, the Broadway composer and film producer Frank Shepard sings, flashing back over his career while addressing the graduating class of his former high school:

ALL: Best of all, we don't stop dreaming  
Just because we're rich—  
FRANK: And famous—  
ALL: And suntanned—  
FRANK: And on the covers of magazines  
And in the columns and on the screens  
And giving interviews  
Being photographed  
Making all the important scenes . . .

By going back in time, Sondheim lets the audience know the characters' futures before they do. In this way their dreams are stripped of enchantment. Sondheim gets both to exploit the traditional Broadway song motifs of anticipation, love, accomplishment, friendship and to piss on them from a great height.

Before it was art, the musical was fun. In trying to push the musical toward greater artiness, Sondheim's shows have lost much of their fun. As a lyricist, Sondheim disdains the enchant-

ers. "I cannot resist the temptation to add my choice for the most overrated lyricist," he wrote with typical acerbity in *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly's* poll of favorite lyricists. "Lorenz Hart, whose work has always struck me as being occasionally graceful, touching, but mostly, technically sloppy, unfelt and silly ('Lover, when I'm near you/And I hear you/Speak my name/Softly in my ear you/Breathe a flame')." But in their technical expertness, Sondheim's own songs often lose in resonance what they try to gain in statement. "The danger of argument in verse," Auden warns in *The Dyer's Hand*, "is that verse makes ideas too clear and distinct." Sondheim polishes every idea; the result is lucid and cold:

Every day a little death . . . g modern  
 Every day a little sting . . . belies the  
 In the heart and in the head.  
 Every move and every breath,  
 And you hardly feel a thing,  
 Brings a perfect little death.  
 (A Little Night Music)

"Anybody can rhyme 'excelsior' and 'Chelsea or,'" Sondheim has said. "I'd rather have an ear-catching thought than an eye-catching rhyme." This is more clever than clear. Sondheim speaks proudly of how his songs define and advance the characters in his musicals. But what distinguishes the characters in most of his later work is that they have no character. As he himself has pointed out, "In *Company* we were up against one of the oldest dramatic problems in the world: how do you write about a cipher without making him a cipher? In *Follies* we deliberately decided not to create characters with warts and all. Everybody would be, not a type, but an essence. . . . *Pacific Overtures* was an attempt to tell a story that has no characters at all." Sondheim makes an asset out of a liability and calls it a breakthrough.

The very nature of the lyric holds the musical back from taking issue with its society. Verse, Auden writes in *The Dyer's Hand*,

is unsuited for controversy, to proving some truth or belief which is not universally accepted, because its formal nature cannot but

convey a certain skepticism about its conclusions. "Thirty days hath September/April, June, and November" is valid because nobody doubts its truth. Were there, however, a party who passionately denied it, the lines would be powerless to convince him because, formally, it would make no difference if the lines ran: "Thirty days hath September/August, May, and December."

*Pacific Overtures* falls into this trap. When Sondheim's lyrics tell a story with no didactic purpose, as in his account of Admiral Perry's treaty-signing with the Shogun, "Someone in a Tree," the song can be astonishing. But at the finale, when the show strains for significance and lectures the audience about the perils of industrialization by showing modern Japan, the lyric is woefully inept. The form of "Next" belies the seriousness of its message:

Streams are dying,  
 Mix a potion.  
 Streams are dying,  
 Try the ocean—  
 Brilliant notion—  
 Next!

"I'm essentially a cult figure," Sondheim wrote in *The Dramatists Guild Quarterly* in 1979. "My kind of work is caviar to the general [public]." Sondheim has set himself up as an avant-gardist in an avowedly popular form. His shows aspire to be mass entertainment while remaining suspicious of the mass. "You have to remember that the average audience for a musical is by definition more traditionalist than for a straight play," he told *The Times* (London). "In America they still regard Kurt Weill as highly avant-garde. . . . But you must go on breaking down old musical forms and creating new ones, otherwise there's nothing but repetition."

But musical comedy is to music what Ping-Pong is to tennis. Only on Broadway could Sondheim's music sound radical. He uses a harmonic language developed in France between 1895 and 1910, notably in the art songs of Ravel. *A Little Night Music*, a show whose libretto confirms Voltaire's dictum that anything too silly to be said can always be sung, is musically Sondheim's most

interesting score. It contains moments of uncommon interest: the roving harmonies in "You Must Meet My Wife"; the metrical modulation in "The Miller's Son," in which the rhythm is constant and the meter changes; great lyrics matched to a memorable melody in "Send In the Clowns." Too often in his music, rhythmic monotony is overlooked because of the vivaciousness of his lyrics. Unlike Gershwin, who began his songs with introductions, Sondheim's songs begin with vamps—an approach that restricts his melodic invention and gives away to the audience what follows. The boldness of the initial musical gesture becomes monotonous because of this imposed pattern.

Even before the audience is successful if . . . Of all Sondheim's shows, *Company* is the most successful if not the most ambitious. The limitations in Sondheim's music—its cold technique, its nervousness with emotion, its stylish defensiveness—match the brittle world *Company* describes. It is not the absence of hits—"Send In the Clowns" is one of his few—but the lack of heart in Sondheim's music that has been his real . . . His music never risks embarrassment. Instead, he hides his deepest feelings behind style, which keeps both his music and his musicals from as yet reaching their fullness. In *Sondheim & Co.*, Leonard Bernstein speaks perceptively about Sondheim's inhibitedness, his fear of direct, subjective expression:

Nothing must be straight out subjectively because it's dangerous, because it reveals your insides. The fear usually takes the form of the fear of corniness, of being platitudinous, or whatever. Steve has very strong feelings and therefore must invent correspondingly strong defenses to guard against those feelings. . . . He's always been a little bit afraid of the word "beautiful," except as it can be reinterpreted as charming, decorative, odd, sweet, touching—touching in some oblique way.

To many people, including Bernstein, "Send In the Clowns" augured a breakthrough, the emergence of a personal language at once passionate and penetrating. But this now seems unlikely. *Pacific Overtures* followed *A Little Night Music*, another "smart"

idea that allowed Sondheim to dodge deep personal feelings in a virtuoso display of technique. *Sweeney Todd* (1979) updates Sondheim's appetite for disillusion in one ferocious metaphor of revenge, which turns his emotional limitation into an asset. It is not love but laceration that is the popular delirium; and Sondheim makes a dazzling opera of cannibalism and gore, but without a shudder.

Swing your razor high, Sweeney!  
Hold it to the skies!  
Freely flows the blood of those  
Who moralize!

Even before the play begins, the audience is submerged in a nether world where life is in retreat. An organ's funereal wheeze, a grave, gravediggers, a pile of dirt, "the deafeningly shrill" sound of a factory—all establish a dark and brutalizing world. A gourmand of griefs, Sondheim's first number, the brilliant "Ballad of Sweeney Todd," sets the stage for the production's boulevard nihilism, praising at once terror and technique:

He kept a shop in London town,  
Of fancy clients and good renown.  
And what if none of their souls were saved?  
They went to their Maker impeccably shaved. . . .

A visionary of death ("Sweeney heard music that nobody heard"), Todd is a demon barber, that is, he has a genius for killing. The ballad hymns his professionalism. A stickler for detail, Sweeney shares with the show a capacity for making emptiness elegant:

Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned,  
Like a perfect machine 'e planned.

Framed by a lecherous judge who plans to despoil his wife and later lay siege to his daughter, Sweeney is deported and returns to London many years later under his new name to look for his family. Convinced that his wife is dead and his daughter lost,

Sweeney sets about administering his rough justice from the barber's chair. *Sweeney Todd* allows Sondheim to make the dead heart heroic. Revenge, after all, is impotence in action.

Sweeney is quick to register his hatred of life and the hierarchical English class system that has victimized him:

At the top of the hole  
Sit the privileged few,  
Making mock of the vermin  
In the lower zoo . . .

By making Sweeney part of the walking wounded of both the class war and the corruptions of capitalism, the show justifies Sondheim's flexing his misanthropic muscle. Eugene Lee's brooding industrial set makes alienation beautiful. The production huffs and puffs to give the gory tale some political resonance; but there is nothing more hollow than a lecture on poverty by the well-fed Broadway elite, idealists with servants. The real issue of the play is hate, and hate alone.

In *Todd*, Sondheim has found his perfect hero. Although a nineteenth-century figure, Todd expresses a contemporary infatuation. In the absence of a destiny, revenge becomes his mission. Rage gives the illusion of strength to the powerless; and the ambitiousness of hate hides the sense of a stalled life. It is not in love but in murder that Todd approaches pure emotion. For Todd (and Sondheim), anger makes him feel alive. As Todd slits his first victim's throat, he is exalted. "I'm alive at last," he sings. "And I'm full of joy."

Other writers as various as Joe Orton and Tom Lehrer have exploited the macabre to satirize the rapacity of mankind, but with a difference. Behind their fury is a moral impulse. Their worlds admit a sense of sin; and their unrelenting laughter is essentially forgiving. But Sondheim simply fulminates. (In the play's epilogue, Sweeney rises from the dead and at the final beat stares malevolently at the audience, then exits slamming the door in its face.) The show merely gives Sondheim's anger an outing. Inevitably, the love interest in *Sweeney Todd* is flat, unconvincing and uninspired; but when Sondheim is scoring the moments of

revenge, the music bubbles with energy and confidence. Death is resolutely Sondheim's dominion. Yet even his appetite for blood is bloodless. Death, what Henry James called "that distinguished thing," is turned into a shallow camp in a world where evil holds no odium and life no significance. In the show's epilogue, Sondheim scolds the audience for clinging to dreams he helped mold, and so gets even for his own lyric past:

COMPANY: Sweeney wishes the world away,  
Sweeney's weeping for yesterday,  
Is Sweeney!

Sweeney, Sweeney!

(Pointing around theatre)

There! There! There! There!

TODD: To seek revenge may lead to hell,

MRS. LOVETT: But everyone does it, and seldom as well

BOTH: As Sweeney . . .

Are we all murderers? But if you call everyone murderers, then what do you call a murderer? Too chic to acknowledge blame or apportion guilt, *Sweeney Todd* celebrates the only value its creators believe in: expertise. The show is wonderful to watch, but the implications behind it are monstrous. In cheering the psychopathic style, *Sweeney Todd* is as traditional a piece of American fare as apple pie.

From My-Lai to El Salvador, the American public has become casual about absorbing catastrophe. And Sondheim has turned this numbed anguish into a mass product. His musicals claim victory for themselves as new departures, but they are the end of the musical's glorious tradition of trivialization. Sondheim's cold elegance matches the spiritual pall that has settled over American life. His musicals are chronicles in song of the society's growing decrepitude. They foreshadow the newest barbarism—a nation that has no faith in the peace it seeks or the pleasure it finds.