
EDITED BY
ROBERT
GORDON

# The Oxford Handbook *of* SONDHEIM STUDIES

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For my Dad,
Whose love of jazz
First ignited my life-long interest in Broadway musicals

# Contents

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# Notes on Contributors

**Stephen Banfield** is a musicologist and Emeritus Professor at the University of Bristol. His books include *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, winner of the Kurt Weill and Lowens awards; *Jerome Kern*, and several on British art music of the earlier twentieth century. Future publications will include social histories of music in an English region (the West Country) and in the British Empire, and a study of classical music's propensity to depict soundscapes.

**Geoffrey Block** Distinguished Professor of Music History at the University of Puget Sound, is the author of *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim and Lloyd Webber, Richard Rodgers*, and *Ives: A Concordat Sonata*, the editor of *The Richard Rodgers Reader*, and coeditor (with J. Peter Burkholder) of *Charles Ives and the Classical Tradition*. He is also General Editor of Yale Broadway Masters and Series Editor for Oxford's Broadway Legacies.

**Andrew Buchman** is a composer, who teaches in interdisciplinary curricula at the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. As a scholar of American musical theatre, he has contributed to the *Oxford Dictionary of American Biography* and written a number of papers for regional and national conferences on works by Stephen Sondheim, including an exploration of the musical sources for "Please Hello" from *Pacific Overtures*, and a comparison of stage and screen versions of *Sweeney Todd*.

**Bud Coleman** is a Professor at the University of Colorado Boulder and Chair of the Department of Theatre and Dance. A former dancer with Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, Fort Worth Ballet, Kinesis, and Ballet Austin, he has directed and choreographed over three dozen musicals, including *Company* in Vladivostok, Russia, under the auspices of the US State Department Cultural Envoy program. He was a Fulbright Lecturer at Waseda University and Kyoritsu Women's University in Tokyo. Bud's essays have been published by Cambridge University Press, St. James Press, Theatre History Studies: Choreography and Dance. With Judith Sebesta he edited *Women in American Musical Theatre*.

**Garrett Eisler** is Assistant Professor of Theatre Studies at Ithaca College. He earned a PhD in Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center, as well as an MA in English from NYU and an MFA in Directing from Boston University. In addition to essays for several academic journals (including *Studies in Musical Theatre*) he has contributed chapters to the *Best Plays Theatre Yearbook* series (Limelight Editions) and

written on contemporary theatre for the *Village Voice, Time Out New York*, and *American Theatre* magazine.

**Paul Filmer** is Honorary Research Fellow in Sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He has published work in sociological theory, methods of sociological research, and sociology of culture, including specific studies in sociology of art, literature, music, dance and popular culture. His work on sociology of the musical includes studies of both musical theatre and film musicals.

**Ben Francis** has written book and lyrics for two musicals: *Letter From An Unknown Woman* and *The Dancing Chef*. He has provided sketches for the long-running BBC radio comedy programme *The News Huddlines*, and his book *Christopher Hampton: Dramatic Ironist* was published by Amber Lane Press. He is currently completing a PhD on Stephen Sondheim at Goldsmiths, University of London.

**Joanne Gordon** Artistic Director of California Repertory Company and Chair of the Department of Theatre Arts at California State University Long Beach, is an award-winning director whose accolades include five Drama-Logue Awards, a Los Angeles Critics Choice Award and being named "Best of the Year" by the *Los Angeles Times*. As an internationally renowned Sondheim scholar, she has directed a number of this extraordinary artist's works worldwide, including the first Chinese-language production of *West Side Story* in Beijing. Published work includes *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*; frequent contributions to *The Sondheim Review* and *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*.

**Robert Gordon** is Professor of Theatre and Performance and Director of the Pinter Centre for Performance and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London. Publications include essays on postwar British theater, South African theater, Shakespeare, Wilde, Pirandello, and *Stoppard: Text and Performance*. His xperience as actor and director informs the survey of modern acting theory in *The Purpose of Playing*. *Harold Pinter: The Theatre of Power* was published in 2012 and his production *Pinter: In Other Rooms* toured to Berlin, Prague, Budapest, and Thessaloniki in 2011. He recently directed Kander and Ebb's *Steel Pier* in Brno, Czech Republic, and he is coediting the *Oxford Handbook of the British Musical*.

**Daniel Gundlachtt** is a counter tenor who has performed internationally with L'Opera de Paris, the Théâtre du Châtelet, the International Bach-Akademie Stuttgart, Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble, and throughout the United States and Canada. Currently based in Berlin where he maintains an active performing schedule, he studied musicology at the University of Illinois Urbana, where he received his master's degree in vocal accompanying under John Wustman (www.danielgundlach.com).

**Roger Hickman** is the Director of Musicology at the Cole Conservatory of Music at CSU Long Beach. Among his publications are the textbook *Reel Music: Exploring 100 Years of Film Music*, the monograph *Miklós Rózsa's Ben-Hur: A Film Score Guide*, the commentaries for the *Norton Scores*, and several articles for *The New Grove Dictionary of*

*Music*. Active as a performer, he is the music director of the Long Beach Ballet Company and the Four Seasons Youth Orchestras, and he has guest conducted a number of symphonies, including those from San Diego, Indianapolis, and Dallas.

**Olaf Jubin** is Reader in Media Studies and Musical Theatre at Regent's University London and a Visiting Lecturer on the MA in Musical Theatre at Goldsmiths, University of London. He obtained his PhD from the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Germany and has written and coedited several books, among them a study of the German dubbing and subtitling of Hollywood musicals and a comparative analysis of reviews of the musicals of Sondheim and Lloyd Webber. He has published essays on the reception of Sondheim in Germany and on the London version of *Follies*, and is coediting the *Oxford Handbook of the British Musical*.

**Raymond Knapp** Professor of Musicology at UCLA, has authored *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (winner of the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism) and *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*, along with many articles on related subjects, and has coedited *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*. His other books include *Symphonic Metamorphoses: Subjectivity and Alienation in Mahler's Re-Cycled Songs*, and he is currently working on a book titled *Surviving Absolute Music: Haydn, German Idealism, and the Persistent Dualities of Music in the New World*.

**Robert Lawson-Peebles** worked at the Universities of Oxford, Princeton, Aberdeen, and Exeter. Among other positions, he has been a Fellow of the Salzburg Seminar and a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellow. He has published three books on the cultural history of the American environment, a history of earlier American Literature, and over ninety articles on subjects ranging from Sir Walter Ralegh to the relationship of ideology and the arts. He has a lifelong interest in American music. He edited *Approaches to the American Musical*, and is currently working on a two-volume history of the cultural impact of jazz in Britain.

**Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen** is a Senior Lecturer in Drama at Bath Spa University where she teaches American Drama and Musical Theatre. She has an MA in Text and Performance Studies from Kings College, London/RADA, and a PhD in Theatre from Columbia University. Dr. Lundskaer-Nielsen was an Associate Producer of the New York Musical Theatre Festival and worked for two years for the British writers' organization Mercury Musical Developments. She is the author of *Directors and the New Musical Drama: British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 90s*.

**Nathan R. Matthews** is a music director and conductor, director, composer, pianist, and educator. Matthews has composed a music theater work, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. He conceived, orchestrated, and arranged *It Goes Like It Goes, The Music of David Shire*. Matthews has worked on Broadway: *Children and Art, A Tribute to Stephen Sondheim on the Eve of his 75th Birthday; Amadeus*; off-Broadway; at the Santa Fe Opera; and on concert tours for Columbia Artists. He is producing Artistic Director of the Riverside

Opera Ensemble, New York City and Associate Professor and Director of Music Theatre at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

**Marianne McDonald,** PhD, MRIA, Professor of Classics and Theatre, University of California, San Diego, has over 250 publications. She is the author of *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy*, coeditor of *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, and her latest book is *Space, Time, and Silence: The Craft of Athol Fugard*. Her translations (all of Greek Tragedy) and her own award-winning plays are performed nationally and around the world. Her latest plays are *A Taste for Blood*, a vampire play set in Dublin, and *Peace*, about a dysfunctional Irish alcoholic family, with a ghost as commentator.

**Robert L. McLaughlin** is Professor of English at Illinois State University. He has published widely on postmodern literature and culture, particularly on the work of Thomas Pynchon. His articles on Stephen Sondheim have been published in the *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* and the *Sondheim Review*. He is currently completing a book on Sondheim and postmodernism. He is the author, with Sally E. Parry, of *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II* and the editor of *Innovations: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Fiction*.

**David Savran** is a specialist in American theater, music theater, popular culture, and social theory. He is the author of eight books, most recently *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theater, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class*, winner of the Joe A. Callaway Prize. He has served as a judge for both the Obie and the Lucille Lortel awards and was a juror for the 2011 and 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Drama. He is Distinguished Professor of Theatre and holds the Vera Mowry Roberts Chair in American Theatre at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**Robynn J. Stilwell** teaches at Georgetown University. Her research interests center on the meaning of music as cultural work, including the interaction of music and movement in such media as film, video, television, dance, and sport. Publications include work on Beethoven and cinematic violence, musical form in Jane Austen, whiteness and rockabilly, French film musicals, psychoanalytic film theory and its implications for music and for female subjects, and the boundaries between sound and music in the cinematic soundscape. The current project is a study of modality in television, drawn from its precedents in film, theater, radio, and concert performance.

**Scott F. Stoddart** is the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts at the Fashion Institute of Technology, SUNY. He has published on the fiction of Henry James, E. M. Forster, and F. Scott Fitzgerald; the musical plays of Stephen Sondheim; and the films of the Coen Brothers, Jane Campion, Jack Clayton, John Ford, Oliver Stone, and Martin Scorsese, and on the image of the president in Hollywood film and television, including *The Adams Chronicles* (1976). He is author of *The 1980s: American Popular Culture through History* and editor of *Mad Men: Critical Essays on the Television Series* (2010). He is currently writing *"Queer Eye" for a "Straight Dick": Contextualizing the Queer Villain in Film Noir*.

**Joseph Swain** is author of *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, which won ASCAP's Deems Taylor Award in 1991. Other books include *Musical Languages, Harmonic Rhythm: Analysis and Interpretation*, and *Sacred Treasure: Understanding Catholic Liturgical Music* (published by Liturgical Press).

**Dominic Symonds** is Reader in Drama at the University of Lincoln. His research focuses on poststructuralist approaches to the musical. He is joint editor of *Studies in Musical Theatre* (Intellect) and founded the international conference Song, Stage and Screen. He is also coconvenor of the music theater working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research. He has recently coedited two collections of essays for the IFTR, *The Legacy of Opera: Reading Music Theatre as Experience and Performance* and *Gestures of Music Theatre: The Performativity of Song and Dance*. His monographs *We'll Have Manhattan: The Early Work of Rodgers and Hart* and *Broadway Rhythm: Imaging the City in Song*, will appear in 2014.

**Millie Taylor** is Professor of Musical Theatre at the University of Winchester. Before becoming an academic she worked as a freelance musical director for almost twenty years, which included two productions of *Sweeney Todd*. Recent publications are *British Pantomime Performance, Musical Theatre, Realism and Entertainment*. In January 2012, she was guest editor of a special issue of *Studies in Musical Theatre* on "Voice and Excess." Forthcoming publications (both with Dominic Symonds) are an edited collection, *Gestures of Music Theatre: The Performativity of Song and Dance,* and a text book, *Studying Musical Theatre*.

**David Thomson** is film critic for the *New Republic* and he has written for both *The Independent* and *The Guardian* in London. His books include *The Biographical Dictionary of Film* (now in its fifth edition), *Have You Seen…? A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films*, and, most recently, *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies and What They Did to Us*. He lives in San Francisco, where he saw a concert performance of *Sweeney Todd* as important to him as seeing *Into the Woods* on Broadway.

**Keith Warner** is an internationally renowned theater and opera director. In the last thirty years he has directed over 150 operas, plays, and musicals in fourteen countries worldwide. He is celebrated for his productions of Wagner, including *Lohengrin* in Bayreuth and *Ring Cycles* in Tokyo and London (Covent Garden). He championed subsidized companies taking on the Sondheim canon in the early 1980s and directed *Pacific Overtures* at English National Opera, and *Being Alive*, a gala for Aids Charities at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London. He will direct a new production of *Sweeney Todd* at opera houses in Copenhagen, Houston, and San Francisco.

**Matt Wolf** is London theater critic of the *International Herald Tribune*. He spent thirteen years as London drama critic for *Variety* and more than twenty years as arts and theater correspondent out of London for the Associated Press. His first, and formative, Sondheim production was the original Broadway version of *Sweeney Todd*, which he saw

during his freshman year at Yale and returned to many times. He has lived in London his entire professional life.

**Stacy Ellen Wolf** is Professor in the Program in Theater and Director of the Princeton Atelier in the Lewis Center for the Arts at Princeton University. She is the author of *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* and *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*, and coeditor, with Raymond Knapp and Mitchell Morris, of *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*.

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# SONDHEIM STUDIES

# INTRODUCTION

Like Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* (1950), the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), Kander and Ebb's *Cabaret* (1966) and *Chicago* (1975), virtually all of Sondheim's musicals are classics of American musical theater. Within a decade of their first performances, each show had attracted a cult following that led to major revivals in more or less continuous cycles. Since its 1970 premiere on Broadway, *Company* has been revived twice in New York and twice in London. In addition to large-scale regional productions and a legendary concert staging in 1985, *Follies* (1971) received its third Broadway revival in 2011, while it has been fully staged three times and been given a number of concert stagings in London. In the past decade, *Sweeney Todd* (1979) has been revived three times to great acclaim in the West End, and once on Broadway. Highly successful revivals of *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) and *A Little Night Music* (1973) transferred from the West End to Broadway in 2008 and 2009 respectively, and in 2012 a revelatory London production of *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) garnered what must surely be the most universal praise ever accorded the production of a Sondheim musical.

Like Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, George Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hammerstein before him, Stephen Sondheim has achieved iconic status in American culture. What makes his work so important in a genre that has most often been viewed as commercial entertainment rather than art? Since 1970 the shows to which he has contributed have been the most widely debated, most artistically ambitious, and most experimental in approach to form in the musical theater. They have achieved the status of modern classics because, although they are not among the longest running on Broadway or in London, they have been more frequently revived On- and Off-Broadway, in opera houses and in regional and amateur theaters around the United States, in Britain, and occasionally elsewhere than those of any artists in the field since Rodgers and Hammerstein. *Company* represents a new paradigm of nonlinear musical structure, utilising elements of musical comedy[1] and the musical play[2] to create a postmodern form commonly—although unsatisfactorily in Sondheim's view—labelled the "concept" musical.[3] In sharp contrast to the work of his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein, the musicals to which Sondheim has contributed are commonly regarded by scholars in the field of popular entertainment as the most consciously and consistently critical of American society and values.[4] The fact that they are studied in music, theater, literature,

and cultural studies courses at many universities is a further indicator of their cultural status.

More than forty years after Roland Barthes proclaimed "the death of the author,"[5] and notwithstanding Sondheim's own insistence on the importance of his collaboration with talented directors like Harold Prince and James Lapine, as well as respected librettists such as Arthur Laurents, Burt Shevelove, Larry Gelbart, George Furth, James Goldman, Hugh Wheeler, and Jerome Weidman,[6] it is Sondheim alone who has achieved the status of *auteur*.[7] In various ways, the chapters in this volume explore the paradox of a highly original auteur operating so willingly as a collaborator—a paradox that becomes unavoidable when art is created in an industrial context.

The analysis of a musical is a complex and often risky business. Given its hybrid form, there is no consensus among musical theater scholars with regard to an appropriate discipline-specific terminology or methodology for the analysis of musico-dramaturgical structure. It may well be the case that a single analytical approach is untenable or even undesirable. Whatever the case, the scope and ambition of Sondheim's work as composer–lyricist—no matter with whom he collaborates as librettist—constitute a peculiar problem for scholar and critic, in part as a consequence of his dramaturgical ambitions as songwriter and composer of sung scenes:

> When I'm writing dramatic stuff, I'm a playwright. This is a worked-out scene, and I can tell the actress how to play this scene, and the music is part of the dialogue. I can tell her why the music gets quick *here*, why it gets slow here, why there's a ritard *there*, why there's a so-called key-change *here*… because I have reasons.[8]

Conceptually, the hybrid mixture of component parts in any musical—dialogue, action, music, lyrics, dance, and scenography—poses a problem for analysis. Ideally the complex conjunction of elements that constitutes each moment of a musical should be comprehended as a musico-dramaturgical gestalt, whose separate elements interact in performance to create a hybrid, which is neither song nor dance nor spoken drama nor mime nor music, but a new ensemble generated from a synthesis of their various possible permutations. Even a relatively straightforward song-and-dance number like "All I Need Is the Girl," from *Gypsy* (1959), is conceived as a complicated game of acting, singing, dancing, and instrumental musical accompaniment, employing the different combinations of acting-music, acting-singing-music, acting-singing-dancing-music, acting-dancing-music, situated in a particular scenic location that indicates both place and time period, and is lit in a particular way. While the number may be fully realized only when music and lyrics are staged by a director and a choreographer, the elements of scenography and dance must, in schematic form, be imagined as an aspect of its composition.[9]

In response to the extraordinary heterogeneity of the musical as a genre and in recognition of the limitations of their own specialist expertise, critics understandably tend when writing about individual examples to focus on the element they are best qualified to comprehend. In order to exploit the full range of complementary methodological and competing critical perspectives available, this *Handbook* adopts a multidisciplinary

and occasionally an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of Sondheim's musicals. Musicological and dramaturgical scholars, literary and film critics, and musical theater practitioners are invited to explain his radical reinvention of the artistic form of the Broadway musical as a series of creative responses to various traditions of artistic innovation and popular entertainment, while cultural critics, historians, and sociologists reflect on the meaning of these musicals as reactions to the changing sociocultural contexts in which Sondheim and his collaborators have been living and working.

Chapters in the first section ("Intertextuality and Authorship: Toward Nonlinear Forms") explore problematic questions of authorship peculiar to the cultural milieu of Broadway musical theater, tracing the play of intertextuality, direct influence, and original innovation from a number of complementary perspectives in order to identify authorial strategies as responses to the traditions of art and commercial theater that confront Sondheim and his collaborators with competing creative possibilities. In demonstrating how an artist as ambitious as Sondheim brings into play intertexts as wide-ranging as Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* (1970), three stage melodramas about Sweeney Todd from 1847, 1968, and 1971, the film *Hangover Square* (1945), the sonata form of the classical symphony, Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, César Franck, and the Dickensian musical, Stephen Banfield (Chapter 1) identifies Sondheim's genius as his extraordinary ability to integrate the commercial values of the Broadway musical with the aesthetic ideals of a highly cultivated auteur. Banfield's multisensory analysis of "God, that's Good," as a sung scene in act 2 of *Sweeney Todd*, serves as a model analysis of the interplay of multiple sign systems operating in the performance of a single musical number.

Robert McLaughlin (Chapter 2) demonstrates how the postmodern sensibility informing Sondheim's musicals from *Company* to *Road Show* (2010) manifests itself through the fracturing of the typically linear narrative of the Rodgers and Hammerstein book musical and through the experimentation with self-reflexive forms that subvert realist modes of representation to expose the uncertainties of the contemporary moment and to subject modern American life to interrogation from radically altered perspectives. Dominic Symonds (Chapter 3) further explores the formative influence of Oscar Hammerstein II as mentor to the young Sondheim, tracing Sondheim's elaboration of Kern and Hammerstein's innovations in the use of the "sung scene" as a dramaturgical unit through a detailed analysis of *A Little Night Music*, and illustrating how Sondheim deploys the palindrome—a structural pattern modeled on Rodgers and Hammerstein's formal experiment in their groundbreaking *Allegro* (1947) *South Pacific*—as a compositional principle in *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) and *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Chapter 4 interrogates Sondheim's response to the mentorship of Hammerstein from a different angle. By highlighting the placement of songs as self-standing "turns" within what in performance recalls a series of items on a burlesque or vaudeville bill, I analyze the dramaturgical technique of songs that empower comic performers to act out the logic of character and plot in a metatheatrical style that pays knowing homage to the simple clichés of early musical comedy. The chapter demonstrates how, by avoiding the pseudonaturalistic conventions of the musical play Sondheim frees himself and his later collaborators to experiment with postmodern forms of nonlinear narrative. David

Savran (Chapter 5) elaborates on the topic of intertextuality by interrogating *Anyone Can Whistle*'s relationship to the theater of the sixties. His incisive analysis of Sondheim and Laurents's absurdist satire on conformism contextualizes the musical as a response to the changing sociocultural and aesthetic values of the Off-Off-Broadway theater scene in the early sixties, explaining the show's ambivalent and unsatisfactory resolution as a result of its anomalous positioning on Broadway as an avant-garde musical aiming for commercial success in a highly conservative environment.

The industrial context of production reinforces the truism that musicals are not written but rewritten. The second section ("The Art of Making Art") concentrates on aspects of craft and the aesthetic and technical concerns motivating the process of collaboration with producers, directors, scenographers, orchestrators, actors, and musicians under the material and economic circumstances of the Broadway industry. Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen (Chapter 6) examines the seminal role of producer and director Harold (Hal) Prince in the fashioning of musicals from *Company* to *Merrily We Roll Along*, identifying the formative nature of his contribution to the initial conception, visual realization, and thematic coherence of the shows and arguing that his work with Sondheim offered a new approach to production processes in the industry. Andrew Buchman (Chapter 7) complements these reflections on the problems and possibilities inherent in such a collaborative working process to provide a detailed outline of the many revisions by Sondheim and George Furth of *Merrily We Roll Along*, from its initial failure on Broadway in 1981 through a series of revivals, culminating in a more or less definitive version in 2002. Bud Coleman (Chapter 8) focuses on the function of scenic design and dance in accomplishing the full expression of each musical's visual conception, highlighting in particular the crucial contributions of scenographer Boris Aronson, director and choreographer Michael Bennett, and director, playwright and visual artist James Lapine to the development of *Company, Follies*, and *Sunday in the Park with George*, and illustrating the collaborative nature of musical theater creation. Nathan Matthews (Chapter 9) collects first-hand accounts of the artistic aims of a number of celebrated orchestrators of Sondheim musicals and collates their commentaries to build up a picture of a recurring phenomenon in Sondheim performance over the last decade—the reorchestration of these shows for different (and smaller) groups of musicians. The impact on musical performance of John Doyle's surprising use of "actor-musicians" in *Sweeney Todd, Company*, and *Merrily We Roll Along* in small theater spaces is explored by several orchestrators. Garrett Eisler's chapter on the various incarnations of *Road Show* (*Wise Guys* and *Bounce*) (Chapter 10) takes up the topic of revision to examine Sondheim and Weidman's relentless search to develop an appropriate musico-dramatic form for a subject that had originally attracted Sondheim as long ago as 1954, further illuminating the intricately interrelated processes of writing and staging entailed in the construction of a musical.

Chapters in the third section of the book ("Sondheim in Performance") engage with the notion of the musical as a performance event, exploring different aspects of the meaning of the works as performances, as well as taking some preliminary steps toward constructing a production history of the Sondheim canon. Olaf Jubin's in-depth explication

(Chapter 11) of the way patterns of doubling in the casting of James Lapine's production of *Sunday in the Park with George* generates new insights into the way meaning can be inherent in performance and production as much as in the forms of written composition. Through careful comparison of the attitudes towards art in act 1 (1884) and act 2 (1984), his reading of the acting and staging offers a concrete exemplification of the self-reflexive quality so typical of Sondheim's work. Joanne Gordon's personal account (Chapter 12) of the reception of her own production of *Assassins* (1990) in Los Angeles (2007) analyzes the significance of a performance of this controversial piece within the sociocultural moment of the Iraq War, offering a provocative view of the politics of Sondheim performance in the United States. Matt Wolf employs his extensive experience of the production and reception of Sondheim's musicals in the United Kingdom (Chapter 13) as an American theater reviewer based in London to identify the wide range of interpretive approaches by British directors in both subsidized and commercial theaters to a number of Sondheim's works whose repeated revival soon gave them the status of modern classics. As an international opera director whose 1987 production of *Pacific Overtures* (1976) for the English National Opera introduced Sondheim to the British opera house, Keith Warner reflects on both the pleasures and challenges of performing these musicals in international opera houses (Chapter 14), locating Sondheim's artistic achievement at the point of intersection between popular and high culture and investigating the impact of increasing commercialization on art produced within the subsidized sector.

The fourth section of the *Handbook* ("Sondheim across the Media") addresses Sondheim's interest in and sensitivity to the range of audiovisual media, with chapters exploring his work for cinema and television, his adaptations of two films into stage musicals and the screen version of *Sweeney Todd* (2007). Sondheim's love of cinema is well documented, but his collaboration with James Goldman in the creation of a rare original television musical and his songs and soundtrack music for films have seldom been subjects of sustained critical commentary. Robynn Stilwell (Chapter 15) offers a detailed, interdisciplinary explication of the absurdist musical dramaturgy of *Evening Primrose* (1966), illustrating the writers' skilful integration of television studio drama techniques with songs to shape a unique piece that is commonly regarded as the earliest manifestation of Sondheim's distinctive voice as a mature composer. Geoffrey Block (Chapter 16) examines in some detail the step-by-step process through which two films, Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955) and Ettore Scola's *Passion d'Amore* (1981), were transformed by Sondheim–Wheeler and Sondheim–Lapine into the stage musicals *A Little Night Music* and *Passion* (1994), while Roger Hickman (Chapter 17) broadens the scope of the volume by taking into consideration individual songs written by Sondheim for several films, and focusing in some detail on the placement and meaning of the five songs he wrote for Warren Beatty's *Dick Tracy* (1990) within the film's narrative scheme. His notion of Sondheim's "cinematic" approach to musical theater paradoxically informs the musicological analysis of the scores for Beatty's *Reds* (1981) and Alain Resnais's *Stavisky…* (1974). In direct contrast with Sondheim's own opinion that Tim Burton's commercially successful film version of *Sweeney Todd* is the most effective transfer of a stage musical to the screen, David Thomson employs his

compendious knowledge as a commentator and reviewer of cinema to offer an incisive critique of the film's failure to translate the unique qualities of the stage musical into a potent cinematic language (Chapter 18).

In the fifth section of the collection ("Sondheim across Genres"), writers reflect on Sondheim's subtle and often ironic exploitation of genre conventions. Questions are raised concerning the exploitation of pastiche and parody, framing strategies, and the manipulation of audience expectation by the composer-lyricist and his collaborators, as audience responses to individual works are affected by the sophisticated deployment of recognizable conventions and styles of operetta, melodrama, kabuki theater, tragedy, musical comedy, opera, revue, vaudeville, burlesque, and the musical play. Four chapters explore the transformation of conventional subject matter by Sondheim and his collaborators through a process in which a wide range of preexisting musical and theatrical genres are reinvented through the play of modern sensibilities on older forms. Joseph Swain's chapter on *A Little Night Music* (Chapter 19) identifies its musical and dramaturgical debt to the tradition of Viennese operetta in order to demonstrate the ways in which Wheeler and Sondheim subvert the most recognizable conventions of the genre to create a more cynical piece— "whipped cream with knives" in Harold Prince's words.[10] Marianne McDonald's comparison (Chapter 20) of Sondheim's first adaptation of Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (written with Burt Shevelove in 1974) with the expanded version (in collaboration with Nathan Lane in 2004) reveals two contrasting responses to ancient Greek comedy, the first of which is sensitive to the mystical and poetic strands of Aristophanes' original whereas the latter highlights the crudely sexual innuendo that animates the biting political satire of a society at war. Millie Taylor's chapter on *Sweeney Todd* (Chapter 21) reveals how Sondheim's deployment of music and song to evoke depths of feeling and intimations of psychological complexity produces tragedy from the stock melodrama of an urban myth whose various manifestations haunt popular nineteenth- and twentieth-century theater and film. Ben Francis (Chapter 22) responds to Sondheim and Lapine's post-Bettelheim use of fairy stories by undertaking a close reading of their multiplicity of intertwined narrative structures to identify a thematic motif of disenchantment in *Into the Woods* (1987), showing the quest for mature psychological and moral insight in the musical to be not only an underlying aim of Sondheim's alternative versions of popular entertainment archetypes but also a subversion of Bettelheim's notion of the psychological function of fairy tales.

Chapters in the final section ("Sondheim, Identity, and Society") engage with questions of cultural, political, and personal identity posed by Sondheim's musicals within the context of contemporary American society. Stacy Wolf's judicious analysis of the representation of women in Furth and Sondheim's *Company* (Chapter 23) problematizes gender as an issue in the Sondheim canon that has until now received little serious attention. By pointing to the contradiction between the quirky intelligence and emotional energy of a range of female roles that have proved gifts for actors, and the restrictions placed on these characters by the play's prefeminist assumptions concerning their socioeconomic status, Wolf reveals a significant "blind spot" within Sondheim's neoliberal political construction and opens up a potentially fertile field for future critics.

Robert Lawson-Peebles' examination (Chapter 24) of the artistic aims of *Follies* in the context of a parallel consideration of Ravel's *La Valse* enables a process of reflection on Goldman and Sondheim's Proustian retrieval of the vanished interwar culture exemplified by the Ziegfield—and equivalent— "Follies" shows. Explication of the musical's multiple layers of allusion to both popular culture and high art of the period reveals the complex ambivalence generated in subjecting the mid-century myths of American society to the harsh light of the post-Vietnam moment, not merely indicating the astonishing variety of Sondheim's musical sources but also exposing his critique of their ideology. As a sociologist, Paul Filmer is concerned to identify how *Pacific Overtures* maps the tension between the national and global conditions of late twentieth-century American cultural identity and their relation to the Enlightenment ideals of American society (Chapter 25). By scrutinizing the modes of representation of the principal characters and the processes of transition between traditional and modern societies his chapter explicates the meaning of the binary division of *Pacific Overtures* into sequential parts as it tracks the inevitable inversion of progress into tragedy. Scott Stoddart's queer reading of the Sondheim canon (Chapter 26) concentrates chiefly on *Company, Merrily We Roll Along, The Last of Sheila* (1973), and *Road Show* in order to interrogate the relationship between Sondheim's iconic status as a representative of the gay sensibility and his ambivalence towards his own homosexuality. From his discussion of Sondheim's first characterization of an overtly homosexual character in the comic lyrics of "The Boy from…" to his interpretation of "The Best Thing that Ever Has Happened to Me," Addison Mizner's and Hollis Bessemer's gay love duet in *Road Show*, as an artistic coming-out for Sondheim, Stoddart identifies the strategies through which Sondheim has challenged and remade the heteronormative paradigm of the twentieth-century Broadway musical. Raymond Knapp's chapter (Chapter 27) concludes the volume by assessing Sondheim's attitude and position as a progressive American artist. By identifying the complex attitudes to American society implicit in his work as, in Knapp's words, "primary author" of musicals, the chapter at the same time analyzes his ambiguous status within the society as cultural icon. Viewing Sondheim's aesthetic approach to the form as a sustained critique of what he calls the "Hammerstein compromise"—a celebration of "the American Dream" in its liberal, antiracist, and humane version—Knapp reads *Anyone Can Whistle* as a darkly parodic version of Meredith Willson's celebration of small-town America in *The Music Man* (1957) before analyzing the complex nature of Sondheim's reputation as American legend.

The twenty-seven chapters in this volume can surely leave little room for doubt that Stephen Sondheim's work with several collaborators has radically transformed the history of American musical theater. If the first era in the development of the American musical as art form saw the triumph of musical comedy (1916–43) and the second witnessed the preeminence of the musical play (1943–64), the epoch of the postmodern nonlinear musical inaugurated in 1970 by *Company* must be regarded as the age of Sondheim. This volume aims to provide a comprehensive survey of Sondheim's achievements and to indicate why they continue to exert a profound influence on generations of musical theater writers who have made his innovations their starting point.

## Notes

1. Some critics have regarded the aesthetic principles of musical comedy with their unashamedly presentational approach to performance, as "Brechtian."
2. Although the development of the integrated musical play by Hammerstein and Kern in *Show Boat* (1927) and Hammerstein and Rodgers in *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1945), and later works involves the convergence of the Wagnerian principle of musical integration with the dialogue-and-song dramaturgy of musical comedy, Hammerstein's musical play format attempts to conceal the break between dialogue and song through the deployment of various devices that merge conversational dialogue with "sung scenes," arias that function as soliloquies and group song-and-dance numbers that dramatize in pseudo-naturalistic terms the social ceremonies of the community. Thus the disparate musical and dramatic segments are integrated in a motivic principle borrowed from the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, with songs being reprised and sections of musical material from these numbers being motivically deployed as underscoring at various points throughout the piece.
3. See Chapter 4, note 14, and Chapter 6, page 104, for further explanation of this term.
4. Popular entertainment forms are generally thought by cultural analysts to deliberately or unconsciously reinforce the social and political status quo.
5. See "The Death of the Author," in Roland Barthes, *Image–Music–Text*, translated and edited by Stephen Heath (London: Harper Collins, 1977), 142–9.
6. Sondheim himself is always quick to point out the importance of the librettists as coauthors of the musicals; in the dedication of *Finishing a Hat* (2010) he listed every "unsung" playwright with whom he has collaborated.
7. The notion of the "auteur" derives from French film theory of the fifties, which regarded certain directors (rather than screenplay writers) as contributing the artistic signature that guaranteed the uniquely coherent authorial identity of their films, as opposed to the majority of films that were merely the products of skilful technicians servicing the industrial demands of the studios. In Chapter 27, Raymond Knapp uses the term "primary author" to indicate the preeminent status among his collaborators ascribed to Sondheim.
8. Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Scarecrow, 2003), 25.
9. Wagner was the first to identify explicitly the heterogeneity of art forms that comprised the manifold form of musical drama, regarding music as the unifying structural principle capable of integrating all the other art forms—poetry, painting, sculpture, dance and drama—to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The paradigmatic example of Wagner's "total art work," while it may be useful in comprehending certain kinds of opera, is misleading when applied to the modern musical, whose various elements are not fully subsumed within the musical structure of the work but are interrelated in complicated combinations of performance modes that may at one point appear as separate components and at another be subsumed in the formation of a compound.
10. Craig Zadan, *Sondheim and Co.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 182.

PART I

# INTERTEXUALITY AND AUTHORSHIP: TOWARD NONLINEAR FORMS

CHAPTER 1

# SONDHEIM'S GENIUS

STEPHEN BANFIELD

Throughout a working life of six decades in the musical theater, Stephen Sondheim has by virtue of this medium been both collaborator and auteur.[1] Yet the name of Sondheim has far outweighed those of his colleagues and his milieu in academic discussion. There is, it seems, something uniquely fascinating and compelling about the force, individuality, and consistency of Sondheim's creative will. That force is sensed in his reception at least as far back as *Sleuth*, Anthony Shaffer's play of 1970 (filmed in 1972, with Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine, and in 2007, with Michael Caine and Jude Law), which was originally to have been called *Who's Afraid of Stephen Sondheim?*[2] It needs to be asked, and has not been asked nearly enough, how or why such a dominating, control-hungry artist should have sustained such a single-minded career in a medium so bound by collaboration, not to mention expediency. The career is deeply paradoxical and at the same time strangely moving, as though the pretensions of the single aspiring artist had not after all entirely lost touch with a paying mainstream audience by the start of the twenty-first century.

A partial explanation perhaps lies in the highly technical, limited-choice media of music and lyrics. Music's very notation is far more prescriptive than any other element in a stage musical. But a great deal in a Sondheim show (let us still call it this for the time being) works by being amenable to opening out from the connoisseur's world of technique to the lifeblood of amateur appreciation. By amateur is meant here not just the "ordinary" paying member of a theater audience, but all those from neighboring disciplines and crafts who have come up against his work, *starting with his original collaborators*. Right from the beginning, one senses, he found himself writing as someone who could somehow do more than, and stay one step ahead of, everyone else involved with the show. This will not have been the case with *West Side Story* (1957) and perhaps not with *Gypsy* (1959); indeed, Leonard Bernstein and (to argue against myself, since he was not a musician) Jerome Robbins must have been his role models in this respect. But from the moment one of Sondheim's own songs first hit the rehearsal piano, as often as not with Sondheim himself at the keys, there was a manifest cleverness involved, and therefore an auteurship, that no one else present could match, either in principle or in

practice. The proof of creation, the emotional pearl, the thing to hold onto when the show seemed to be getting nowhere in its development, was already there in the manuscript (or very soon would be, once a song was written), and did not need experimentation on the stage with actors and costumiers and directors to generate a lifeblood for the entire enterprise. And Sondheim knew full well that no one else around him in the rehearsal room ever had such magic powers. At bottom everyone was relying on him.

Collaborative his medium was, however, and one might see Sondheim coming to terms with this by setting himself two agendas—a self-imposed challenge, conscious or inevitable, to discharge a debt to two traditions. Those two traditions were, first, the trade of Broadway, bound to vaudeville values and essentially collaborative, and second, the intellectual sanction of liberal arts America, essentially individualistic and *auteuriste*. Sondheim, it seems, has spent a lifetime paying off this debt, and doing so with genius, a word which I shall take not entirely at face value. One could argue that the trade of Broadway was an inheritance from his father, who worked at the parallel and overlapping trade of the garment industry, while the liberal arts background was a legacy from his parents' divorce: doing well at an expensive school and college would see him through the divorce while incurring a debt that was not just liberal but literal.[3]

He was far from the first musical theater practitioner to bring these two sides together, but he did nevertheless respond to a unique moment in a unique way. Swayne, in *How Sondheim Found his Sound*, serves to remind us of the opportunities and expertise with which Sondheim was surrounded at Williams College in the late 1940s.[4] The United States had won the war and the peace, was entering its great period of affluence, and could sport the best teachers for the best students anywhere, not least because of the influx of European immigrants available as faculty, coming as they did from what was seen as a more consciously intellectual tradition. A four-year undergraduate program, a modern curriculum, well-funded facilities, and a devoted staff all too happy to have been demobbed put the higher-education system on an enviable plane, as yet without any serious challenge from alternative agendas. No wonder that Sondheim's lyrics would in due course seem to echo *The Waste Land* or Emily Dickinson, his music Stravinsky, Milhaud, or Hindemith, his comments a knowledge of nonmusical theater stemming from academic study of it as well as attendance and participation.[5] His teachers had made serious art rewarding for him to study; he went on to reward us similarly. Those who dislike this side of him find themselves reacting to one who has always been the clever student, from his senior thesis to his earnest, competitively self-justificatory comments in interviews and exchanges. Those happier with the product prize his scholar's devotion to detail, accuracy, context, and technique.

At the same time something else was going on. Little of this description would have applied to Oscar Hammerstein in his younger days, though it needs to be remembered that Hammerstein first met Rodgers at Columbia University.[6] Yet Hammerstein remained Sondheim's single most important mentor. The famous afternoon session with Hammerstein when Sondheim was fifteen, in which Hammerstein picked apart *By George* and taught him everything he knew about musical theater, probably occurred only a month or two after the sudden death of Jerome Kern, perhaps in the Christmas

vacation of 1945–6, perhaps a little later. Kern, though from a comfortable middle-class family, had not been to college, and *his* genius in popular musical theater was much more a distillation of business training and experience than of liberal arts aspirations, however much he tried to impress Robert Russell Bennett. One imagines Hammerstein in his bereavement—it was nothing less—wanting to pass on all he had learnt from Kern before he began to forget. Thus the vaudeville and liberal arts traditions were in a position, over a concentrated period of little more than four years, to provide a precise mixture of fuel for Sondheim to combust.

But especially since Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* of 1927, to remain with these two figures for a moment, popular musical theater has itself learned to negotiate between collaboration and authorship on a different axis from the one just proposed for Sondheim: it started collaborating with the auteurs of the past. Musicals can be touched by long shadows in this respect. *Hello, Dolly!*, for example, traces its lineage all the way back to John Oxenford's *A Day Well Spent*, a one-act London "operetta" of 1836 with music from unknown sources, via two plays by Thornton Wilder and an Austrian farce by Johann Nestroy.[7] *Cabaret* likewise represents a complex chain of incarnations.[8] If we look at *Sweeney Todd* from this standpoint, it will lead us back to the notion of both collaboration and authorial genius but with a different spin on them. The *Sweeney Todd* plays need considering briefly prior to penetrating another type of shadow, that of genre and the spirit of place as it settles on London. Both these topics will show Sondheim's genius collaborating with the past and *negotiating the authorship of ideas* through the appropriation of sources. We shall remain with *Sweeney Todd* for the remainder of this chapter.

George Dibdin Pitt's *The String of Pearls*, the first dramatic source for *Sweeney Todd*, played at the Britannia, Hoxton, a London "bloodbath" theater, in 1847.[9] The general idea of British melodrama in Pitt's day seems to have been that of the modern pornographic novel: you had to have an orgasm, or in this case a murder, on every page. In the first act of Pitt's *The String of Pearls*, almost every scene (which means every couple of pages) ends with someone being "polished off," as Todd puts it in his stereotypical asides, or at least going down the chute from the chair. Here is one such episode from act 1 scene 1:

*Enter Jean Parmine*

JEAN: Good evening, neighbour; I would have you shave me.

SWEENEY: Your servant, Mr Parmine—you deal in precious stones.

JEAN: Yes, I do; but it's rather late for a bargain. Do you want to buy or sell?

SWEENEY: To sell.

*Produces a casket and gives it to Jean*

JEAN: (*examining pearls*) Real, by heaven, all real.

SWEENEY: I know they are real. Will you deal with me or not?

JEAN: I'm not quite sure that they are real; let me look at them again? Oh, I see, counterfeit; but so well done that really for the curiosity of the thing I will give you £50.

SWEENEY: £50? Who is joking now, I wonder? We cannot deal to-night.

JEAN: Stay—I will give you a hundred.

SWEENEY: Hark ye, friend, I know the value of pearls.
JEAN: Well, since you know more than I gave you credit for I think I can find a customer who will pay £11,000 for them; if so, I have no objection to advance the sum of £8,000.
SWEENEY: I am content—let me have the money early to-morrow.
JEAN: Stop a bit; there are some rather important things to consider—you must know that a string of pearls is not to be bought like a few ounces of old silver, and the vendor must give every satisfaction as to how he came by them.
SWEENEY: (*aside*) I am afraid I shall have to polish him off. (*Aloud*) In other words, you don't care how I possess the property, provided I sell it to you at a thief's price; but if, on the contrary, I want their real value, you mean to be particular.
JEAN: I suspect you have no right to dispose of the pearls, and to satisfy myself I shall insist upon your accompanying me to a magistrate.
SWEENEY: And what road shall you take?
JEAN: The *right* path.

*As Jean turns, Sweeney springs upon him. A fierce struggle ensues. Sweeney succeeds in forcing Jean into the chair. Sweeney touches a spring, and the chair sinks with a dreadful crash. Sweeney laughs and exclaims,* "I've polished him off!" *as scene closes*.[10]

It is money, not revenge, that makes the world go round in this old version: Todd has no sooner purloined a string of pearls from his previous victim than, after an inconvenient interruption from the shop boy Tobias, his next arrives.

Austin Rosser's play of *Sweeney Todd*, published by Samuel French in 1971 following a Dundee premiere, is not only much more recent but also much more daringly in tune with modern sensibilities. Sweeney's victim in the scene given below is Lupin, an unctuous and villainous clergyman very much in the position of Pirelli in the Wheeler and Sondheim version; and what is being acted out is a classic sadomasochism game. The Wheeler and Sondheim S and M elements seem rather undeveloped by comparison, for Rosser has Todd clever and daring enough—playing for real risks—to get *himself* into the chair first, at the mercy of Lupin's hold on the razor. That cunning, insidious reciprocity with reversal of roles is the point of the near-anagrammatic play on Lupin's name with the "Tulip" references—Freudian touches followed up in Todd's final speech before the act 1 curtain about cutting flowers:

SWEENEY: Here! Take these! (*He tosses the bag of jewels to Lupin*)
…
Between us we would gain enough wealth in two years to live as lords in golden palaces. Here! Look at 'em! (*He pushes the ropes of pearls, etc, at Lupin*) Go on! Touch 'em!
LUPIN: (*almost choking with delight as he examines them*) Oooh, oh, ah, aah! But now tell me, how do you manage?
SWEENEY: To polish them off?
LUPIN: (*nodding*) To polish them off!

SWEENEY: Ha! Ha! (*He takes the black bag from Lupin, picks up the jewel box and deposits them on a chair*) Now you watch! I say, "Good day, sir!" (*He walks to the door pretending a customer has entered the shop*)
*Lupin follows behind Sweeney, enjoying the "entertainment"*
"Certainly, sir. No, not that chair, sir, this one. The light is better, sir, and it's more comfortable!" And they sit like this. (*He sits in the barber's chair, still pretending*)
*Lupin gets caught up in the fun*
Get the brush!
*Lupin does so and starts to lather Sweeney*
Don't you tickle! Oh, ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! It tickles! Now the razor! Get it quick!
*Lupin goes for the razor*
Then when you're sitting comfortably, somethin' horrible happens. You'd never think anything was. Have you ever shaved anyone? Get the razor, man! It's sharp! Now slide it gently down my skin.
*Lupin does so*
Ah, yes. One would never think anything was going to happen. Tell me, would you suspect?

LUPIN: (*handing Sweeney the razor*) Let me try.

SWEENEY: (*handing Lupin the sheet*) Put this round you! (*He swiftly takes a noosed rope from under the wash-stand and throws it over Lupin from behind. As he binds Lupin to the chair*) Aha, my little bird—caught!

LUPIN: But I'm your partner.

SWEENEY: (*behind the chair*) But you are, my dear Tulip—I mean Lupin—you still are, for ten seconds. (*He gets the brush and lather mug*) Now I'll lather you. Oh, you've a very good skin. (*He returns the mug and brush and picks up the razor*) A very good skin. The razor is going over it like a slender skater. You know, when I go near the neck I want to draw my razor across it—like a violin. Isn't it strange—and there are no musicians in the family. (*He starts to sing*) "Oh, tis a tulip stem I draw my blade across—blade across!"

LUPIN: Please, please! (*Hoping to humour Sweeney*) Ha, ha, don't joke.

SWEENEY: I'm not. I usually slit 'em in the cellar. There are a number there now; some of 'em dead, some of 'em almost dead—it's a terrible long drop to the cellar, you know—waiting to go to the lovely Lovett. For your next stop, mate, is the pie factory!

LUPIN: (*imploring*) No, no, Todd, please.
*The* LIGHTS *begin to dim*

SWEENEY: (*quietly*) So now, partner, you know everything—(*slowly*)—everything you were snooping to find out from Lovett. I was listening you know.
*The* LIGHTS *are now so low that only the outlines of the figures can beseen*
So this is where our partnership ends. (*He cuts Lupin's throat*)
*The* LIGHTS *come up to half full. Lupin is seen dead in the chair, his head dropping forward. Sweeney, with the open razor in his hand, comes down and speaks to the audience*
As a little child I used to cut the flowers with Granny's scissors in her sunlit garden. Oh, oh, I wish the whole world were a throat so that I could cut it!
Curtain[11]

Now, was Christopher Bond, his play the source of the Sondheim–Wheeler *Sweeney Todd*, influenced by Rosser? It is unlikely, unless he changed his script a good deal between the 1968 Stoke-on-Trent version and the 1973 Stratford East one, Rosser's coming in between the two. But although no one ever mentions Rosser, the possibility that Sondheim or Wheeler may have drawn on it is intriguing. Sondheim's own sensibility as refracted in *Sleuth* and developed in his screenplay for *The Last of Sheila*, all within a few years of his seeing Bond's play in London, would surely have been attracted to it. Most striking is a reference from Sweeney in Rosser's play to "find[ing] out the men who carry a lot of wealth—who have few prying relatives—men who won't be missed much": this is in Sondheim and Wheeler, of course, but not in Bond. The play-within-a-play element in the extract above is also highly suggestive. Todd's "Certainly, sir" speech seems echoed in his "Epiphany" in the musical, while the following episode reminds us that live theater, especially in a piece such as *Sweeney Todd*, is in any case a kind of S and M contract, actors and technicians having to submit to, command, and trust each other in deadly earnest if a performance is to come off without lethal mishap. The mattresses beneath the chute must be securely in place, the barber's victims unable to ascertain their own safety; the apron must not get caught up in the chair, to avoid genuine risk of hanging. (Having the chair tip Sweeney's victims backwards, head first down the chute, was a brilliant touch in Tim Burton's film, not least because unfeasible in the theater.)

As suggested earlier, dramatic precursors are only one set of coordinates for assessing the company genius keeps. Another takes the generic aspects of location, and London is the best source of all for *Sweeney Todd*. The public fascination with the dirty, wicked metropolis, this fascination a draw for entertainment as early as *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728, was most famously and enduringly encapsulated by Dickens. His tropes, all of them enjoying a long afterlife, include those of darkness, fog, and obscurity; of lamplight and fire; of Bedlam—iron bars and prison; of basements and attics and all kinds of domiciliary extremes; of jostling and beggars and Cockney quick-talkers; of the sounds of bells; of Jews, Aladdin's caves, and thieves' kitchens; of urchins and innocent observers (including Sykes's dog); and of much more.

What one might for convenient shorthand term the Dickensian musical is a definite subgenre — recall *Oliver!, Pickwick, Scrooge, My Fair Lady*, or *Mary Poppins*, with its chimney pots. So is the Dickensian film, and *Hangover Square* of 1945 provides a perfect example of it, though set rather later, at the beginning of the twentieth century. The film's title already denotes staginess, for a London square is inherently theatrical, as George Bernard Shaw realized when at the conclusion of one of his music criticisms he described a policeman's ballet occurring in his own, Fitzroy Square, at one o'clock in the morning.[12] And if *Hangover Square*'s opening sequence collaborates knowingly with Dickens, unconsciously with Shaw, it demonstrates Wheeler and Sondheim collaborating no less purposively with *Hangover Square*, which Sondheim has always stressed as a major influence on *Sweeney Todd*.

In the film's opening scene, a street piano with a curious flame coming out of its side is playing a shrieking, discordant waltz. From a lamplighter, the camera moves further up to where an intruder murders an ancient, bearded, and bespectacled antique

dealer and sets fire to his shop by throwing the kerosene lamp to the floor. The dazed but respectable-looking murderer is then seen wandering the streets, bumping into other pedestrians. Here, then, we have the jostling, hostile passer-by, with "Look where you're going" as equivalent of "Off with you, I say" to the Beggar-Woman in *Sweeney Todd*; the Jewish Aladdin's cave (though the antique dealer is called Ogilby); the ever-present flame or pyromaniac motif of the lamplighter (and a lamplighter appears in the very first stage direction in Bond's play); the nasty deed happening "above" (with an important camera viewpoint); and, most obviously, "City on fire," which, not being in Bond or the other play sources for *Sweeney Todd*, provides one of the many examples that link Wheeler and Sondheim directly with this particular inspirational source. The very first thing seen in the film, along with the flame, is the turning handle of the barrel piano, enough to remind anyone of the meat grinder in *Sweeney Todd*.

A later expository scene in *Hangover Square*, about twenty minutes in, may be taken as a further compendium of intertextual collaboration. The protagonist George Bone has met his female nemesis, the music-hall singer Netta, and is walking home with her and her accompanist. Here, the idea of taking a turn—another concordance with Shaw and his Fitzroy Square ballet—contributes to the trinitarian symbolism of the film when Mickey tells George that he will cure his hangover in the morning by walking three times round the square. He and Mickey have just composed a popular ballad called "All for you"; that title too has a Sondheim resonance.[13] On the walk home from the pub, the "dirty London" motifs include the ever-present flaming lamps and the play made with the roadworks, another Dickensian motif, symbolizing the "great black pit" of London, Cobbett's "great wen." George, though drunk, must avoid the hole in the road (though, later, a pile of lead pipes fails to do so, which sets off another murder), the hole being a plausible corollary to dungeons and the cellars in *Sweeney Todd*. Finally, consider the cat, a kind of artful dodger—though, unlike those that evade Mrs. Lovett's chopper, not artful or quick enough, as the film later demonstrates—or an (initially) innocent observer of the relations of others, like Tobias. Passing from one patron to another, it functions as an extension of the idea of the urchin (who, like Tobias, gets "taken in," in a double sense).

Later in the film there is a third obvious "turning" reference (just as Bone commits three murders, one attempted, two successful). A character says, "Turn the handle like this, three times" to crank a telephone for ringing off. Again, this is not in Christopher Bond's play, a further demonstration that Wheeler and Sondheim reach directly back to *Hangover Square*.

Genius is by nature selfish and ambitious. Even when shy, it exacts accomplishment on its own terms, appropriates everything in its way, emulates only in order to surpass, and collaborates, if not as auteur, at least, to excuse a pun, *avec hauteur*. It is overreaching and overweening, driven by the motoric engine of creativity. All-consuming, like George the pyromaniac, it is, in short, demonic. But it has to be accountable. George, the genius composer in *Hangover Square* (Figure 1.1), is more than a melodramatic character driven by some kind of machinery (his blank moods), for before he tries to murder Netta's fiancé he touches the back of his neck, as he does when his trances are coming on.

FIGURE 1.1 Laird Cregar as George Harvey Bone in *Hangover Square*, directed by John Brahm (1941).

At this point he is beginning to act out *real* murderous tensions that inhabit his psyche, and like a tragic hero is responsible for his actions, all the more so as his musical career becomes increasingly obsessive.

There is a price to pay. The idea is, of course, Faustian. Bone, like Todd, has excessive ambition based on a formidable, professional artisanal technique, which is seen as demonically unnatural and brings about his downfall. The barber, the "proper artist with a knife," is a composer, and a high-class one at that. Like Todd, Bone practices the "execution" of his creations on "less honourable throats," and it is the social grubbing that he gets entangled with—the lower-class *id* battling with his "classical" *ego*—that dramatizes the schizophrenia. He doesn't exactly sell his noble soul for commercial gain, but is caught up in a dichotomy of love and duty in which his sexual and artistic demons are at destructive loggerheads. This theme is an important one in Sondheim: Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along*, another George in *Sunday*, and most importantly Neil in *All That Glitters* (like *Merrily*, based on a George Kaufman play about an artist) represent a theme to which Sondheim seems to have returned constantly.

Here *we* must return to the question of collaboration, for several times in the preceding paragraphs the phrase "Wheeler and Sondheim" has had to be used. Most of the Dickensian concordances must have been written into *Sweeney Todd* by Wheeler, not Sondheim. We do not yet know exactly what role Sondheim's persuasive genius will have played in that process. We probably never shall unless his collaborators, those still

alive, speak for themselves. If that fails to happen, where does it leave the over-reaching auteur genius among them?

To ask a different question, what is it about music itself that makes it so susceptible to this theme of overweening genius? The film scholar Claudia Gorbman gets to the heart of the matter when she discusses how music's "anempathy" means that once its machine is set going it is oblivious of, indifferent to the human events played out against its turning, rolling continuation. "A street organ plays while a murder is taking place," she says of the opening of *Hangover Square*, while the point and the climax of the film, of course, are that "a concerto plays while a symphony hall is burning down."[14] Indeed, Bernard Herrmann's musical score for *Hangover Square* has the same aspirations, against the cinematic odds, toward the "perfect machine 'e planned" as do some of Sondheim's scores against the even greater theatrical odds. The summation of its musical materials in the piano concerto heard apparently complete in the final ten minutes of the film, in which for example the opening barrel piano waltz becomes a scherzo motif, deserves a musicological study of its own, no less than the musical structures of, say, *Passion* or *Sunday in the Park with George*.[15]

Genius is heartless; Sondheim's music has been accused of being heartless; indeed, he has used the word himself.[16] My own view of the matter is that if Sondheim has saved his soul it is through *subjecting* his genius, and his music as it actually features in Broadway musicals, to collaboration. *Sweeney Todd* shows a musical score that in its intense, intricate, and sometimes savage beauty seems to condone or glory in the very devastation its protagonists cause; and shows lyrics that couch the most dreadful serial murders in the most hilarious, irresistible wit. Perhaps no other work could get us so close to being the gleeful accomplices of Fred and Rosemary West, to actually *feeling* the demonic joy they took in playing with their victims as though murder were a fine art—and this is not something to be said lightly.

What, then, pulls him, and us, back from the brink of immoral collusion? It is a question posed in many of his musicals, including *Assassins, Passion*, and *Road Show*. The man who can wield such dangerous tools of musical and lyric delight, putting them apparently at the emotional service of John Wilkes Booth's white supremacism, of the arguably murderous Fosca, and the callous, amoral Mizner brothers, has been frequently resisted for his demonic craft. But Todd does get his comeuppance, and music fades into silence as he himself is murdered. Sondheim too gets his, one might argue, in the multidisciplinary hurly-burly of the theater, where almost never does one have the opportunity to follow his musical and lyric train of thought in all its intricacy or with the right degree of clarity and balance, simply because there is too much going on—too much to look at, too much else being heard. They too get murdered.

The best way to demonstrate this point is to experience a complex musical number twice, in two different ways: once as the perfected, liberal arts exercise in the controlling intellect of Sondheim the auteur, then as the vaudeville number we actually see in the theater. If the ungiving machinery of analysis somehow implicates the former, is Sondheim the collaborator redeemed by the latter? We can decide, though only the former experience can be demonstrated here on paper, by examining "God, that's Good!" from *Sweeney Todd*.

This number is the opening scene of act 2. First, a reminder of its overall symmetrical position in the musical. It is a variation on certain aspects and numbers of act 1, perhaps functioning like the sonata-form recapitulation within a classical symphony. The curtain rises on a transformed Mrs. Lovett and her shop, which now has not the worst but, as Sondheim's sketches for the song show, "the best pies in London."

The London mob had appeared in the act 1 scene in St. Dunstan's marketplace, the other parallel to this number. There Toby was drumming up a crowd for Pirelli's wares and services. By act 2 he has changed his master (the old one is now a pie) but not his tune. He opens the number with his sales-pitch prelude or verse section to the song, which, appropriately enough to his drumming and strutting, is cast overall as a march and trio. And along with the mob go the sounds of London, especially the bells. The Westminster chimes, a four-note sequence as opposed to the three thumps of the crowd, similarly open both scenes.

In act 1, Toby's sales of Pirelli's Miracle Elixir were scoffed at by the superior barber Todd, and as the crowd got restive and began to ask for their money back he turned his march into double-quick time to keep control of them. Here, in the act 2 number, Mrs. Lovett, a woman "of limited wind," as she described herself in act 1, does the same for the opposite reason, in order to keep pace with the satisfaction of her customers who are demanding more. And as she does so, her sidekick Todd is waiting impatiently upstairs for his fancy new chair to arrive, just as in act 1 he was pacing up and down waiting for the Beadle to come and have his hair cut.

As for the symmetries within the song itself, despite the number's complexity they are really quite simple, but best explained with the help of a diagram (Figure 1.2). This needs to be read as a single journey from left to right as the song progresses. At first, as already stated, it sounds as though it is going to be a short verse–refrain popular song for Toby; this structural implication is indicated with the italic *x* and *y* within its square bracket. But since the *y* part turns out to be the first limb of a march and trio, it is necessary to read the whole number according to the top row of algebra: that is, the march is the big A section, the trio is the contrasting B section, and then a shortened version of the march returns, making a symmetrical ABA structure, what musicians call ternary form. The very title of the song seems to reflect this shape, with its transformation of "God" into "good." With the music, however, there is a slight complication in that the trio section, B, also returns overlaid onto part of A. Marches since the later nineteenth century have often recapitulated the lyrical B section, making an ABAB form overall. Sondheim merges the two forms with his contrapuntal overlay, literally a matter of hearing the two tunes simultaneously. (There is nothing new in this; Sullivan did it continually.)

But cast the eye down to the lower reaches of the diagram and it can be seen that this upper-case algebraic representation of the song's form is a way of making sense of what are actually a far greater number of short sections, seventeen in all. These are like little separate scenes within a complex action, or like the stage blockings of a director, or like the camera shots in a film, constantly intercutting. Each of these seventeen short sections, with the exception of the opening two, is based on a sixteen-bar musical paragraph, though some are curtailed, some longer; and ignoring toppings and tailings,

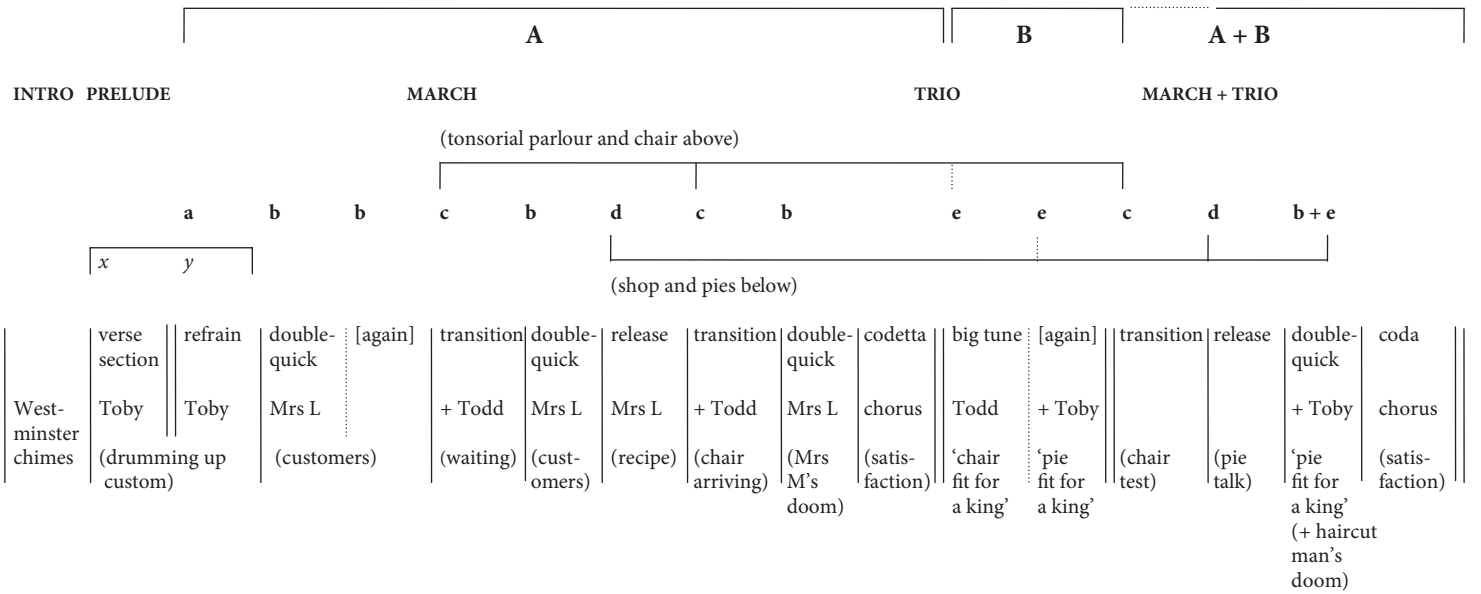


Figure **1.2** "God, that's Good," formal diagram.

there are five different modules of music, **a**, **b**, **c**, **d**, and **e** (the lower-case algebra), distributed repeatedly among the sections. The one labelled **a** never recurs, because it is Toby's sales pitch from act 1. The real body of the song is Mrs. Lovett's ceaseless chatter, the **b** music of the double-quick march, plus Todd's fixing up of his special barber's chair, sung to the gorgeous big tune of the trio, **e**. So the march and the trio correspond roughly to the two alternating focuses of action in this complex scene, what is going on downstairs in and around Mrs. Lovett's pie shop, and what is going on in Todd's tonsorial parlor up above, a binary opposition exploited throughout the show.

The casual audience member, CD listener, or DVD viewer will have noticed a few extra things. Anyone who has directed the piece will have noticed hundreds more. Sondheim keeps musical and lyric ideas yoked in various ways. Everything we hear to the music of **b** is Mrs. Lovett talking to her customers or shouting to Toby about them, and that holds the whole scene together. Note, however, how many different minuscule pieces of action she has to deal with in her virtuoso act of overall control, surely an analog for the composer's own role as overall puppeteer. We hear her attending in some way or another to no fewer than eight characters: the waiting man, the drunkard, the beggar-woman, dim Toby, impatient Todd, her cronies (whom she updates on her rival Mrs. Mooney's nemesis), nonpaying customers, and the man who arrives providentially for a haircut just as she's sold out. And a third strand in these threads of signification, linking her doings with Todd's, is the eulogy to the pies themselves. In the "release" section of the music (**d**) she releases her recipe (not the real one, of course) and talks about the content of the pies; Toby takes up this description when he sings about "a pie fit for a king" to the repeat of the trio tune, **e**. All three sections (**b**, **d**, and **e**) are obsessed with gravy (appropriate enough to the flowing tune, and a subtextual preparation for the blood flowing so freely in the following number). The melody of **e** is a marvelous tune, fit for a king indeed, with the wonderful irony that it is first sung to a chair, secondly to a meat pie. In fact its first three notes are a relaxing transformation of the "excuse me" musical motif of module **c**, signifying impatience for action, that marks time throughout the "waiting" transition sections—Todd waiting for the chair to arrive, waiting for it to come up the stairs, and waiting to see whether it will work properly when he tests it. Here again, in this motif, the idea of one, two, three asserts itself, spelled out for all to hear when Todd arranges the "knock on wood" signal with Mrs. Lovett and given a wonderfully Stravinskian touch of rhythmic dislocation when she forgets the third knock. This dislocation is analogous to what happens in the music when the ostinato of three quarter notes that we keep hearing—for instance, in the chorus codetta and coda—straddles the duple meter (as can be seen in the thumbed right-hand notes of the piano part on the last page of the piano–vocal score, which duplicate those of the sopranos in the chorus). No one but Sondheim could have made such a simple stage action, that of three strokes, work for him at so many different levels, right down to the stylistic fabric of the musical continuum.

He puts in far more than a listener can grasp, of course. Does anybody consciously hear all of these words from Toby as he sings the trio tune? "Is that a pie fit for a king / A wondrous sweet and most particular thing? / You see, ma'am, why there is no meat / Pie can compete / With this delectable pie! / The crust all velvety and wavy, / That glaze, those

crimps . . . / And then the thick succulent gravy . . . / One whiff, one glimpse . . . / So tender / That you surrender."[17] Nor does one have time to take in the full effect of Sondheim's counterpoint, rich harmony, and general finesse of voice-leading in that trio section, which can be sampled at slow, detached leisure by playing Figure 1.3 on the piano at whatever speed the fingers and ears demand for the full sonorities to register. (This is the second time around. The first time, at the point marked *x*, there are no F♮s but an F♯. Try it.)

The chorus interjections, represented by the lowest voice on the upper stave, in three and sometimes four parts, are particularly delicious (like the pies). They enrich the harmonic effect, counteract any staidness in the rhythm, and help build a climax. Their unpredictably cross-rhythmic "Yum!"s somehow remind me of the second choir's questions in the opening chorus of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, just as the canon at the unison in Figure 1.3 reminds me of the last movement of César Franck's Violin Sonata. Intertextuality can lead the listener (I cannot speak for the composer) to unexpected places.

The conscientious musical theater composer in such circumstances is like the mediaeval stained-glass artist or roof sculptor, lavishing infinite care on things the viewer never sees; if one never hears everything in actual performance, inevitably one loses yet more when the primary focus is visual. In fact there is so much going on visually in "God, that's Good!" that one's eyes cannot take it all in either, which leaves the ears at a double disadvantage. In conclusion, then, if genius is the infinite capacity for taking pains even when the artist's work will eventually serve somebody else's star turn and much of its detail will be lost, then the vaudeville tradition has perhaps preserved this particular genius in a state of grace, just as it hallowed many earlier ones only within the unmarked graves of theatrical collaboration. Let us not begrudge Sondheim his following or deplore his self-justificatory obsessiveness so long as he continues to inhabit and be buffeted around by the dirty, messy, imperfectly collaborative world, not of Dickensian London, but of the modern musical theater. It has kept him sane, unlike the murderous Bone and the wicked Todd, and it will assure him audiences for a long time to come.

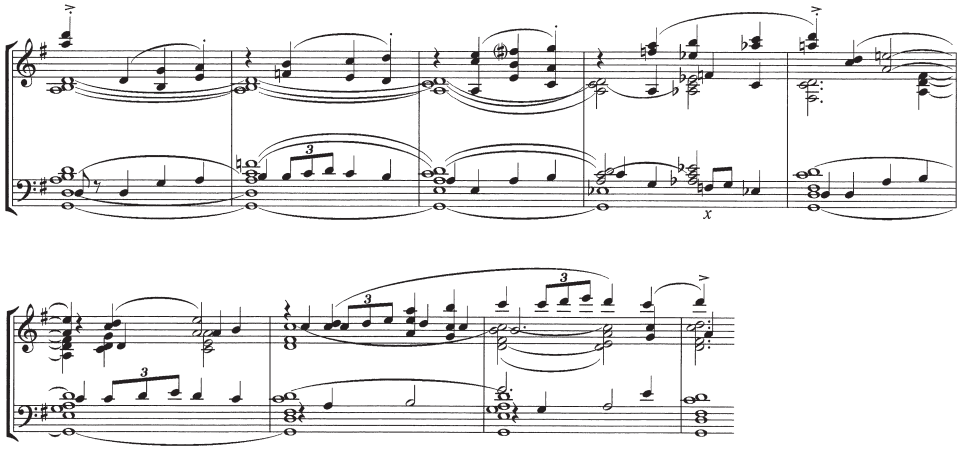


FIGURE **1.3** "God that's Good," bars 183–91 (musical reduction).

## Notes

1. Elements of this essay were first presented at a Stephen Sondheim Society study day on *Sweeney Todd* at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, on November 23, 1996; the session included readings from the Rosser and Dibdin Pitt versions of *Sweeney Todd* performed by my MA students Fran Birch, Tim Harding, and Helen Smith (née Wrigley). I am grateful to Tim Harding for having drawn my attention to Rosser's play in the first place. Nine years later, a more fully developed text incorporating this material and entitled "Sondheim's Genius" was presented on November 25, 2005, at Goldsmiths' College, University of London, in the conference Stephen Sondheim: Collaborator and Auteur.
2. Anthony Shaffer, *Sleuth* (London: Samuel French, 1970); Craig Zadan: *Sondheim & Co.*, 2nd ed. (London: Pavilion, 1987), 167.
3. For Sondheim's biography through college, see Secrest: *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 1–83.
4. Swayne, *How Sondheim Found his Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 139–42.
5. See Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 19, 106, 150–51, 394; J. D. McClatchy: "Laughter in the soul," *The Poetry of Song: Five Tributes to Stephen Sondheim*, ed. George Robert Minkoff and J. D. McClatchy (New York: Poetry Society of America, 1992), 5; Steve Swayne: "Sondheim's Piano Sonata," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association 127*, no. 2 (2002), 258–304.
6. Hugh Fordin, *Getting to Know Him: Oscar Hammerstein II* (New York: Ungar, 1977), 29.
7. John Oxenford, music unknown, *A Day Well Spent*, one-act operetta (English Opera House, Lyceum Theatre, London, April 4, 1836); Johann Nestroy, music by Adolf Müller: *Einen Jux will er sich machen*, Posse mit Gesang (Theater an der Wien, Vienna, March 10, 1842); Thornton Wilder: *The Merchant of Yonkers* (Guild Theatre, New York, December 28, 1938) and *The Matchmaker* (Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, August 23, 1954); Michael Stewart and Jerry Herman: *Hello, Dolly!* (St. James Theatre, New York, January 16, 1964). The chain of collaborations did not stop there: Tom Stoppard reworked Nestroy's farce in English as *On the Razzle* (Lyttelton Theatre, London, September 18, 1981).
8. See James Leve, *Kander and Ebb* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 36–9.
9. Kilgarriff gives the date of the first performance as March 1, 1847. See Michael Kilgarriff, ed., *The Golden Age of Melodrama: Twelve 19th Century Melodramas* (London: Wolfe, 1974), 241. A "penny dreadful" version for reading in serialized prose marginally preceded it in the same season.
10. Kilgarriff, *Golden Age*, 248–9.
11. Austin Rosser, *Sweeney Todd: A Victorian Melodrama* (London: Samuel French, 1971), 21–2.
12. Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Shaw's Music* (London: Bodley Head, 1981), vol. 1, 932–3.
13. He composed a song of that title for *Saturday Night* (1954).
14. Both statements are somewhat inaccurate: the instrument at the opening of the film is a barrel piano, the venue at its end a private mansion. See Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (London: BFI, 1987), 151–161.
15. Further, the structural ramifications of the fashionable confluence of film and piano concerto in the early 1940s deserve an essay. It would encompass *Brief Encounter*.
16. Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 182.
17. Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, libretto (New York: Dodd, Mead), 119.

CHAPTER **2**

# SONDHEIM AND POSTMODERNISM

ROBERT L. MCLAUGHLIN

About midway through *Follies*, Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman's 1971 musical about the reunion of the casts of a Ziegfeldesque Follies, one character says to no one in particular, "Wasn't that a blast? I love life, you know that? I've got my troubles and I take my lumps, we've got no kids, we never made much money, and a lot of folks I love are dead, but on the whole and everything considered . . . (*She loses the thread*) Where was I?"(53)[1]. This attempt to sum up one's life into a grand statement and derive meaning from it and then to lose the thread, the narrative glue that holds it together, is paradigmatic of the play as a whole and suggestive in general of the skepticism many of Sondheim's plays hold toward narrative as a means of structuring and containing meaning. This skepticism, which is shared by much of the drama and fiction of the postmodern era, functions in many of the plays Sondheim and his collaborators presented from the 1970s into the twenty-first century to challenge the dominance of narrative as an aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological structure.

I place Sondheim's career in the context of two overlapping cultural moments. The first is the exhaustion of the Rodgers and Hammerstein aesthetic of the Broadway musical. With *Oklahoma!* in 1943, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II remade the Broadway musical by insisting on the integration of all its elements—story, character, song, dance, comedy, design. Each element had to be justified in terms of the story and characters, with extraneous material, no matter how entertaining, removed. One result was a musical theater capable of treating serious topics in a thoughtful manner. Another result was an aesthetic of realism—the introduction of a suspension of disbelief or the construction of a fourth wall—that had never previously been a part of the musical theater. Because of the success of *Oklahoma!* and the series of musicals that Rodgers and Hammerstein subsequently produced, the integrated-musical aesthetic dominated Broadway for the next twenty years. By the mid-1960s, however, the possibilities for the Rodgers and Hammerstein–style musical were beginning to run dry. A number of new musicals—*Man of La Mancha, Cabaret*, and *Hair*, for example—in various ways eschewed Rodgers and Hammerstein–style realism, calling attention to their own artificiality as a way of developing their themes.

The second context for Sondheim's musicals is the growing cultural presence of postmodernism, which by the late 1960s was evidenced in all the arts.[2] *Postmodernism* is a slippery and sometimes contentious term to define, not least because the postmodern enterprise resists definitive definitions. For me, postmodernism is marked by overlapping aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological concerns. Briefly, postmodernism dismisses the primacy of individual experience by suggesting that all experience—lived experience, spoken experience, written experience—is mediated through language that preexists our immersion into it. Thus postmodern art does not seek to make the process of representation invisible, as realism seeks to do so as to foster a suspension of disbelief, but rather makes it opaque or at least translucent. This self-referentiality, the awareness of the discourse that is expressing the art, the fogging of the mirror art holds up to nature, the refusal to let the audience suspend its disbelief, the self-awareness of art pointing, not to the world, but to itself pointing to the world, is the seminal feature of postmodernism. Connected to this is a skepticism about narrative as a meaning-conveying vehicle. Similarly, our immersion in language suggests an idea of the self at odds with the humanist model of the individually created, autonomous identity. Rather, our possibility for being arises from the societal discourses—about gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and so on—that we inherit; the self is socially constructed. By drawing attention to the discourse- and narrative-driven construction of the self, postmodernism calls into question the concept of a coherent, inherently purposeful identity. Finally, following from the rest is an epistemological and ideological critique of totalizing systems, any system that seeks to account for, make understandable, and control all knowledge.[3]

Although Sondheim's first shows as lyricist, *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959), and composer–lyricist, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) and *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), all exhibit some postmodern themes, especially regarding identity construction and the reproduction of ideology, and although the last two flirt with a humorous critique of narrative structure, in form they all generally work within the Rodgers and Hammerstein aesthetic. *Company*, which premiered on Broadway in 1970 with music and lyrics by Sondheim, book by George Furth, direction by Harold Prince, and choreography by Michael Bennett, marks the postmodern break with the integrated musical play. The play focuses on Robert, a Manhattan bachelor, and five married couples who gather to celebrate his thirty-fifth birthday. There is no plot as such. Rather, a series of scenes follows in which Robert interacts with the couples and with three girlfriends and through which the play explores marriage and personal relationships—their virtues, their eccentricities, their disadvantages. In form the play dispenses with the realism of the Rodgers and Hammerstein aesthetic, violating the fourth wall. The songs, rather than arising from the dramatic situation or the characters' emotions, tend to comment on the action and are often performed by characters observing, not participating, in a scene (as in "It's the Little Things You Do Together"). Although Sondheim has frequently expressed his dislike of Brecht, the result is nevertheless an alienation, wherein the audience is encouraged not to identify with the characters but to consider the ideas about relationships the play is developing. Further, *Company* eschews classic narrative form. The structure recalls a revue or vaudeville (an

impression reinforced by the pastiche number "What Would We Do without You?") in that generally there is no chronological or causal necessity ordering or linking the scenes. Instead, the structure is cyclical, the main event being Robert's birthday party, which plays out differently each time it recurs, and the main musical motif being the "Bobby, Baby" theme, in which the couples implore Robert to spend time with them and which recurs, vocally or instrumentally, at those moments when Robert's sense of self becomes confused.

This cyclical structure functions thematically as well. The play challenges our cultural reliance on narrative as a knowledge-constructing, meaning-providing vehicle. In a scene where Robert smokes marijuana with one of the couples, Jenny argues that Robert should be married because, "a person's not complete until he's married"[4] (39). A stoned David agrees, "Your life has a—what? What am I trying to say? A point to it—a bottom" (39). The implication here is that marriage gives one's life story a structure: a goal to aim at, the achievement of which provides closure. In the broadest of terms, we meet someone, fall in love, marry, and enter the nonnarrative timelessness of happily ever after. It is this narrative structure, basic to so much of our cultural experience, from fairy tales to Hollywood cinema, and absorbed by us into the epistemological framing of our life stories, that *Company* seeks to challenge through its own eschewal of conventional narrative. The play's dramatic tension is achieved by juxtaposing this traditional narrative structure and its association in the play with marriage with the cyclical form and its association with constant pleasurable activities. In the "Bobby, Baby" theme the characters call out to Robert to join them at a concert, at the opera, on an outing to the beach or the zoo, to play Scrabble, and most insistently to "come on over for dinner!" (19). Throughout the play we see and hear about Robert engaging in these kinds of activities plus drug use, drinking, casual sex, and homosexual curiosity. As he says at the beginning of the play, in response to the many messages on his answering machine, "whatever you're calling about my answer is yes" (4). This is the lifestyle he embraces while resisting the individuality and narrative restrictions of marriage. Robert neatly sums this all up when discussing his apartment with a girlfriend: "I've always liked my apartment but I'm never really in it. I just seem to pass through the living room on my way to the bedroom to go to the bathroom to get ready to go out again" (85).

The tension between these two structures and their associated themes is developed throughout the play. The narrative structure of marriage fails because the couples as far as we can see do not find the security of a clear meaning in or purpose for their lives. There is no happily ever after. Their fascination with Robert is in many ways based on their jealousy of his life of pleasurable activities. However, the life of pleasure is undercut as well, not least because in its repeatability it lacks a point, a narrative goal, and so seems like so much pointless, meaningless action. Further, as we hear in "Another Hundred People," the never-ending activity of Manhattan drives people apart, interdicting communication and connection, resulting in "a city of strangers" (50). So where does this leave Robert? In pre-Broadway versions of the play, the authors rejected endings where, on the one hand, Robert ended up proposing to a woman ("Multitudes of Amy") and, on the other hand, he ended up embracing the world of constant, near-hedonistic