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THE MUSICAL COMES OF AGE

America's greatest original contribution to the theater is the musical; yet the genre is too often dismissed as escapist entertainment. The reasons for the musical's disrepute are many. In its infancy, in the early years of this century, musical theater was unsophisticated. The plot line was thin. There was little attempt to integrate song and dance, and a basic formula of delight and diversion, beautiful girls, slapstick comics, and romantic ballads prevailed. The simplistic moralism, the naïve optimism, the noble hero and simpering heroine were adopted, unaltered, from nineteenth-century melodrama. The commercial success of these pieces encouraged their fossilization into a predictable pattern of sensational extravaganzas. Artistic merit was deemed less important than financial gain. The musical was viewed solely as a commercial commodity.

Not all musicals stuck rigidly to this pattern. Some tried to introduce thematic depth and social relevance. Particularly in the fervent political climate of the 1930s, musicals began to reflect social anxieties. Kurt Weill realized that Broadway was the heart of American theater and adapted his political commitment to its idiom. His major works of the thirties—*Johnny Johnson* (1936), a diatribe against war, written with Paul Green and produced by the Group Theatre; *The Eternal Road* (1937), a pageant of Jewish history written with Franz Werfel and directed by Max Reinhardt; and *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), in which, together with Maxwell Anderson, he attempted to expose the evils of fascism—present a sharp contrast to the work of Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Jerome Kern. Harold Rome wrote a pro-union *lehrstück* in his revue *Pins and Needles* (1937), for the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, and Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will*

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Rock (1937), a project of the W.P.A. Federal Theater, achieved notoriety with its overtly anticapitalist stance. George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, first produced in 1935, represented yet another radical new direction and form for the American musical theater. Unfortunately, it was not an immediate commercial success, closing after only 125 performances. E. Y. ("Yip") Harburg's song "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" was also a pertinent reflection of America in the thirties, but it was not until 1947, with *Finian's Rainbow*, that Harburg fleshed out his social commitment in a complete musical production. Indeed, all these works were essentially fringe elements, never really penetrating the mainstream of Broadway's musical consciousness.

From the twenties onward, however, disturbing elements did intrude more and more frequently onto the musical stage. Kern and Hammerstein's *Showboat* (1927), the epochal production in this regard, combined the glamor associated with its producer, Flo Ziegfeld, with the serious themes of miscegenation, racial prejudice, marital problems, and gambling. This erosion in the glistening surface of musical theater disturbed many critics. George Jean Nathan, for example, writing in 1947, laments: "Sense and intelligence are desiderata of drama. Musical Comedy is best when it abjures them and substitutes for them absurd fancy and all the wonderful illogic of a wonderful world that never was." He adds: "What we want, despite the academic critics, is a return of the oldtime enchanting absurdity, the oldtime refusal to reflect life and reality in any degree, the oldtime razzle and dazzle of the unreal and the incredible."¹ Too many contemporary critics echo these sentiments.²

The evolutionary progression of the musical from *Showboat* to Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* is well documented in histories of the American musical.³ The form changed and became increasingly complex. Integration became the key word as Rodgers and Hammerstein wove the texture of song, dance, and plot closely together. Yet despite the fact that such themes as racial prejudice (in *South Pacific* and *Finian's Rainbow*, for example), marital disharmony and infidelity (in *Carousel* and *The Most Happy Fella*), and capitalist venality (in *Allegro* and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*) were introduced, this kind of theater retained an essential naïvete. The musicals of the forties and fifties were escapist in that they transported their audience into a larger-than-life world where emotions were expressed in melody and the evening was capped with a reassuring reprise at the final curtain. It was a world of romance, in which love and happiness were guaranteed. These musicals did not mirror life as it was, but as it should

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be. The average gave way to the unique, emotion prevailed over reason, passion over decorum. The Rodgers and Hammerstein formula was based on the dictum "You feel, therefore you are."

The optimism of America after the Second World War is reflected in this body of work. Although it is a generalization, the America of the Eisenhower era was a country united by a complacent self-confidence. It found in the musical theater an image of itself that it chose and enjoyed. Audiences knew that they would be diverted and also that their bourgeois values would remain inviolate. As the popular theater of the period, musical theater reinforced prevalent attitudes.

Escapism is not, however, a necessary component of the musical. After the social and artistic upheavals of the sixties, Stephen Sondheim faced the sterile disillusion of the seventies by confronting the typical Broadway musical audience of tired businessmen and their wives with the very problems they had fled to the theater to escape. This was an audacious course to follow, for in so doing Sondheim flouted convention and flew in the face of audience expectation. Although his work is often condemned as sterile, cynical, over-intellectualized, and arid, it cannot be dismissed as glib theatricality, or superficial sentimentality.

Most of the significant artificers of the American musical theater have come from secure, middle-class environments, which may explain why their work reflects an enthusiasm for the material world. Sondheim, although he shares this affluent background, belongs to a different generation. The climate of progress and promise that prevailed during the creative period of Rodgers and Hammerstein's career no longer existed by the late 1960s. From that point on, for an artist in the commercial theater to comment on, or attempt to change, prevalent attitudes has been an invitation to financial disaster and obscurity.

Yet Sondheim and his collaborators have blazed a trail of creativity and commitment on Broadway. Rather than an esoteric style, they have chosen the popular form of American theater and invested it with a truth and vitality rarely associated with Broadway musicals. It may be true that "social comment is as unwelcome to most Broadway producers as syphilis is to a whore,"⁴ but this has not deterred Sondheim. Inflationary economics, the rising crime rate in the inner city, and the deterioration of the theater district in New York may have all had a chilling effect on theatrical creativity. (As lyricist Sheldon Harnick rather ruefully comments: "I keep remembering that fine old definition of theater: 'Two planks and a passion!' I keep thinking

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that whatever happens that still holds true, and then I notice the price of lumber."⁵) But commercial success, though obviously important for survival, has never been the *raison d'être* for any of Sondheim's work.

One of the foremost influences on Sondheim's work, producer/director Harold Prince, repeatedly emphasizes his own commitment to serious musical theater:

I am stuck with "why am I doing it." And in fact all the plays that I see suffer the same criticism. I did not enjoy *Mame*. Why did they bother? I see that it is amusing, and I appreciate the polish the talent provided. But the why anyone bothered, the why consistently gets in the way.

That doesn't imply that all musicals need be trenchant. God knows, *A Funny Thing* wasn't, but it had classical antecedents and it was conceptualized. . . .

There is a kind of deliciously unmotivated musical, a cherished memory of yesteryear, which some of our critics lament the loss of. Not I. I think that shows in which songs are utterly unmotivated, in which characters react inconsistently for laughs, mindless and pleasantly entertaining though they may be, through overpraise dangerously inhibit the future of the musical theater.⁶

Sondheim admits that he, like Prince, is committed to didactic theater, but they both recognize that didacticism must never become overpowering nor unentertaining. In discussing the development of *Sweeney Todd*, the two agree:

Prince: . . . It amuses me the number of people who tell us that the set for *Sweeney* is large, as though we hadn't noticed! Then the people who point out that the show neglects the industrial revolution in its text. We discussed all of that and agreed that it should.

Sondheim: In fact, . . . when Hal first started to shape the show in his head that way, and we started to talk about the whole aspect of the piece, I was most concerned that we not soap-box it. He was too, because we both like didactic theater but don't like soap boxing. I try to do it by just inserting here and there throughout the lyrics words like "engine," basic images, not just inserting the words but using them as little motivating forces to make a slightly wispy connection with the industrial revolution. I was afraid if we made too much of a connection it would put too heavy a weight on the image or on the metaphor. I don't think it did.⁷

Sondheim and his collaborators choose both complex subjects and consistently experimental techniques, and their musicals begin after the tradi-

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tional happily-ever-after has run into trouble. In an interview with Hubert Saal of *Newsweek*, Harold Prince explains his and Sondheim's commitment to "truth" in the musical theater: "I work in the theater, not in the musical theater. . . . Who says to be entertained means to be tickled? . . . I think it's more stimulating to be upset. I try to be part of what I want to see. And I go to the theater to see a little blood drawn."⁸

The experience of catharsis is not generally associated with the American musical theater, although one happily applies the term to Wagnerian opera. Sondheim has shown, however, that a gut-wrenching theatrical experience of music and word does not always have to be presented in a language other than English. Though Sondheim also explores the unique joy, delight, and wonder of our time, his musicals, thus, are not as popular or readily accepted as those of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, and Loesser. They disturb and challenge. Commercial and aesthetic criteria should not be confused, however. Sondheim explores new territory every time he writes a new musical. This does not lead to automatic acclaim and financial success; Sondheim's triumphs are of a different order.

It would be misleading, though, to suggest that the innovation of Sondheim's work is to be found exclusively in the seriousness of its themes and the disturbing quality of its content. Much of the significance of his work lies in his creative use of form.

A great deal has been written about the "integrated" structures of the Rodgers and Hammerstein type of musical. From 1943 (with the unprecedented success of *Oklahoma!*) until the death of Hammerstein in 1960, that team's musical creations dominated American musical theater. Their work provided a model, not only for audiences and for critics, but for other writers and composers as well. There were naturally experiments and deviations, but generally the Rodgers and Hammerstein formula set the standard for what the musical could and should be. In their work they fused the two primary streams of influence in American musical theater: the sentimental romance of European operetta and the jazzy colloquialism of revue. The form of their work was pioneered by Hammerstein and Kern in *Showboat* and consisted of a scene-song scenario in which plot action is climaxed with a song that delineates character. After a blackout, the scene changes, and the basic pattern repeats. This sounds simplistic when summarized, but prior to such work there was no intimate and necessary connection between the songs, dances, and book scenes. The music of the early musicals was essentially noncontextual. Songs could be fitted into any show and fre-

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quently were shifted about. With *Oklahoma!* integration of song, dance, and dialogue became mandatory, as the structure of Rodgers and Hammerstein was adopted without any real modification by such masters as Lerner and Loewe, Loesser, and Harnick and Bock.

Although the formula has proven successful and lucrative, it had become tired and predictable by the time *West Side Story* (1957) raised "integration" to a new height of excellence as song, dance, and dramatic action coalesced into a theatrical totality (Rodgers and Hammerstein themselves had tried, unsuccessfully, to modify the formula as early as 1947 with *Allegro*). The boundaries between the components of the musical were blurred. Consequently, *West Side Story* possesses a unity previously unknown in the musical theater.

It was from such antecedents as these that Sondheim's talents evolved. He developed from Oscar Hammerstein's young protégé, who had assisted Hammerstein on the experimental *Allegro*, into the lyricist for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*. Of *Gypsy* and *Allegro* he asserts:

I really believe that *Gypsy* is one of the two or three best shows ever. It was the last good one in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical form—where you take a story and tell it with scene-song-scene-song, where peaks of emotion are carried forward in song. . . . *Allegro* was a development that used the Greek chorus—it started the type of musical that Hal Prince likes to do, like *Cabaret* and *Zorba*, where there is comment on the story at the same time the story is being told.⁹

The form of a Sondheim musical goes well beyond *Allegro*, *Gypsy*, and *West Side Story*, however. Although the songs and dances in a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical relate to character and text, they have an active life outside the theater. Many of their tunes are standards in the world of popular music. Sondheim's music and lyrics rarely possess this independent life. They are so intimately linked to text and so intricately woven into the fabric of the entire work that they cannot easily stand alone. Other than "Send in the Clowns," Sondheim has not written a "hit" tune.

Many detractors claim that this lack of popularity resides in the unmelodic quality of his music. Critics often complain that one does not leave a Sondheim show "humming," but as Sondheim points out, anything that can be sung can be hummed. The fact is, Sondheim's music overflows with haunting melodies, but his melodic line is intimately tied to the lyric, and

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the lyric, rhythm, and tone of each song belong specifically to the character who is singing the song at that particular stage of the action.

Moreover, Sondheim's music is more sophisticated and complex, more advanced in harmony, form, and melody than the work of previous theater composers. Sondheim modifies—and often spurns—the conventional structure of the theater song, with its AABA form. This structure assured the traditional composer that the listener was exposed to the theme at least three times. And songs were often reprised, sometimes several times, as the cover for a scenic change. If audiences do not hum after a Sondheim musical, it is both because they have not been exposed to the melodies as often and because Sondheim's music is not simple. The texture is denser and the content more complex. It is consequently more difficult to grasp in the fleeting immediacy of the theatrical moment. With each musical and lyrical nuance perfectly matched to the particular character in the particular situation, music, lyric, character, and plot are interwoven into a seamless whole, closer to Wagnerian opera than traditional musical comedy.

If, though, all Sondheim offered was a more intricate blend of the elements of the musical, then his work would be an extension rather than an innovation. *Concept*, the word coined to describe the form of the Sondheim musical, suggests that all elements of the musical, thematic and presentational, are integrated to suggest a central theatrical image or idea. This unity is certainly to be found in Sondheim's work, but no label can possibly encompass the broad range of Sondheim's innovations. Sondheim himself, with his loathing for glib generalizations, repudiates the designation:

"Concept" is this decade's vogue word, just as "integrated" was the vogue theatrical word of the '40s, referring to an approach in which a story is told and characters are advanced through song. The watershed, the landmark musical was indisputably *Oklahoma!* Everything that followed can be seen as a development of it—either a rejection or a carrying on. Me, I'm carrying it on, making variations.¹⁰

Prior to Sondheim, the musical was built around its plot. The narrative structure focused primarily on a love relationship and provided a framework for all songs, dances, and dialogue. Sets were naturalistic, if extravagant, and a basic pattern of exposition, complication, and resolution pertained. The book structure of these musicals meant the story. The book structure for Sondheim, on the other hand, means the *idea*. Music, lyric, dance, dialogue, design, and direction fuse to support a focal thought. A central

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conceit controls and shapes an entire production, for every aspect of the production is blended and subordinated to a single vision. The thematic thrust of the work is conveyed to the audience through a primary image or metaphor that dictates not only the content of the piece but also its presentational form. Form and content cannot really be separated, for the one dictates and is dependent on the other.

It is for this reason that each of Sondheim's works is unique. The pattern in all of the Rodgers and Hammerstein type of musical is basically the same, but Sondheim develops a new lyric, musical, and theatrical language for each work. Sondheim's music and lyrics grow out of the dramatic idea inherent in the show's concept and themselves *become* part of the drama that previous theater songs would only reflect. Rodgers and Hammerstein may have set *The King and I* in Siam, but that work's Eastern locale is merely decorative. The music and sets may suggest the East, but the texture and impact of the work is little different from those of *Oklahoma!* The contrasting effect of Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures*, where all elements of the work are products of its central idea, could not be more marked.

Sondheim's contribution to the advancement of the genre can also be seen in his break with the traditional logical development of realistic theater. Sondheim's structures are closer to the freewheeling patterns of avant-garde nonmusical theater. Time and place are fragmented and distorted. Logical connections are associative rather than linear. Sondheim and director Harold Prince acknowledge that this presentational style is inspired by the work of Joan Littlewood, whose innovative directional approach resulted in such productions as *Oh, What a Lovely War!* and *The Hostage*. Littlewood rejected traditional narrative patterns and chose instead a revue-like format. This, combined with her ability to blend reality and fantasy and use song fragments to upbraid audiences, intrigued Sondheim and Prince. They acknowledge, for example, that the style of *Company* was consciously derived from Littlewood's work.¹¹

Sondheim and his collaborators experiment with the notion of theater as a game that the audience actively plays. Many of the imaginative leaps necessary for comprehension are achieved only through audience collaboration. This does not mean that Sondheim's musicals resemble the "tribal rock" phenomena of environmental theater. In Sondheim's musicals, rather, the empathic bond is both established and examined. Audience activity is intellectual rather than physical.

As an extension of this gamelike quality, Sondheim has evolved a particu-

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lar category of musical language. The heightening emotional impact of tonality; the stimulating effect of rhythm; the soothing quality of harmony; the expansion and compression of time and feeling—these emotive powers of music are well established, and Sondheim naturally exploits all the connotative resonances of musical form. His work is subtle and intricate, but no different in kind, in this regard, from that of his predecessors. One facet of his work, however, is unique. Sondheim uses the various forms and patterns of theater music as comments upon themselves. This point will be clarified in the actual analysis of his work, but Sondheim's technique can be likened to that of Bertrand Russell's second-order language. Music's ability to convey emotion is commonly recognized. That is its first-order dimension. But certain musical styles are definitely associated in an audience's mind with certain eras, certain emotions, and certain truths. Sondheim takes these well-known musical forms and places them in antithetical situations. Lyric and character are thus at odds with the musical suggestion. Such dislocation of style and content achieves a number of interesting and effective results, as the audience is forced into examining both the truth of the lyric and the contrasting emotional implications of the musical structure. The psychological gestalt of audience expectation is placed in ironic relief. The effect can be alienating in a Brechtian sense and unquestionably enhances the multileveled implications of the experience.

Sondheim mentions his use of this technique very briefly in two interviews given in the early seventies:

I had begun to feel, way back during *Gypsy*, that the whole notion of Broadway musicals depending on "integrated" songs—numbers that spring from the dialogue and further the plot—ought to be re-examined, and perhaps changed. Though the tone of *Anyone Can Whistle* was off, the songs did break with tradition: they commented on the action instead of advancing it, and I think their relation to the book was excellent. In *Forum*, I'd already tried another break: songs that were respites from the action. In *Company* the songs were respites and comments.¹²

Anyone Can Whistle is a cult show. . . . It was experimental and started a technique for me which I've used ever since and hope never to use again—the use of traditional musical comedy language to make points. All the numbers that Angela [Lansbury] sang in the show were pastiche. . . .

Incidentally, the technique of using attitudes instead of emotions for Angela in *Whistle* I used in "Side by Side by Side" and "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" in *Company* and a great deal in *Follies* where it's really called for.¹³

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But Sondheim's use of musical-comedy language is far more complex and effective than these remarks suggest. The "pastiche" results not only in a comment on character, but also in a comment on audiences and on society in general.

Martin Gottfried, the only critic to comment upon this stylistic device, has a negative response: "Musical satire is always around the corner in Sondheim's work. He indulges this taste too frequently and it grows tiresome. It might be the result of his retentive musical mind or a reflection of his disinclination to be emotionally expressive. Mockery, after all, is a form of self-disguise."¹⁴ Gottfried is correct that the device is satiric, but Sondheim is not using it simply as a means to hide self. The juxtaposition of an earlier, more frivolous style, with a contemporary issue or character serves as a highlight and ironic comment both upon the two contrasting eras and the difference in audience expectation then and now. Gottfried rejects the technique because it results in a severing of the empathic bond. There is a vast distance, however, between the beliefs that produced the cheerful tunes of early musical comedy and the biting cynicism of today. Sondheim's musicals are not reassuring and complacent. One of his chief methods for making his audience uneasy is this technique of double exposure. Gottfried is an intelligent and sensitive critic, but his unstated premise is that musicals should be primarily escapist entertainment.

Careful examination of Sondheim's work shows that although satire may be characteristic, it is not confining. Sondheim's musicals are not sentimental, but this does not mean that they are sterile or heartless. An overwhelming emotional blast lies at the heart of Sondheim's theater, but for Sondheim it is a *referent* rather than an *ingredient*. The old forms, the well-loved styles, remind us of what the theater can do, and what society once was. The satiric lyrics inform us of what our lives now are. The conflict and contrast between the two set up a stimulating theatrical experience. Sondheim's theater is not simply "show" but is also "tell." Sondheim's use of theatrical language, furthermore, is not restricted to individual songs or even to musical-comedy antecedents. Each major work is also refracted through a contrasting or complementary theatrical, or related, form: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and Roman farce; *Company* and drawing-room drama; *Follies* and the Ziegfeld revue; *A Little Night Music* and operetta; *Pacific Overtures* and Kabuki; *Sweeney Todd* and Victorian melodrama; *Sunday in the Park with George* and pointillism; and *Into the Woods* and fairy tales.

Sondheim's departure from the traditional patterns of realist theater has

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affected the fundamental nature of his characters. Lehman Engel asserts, "One of the chief differences between most plays and most musicals . . . is that characters in plays are often not what they seem; in musicals they invariably must be."¹⁵ This intrinsic simplicity and superficiality of character may have been true in the early years of the musical's development, but is not an essential quality of the genre. It is certainly not true of Sondheim's work. Sondheim repeatedly emphasizes the importance of multidimensional characters and admits a preference for "neurotic personalities." He acknowledges: "At least half of my songs deal with ambivalence, feeling two things at once. . . . I like neurotic people. I like troubled people. Not that I don't like squared-away people, but I *prefer* neurotic people. I like to hear rumblings beneath the surface."¹⁶ These troubled, complex characters have little in common with the straightforward, ingenuous creations Engel suggests are endemic to the musical theater.

The songs Sondheim composes for his *dramatis personae* explore the depth and turmoil inherent in each character. Sondheim's characters are never secure in any complete self-knowledge, for, as he explains: "Not enough songwriters understand the function of a song in a play. . . . They write songs in which a character explains himself. This is self-defeating. A song should reveal the character to the audience but the character does not have enough self-knowledge to describe himself in these terms."¹⁷ Sondheim's music and lyrics investigate the particular intricate maze of emotional sensibility of which the character is constituted. The audience is party to the character's confused search for self and stability. Consequently the characters are never one-dimensional cutouts.

Sondheim believes that drama is to be found in character, and one of his favorite maxims is Wilson Mizner's "People beat scenery." He writes songs that are not simply decorative or entertaining but are necessary to his characters. In his lyrics he attempts to direct all humor toward a fuller realization of the particular personality. He maintains that true theatrical wit results, not from an author's cleverness, but from the accuracy with which an observation matches the established temperament of a character: "that is what humor is all about: character, not cleverness."¹⁸

Whether or not Sondheim achieves this complexity of character delineation is an open question. The answer is certainly influenced by the particular book writer with whom he has collaborated. John Lahr, one of Sondheim's ardent castigators, vehemently denies the validity of Sondheim's character portrayals. He asserts:

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Sondheim speaks proudly of how his songs define and advance the characters in his musicals. But what distinguishes the characters in most of his later work is that they have no character. As he himself has pointed out, "In *Company* we were up against one of the oldest dramatic problems in the world: how do you write about a cipher without making him a cipher? In *Follies* we deliberately decided not to create characters with warts and all. Everyone would be, not a type, but an essence . . . *Pacific Overtures* was an attempt to tell a story that has no characters at all." Sondheim makes an asset out of a liability and calls it a breakthrough.¹⁹

Certainly Sondheim's characters do not possess the immediate appeal of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Anna Leonowens, the King of Siam, Nellie Forbush, or Ado Annie, but in exchange for that direct emotional simplicity, Sondheim's characters possess a complexity that is equally theatrically valid and exciting.

Although some have cast doubt on Sondheim's genius as a composer, no one has questioned his brilliance as a lyricist. In the American musical, word and sound are intimately related and much of the theatrical impact of any production is dependent upon the wit, insight, and perspicacity of the lyrics. It does matter what the characters are saying, for the score cannot be reduced to beautiful but meaningless melodic patterns. The words of a libretto are as essential as the notes to which they are set, for "beautiful sounds are not always beautifully theatrical, and no one goes to the theater to close his eyes."²⁰ One of the achievements of American musical theater is its exploration of the musical and theatrical possibilities of the American vernacular. Sondheim, in his scintillating lyrics and complex harmonies, has evolved a compelling synthesis of musical idiom and the American language and thought patterns. Word and sound blend, contrast and complement each other, and create an appropriate theatrical moment, a valid expression of a particular character's personality. Word and note are inseparable.

Sondheim makes it quite clear that the lyrics that interest him belong very specifically to the theater. They are "lyrics in a dramatic situation on a stage in terms of character."²¹ As Arthur Laurents, who has worked with Sondheim on four shows, explains, "Steve is the only lyricist who almost always writes songs that can only be sung by the particular character they are written for."²² Sondheim believes there are two basic principles that dictate what a lyric writer can and should do. The first is that lyrics exist in *time*. An audience cannot ask a performer to slow down or repeat, for "the music is a

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relentless engine and keeps the lyrics going."²³ This principle then leads to the next, which Sondheim explains thus:

Lyrics go with music, and music is very rich, in my opinion the richest form of art. It's also abstract and does very strange things to your emotions. So not only do you have that going, but you also have lights, costumes, scenery, characters, performers. There's a great deal to hear and get. Lyrics therefore have to be underwritten. They have to be very simple in essence. That doesn't mean you can't do convoluted lyrics, but essentially the thought is what counts and you have to stretch the thought out enough so that the listener has a fair chance to get it. Many lyrics suffer from being much too packed.²⁴

The lyricist's task is difficult because he or she has to charge each word with significance. Lyrics can possess all the complexity of poetry, exploring both the connotative and denotative resonances of each word. In addition, the music itself adds further depth and different levels of meaning. Yet because each lyric is ephemeral and has an extremely restricted exposure, each word must count. Consequently, lyric writing is an extraordinarily precise craft. Sondheim shows just how exact a lyricist should be in his sensitive analysis of the opening line of DuBose Heyward's "Summertime" from *Porgy and Bess*. Of the line, "Summertime and the livin' is easy," Sondheim writes:

That "and" is worth a great deal of attention. I would write "Summertime when" but that "and" sets up a tone, a whole poetic tone, not to mention a whole kind of diction that is going to be used in the play; an informal, uneducated diction and a stream of consciousness, as in many of the songs like "My Man's Gone Now." It's the exact right word, and that word is worth its weight in gold. "Summertime when the livin' is easy" is a boring line compared to "Summertime and." The choices of "ands" [and] "buts" become almost traumatic as you are writing a lyric—or should, anyway—because each one weighs so much.²⁵

Sondheim acknowledges three major influences on his work: Oscar Hammerstein, Burt Shevelove, and Arthur Laurents. Like Hammerstein, Sondheim is acutely aware of the needs of his singers. Technicalities like ending a song on an open sound, choosing consonants with care, building a number to an applause-pulling finale are all evident in the work of both men. More important, from Hammerstein Sondheim learned that "it's content that

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counts. It's what you say rather than how you say it, and clarity of thought, making the thought clear to the listener. . . . Oscar also said, 'Say what you feel, not what other song writers feel.'"²⁶ Sondheim heeded Hammerstein's advice, and for this reason his work is profoundly different from that of his mentor. Whereas Hammerstein believed in and could express a basic optimism and faith, Sondheim's work reflects a cynicism and distance.

The second major influence on Sondheim's writing was Burt Shevelove, who together with Larry Gelbart wrote the book for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Shevelove stressed clarity, teaching Sondheim that

clarity of language was important as well as clarity of thought. He believes that the best art always seems effortless—maybe not true of something like *Guernica*, but true of lyric writing, I think. Burt advised me, "Never sacrifice smoothness for cleverness. Better dull than clumsy." I agree. An awful lot of lyrics suffer from the lyric writer having a really clever, sharp idea which he can't quite fit into the music, so it sits there clumsily and the actor is stuck with singing it. The net result is always that it doesn't land with the audience. It has to be smooth if you are going to make the point.²⁷

Sondheim worked with Authur Laurents, his third major influence, on *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, and *Do I Hear a Waltz?* From Laurents, Sondheim believes, he learned to appreciate the significance and importance of "subtext." By "subtext" Sondheim means "giving the actor something to act."²⁸ In all his lyrics Sondheim attempts to invest words with several levels of meaning. Often the meaning of the subtext will be in complete contrast to the overt content of the lyric, but this complexity is not accidental, or something added by a subtle actor. It is written by the lyricist. (Sondheim not only explores the subtext necessary to the full realization of character but also attempts to invent staging for each number as he writes. It is not important to him that the director or choreographer adhere rigidly to his staging suggestions, but by envisaging the theatrical possibilities Sondheim assures that his work will be viable on stage.)

Another axiom in Sondheim's system is "Content dictates form." The structure, rhythm, and complexity of the rhyme scheme and the melodic form and tone of each song are carefully matched to the dramatic needs of the characters. Sondheim stresses that the "grammatical structure" of music and the lyric must match exactly. Stressed meter in verse must be coupled

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with accented notes in music, for otherwise the clarity of expression will be seriously impaired. Sondheim advises:

When a phrase of music comes to an end the lyric should come to an end, otherwise it sets up a conflict in the listener's ear. The lyric should match the music with a comma, a semi-colon, or just the completion of a phrase. . . .

Words have to sit on music in order to become clear to the audience. I am talking about clarity, . . . and clarity has to do with that thing I talked about, time. You don't get a chance to hear the lyric twice or to read it, and if the lyric doesn't sit and bounce when the music bounces and rise when the music rises, it isn't just a question of mis-accents, which are bad enough, but if it is too crowded and doesn't rise and fall with the music, the audience becomes confused.²⁹

Music and lyrics should complement each other. Music, Sondheim points out, is so rich a medium that the lyricist must be careful never to overwrite. He believes that if a very rich lyric is coupled with a passionate musical phrase, the audience will be overwhelmed. In order for a characterization to be completed with the addition of music, something must be left unsaid or implied. A lyric may often look banal on paper, for it only acquires its own poetic dimension when sung.

Sondheim has very definite attitudes about the use of rhymes, identities, and alliteration in lyric writing, but most of these practical details about the basics of the craft are more useful to the practitioner than to the critic. One area, however, is of interest: Sondheim emphasizes his conviction that rhyme suggests education. The quality of language must match the character, for in many ways a song functions like a soliloquy in which the internal motivation of a character can be conveyed. He admits to loathing one of his own lyrics from *West Side Story* for this reason:

One of the most embarrassing moments of my life as a lyric writer was after a runthrough of *West Side Story* when some of my friends including Sheldon Harnick were out front. I asked Sheldon after the show, "What do you think?" knowing he was going to fall to his knees and lick the sidewalk. But he didn't, and I asked him to tell me what was wrong. "There's that lyric 'I Feel Pretty,'" he said. Now, I thought "I Feel Pretty" was just terrific, I had spent the previous year of my life rhyming "day" and "way" and "me" and "be," and with "I Feel Pretty" I wanted to show that I could do inner rhymes too. So I had this uneducated Puerto Rican girl singing, "It's alarming how charming I feel." You know, she would not have been unwell-

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come in Noel Coward's living room. Sheldon was very gentle, but oh! did it hurt. I immediately went back to the drawing board and wrote a simplified version of the lyric which nobody connected with the show would accept; so there it is, embarrassing me every time it's sung, because it's full of mistakes like that. Well, when rhyme goes against character, out it should go, and rhyme always implies education and mind working, and the more rhymes the sharper the mind.³⁰

In contrast with Maria's simplicity, Sondheim has subsequently created many complex sophisticated characters who can display their creator's complex, sophisticated mind. Joanne' singing "The Ladies Who Lunch" (*Company*), Phyllis's vitriolic attack "Could I Leave You?" (*Follies*), Fredrik's witty use of literary allusion in his aborted seduction attempt "Now" (*A Little Night Music*); and the smart but vacuous chatter of the New Yorkers in "Putting It Together" (*Sunday in The Park with George*) are just a few of the examples that demonstrate how brilliantly Sondheim can combine a dextrous mind and intriguing rhyme schemes with the fabric of character.

Martin Gottfried writes of Sondheim's lyrics:

If Sondheim's work has weaknesses, they are excess complexity and a lack of warmth. Yet he *is* without question, the most influential lyricist of his time, because his work deals not merely with words but with the entire structure of the musical. Sondheim is attempting to do more with lyrics than anyone has ever attempted. . . . Even his peers have been influenced by his theatrical approach to lyric writing. For he writes not mere songs but musical scenes, in a style peculiarly devised for the theater. While we may miss the simplicity and warmth of the plain song in his work, Sondheim is drawing music and lyrics toward a higher purpose than the free-standing song. It will be because of his work that a musical's lyrics will finally be recognized for being as important to a musical as the book and music.³¹

Despite the innovation of form, content, and style, despite the numerous Tony Awards, accolades, and a Pulitzer Prize, Sondheim's work remains controversial. The reasons for both his succès d'estime and lack of popular appeal are related. Sondheim's work is complex and much of America's theatergoing public does not want to be challenged. The prevailing attitudes of his detractors is articulately expressed by John Lahr:

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

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him. "If I consciously sat down and said I wanted to write something that would send people out of the theater *really* happy, I would not know how to do it." His mature musicals sing about a new American excellence: desolation. . . .

Sondheim sat out the turmoil of the late '60s in his Manhattan townhouse, reemerging with *Company*, a musical in tune with the new, winded, post-protest times. Sondheim had come of age: his own diminished sense of life and guarded emotions were now shared by a nation obsessed with its despair. Sondheim's glib toughness echoed the mood of the unromantic era. He became a phenomenon new to the Broadway musical: a laureate of disillusion.

A society that feels itself irredeemably lost requires a legend of defeat. And Sondheim's shows are at the vanguard of this atmosphere of collapse. He shares both the culture's sense of impotence and its new habit of wrenching vitality from madness. He is a connoisseur of chaos. . . .

Sondheim's mature scores mythologize desolation.³²

Lahr writes persuasively and with intelligence about the nihilism he finds in Sondheim's work. His criticism is fascinating, but ultimately old-fashioned in its premise. He displays his prejudice in the following brief sentence, "Before it was Art, the musical was fun."³³ Lahr is at heart little different from George Jean Nathan, nostalgically longing for the "mindless" musicals of the past. Lahr is intrigued, fascinated, but ultimately offended by Sondheim's ability to fuse the serious psychological, political, and social angst of contemporary America with a form that he believes should be ultimately frivolous. He takes issue with the fact that "Sondheim has set himself up as an avant gardist in an avowedly popular form,"³⁴ for Lahr is essentially contemptuous of the genre. He unequivocally states, "Musical comedy is to music what Ping-Pong is to tennis."³⁵ Even his use of the term "musical comedy" rather than "musical theater" displays his prejudice. Lahr concludes his condemnation of Sondheim thus:

From *My Lai* to *Guyana*, the American public has become casual about absorbing catastrophe. And Sondheim has turned this numbed anguish into a mass product. Too chic to register disapproval, Sondheim is an entrepreneur of modern anxieties. His musicals claim victories for themselves as new departures, but they are the end of the musical's glorious tradition of trivialization. Sondheim's cold elegance matches the spiritual pall that has settled over American life. His musicals are chronicles in song of the society's growing decrepitude. They foreshadow the newest barbarism—a nation that has no faith in the peace it seeks or the pleasure it finds.³⁶

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Lahr's conclusions are unconvincing. The musical may have been "trivial" in the past, but its greatness did not lie in that triviality. Sondheim has shown that musical theater can be serious, poignant, and still exhilarating.

In his article "In Search of a New Consensus," Julius Novick confronts the kind of attitude exemplified by Lahr and argues that musicals have changed because the country, its culture, and people have changed.³⁷ The American musical theater cannot return to the carefree days of escapist entertainment because there no longer exists a real consensus among the majority of Americans. The American self-image has been shattered. A monumental disillusion prevails. The mythic pattern of good triumphing over evil has not been substantiated in recent history. As Alan J. Lerner so succinctly expressed it: "The point is, I wouldn't write *My Fair Lady* today. I don't feel *My Fair Lady* today."³⁸ In contrast with the biting cynicism and nostalgic longing of Lahr, Novick does not see this transition as a disaster:

It is no longer assumed that a musical is or should be an escapist entertainment. Over the past couple of decades, American musicals have been reflecting with increasing vividness the changes in the society out of which they grew. These last two decades have not been carefree ones, and they have not given rise to carefree musicals. The Broadway musical, instead, has opened itself more and more to the real world: the fearful, divided, confused real world we live in every day. . . .

. . . Broadway musicals have lost something in gaiety, charm, and exhilaration over the past 20 years, but they have gained something in variety, imaginative freedom, and truth to life.³⁹

Sondheim is the preeminent exponent of this new musical form. His work has redefined the genre and as a result the gulf that separated "serious," "legitimate" theater from the musical theater has effectively been bridged.