KEEPING THE CONCEPT CLEAR:

A PERSPECTIVE ON PERFORMING SELECTED MEZZO-SOPRANO SONGS

FROM THE MUSICALS OF STEPHEN SONDHEIM

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During the second half of the twentieth century, American musical theatre underwent many evolutionary changes. The book musical of Rodgers and Hammerstein, where music and dance were fully integrated into the development of a linear plot based on a book, was no longer commonplace, and different approaches to the musical emerged. One of these approaches was the concept musical, which can be defined in several different ways, but the most commonly accepted definition of a concept musical is a musical that is based around a central concept or idea in lieu of following the traditional trajectory of a linear plot.¹

Stephen Sondheim is commended as one of the greatest composers of the concept musical, and is often credited with establishing the genre. Although Sondheim is often praised as a lyricist and composer, his musicals have received mixed reviews. They are often criticized for the lack of a linear plot or the absence of the “happy ending” that is prevalent in musical theatre. However, Sondheim’s musicals are widely acclaimed for their musical complexity and intellectually stimulating concepts. An example of the stimulating possibilities discovered through the avenue of Sondheim’s concept musicals is Company, which is frequently acknowledged as the first great concept musical. This

masterpiece does not follow a linear story line, but instead focuses on the complexities of relationships between people.

Sondheim’s musicals were composed at a time in society when women were becoming more educated and respected. Thus, it is not surprising that the female characters in his musicals exhibit remarkable complexity. Sondheim’s characters are rooted both in their original historical contexts and within the complexities of the music and lyrics, and solo performances should be mindful of these roots. A soloist should attend to both Sondheim’s musical devices and informed character analyses in order to fully realize the work of art. This research will provide a resource for performers that will assist in preparation of selected roles.

From a singer’s perspective, one of the most notable qualities of Sondheim’s music is his uncanny ability to set a vocal line. Though his melodies do not tend to be “hummable” or instinctively memorable like the music of Rodgers and Hammerstein, his synthesis of words and music is incredible. The vocal lines suit the intonation of speech and flow naturally. His songs do give insight into the characters and plot development, which is difficult to find in many of the musicals that preceded Sondheim. After an era where characters sang about “beautiful mornings” and “enchanted evenings,” Sondheim’s intricate lyrics and distinctive style of music serve a different purpose, where the question of why a character is singing rather than speaking never seems necessary.

The research presented here is an important and unique contribution because it presents a comprehensive perspective of four different mezzo-soprano roles from the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. Both musicological and performance practice approaches are considered for the research in each chapter, a comprehensive strategy that
is often missing in similar research projects. Each subsequent chapter discusses the inception, creation, and reception of each musical, the cultural and historical influences on the musical, the development of a specific character, and the musical characterization of the same character. The selected musicals—*Company, Merrily We Roll Along, Into the Woods,* and *Assassins*—cover a period of twenty years, 1970-1990, which is in the midst of Sondheim’s most productive period of compositional output. These four roles were chosen because they offer a broad range of compositional techniques employed by Sondheim and display a variety of different character types.

Chapter two provides an overview of Sondheim’s contribution to the genre of American musical theatre. This research is important in order to understand Sondheim’s overall approach as a composer and lyricist; an understanding that grounds both the musicological and theatrical analyses that follow. The chapter covers contextual information regarding his collaborators, his process, and the reception of each musical. The information contained within displays Sondheim’s penchant for making bold compositional choices in order to fully commit to his artistic vision.

Chapter three discusses different categories of American musical theatre and compares typical mezzo-soprano characters from these genres to typical mezzo-sopranos in Sondheim musicals. Specifically, the chapter compares and contrasts Sondheim’s characterization of mezzo-sopranos with treatment of similar characters from Golden Age Musicals and Rock Musicals. The research presented in this chapter illustrates Sondheim’s progressive treatment of female characters, and presents how his approach differs from his contemporaries.
The subsequent four chapters—chapters four through seven—discuss research based on four mezzo-soprano roles from the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. The roles included in this study are Amy from *Company*, Beth from *Merrily We Roll Along*, the Baker’s Wife from *Into the Woods*, and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme from *Assassins*. Each of the chapters includes research on contextual factors of each musical, including an overview of the inception of the idea, the reception of the work, and discussion of historical and cultural factors that affected the production. Understanding factors that influenced Sondheim’s composition of the musical will inform elements of characterization of the roles being discussed.

Additionally, the chapters include research on the development of the selected mezzo-soprano roles. The character analyses were completed via Chekhov’s acting method, which is grounded in the Stanislavski method. In this type of character analysis, the actor must consider personal events in his or her own life and relate those events to the events occurring in the dramatic moment onstage. The actor’s objective in the Stanislavski and Chekhov methods is naturalness—therefore, the actress must find attributes of the character she can relate to, in order to create genuine natural moments onstage. The discussion of character development in the subsequent chapters focuses on some prominent elements of the selected mezzo-soprano roles, with the intention of offering suggestions for the actress preparing the designated songs.

After completing functional harmonic analysis, important musical events were selected and highlighted in the research based on the impact they had on characterization. The musical analysis considers several key elements of music, including melody, harmony, timbre, dynamics, form, tempo, and rhythm. After examining these elements to
determine major musical events, the lyrics are taken into consideration to determine the manner in which Sondheim fuses music and lyrics to enable musical characterization.

Following a character analysis and a musical analysis, the research is synthesized and hypotheses regarding performance practice of the selected songs are provided. The sections regarding performance considerations include suggestions for acting choices as well as postulations of ways important musical events can be highlighted to enhance a performance. The theories provided in these portions of the chapter are relevant for performers preparing these songs, as well as for pedagogues assisting mezzo-soprano students with these songs or roles. A recorded example of a performance that uses these suggestions can be found as Appendix B, accompanying this document.

The final chapter of this document contains a summary and conclusions of the research. The research takes a classical approach to musical theatre idioms, and combines different conventions of these two genres. Chapter eight explores the implications of this synthesis, draws conclusions based on the research, and gives recommendations for further study.
CHAPTER TWO: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Early Years (Sondheim prior to West Side Story)

Herbert and Janet Sondheim, a comfortable upper-middle class New York couple, had a son on March 22, 1930. What this couple did not realize was that this son, Stephen Joshua Sondheim, would go on to become one of the most brilliant and innovative composers in American musical theatre. Stephen Sondheim’s parents’ divorce in 1940 proved to be a central event in his childhood, which ultimately facilitated a fortuitous move to Doylestown, Pennsylvania that granted Sondheim the opportunity to meet one of the greatest influences in his life, Oscar Hammerstein II.\footnote{Stephen Banfield, \textit{Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals} (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 12.} Hammerstein had tremendous influence over Sondheim as a young man and a composer.

Sondheim began his musical pursuits at a very young age. He started to play piano at the age of seven, and took lessons for approximately two years, though he doesn’t remember why he stopped. Sondheim’s parents woke him up at night to entertain guests by playing Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee,” one of the pieces Sondheim enjoyed playing. Interestingly, Sondheim does not recall having a special interest in music at a young age. He did not think he had unique talents in music...
compared to other children, and he did not know that he wanted to have a career in music from the beginning.\(^3\)

Sondheim’s first real attempt at writing music was in the spring of 1945. At this time, Sondheim was a student at the George School, a college preparatory school just outside of Philadelphia. Sondheim and a classmate of his discussed the idea of writing a musical about life at the George School, and although the idea was initially postponed, By George, a three-act musical with twenty songs, was performed in 1946. The show was the biggest success of the season at the George School, and Sondheim had high hopes of being the first fifteen-year-old boy to have a show on Broadway. These hopes were crushed when Hammerstein gave Sondheim harsh criticism of the script and the songs. Hammerstein recognized talent within the score, but expressed to Sondheim that the script was terrible.\(^4\)

In 1946, Sondheim entered the exclusive Williams College. Initially, Sondheim intended to major in mathematics, but a freshman music course with Robert Barrow changed his mind and convinced him to pursue a career in music.\(^5\) Barrow inspired Sondheim to view music as a craft, and Barrow taught that composers create music in much the same way as a carpenter creates a table.\(^6\) At Williams, Sondheim proposed that the college produce a new work, but the school was, at first, reluctant to provide funding. After presenting a logical argument and getting support from faculty members, Sondheim was finally successful in his efforts, and Phinney’s Rainbow was presented at Williams.

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\(^4\) Ibid, 51-53.

\(^5\) Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 12.

College in 1948. Also during his time at Williams, Sondheim wrote *All that Glitters*, a musical based on the play *Beggar on Horseback* by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, and the musical was well received.

During the summer after Sondheim’s freshman year at Williams, Hammerstein suggested Sondheim become an apprentice for Richard Rodgers and Hammerstein during the writing of their new project, *Allegro*. This experience was important to Sondheim’s growth as a composer, because he was able to observe, in his words, “a lot of smart people doing something wrong.” Although *Allegro* was a failure in comparison to other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, its innovations proved to be very influential over Sondheim.

Upon graduation from Williams, Sondheim was awarded the Hubbard Hutchinson Prize fellowship, a two-year fellowship to study music. This fellowship afforded Sondheim the opportunity to study composition with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt. Studying with Babbitt was a logical choice for Sondheim, because Babbitt had written popular songs, film scores, and a musical, and Sondheim was very clear that he wanted to pursue writing musicals, rather than classical music.

After completion of the fellowship, Sondheim tried to get his original musical *Climb High* produced, but without success. Shortly after, Sondheim traveled to Italy with a friend to work on a film called *Beat the Devil*, which included such stars as Humphrey Bogart. This brief visit to Europe began to propel Sondheim into his interests in filmmaking and script writing. Hammerstein introduced Sondheim to the well-known playwright and screenwriter, George Oppenheimer, who hired Sondheim to write for his

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7 Kislan, 69-70.
8 Secrest, 53.
new television series, *Topper*. This job proved to be lucrative and exciting, but eventually he tired of it, and realized this type of work was not his life-long ambition.⁹

After about five months, in 1952, Sondheim left *Topper*, and returned to New York City. He wrote some miscellaneous works, including some songs that appeared in plays, such as the 1955 Broadway play *A Mighty Man Is*. Although the show was a Broadway flop, Sondheim’s music had finally appeared on a Broadway stage.¹⁰ During the early 1950’s, Sondheim picked up several jobs writing television scripts, in order to make money, and continued to pursue writing musicals. He worked tirelessly to make some of them work, but the results were unsuccessful.

Of all of the works he wrote in the early 1950’s, the musical *Saturday Night* was one of the most promising ventures. Sondheim ushered at a wedding with Broadway producer and set designer Lemuel Ayers, and as it turned out, Ayers had just bought a script from Academy Award winners Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein, who had written the screenplay of *Casablanca*. Originally, Ayers wanted Frank Loesser to compose the score for this new musical, but Loesser was too busy to compose for the project. Ayers then asked Sondheim to audition by writing three songs. Sondheim won the commission to write the entire score because Ayers and Epstein liked his songs. Unfortunately, the project was only able to raise about half of the necessary funds, so it was postponed. During the postponement, Lemuel Ayers died of leukemia, and the project was completely abandoned.¹¹

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⁹ Secrest, 97.
¹⁰ Ibid, 103.
¹¹ Ibid, 110.
In the midst of the production of *Saturday Night*, Sondheim met Arthur Laurents, who was working with Leonard Bernstein on a musical based on the James M. Cain novel, *Serenade*. Sondheim auditioned to be the lyricist for this work, and he came in with his music from *Saturday Night*. Laurents did not like Sondheim’s music, but was impressed by the lyrics. However, *Serenade* ended up becoming a film rather than a musical, which made the project seem like another dead end for Sondheim. In an interesting turn of events, Sondheim discovered that Laurents and Bernstein were working on a musical adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and Sondheim auditioned to be the lyricist by showing Bernstein his music from *Saturday Night*. Bernstein originally intended to write the lyrics himself, but he recognized Sondheim’s talent, and offered Sondheim a position as co-lyricist. Out of this series of events, coincidences, and mishaps, Sondheim was finally part of a Broadway musical—the 1957 Tony Award winning Broadway musical *West Side Story*.

Influences

Sondheim acknowledges that influences from other composers are evident in his music, including that of Leonard Bernstein. Sondheim argued that Bernstein’s primary influence was his example. He said “It was always very clear in Lenny’s music where his influences are…you can hear the Copland. But you can hear Lenny! It’s Lenny. I don’t care if you can hear strains of the other people. He had a voice. And that’s what
you listen for in music: it’s a voice. Even if you hear where it comes from. I’m eclectic
the way that Lenny was eclectic. But I have a voice. I have a voice.”12

Sondheim stated that Ravel and Copland are among his favorite composers. He
even wrote term papers in college about the two composers. Consequently, some
scholars try to link Sondheim and Copland, claiming Copland to be a major musical
influence over Sondheim’s compositional language. Sondheim has never listed Copland
as one of his major compositional influences, and expressed, “Copland hasn’t particularly
influenced me. He’s influenced every American writer. But the only time I’m aware of
having been influenced by Copland is in Assassins where I was trying to recreate a
certain expanse of Americana. It occurs mostly in the harmonies of “Hail to the Chief,”
at the beginning. But no, Copland doesn’t influence me particularly.”13

The first major influence on Sondheim was Oscar Hammerstein, who was an
immense presence in his life and career. Specifically, Hammerstein gave Sondheim some
advice regarding composition of musicals. One of the pieces of advice was that a song
needed to seem genuine and have sincerity, and that the audience would not fall for “false
sentimentality.”14

Hammerstein was very fond of simple, direct expression, because in his opinion, a
musical should not be written for the satisfaction of the writer or the cast, but to satisfy
the audience. For that reason, Hammerstein felt it was necessary for a composer to write
what he genuinely feels or believes. Hammerstein taught Sondheim how to structure a
song with a beginning, middle, and an end, and impressed upon him the importance of

12 Steve Swayne, “Music for the Theatre, the Young Copland, and the Younger Sondheim,” American
Music 20, no. 1 (Spring, 2002): 80.
13 Ibid, 85.
14 Secrest, 52.
every single word in a lyric. Another Hammerstein influence over Sondheim’s musical composition is that all songs have a purpose within the story, and the story should move effortlessly into each song, so that all of the music and lyrics have dramatic power. Hammerstein trained Sondheim to, “think of a song as a one-act play which either intensifies a moment or moves the story forward.”

Hammerstein continued to serve as a mentor to Sondheim until his death in 1960. Sondheim sought his advice about West Side Story and Gypsy, which Hammerstein would live to see succeed on Broadway. Hammerstein did not live long enough to ever see a musical Sondheim composed make it to the Broadway stage, though there is no doubt he expected it to happen. In fact, shortly before his death, Hammerstein told Sondheim that he would be thrilled if Sondheim would consider working with his former partner, Richard Rodgers. Sondheim agreed, and ultimately worked with Rodgers on Do I Hear a Waltz?

Sondheim acknowledges Bert Shevelove as another tremendous influence upon his career. Sondheim and Shevelove worked together on a couple of projects, including A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, which would be the first Broadway show that featured Sondheim’s lyrics attached to his own music. Shevelove, along with Larry Gelbart, wrote the book based on plays by Titus Maccius Plautus, and Sondheim wrote both lyrics and music. Sondheim admits that the score to this musical was one of

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15 Kislan, 154.
16 Secrest, 52-53.
18 Secrest, 174.
the most difficult for him to write. One of the reasons was that he had been groomed to write music in the fashion of Oscar Hammerstein’s songs, where the songs were necessary scenes to the story. While writing *Forum*, Shevelove challenged Sondheim to think of writing songs in an entirely different fashion, where they did not further the plot, but “savor the moment.” Sondheim also learned a number of other significant lessons from Shevelove. First, he learned the value of sacrificing smoothness for cleverness in composition. Shevelove also inspired Sondheim to see the value of clarity in language and thought, and that even with cleverness, there needs to be clarity. Additionally, Shevelove showed Sondheim that the best art always seems effortless.

A third main influence over Sondheim’s career was Arthur Laurents. The main lesson Sondheim learned from Laurents is the importance of subtext in dramatic writing. When Sondheim and Laurents began work on *West Side Story*, the two had gone to a session at the Actors Studio together. Laurents took Sondheim there so that he could observe actors, and he told Sondheim that someone who writes for musicals should understand actors and what they need from a script or a song. The idea of subtext was becoming popular during the creation of *Gypsy*, and Laurents impressed upon Sondheim the idea that what is happening in a scene is often not what keeps the story alive, but what is happening beneath the surface supplies the energy to propel the story forward.

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20 Ibid, 71.
22 Kislan, 155.
23 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 57.
24 Ibid, 57.
Another notable influence upon Sondheim was one of his collaborators on *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein. As previously mentioned, Bernstein was co-lyricist with Sondheim on *West Side Story*, which proved to be the work that truly launched Sondheim’s career in American musical theatre. Interestingly, Bernstein and Sondheim have very different opinions about what makes a lyric “poetic.” Sondheim regrets that many of his lyrics suffered in order to satisfy Bernstein’s taste for what was poetic. Bernstein likes to enrich the language and use beautiful imagery, and Sondheim prefers to use only language and images that the character would actually use if he or she was a real person. Sondheim thinks Bernstein was encouraging and supportive, but he always insisted on getting his way, and in most cases, Sondheim would eventually relent. Bernstein wrote his lyrics from the perspective of a writer, whereas Sondheim preferred less colorful language, because he wrote his from the perspective of the character.

Nevertheless, Sondheim learned a great deal from Bernstein and was influenced by him in several ways. For instance, the constant change of Bernstein’s music inspired Sondheim through its ability to surprise listeners, particularly rhythmically. The music breaks the expectations of the listener, which keeps the music fresh and unpredictable. Also because of Bernstein’s influence, Sondheim learned to approach his composition of theatre music with more freedom and variety. Sondheim says, “Lenny taught me by example to ignore the math.”\(^\text{25}\) Music written for the theatre does not need be rounded into four-bar phrases, or stay in the same meter throughout the song, which was a radical idea in 1955, as varied meters tended to be reserved for contemporary concert music. However, the biggest lesson Sondheim learned from Bernstein was not just about art, but

about life. This lesson was to always take big risks. Sondheim notes that if Bernstein
made mistakes, the mistakes were always huge, because he always took risks.

Robert Barrow and Milton Babbitt were also strong influences on Sondheim’s
compositional career. Barrow was Sondheim’s theory instructor while he was at
Williams College, and he inspired the young Sondheim to become a music major.
Barrow believed and taught all of his students, including Sondheim, that all art is work,
and should not be based solely on inspiration, but that hard work and craftsmanship is
also involved.

During the two years following Sondheim’s graduation from Williams College,
he used a fellowship to study with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt. Sondheim
says one of the greatest lessons he learned during his time studying with Babbitt was how
to sustain a musical idea. Babbitt challenged Sondheim to understand how to write a
piece of music so that it could last for any given amount of time, whether it was a short
three minute song, or a thirty minute work. 26

26 Secrest, 86.
Works as a Lyricist (*West Side Story* and *Gypsy*)

Sondheim as a Lyricist

Sondheim first made his appearance on the Broadway stage as a lyricist with *West Side Story*. From that time forward, Sondheim has been well-respected as one of the greatest lyricists to ever write for the American musical theatre. There are a couple of fundamental assumptions Sondheim abides by with regard to lyrics. These assumptions are that all lyrics exist in time, and also that lyrics live on the sound of their music and must be underwritten.\(^27\) Sondheim learned from Hammerstein the importance of every single lyric and its placement within the musical phrase, and his lyrics are meticulously selected and placed throughout his songs. Sondheim’s carefully selected lyrics and music create important moments that words cannot sustain on their own. Sondheim also believes that content dictates form, and thus, he very rarely repeats lines or has refrains in his music like that of his predecessors and mentors.\(^28\)

Another belief Sondheim has about lyrics comes from his interactions with Arthur Laurents. This belief is the importance of subtext to a good dramatic songwriter. Sondheim believes that drama does not happen by chance, and it is critical that a lyricist takes subtext into account while writing the lyrics to a song. Additionally, Sondheim believes that good lyrics use rhyme to highlight the most outstanding words in the pattern. In the case of rhyme, Sondheim says that “sometimes you want to hide it and

\(^{27}\) Kislan, 158-159.

sometimes you want to show it. And sometimes you want to *not* rhyme.” Sondheim believes there are times where it can be equally effective not to rhyme, particularly when the non-rhyming words are really unexpected, where the listener anticipates a rhyming word and that expectation is not met. That can further highlight text, because it draws the attention of the listener to the words.

West Side Story

*West Side Story* was a major undertaking for Sondheim, because he was writing lyrics for someone else’s music for the first time, and he would be writing these lyrics for the music of a legend, Leonard Bernstein. The offer of working on this project was not entirely appealing, as Sondheim had always viewed himself as a composer, and he was not only accepting a lyricist position, but was to be the *co-*lyricist with Bernstein. Eventually, Sondheim received billing as the lyricist, because Bernstein decided he had done more of the work on the lyrics and there were several songs for which he had written all of the lyrics.

In 1957, as the show was beginning to come together, *West Side Story* encountered its greatest difficulties. The story was difficult to sell, and even though Bernstein and Laurents had only experienced successes on Broadway, the team had a difficult time getting backers. Multiple producers turned the show down, until finally Cheryl Crawford and Roger Stevens agreed they would both produce the show.

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29 Horowitz, 236.  
However, there was a backer’s audition in New York where not a single backer offered to support the show, which caused Crawford to abandon the project. Just when Sondheim thought he would have another abandoned project, Hal Prince called Sondheim. Prince was having a difficult time with his show, *New Girl in Town*, which was being produced in Boston at the time. Prince and his partner, Bobby Griffith, came to New York, heard Bernstein and Sonheim’s score, and agreed to help once their show was up and running. They kept their word, and *West Side Story* was able to raise enough money to begin the casting and rehearsal process.\(^\text{32}\)

During the rehearsal process of *West Side Story*, Sondheim learned a valuable lesson about writing for musicals from the choreographer, Jerome Robbins. While working on the staging of the song “Maria,” Robbins asked Sondheim what Tony would be doing. Sondheim thought he would be standing and singing, but Robbins helped him to see that *West Side Story* was not that kind of musical. Sondheim learned from this experience that a songwriter and lyricist should always take the staging into account, to avoid having too many static songs.\(^\text{33}\)

*West Side Story* did out-of-town previews in Washington and Philadelphia. In Washington the show received rave reviews, but in Philadelphia the response was much less enthusiastic. However, after a few minor changes, *West Side Story* finally saw its premiere at Winter Garden on September 26, 1957. The show played to a sold-out house, and all of the reviews were good except for Walter Kerr’s review in the *Herald Tribune*.\(^\text{34}\) However, *West Side Story* experienced its greatest successes a few years later, after the

\(^{32}\) Zadan, 20.
\(^{33}\) Secrest, 123.
\(^{34}\) Secrest, 126.
creation of the film in 1961, which won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Gypsy

Following *West Side Story*, Sondheim was invited to become part of a new project, based on the story of the striptease artist, Gypsy Rose Lee, to be titled *Gypsy*. Although he was in the middle of writing the music for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Sondheim entertained the idea of this new project because it appeared to be a promising opportunity. Sondheim said, “I was heartsick, but I did it. And part of me is glad, because I think it’s a first-rate show, and part of me is sorry because it delayed my work as a composer just that much longer. It also interrupted *Forum* for six months.”

When *Gypsy* traveled to Philadelphia for the preview performances, Sondheim and Laurents were interested in receiving Hammerstein’s opinions and advice regarding the construction of the musical. Hammerstein said there were three problems with the show. First, the doorknob to the kitchen kept falling off. This problem was minor, and Sondheim thought it was trifling. The second problem Hammerstein had was with the placement of the song “You’ll Never Get Away from Me,” because he felt the song should come at the end of the scene, not in the middle. The final piece of advice Hammerstein gave Sondheim and Laurents was that they needed to add a big ending for Ethel Merman on “Rose’s Turn.” He felt that people would want to applaud Ethel

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35 Zadan, 43.
Merman so much that they would not be focused on the following scene, which was the most pivotal scene in the entire show. Sondheim and Laurents, though they were a little put off at first, followed Hammerstein’s advice, and those changes proved to be successful ones.36

*Gypsy* opened on Broadway on May 21, 1959. The show received rave reviews, and so did Ethel Merman, the actress who played the title role. John Chapman of the *Daily News* said, “What this town has needed is Ethel Merman. What Miss Merman has needed is a good show. We got her and she got it last evening.”37 However, the show did not run as long as the artistic team would have liked. *Hello, Dolly!* was released at the same time, and that was the real smash hit. Sondheim attributes it to the difference of the stories. He says *Gypsy* isn’t really a likeable story. According to Sondheim, “what make[s] smash-hit musicals are stories that audiences want to hear, and it’s always the same story. How everything turns out terrific in the end and the audience goes out thinking: That’s what life is all about.”38 Sondheim did enjoy financial success with *Gypsy*, and it was the first time Sondheim truly felt like an equal, and not an apprentice. He finally felt as though he did not have to imitate other writers or follow directions from his colleagues, but could write with real freedom.

Do I Hear a Waltz?

36 Secrest, 139.
37 Zadan, 57.
38 Ibid, 59.
After *Gypsy* opened, Arthur Laurents approached Rodgers and Hammerstein about making a musical to his successful 1952 play, *The Time of the Cuckoo*. However, Hammerstein died only a year after that, and just before Hammerstein died, he said to Sondheim, “I know you want to write music, but if you can see your way to writing with [Rodgers], I would be thrilled.” Following that interaction, Sondheim was hesitantly open to the idea of being a lyricist for Rodgers, and corresponded some with him during the following years.

Laurents approached Sondheim about *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, which was to be the setting of *Cuckoo* he had dreamt of years before. Sondheim didn’t particularly want to be solely a lyricist again, but he felt that he would be able to hold true to his promise to Hammerstein, as well as have the opportunity to work with Laurents once more. He recognized that a Rodgers show had never lost money, and he thought this collaboration could potentially be very lucrative.

The collaboration between Rodgers and Sondheim was not optimal. Their respective approaches to writing were very different and the two were often at odds. For one thing, Rodgers refused to rewrite anything, and as a result, Sondheim was forced to write lyrics that fit evenly into music that had already been written. Rodgers had an aversion to any music that did not divide into multiples of two or four measures. The first thing he did when Sondheim handed him lyrics was count the bars. Sondheim described this experience by saying, “I would bring him the sketch of a lyric on music paper with a suggested rhythmic notation attached, and he wouldn’t even read it until he had counted the bars, usually by tapping on my sketch with a pencil in authoritarian skepticism; woe
beted me if it turned out to be an odd number.” It would not be productive for Sondheim or Laurents to disagree with Rodgers either, because Rodgers was also a producer, and he inevitably had the final say in all decisions regarding the show. After the show was long over, Rodgers admitted that the working climate of the show had been tense, but he blamed Laurents and Sondheim, saying they rejected his ideas. In 1973, Sondheim was quoted in Newsweek as having said that Oscar Hammerstein was a man of limited talent but infinite soul, and that Richard Rodgers was exactly the opposite.

Do I Hear a Waltz? opened on Broadway on March 18, 1965, and although it had a run of two hundred and twenty performances, it was a failure in comparison to what the artistic team was hoping for. Sondheim says that the show itself was not bad, it was well written, with some beautiful music and a lovely libretto, but there was no passion behind it. The driving force behind writing the show was a successful and well-written play, but for a musical based on a play to succeed, there must be some kind of transformation or a real passion for the material in its original form.

Works as Both Composer and Lyricist

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39 Secrest, 142.
40 Secrest, 179.
Sondheim as a Composer

There are typical expectations for sounds and conventions in a Sondheim musical. Just as he does with lyrics, Sondheim has some preferred precepts which govern his compositional process and style. One of the main expectations for a Sondheim musical is a phrase for which he is well known: “content dictates form.”

This is one of the main motivations behind Sondheim’s apprehension regarding the use of a refrain, and especially explains his aversion to the reprise. Sondheim said, “I find the notion that the same lyric can apply in the first act and the second act very suspect.”

The entire score of a Sondheim musical reflects the concept of the show and intensifies the dramatic moment.

While admirers of Sondheim view him as one of the greatest artists in the history of musical theatre, there are those who criticize Sondheim for his style of writing. One of the criticisms is that his work is “not hummable.” In response, Sondheim said, “The very idea of it not being hummable is laughable. But critics and audiences have said that about my scores, when in point of fact, anything is hummable. Obviously if it can be sung, it can be hummed. When people say it’s not melodic, not hummable, it makes my blood boil.”

Sondheim’s opinion is that what makes a score “hummable” is how well the listener knows the song, and people find music instantly “hummable” if it is familiar to them before they hear it, and they can predict where the next note is going to go.

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41 Kislan, 157.
43 Zadan, 29.
him, it’s really a matter of how many times the person hears the song. With this presupposition, his music would obviously not be considered immediately hummable, because considering his hesitation to use refrains and reprises, the listeners would rarely get a chance to hear melodic material that is familiar to their ears. Author Joanne Gordon wrote, “Sondheim’s work is complex, and much of the American theater-going public does not want to be challenged.” The following portion of this chapter includes a description of each of the major musicals for which Sondheim was both composer and lyricist. The four musicals discussed in subsequent chapters—Company, Merrily We Roll Along, Into the Woods, and Assassins— are omitted because information regarding their chronology and background will be included in their respective chapters.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

In 1958, prior to beginning work on Gypsy, Sondheim had begun work on his first project as both composer and lyricist. The book writers were Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, who had always wanted to base a musical on the work of Plautus. Shevelove gave Sondheim some books of Plautus’s works, and after reading them Sondheim also became excited about turning some of the short plays into a musical. An attractive quality about Plautus’s writing was that, “Plautus was the first person to domesticate comedy. All comedy, Aristophanic, for instance, was about gods and goddesses.

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44 Gordon, Art isn’t Easy, 16.
Nobody had ever written about husbands and wives, daughters and maids. Plautus is responsible for the situation comedy."45

According to Sondheim, he had to write the songs exactly opposite to the way he was taught by Hammerstein. He had been taught, and prefers, to view songs as one-act plays, where the drama is propelled forward through the singing, and depth is added to the characters. However, because Forum is a farce, the characters are intended to be one-dimensional and the songs intentionally only deal with one idea and are lacking in subtext. After hearing some feedback, Sondheim suggested to Shevelove that Forum would be better off as a play than a musical, but Shevelove disagreed. He told Sondheim that the show, as a play, would be a relentless farce, but by adding songs that consist of one joke, the audience has a chance to recover. In order to achieve “dramatically static but theatrically funny” songs, Sondheim looked for moments in the story that would offer some kind of substance without needing to achieve much depth.46

When Forum did preview performances in Washington, the critics and audience were not amused, and one critic even said the show would be wise to close before it even opened in New York, but with some adjustments, when the show finally opened in New York it was a smash hit. Sondheim’s music was well received, and was thought to be impeccably constructed, and even considered “genius.”47 A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum was the first musical to earn Sondheim a Tony Award for best musical. The show won four other Tony Awards, including best actor, best director, best supporting actor, and best musical. Strangely, even though Sondheim received high

45 Secrest, 149.
46 Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, 80.
47 Secrest, 155.
praise, music and lyrics were not even nominated, and none of his colleagues mentioned him in their acceptance speeches at the awards ceremony. Sondheim was heartbroken until shortly thereafter he received a letter from composer Frank Loesser praising the score, and it said, “Sometimes even a composer’s working partners, to say nothing of the critics, fail to dig every level and facet of what he is doing. But I know, and I wanted you to know I know.”

Anyone Can Whistle

Following the enormous success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Sondheim had his first real Broadway flop, titled *Anyone Can Whistle*. According to Sondheim, the musical was “a perfectly acceptable attempt to present something unconventional in the commercial musical theatre.” However, he admits that the show had its flaws; a view substantiated because it only ran nine performances on Broadway, and received terrible reviews. *Anyone Can Whistle* likely failed because it was too experimental, or too modern in its own time.

Sondheim himself offers several explanations as to why *Anyone Can Whistle* was a failure. One reason he gives is that although the show utilizes both imagination and cleverness, the two aren’t enriching the other; they are drawing attention to themselves. Sondheim has even described aspects of the show as being “smart-ass” and “rather

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48 Ibid., 157.
49 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 111.
50 Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 123.
condescending.”\textsuperscript{51} The musical is structured more like a non-musical play; it is in three acts, and is not divided further into scenes. Sondheim says that the score is really like a music student’s score. The entire score is based on the first four notes of the overture, and all of the songs are based on intervallic relationships, specifically seconds and fourths.\textsuperscript{52}

One of the main issues Sondheim blames for the failure of \textit{Anyone Can Whistle} was the lack of a separate director, because Arthur Laurents wrote the book and also directed the show. This doubling had both positive and negative results, and Sondheim himself believes, “The blessing of a writer serving as his own director is that one vision emerges, there being no outsider to contradict him. The curse, inevitably, is that the vision may turn out to be myopic, there being no outsider to contradict him. So it was with \textit{Anyone Can Whistle}. There was no one to challenge Arthur and me but ourselves. We had the courage, but not the perspective.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Follies}

Shortly after \textit{Company}, performed in 1970, Sondheim worked with James Goldman on his new musical, \textit{Follies}. The original idea for the musical was a murder mystery theme, with a slightly different twist that Sondheim describes by saying the show is “a who’ll-do-it rather than a whodunit.”\textsuperscript{54} However, the plot of the show evolved and changed a great deal over time, and went through nine drafts before it ever reached a

\textsuperscript{51} Zadan, 97.
\textsuperscript{52} Banfield, \textit{Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals}, 123.
\textsuperscript{53} Sondheim, \textit{Finishing the Hat}, 112.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 199.
stage. In the end, *Follies* became a story with virtually no plot that was just based on the concept of a nostalgic mood.

The musical revolves around a reunion of people who performed in the Weismann *Follies* at the Weismann Theatre, which is about to be torn down. The characters were supposed to be performers who worked at the theatre during a multitude of different time periods, ranging from 1918 to the 1940’s. Sondheim chose to emulate these different eras of *Follies* performances by making use of pastiche. The challenge presented for Sondheim was that he was writing in a style in which he had never before written. Therefore, Sondheim had to rely on life experiences and compositional traditions he gleaned from listening to records. Sondheim wrote character songs for the four principles, and used pastiches for the other characters, which gave him an opportunity to emulate the styles of composers he admired. Sondheim said, “It allowed me to imitate the reigning composers and lyricists from the era between the World Wars, and I grabbed at it with all ten fingers and a rhyming dictionary. *Follies* is an orgy of pastiche.”

Among the composers he imitated were Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern, and others.

*Follies* opened on April 4, 1971 to mixed reviews, though it seemed critics felt strongly about it, whether they liked it or not. The critic for the *New York Times* did not seem to understand the aesthetic vision behind the pastiche numbers. He referred to the music in such terms as “pseudo-oldie numbers,” that utilized musical composition styles that had been forgotten for a reason. Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* called it both

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55 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 200.
“brilliant” and “cunningly imaginative.” Follies was not a major success financially, but it did sell enough tickets to pay expenses long enough to run for over five hundred performances. The show did receive several Tony Awards, as well as the Drama Critics’ Circle Award for Best Musical of the Year.

Some critics thought the musical would have been better as an opera, because the ending was not optimistic. William Goldman wrote in The Season, “Whatever you call it, the thing that characterizes Popular Theatre is this: it wants to tell us either a truth that we already know or a falsehood we want to believe in… I cannot believe… in light of our divorce statistics, that Americans believe any longer that love really will find a way, that Cary Grant is just around the corner. But they want to believe it… The Popular Theatre… whatever else it may be, can never be unsettling.”

A Little Night Music

The idea for Sondheim’s next Broadway musical, A Little Night Music was conceived several years prior to when it opened. After Hal Prince was the producer-director of She Loves Me, he and Sondheim discussed writing a more romantic musical based on the Jean Anouilh play L’Invitation au Château, which was translated by Christopher Fry into the play Ring Round the Moon. Initially, in 1964, Anouilh declined the request to base a musical on his play, stating he’d only allow it if Leonard Bernstein wrote the music. However, Prince and Sondheim really wanted to base this show on the particular type of literature called a masque, in which the characters are in a country

56 Secrest, 218.
57 Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, 251.
house and fall in love with the wrong people, and have foolish problems, so they searched for a play or movie that would meet the needs of this genre. The story they selected was Ingmar Bergman’s film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, to which he gave them the rights to everything except the title.

Sondheim structured *A Little Night Music* around his favorite type of musical form, which has always been Theme and Variations. Much of the inspiration for this musical comes from Rachmaninoff, and Sondheim admits that the influence of this pivotal composer can be seen throughout the score of *A Little Night Music*. Originally, when Prince and Sondheim were planning to use *Ring Round the Moon*, Sondheim had written a waltz, which was inspired by the French composer Maurice Ravel. Ultimately, this waltz inspired the score of *A Little Night Music* to be a series of waltz variations. However, an entire score of waltzes would get monotonous and repetitious, so Sondheim made the defining thread that connected all the music the triple meter. This way, he could also utilize other forms of triple meter, or even duple meters that were subdivided into threes. Thus, all of the score, with the exception of eleven measures in the second act, are written in some form of triple time.

*A Little Night Music* was a hit, and received rave reviews. Critics felt both the story and the music had imagination and flair. Robert Cushman wrote that Sondheim’s music “has never been so eloquent before. Individual melodies lilt, soar, tantalize, dazzle, but never descend into lushness. The effect is of an overwhelming romantic sense

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58 Secrest, 218.
59 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 252.
60 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 253.
held in check until the very last moment." After the show opened and earned widespread acclaim, Anouilh’s agent sent a telegram to Prince, saying the rights to *Ring Round the Moon*, the play Sondheim and he initially wanted, were available. The duo declined, and questioned whether the playwright had ever even seen their request, or if Anouilh’s agent had declined simply because Sondheim’s name was not as renowned as Leonard Bernstein. Happily, Prince and Sondheim had found the masque which brought them great success, both critically and financially. *A Little Night Music* ran for over six hundred performances.

The musical was made into a much less successful film version, which Sondheim was opposed to from the beginning, but Prince desired. Though the film received criticism, Sondheim’s reputation went unscathed. Shortly thereafter Craig Zadan, a young writer, interviewed Sondheim for an article, which was so well written that a publisher asked him to write a biography about Sondheim, who he referred to as “the next Cole Porter.” When Zadan approached Sondheim about the idea, Sondheim said, “Who will buy it, my mother?” Instead, Sondheim and Zadan worked together to create a history of the making of his musicals from interviews with people who had worked with Sondheim, which was published in 1974.  

The Frogs

In 1941, Burt Shevelove directed a play called *The Frogs*, based on a play by Aristophanes, which was written and performed by undergraduates at Yale University. In

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61 Ibid, 256.
62 Secrest, 259.
1973, Yale Repertory Theatre asked Shevelove to do a revival production, and he approached Sondheim about writing a few songs for it. The show was performed in 1974 at Yale, by the pool at the gym, just as the original version of the play had been.

The press and public both received *The Frogs* well, though the process proved to be a somewhat difficult collaboration. The show was turned into a concert version in 2000, and Nathan Lane, who sang in that production, expanded the book and convinced Sondheim to write more music in order to turn it into a full-length musical. The extended version was presented at Lincoln Center in 2004, and according to Sondheim, “In Aristophanes’ and Burt’s hands, it had been an hour and a half long; it should have stayed that way.”

Pacific Overtures

Sondheim’s next Broadway musical, *Pacific Overtures*, would open two years later, in 1976. Sondheim referred to it as “the most bizarre and unusual musical ever to be seen in a commercial setting.” The idea for the musical was inspired by the play under the same title, written by John Weidman. The musical was to be written from the perspective of the Japanese culture, and Hal Prince was particularly excited about this challenge. Sondheim did not find the idea exciting at first, but after researching Japanese music, Sondheim discovered the major influence of the pentatonic scale, and made a correlation to the Spanish composer de Falla, whose work he admired greatly. Sondheim said he combined chords of the pentatonic scale until the timbre resembled that of the

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63 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 287.
64 Secrest, 279.
Spanish guitar music de Falla would write. Through this technique, he was able to achieve an Eastern aesthetic with inspiration from Western music as well.

When the show opened, it received a great deal of criticism. The show was not successful critically or financially; it was only able to run for a total of 193 performances and it lost its original investment of $650,000. However, Sondheim felt that his learning process as a composer was reinforced through this musical. He claims his three main principles of composition are: “Less Is More, Content Dictates Form, and God is in the Details,” and he says that he learned a lot about the first principle while writing *Pacific Overtures*. For this work, Sondheim was inspired by Japanese Haiku poetry, and he said, “I tried to infuse the lyrics with the evocative simplicity of haiku (although there are only two proper examples of the form in the score).”

Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street

In 1973, Sondheim attended performance of the Christopher Bond play *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street* in London, and was immediately inspired to compose a musical thriller based on this play. In fact, *Sweeney Todd* is the only Sondheim musical that has a more descriptive subtitle than “musical” or “musical comedy.” Sondheim described *Sweeney Todd* as a “musical thriller,” in which he relied heavily on the horror and suspense he could create with a sensational story.

Sondheim’s compositional process for *Sweeney Todd* was influenced by several factors. He started composing by writing a musical theme for each of the characters out

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65 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 303.
of which all of that character’s music was developed. He was also inspired and influenced by the Catholic Dies Irae, which is part of the traditional mass for the dead. Yet another influence Sondheim exhibits in Sweeney Todd is inspiration from the composer Bernard Herrmann. Sondheim knew that one of the things that make horror and suspense successful is the music that underscores it, and Herrmann’s harmonic language had a way of adding to the lushness of the moment.67

Sweeney Todd opened in 1976 to accolades from the public and critics, and it received top awards. The show did not experience great financial success, but is still considered the prize jewel of the Sondheim-Prince collaborative team. Richard Eder of the New York Times wrote, “There is more of artistic energy, creative personality, and plain excitement in Sweeney Todd than in a dozen average musicals.”68 The concept was referred to as brilliant, and the musical was thought of as innovative, creative, and effective. The musical won eleven Drama Desk Awards, the Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best musical, and eight Tony Awards, including best musical. The highest praise, for Sondheim, came from Jule Styne, who expressed, “I think the most unbelievable job of music writing, and I say this with deep reverence and envy…is Sweeney Todd.”69

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67 Secrest, 292.
68 Ibid, 301.
69 Secrest, 302.
Sunday in the Park with George

The next Sondheim musical to hit the Broadway stage was *Merrily We Roll Along*, which will be discussed in more detail in the fifth chapter of this document. *Merrily We Roll Along* was a failure in many respects, and the reviewers provided harsh criticisms of Sondheim and Prince. Prince said, “We were sitting pigeons. We had been overly celebrated as a team, and when the show didn’t work as well as it should, the reaction was excessive.”\(^{70}\) After that failure, Prince put an end to their partnership, and neither Prince nor Sondheim experienced great success for a while.

Sondheim soon met James Lapine, the man with whom he would collaborate next. Both Sondheim and Lapine were attracted to writing a musical largely structured like a theme and variations. They began to look at photographs and paintings for inspiration to develop a story, and they selected the painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by Georges Seurat. Sondheim said, “All those people in that painting. You speculate on why none of them are looking at each other…Maybe someone was having an affair…or one was related to someone else. And then Jim said, ‘Of course, the main character’s missing—the artist.’ When he said that I knew we had a real play.”\(^{71}\)

During the writing process, Lapine wrote lengthy monologues that would never be used in performances of the show, a task Sondheim requires of all his book writers. These monologues were meant to give Sondheim a chance to dig deeper into the characters, and understand more fully what the writer intended with them. However, Sondheim liked Lapine’s writing so much that he did not want to disrupt it, even to make

\(^{70}\) Ibid, 320.
\(^{71}\) Secrest, 326.
it easier to set to music. As a result, he included some of Lapine’s prose passages, unaltered, as spoken interludes within the songs.  

Sondheim’s collaboration with Lapine afforded him the opportunity to have Sunday in the Park with George premiere in a non-profit theatre. Lapine previously worked with the Off-Broadway group Playwrights Horizons, and the group invited Sondheim and Lapine to use their theatre for a series of workshops. Sondheim enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of writing for this different type of venue. Most of the people attending the opening performance were subscribers, and they understood it was a work in progress, which gave Sondheim and Lapine the opportunity to polish Sunday in the Park with George even after performances were underway. Additionally, these types of theatres did not invite reviewers to come watch the shows until near the end of the short run, because they assumed that further editing would take place after it opened. If the show was a success, which Sunday in the Park with George was, it would later be taken to a larger Off Broadway stage, or even move to Broadway.  

Sondheim’s compositional style experienced a growth through his partnership with James Lapine. Prior to Sunday in the Park with George, the underlying theme of many Sondheim musicals was detachment, and he was criticized for having unsentimental and unfeeling characters. In musicals from the Sondheim-Lapine collaboration, including Sunday in the Park with George, the characters have an added vulnerability and sentimentality, which Sondheim described by saying, “I realized that by

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72 Secrest, 329.
having to express the straightforward, unembarrassed goodness of James’s characters I
discovered the Hammerstein in myself—and I was the better for it.”

*Sunday in the Park with George* received negative reviews from critics, but
audiences enjoyed it, which explains the successful run of the show. The musical
received seven Drama Desk Awards, won the Critics’ Circle Award, and was nominated
for ten Tony Awards. However, *La Cage aux Folles* was on the ballot the same year, and
most of the Tony Awards were given to that show. *Sunday in the Park with George* was
awarded the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1985, the sixth musical ever to earn that award.

Passion

The next Sondheim musical on Broadway was *Passion*, another collaboration
between Sondheim and James Lapine. The story of *Passion* was inspired by *Passione
d’amore*, an Italian film by Ettore Scola. The film was inspired by a series of novels
edited by Italo Calvino, which were based on the nineteenth-century novel *Fosca*, written
by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti. The plot of the novel was about a young man named Giorgio
who is having an affair with a married woman named Clara. He meets a young woman
named Fosca, who is extremely disfigured from the after-effects of epileptic seizures, and
she falls in love with Giorgio. Eventually, he is able to look past her grotesque outward
appearance and fall in love with her, only for her to die shortly thereafter.

Sondheim felt that Lapine had a sense of Romanticism that equipped him to be
the perfect book writer and director for *Passion*. Sondheim thought Lapine would like

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the subject because he was “enthusiastically attracted to weirdness.”  

Lapine wanted to work with Sondheim on a different musical based on *Muscle* by Sam Fussell. Both stories had similar themes—their both dealt with outward physical appearance. Lapine and Sondheim decided to treat the two pieces as a double bill, and began work on writing two related one-act shows based on these two separate stories. Sondheim and Lapine arranged a first reading of what they had written thus far, and Sondheim was uncomfortable with his music for *Muscle*, so they abandoned *Muscle* but continued with *Passion*, which was progressing well.

Sondheim’s main concern with the composition of *Fosca* was “how to treat a story as ripe as *Fosca* and maintain its intensity without the indulgence in vocal opulence and spectacle that is the blood of opera.”  

Sondheim does not particularly like opera because of the emphasis on orchestra, staging, and vocal production, whereas musical theatre has emphasis on the story and the characters, not the singers themselves. This dilemma caused Sondheim to think of *Passion* as one long love song, and he composed it like a chamber opera, which has some spoken dialogue, though most of it is underscored, and is basically through-composed.

The show had poor reception in its previews. Sondheim and Lapine believe that people were unable to accept the idea that an attractive man could fall in love with a grotesquely disfigured woman, who was tragically in love with Giorgio. Audiences perceived the story as Fosca being obsessively in love with Giorgio, and could not believe that the two could legitimately fall in love. Sondheim believes part of the reason

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75 Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 146.
76 Ibid.
77 Secrest, 336.
audiences laughed was because Fosca was an operatic character written into a musical comedy. Operatic audiences were not surprised by obsessiveness or madness from female characters, and Sondheim postulates that if Passion had played to an audience at the Metropolitan Opera House, the reception would have been better.  

After some changes to the script, music, and staging, Passion opened on May 9, 1994. The reviews were mostly positive, which was rewarding after the work Sondheim and Lapine did to revitalize the show after previews. Passion was called the first serious opera to appear on Broadway, and was also referred to as thrilling, emotionally engaging, bold, and modern. Clive Barnes wrote in the New York Post, “Once in an extraordinary while, you sit in a theatre and your body shivers with the sense and thrill of something so new, so unexpected that it seems, for those fugitive moments, more like life than art.”

Wise Guys/Bounce/Road Show

During the nineties, Sondheim was widely recognized and appreciated for his work as a composer. There have been multiple tribute concerts held in his honor, and concert versions of several of his shows were organized, including a reunion of Sunday in the Park with George, that reunited the original cast. A concert version of Anyone Can Whistle was held as an AIDS benefit, and raised a large sum of money for the cause. He also received a lifetime achievement award at the Kennedy Center in the 1993, and in

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78 Secrest, 388.
79 Ibid, 392.
1997, under the Clinton administration, Sondheim earned the National Medal of Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts.  

In 1995 Sondheim and George Furth worked together on Sondheim’s first attempt at a play. This play was a murder mystery entitled *Getting Away with Murder*. The plot had several problems, the first and most obvious being that the murderer was revealed at the end of the first act, and there was no real major plot climax at the end of the second act. The play opened March 17, 1996 at the Broadhurst, and the reviews were not positive. Sondheim said the critics were vicious, and one even said, “stick with the day job, Stephen.”

Sondheim’s next major project was an original idea inspired by the book *The Legendary Mizners*, which was based on a series of articles written by Alva Johnston concerning the lives of Wilson and Addison Mizner. However, when Sondheim attempted to get the rights to the story he discovered that Irving Berlin, David Merrick, and S. N. Behrman were already working on a musical based on the novel. He later talked to Merrick about the project, and learned that the team had lost interest in the project, and it had been abandoned, left partially completed, so Sondheim pursued the idea again.

Sondheim and John Weidman decided to use the concept of a “Road” movie, resembling the 1940’s movies starring Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, in which they crossed foreign countries. The musical progressed through many changes over a time span of 14 years, and it was presented in several different forms. Originally, *Wise Guys* was

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80 Secrest, 400.
81 Ibid, 402.
supposed to be included in the Kennedy Center’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebration in 1996, but there were some interruptions. Weidman was busy writing the book for the musical *Big*, and Sondheim’s apartment burned down in the mid-nineties. It was 1997 before a draft was able to be used for a reading, and even then, the score was only about halfway completed.

After a good response from the reading, Sondheim and Weidman proceeded, had a second and a third reading, and then offered a completed score. Sondheim terms the project a “saga in four acts,” with the first act being a combination of the product of the first three readings, the second was a revision of the first, temporarily titled *Gold!* but ultimately still named *Wise Guys*, performed in 1999. The third act was an even further edited version, renamed *Bounce*, and performed in Chicago and Washington in 2003. Finally, act four was presented in a limited run in 2008 by the Public Theatre, and was renamed *Road Show*.83

Summary

Sondheim continues to be revered as one of the most innovative and skilled composers of the American musical theatre. His contributions to American musical theatre are vast, and though his compositional style varies with each musical, his music and lyrics are invariably rich and complex. Understanding the intellectual approach he takes to composition, where content reigns supreme and dictates all other elements, is

vital to achieving an informed view of his contributions to the genre. Sondheim’s biographer, Meryle Secrest, closes his biography with reference to the ending of *Sunday in the Park with George*, echoing Sondheim’s own feelings toward his artwork. He says “And as he examines his work, populated by so many ghosts, they begin to leave the stage quietly, one by one. All that remains, finally, is a blank canvas, an empty space. It is that most tantalizing of colors: white.”84

84 Secrest, 407.
CHAPTER THREE: MEZZO-SOPRANOS OF THE AMERICAN MUSICAL

The Golden Age of Musical Theatre

The American musical has changed and developed several times throughout the course of history. Beginning with the well-known collaborators Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, the integrated musical took the forefront on the American theatrical stage, meaning that all aspects, including song, dance, and dialogue work together to create a cohesive story. These integrated musicals are also referred to as book musicals, and it is widely accepted that the period of time when these musicals reigned is referred to as the Golden Age of Musical Theatre.

The Golden Age of Musical Theatre began with the celebrated Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!*,85 which opened in 1943, and the era ended between 1965 and 1970. During the Golden Age, musicals followed the Rodgers and Hammerstein formula of “you feel, therefore you are.”86 In this style of musical, a “happily ever after” ending was virtually guaranteed, and all of the issues the characters face during the show would be resolved before the final curtain. The musicals of this era follow a formulaic approach to structure, in which each scene furthers the plot in a way

that the action climaxes into a song. This approach was innovative for the time, because prior to Oklahoma! musical theatre songs were not contextual to the action occurring within the scene. In earlier works, songs could be removed from one musical and placed into an entirely different musical and still have some dramatic effect.  

During the Golden Age of musical theatre, female characters tended to traditionally fall into stereotypical roles, which can be divided into four categories. The first category is the virginal ingénue, who would typically be played by a young and beautiful soprano. This character would face some kind of dilemma with a man, which would always resolve into marriage, or at least love, by the end of the musical. The dilemma usually dealt with a misunderstanding or complications that result from differences in social or economic class.  

The second type of female character was the wise-cracking and often promiscuous or rude secondary woman. This character may have a secondary love story, but it was usually for comic relief, and was not meant to be the focus of the story. This secondary female would generally be played by a mezzo-soprano. The other two types of women could be played by a mezzo-soprano as well, and those types are the older woman and the suffering woman who loves the wrong kind of man.

Perhaps partially due to the role of women in society in the 1940’s, 50’s, and 60’s, when the book musical was thriving, women’s roles within civilization and culture were often idealized within these musicals. For instance, the young and beautiful soprano character would rarely deal with any issues of consequence, but instead was primarily

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87 Gordon, Art isn’t Easy, 5.
89 Ibid.
concerned with her romantic relationship with someone of the opposite sex; she would rarely trouble herself with the mundane problems of everyday life. Relationships, romance, and marriage provided the “narrative spine” of most musicals, particularly musicals from this era.\textsuperscript{90} Thus, the development of many female characters was dependent upon their relationship to the male character.

Stacy Wolf postulates that gender and sexuality invariably organize the message of many musicals, and she suggests several questions to consider when examining this message. First, what the characters do in the story, which would entail taking a comprehensive look at the plot, not only how the character fits into it, but also what the motivation is behind some of the actions the character takes. This same approach applies to what the character sings, how the character moves, and how the character relates to others within the story.\textsuperscript{91}

Attributes of a character in a musical are often heavily dependent on the vocal range of that character. Typically, sopranos play the ingénue roles, which are usually the leads that are participants in the main love story. Mezzo-sopranos typically play a comic sidekick, an evil character, a witch, or an old woman.\textsuperscript{92} This characterization likely has a lot to do with vocal characteristics, most notably the lower tessitura of a mezzo-soprano’s voice, as well as the darker and warmer timbre.

Most of the Golden Age musicals hold true to these archetypes, and Oklahoma! is a shining example of all of them. To consider Wolf’s questions with regard to the main female characters in Oklahoma!, it is important to contrast the different motivations these

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, 210.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid, 211.
two characters would experience. The ingénue role, Laurey, is a young girl who lives with her widowed Aunt Eller, and is in love with the cowboy Curly. Laurey and Curly are coy and playful with one another, and in an effort to make him jealous enough to be open about his feelings, Laurey agrees to go to the box social with their farm hand, Jud. By the end of the musical, Curly saves the day, he and Laurey get married, and presumably live happily ever after. The secondary story in this musical is that of Ado Annie. Ado Annie falls into a stereotypical mezzo-soprano character who is torn between her attractions to two different men, Will Parker and Ali Hakim.

The songs Laurey sings are more intelligent and focused on the goal of a romantic relationship with Curly. She sings “Many a New Day” and the duet “People Will Say We’re in Love,” which are both songs proclaiming that she is unaffected by Curly’s actions. She also sings “Out of My Dreams,” about her dreams of falling in love with Curly. Ado Annie, on the contrary, sings “I Cain’t Say No,” which is about how she simply cannot resist when a man is affectionate towards her. She also sings the duet “All or Nothin’” with Will Parker, in which she insinuates that his desire for her to settle down is ruining all of her fun. Ado Annie is portrayed as being promiscuous and flighty through these two songs, and her lyrics evidence her lack of desire to settle down. Interestingly, Ado Annie ultimately settles down with Will Parker despite her hesitations, which is yet another idealization of the role of women.

Overall, the mezzo-sopranos of the Golden Age tend to fall into the few general stereotypes listed above. It is pertinent to examine *Oklahoma!* when considering these categories for many reasons, most notably because Ado Annie accurately depicts several of the common stereotypes of a mezzo-soprano in a Golden Age musical. Additionally,
*Oklahoma!* is the musical that truly established the beginning of the era of the Golden Age of the American musical, which makes it germane simply out of respect for its historical and cultural value.

The Rock Musical (and the Contemporary Musical)

The exact ending year of the Golden Age of the American musical is unclear, though it is generally thought to be sometime during the five year span of 1965-1970. The reason some scholars end the era in 1965 is because that is the year *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* premiered, which was considered to be the last great musical that followed the conventions of the Golden Age era musicals. Other scholars place the end of the Golden Age in 1970, most notably because of the success of Sondheim’s musical, *Company.* With the creation of *Company*, the notion that a musical was to be used for escapist entertainment, and was to follow a linear plot at all times, was abandoned, which completely changed the approach to this type of composition. However, some scholars place the end of the Golden Age earlier, in 1967, when Galt McDermott’s musical *Hair* commanded the Broadway stage.

*Hair* was revolutionary, because it was the first real “Rock Musical,” a term used to describe several different types of musicals, but typically encompassing those which include reference or utilization of “rock ‘n’ roll” idioms in the composition of the

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93 Naden, 32.
music.\textsuperscript{95} Traditionally, Rock Musicals can be broken down into four different types. The first type of Rock Musical is one that was identified as such by the creators of the musical, such as \textit{Hair}. The second type of Rock Musical began as a concept album, and was staged for Broadway after achieving some popularity. The most notable example of this type of Rock Musical is Andrew Lloyd Weber’s musical \textit{Jesus Christ Superstar}. The third type uses rock styles in composition of the musical, but the creators never identified it as one, such as Stephen Schwartz’s musical \textit{Godspell}. The fourth and final type of Rock Musical does not necessarily use rock ‘n’ roll idioms consistently, but rather emulates those idioms and portrays them as rock ‘n’ roll in the content of the musical. A major example of this style of Rock Musical is the celebrated Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey musical \textit{Grease}.\textsuperscript{96}

One of the threads that tie all of the different examples of Rock Musicals together is reality and naturalism within the characters and events of the story. For example, \textit{Hair} uses tone poems from the hippie generation that “bristled with originality,”\textsuperscript{97} and the actors were not just theatre people portraying hippies, but the director actually sought out hippies to play the hippie roles, in order to bring genuine performances to the roles.\textsuperscript{98}

The themes of \textit{Hair} and other rock musicals were cutting-edge, and relevant to modern life. The goal of these musicals was to present issues that were important to young

\textsuperscript{95} Scott Warfield, “From \textit{Hair} to \textit{Rent}: is ‘rock’ a four-letter word on Broadway?,” in \textit{The Cambridge Companion to the Musical} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 235.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid, 236.
\textsuperscript{98} Miller, \textit{Strike Up the Band}, 108.
people, even though these were extremely atypical themes to be presented on the Broadway stage.  

Though the Rock Musical began to flourish in the late 1960’s, the inventions of the genre have not ceased to be valuable for the American musical. “By the 1990’s, rock [music]—or at least a conservative form of it—was in widespread use on Broadway, making the rift between theatrical and popular music narrower than it had been at any time since just before the premiere of Hair in 1967.” One of the mid-1990’s musicals that helped accomplish this resurgence of the Rock Musical was Jonathan Larson’s musical Rent.

Rent exemplifies many of the characteristics of what makes a successful Rock Musical. First, a Rock Musical will likely only be successful if the book demands it be written in rock ‘n’ roll style. The characters in Rent are all members of a Bohemian group of young people, many of whom are dying of AIDS, and some of whom are involved in the music and film industry. It is entirely believable that these characters would sing rock music, because that would be true to these types of people in real life. Also, the characters in Rent are “unflinchingly real,” and are injected with vitality through the rock music, and have honest, youthful attitudes. In typical productions of Rent, the large personalities of the characters are starkly contrasted against ordinary clothing and an industrial gray set, making these characters seem even more realistic.

99 Warfield, 243.
100 Ibid, 245.
101 Flinn, Musical!, 319.
The female characters in *Rent* defy the traditional female stereotypes from the Golden Age musicals. There are three female leads, all of whom are mezzo-soprano belting roles. The actresses are expected to sing in the rock ‘n’ roll style, and soprano voices are not conducive to that genre of music. Also, in an effort to keep the reality and naturalness of the characters, the lower ranges are used to resemble speech inflections and tessituras for all of the females.

One act of defiance that abandons the traditional gender archetypes is the inclusion of homosexual relationships within the plot. In the Golden Age, the expectation was that a young woman falls madly in love with a man, and they live happily ever after. In *Rent*, Joanne and Maureen are lesbians, who sing a duet called “Take Me or Leave Me,” which is about them accepting each other. In this duet, Maureen takes on what would have been considered a stereotypical mezzo-soprano role, in the sense that she sings of her promiscuity, and she asks Joanne to accept that as a part of her character. This concept is strikingly reminiscent to Ado Annie from *Oklahoma!*. Joanne takes on a more masculine role, where she explains that she is more calculated and careful, and that she expects Maureen to settle down and be loyal to her. The third female character, Mimi, is a conundrum for previous vocal range stereotypes. Mimi is involved in the main heterosexual love story of the musical, because she falls in love with Roger, and though circumstances get in their way throughout the musical, they fall in love and find happiness at the end. Towards the end of the show Mimi sings the moving love ballad, “Without You,” in which she confesses that her life without Roger would not be nearly as good, which is a very ingénue-like sentiment. However, Mimi also sings
“Out Tonight” and “Would You Light My Candle,” both of which highlight her own promiscuity and desire to just have fun, which is a typical mezzo-soprano sentiment.

The Rock Musical genre presents many interesting dilemmas. Most Broadway composers shy away from it because of the difficulty in achieving true cohesion of the two genres of rock ‘n’ roll and Broadway music. Also, because many theatrical composers are drawn to the dramatic power of lyrics and melodies, they shy away from these types of shows, where rhythm replaces melody as the unifying element of a song. Not all contemporary musicals are Rock Musicals, either. Jason Robert Brown, composer of *Songs for a New World* and *The Last Five Years*, is a prime example of a composer who writes with the intensity of naturalness found in Rock Musicals, but does not utilize true rock ‘n’ roll idioms in his composition. The unifying factor of these contemporary musicals and Rock Musicals is that characters are all presented in a realistic, raw, natural and genuine manner. “It’s naturalism and realism that has a current grip on the American culture, though in musicals perhaps highly theatricalized and stylized.”

### The Concept Musical

Around the same time frame as the emergence of the Rock Musical, the genre of the Concept Musical emerged. This genre, made up of musicals that abandon linear plot

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lines in favor of following a more abstract structure based around a central theme or concept, is most often associated with the musicals of Stephen Sondheim. Though there is some debate, most critics agree that Company established the genre of the Concept Musical in 1970. Another notable feature of Sondheim’s musicals, and most Concept Musicals in general, is the lack of a traditional “happily ever after,” which audiences came to expect at the end of a show from the Golden Age of the American musical.

Because of the lack of structure or allegiance to a specific formula or style, many Concept Musicals do the unexpected, and are not as appealing as a form of escapist entertainment. The characters do not follow expected story lines, and the problems in the plot do not necessarily work out before the end of the show. Joanne Gordon said, “Certainly Sondheim’s characters do not possess the immediate appeal of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s…but in exchange for that direct emotional simplicity, Sondheim’s characters possess a complexity that is equally theatrically valid and exciting.”

A cultural attribute that may have affected Sondheim’s characters was that by the time Sondheim’s works were on Broadway, society was changing, and the role of women within society had already changed a great deal. This liminal moment affected the way women were portrayed in Sondheim’s musicals—His characters do not fit tidily into a stereotypical role, but are instead freshly born out of the dramatic content of each scenario.

One of the changes in characterization in the musicals of Sondheim is that women are no longer portrayed as needing a man to complete their story. In fact, some women are portrayed as not needing or wanting a man at all, and are drawn into relationships.

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105 Gordon, Art isn’t Easy, 12.
106 Hanson, 14.
with the opposite sex against their own volition. Women, including mezzo-sopranos, are refreshingly intelligent and take initiative to get what they want in life, whether it includes a man or not.

Sondheim not only portrays the independence and intelligence of women, but he also portrays many of their personal flaws as well. One of the main typical female flaws Sondheim exhibits is the lack of self-confidence or issues with self-image. The song “Lovely,” sung by the character Philia in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, completely mocks the notion that outward beauty is what makes a woman attractive, because it presents that all she has to offer is her good looks. There is no intelligence or common sense to come with Philia’s charm. In fact, the song “Lovely” is turned into an ironic comment when Hysterium, a man dressed in women’s clothing, sings the same lyrics Philia previously sang, but about his own loveliness. Other women in Sondheim musicals, such as Fosca in Passion or the Baker’s Wife in Into the Woods, defy the stereotype of the leading lady needing to be young and beautiful. They prove that love is possible without the loveliness and grace offered by the ingénues of the previous generation. The women of a Sondheim musical tend to be multi-faceted and more multi-dimensional than their traditional counterparts from the musicals of the Golden Age. The women do not generally fit into the typical stereotypes set forth by Sondheim’s predecessors from the 1940’s through the 1960’s, and his female characters possess great strength, independence, and prowess.

In conclusion, while the three different genres of musical theatre discussed have similarities, they differ in important ways. Whereas Golden Age musical theatre relies on

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107 Hanson, 14.
the beauty of emotions, Rock Musicals rely on the vulnerability of Realism, and Concept Musicals, particularly those by Stephen Sondheim, rely on the complexity of human thought and endeavor for their success. The typical function of a mezzo-soprano character in musical theatre has developed over time, and there is a greater variety of roles available to mezzo-sopranos in more contemporary musical theatre than there was in Golden Age musicals.
George Furth, an actor with whom Sondheim had previously worked, contacted Sondheim in 1969 about a group of plays he had written. At the suggestion of Furth’s therapist, and as a part of his therapy, he began writing a series of one-act plays about relationships. All of the people in the relationships were in couples, regardless of their marital status. The plays turned out better than Furth had anticipated and seven of the plays were put together into one show, which was slated to appear on Broadway in late 1968. Unfortunately, the show was unable to open because the producer was unable to secure the necessary funding.

Furth sought advice from Sondheim who sought advice from Hal Prince. Prince, who Sondheim trusted most in the business, suggested they create a musical based on the plays. Prince, Furth, and Sondheim discussed how they could connect the seven one-act plays into a cohesive musical, and they realized that in all of the plays there was a couple plus a third person who often set the action into motion. The suggestion that the third
person be the same person throughout the musical made sense, the three collaborators agreed, and the idea for *Company* was born.\(^{108}\)

In regard to the plot of *Company*, Sondheim says, “A man with no emotional commitments reassesses his life on his thirty-fifth birthday by reviewing his relationships with his married acquaintances and his girlfriends. That is the entire plot.”\(^{109}\) Robert, the character who serves as the connective tissue between the plays, is turning thirty-five, and his friends are about to throw him a surprise birthday party. The group of friends includes five married couples, who the audience will meet in episodic entries throughout the course of the musical. The women all talk to Robert as though they want him to get married, but any time he attempts to have a girlfriend, they intercede to warn him against the woman, finding something wrong with each of the women he presents. The married men are envious of Robert’s bachelorhood, though they also recognize the benefits and joys of their own respective marriages.

One couple is Sarah and Harry, who bicker and feud throughout their vignette, which leaves Robert feeling awkward during his evening in their apartment. Another couple is Jenny and David, who smoke pot with Robert in their fashionable Manhattan apartment. Susan and Peter intend to get a divorce, yet continue to live together, and what makes the situation even more bizarre is that they are pleased with the arrangement. In another vignette, Paul and Amy are supposed to get married that day, but Amy is apprehensive about the upcoming nuptials. The fifth and final couple is Joanne and

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\(^{108}\) Secrest, 190.  
\(^{109}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 165.
Larry, who are an extremely mismatched pair. Joanne represents the “trophy wife” that would have been typical to the era in which this play was written.\(^{110}\)

The script of *Company* is more episodic than linear because of the nature of the material on which it is based. The musical abandons the idea of chronological order and linear plot lines, and each scene is based around a central concept or idea rather than the passage of time. The episodic format of *Company* is an example of a “Concept Musical.” Sondheim felt that this term emerged in reference to *Company* because people were confused by the lack of plot and felt the need for a label. Sondheim believes a more adequate description of this style is to discuss it in terms of combining aspects of a musical revue with aspects of the integrated book musical.\(^{111}\) In a musical revue, the scenes are unconnected songs and sketches, whereas an integrated musical tells a story in which all elements, including songs and dances, are part of the storytelling. Revues were the earliest examples of musicals that did not have a plot, but what makes *Company* special is that it focuses on the same theme through use of the same characters from beginning to end.\(^{112}\)

The central concept of *Company* is the challenge involved in maintaining relationships of all kinds, including friendships, dating relationships, and marriages. As interpersonal communications and personal connections become less prevalent in society, relationships become even more difficult to sustain.\(^{113}\) Sondheim phrased this concept, “the increasing difficulty of making connections in an increasingly dehumanized

\(^{110}\) Secrest, 191.
\(^{111}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 166.
\(^{112}\) Ibid.
\(^{113}\) Ibid.
society.” The lyrics are connected because they deal with either New York City or marriage and the show has momentum because there is concern with the character development and structural elements within the separate vignettes. Company’s cohesion lies in its ability to provide multiple perspectives on the same subject, much like a cubist painting or sculpture.

The chronology of the separate vignettes is unclear. It has been interpreted that the scenes are happening throughout the year leading up to Robert’s thirty-fifth birthday, or in the following year. Another interpretation is that the moments are reflective flashbacks Robert experiences when he realizes his friends are throwing him a surprise birthday party. Sondheim said it is also possible to interpret the events as though Robert is reflecting about his life on a psychiatrist’s couch, and the audience is merely seeing his thoughts take shape.

Furth’s writing style did not lend itself to singing as well as Sondheim would have hoped. For that reason, very few of the lyrics for Company’s songs were actually derived from the script, which was particularly difficult for Sondheim because it was the opposite of the way Oscar Hammerstein taught him to write lyrics for a musical. The songs, therefore, have been described as “self-encapsulated Brechtian commentary,” which essentially means that the songs do not move the action forward, but instead rely on reflection from the audience. The score is comprised of a mixture of comment songs,

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114 Zadan, 177.
115 Secrest, 167.
116 Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 148.
117 Ibid, 147.
118 Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, 166.
119 Secrest, 192.
which deliver commentary on the action; soliloquies, which provide thoughtful reflection
on a character’s feelings and emotions; and musical scenes, which inform the actions
taking place. In the case of *Company*, the songs either contain the action or are
comments on the action; they are never just a component of the action.\(^{120}\) Joanne Gordon
indicated, “By focusing on the complex evolving musical pattern, Sondheim and Prince
could abandon linear causality and explore the inner world of memory, desire, and
speculation.”\(^{121}\)

When *Company* opened in 1970, it was very well received, both by its audiences
and by most of its critics. Douglas Watt of the New York *Daily News* said that *Company*
would pass over “like a shock wave,”\(^{122}\) while *Time* and *Newsweek* referred to it as “a
landmark.”\(^{123}\) When the show was produced in London, Harold Hobson of the *Sunday
Times* wrote, “It is extraordinary that a musical, the most trivial of theatrical forms,
should be able to plunge as *Company* does with perfect congruity into the profound
depths of human perplexity and misery.”\(^{124}\) The only mixed reviews *Company* received
were from *The New York Times*, where the critic Clive Barnes had lukewarm feelings
about the show, while Mel Gussow, another critic, raved about it. Barnes believed the
musical was slick and clever, but that it was not emotionally stimulating to the audience.
According to Barnes, *Company* was well executed as an intellectual endeavor, but did not
offer a strong emotional experience. Gussow, on the other hand, thoroughly enjoyed the

\(^{120}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 167.
\(^{122}\) Secrest, 195.
\(^{123}\) Ibid.
\(^{124}\) Ibid.
show, and used words such as “inventive,” “sophisticated,” and “elegantly intricate” in his review.\textsuperscript{125}

Though the show was widely acclaimed, there were some criticisms about the character Robert, who was said to be a void at the heart of the musical.\textsuperscript{126} Furth agrees with this evaluation, saying that “truth was not considered when Bobby was written.”\textsuperscript{127} One of the central issues with Robert is that he really doesn’t learn anything by the end of the show, and his situation does not change. Through the examination of all of the relationships around him, he experiences contradicting beliefs about marriage.\textsuperscript{128} According to Sondheim, “\textit{Company} says very clearly that to be emotionally committed to somebody is very difficult, but to be alone is impossible.” \textsuperscript{129} In general, audiences went to the theatre to feel soothed, happy, and entertained. However, \textit{Company} was one of the first musicals that discomforted and disturbed the audiences, making them laugh while in the theatre, but leave in a state of uncomfortable retrospection. Part of the issue was that “Being Alive,” the ending song used for \textit{Company}, is not the song originally intended to close the production. The original song, “Happily Ever After,” showed more character development in Robert, which drew the audience to him more than “Being Alive.” “Happily Ever After” was a much darker and more cynical approach to closing the musical, and the collaborators feared that if they used that song, people would leave feeling unhappy, and the show would be unsuccessful.

\textsuperscript{125} Secrest, 197.
\textsuperscript{126} Sondheim, \textit{Finishing the Hat}, 166.
\textsuperscript{127} Zadan, 236.
\textsuperscript{128} Secrest, 197.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 191.
These issues were resolved in the 2006 revival of *Company*, directed by John Doyle. In Doyle’s production, all of the characters except Robert also played instruments in the orchestra when they were not directly involved in the scene. Robert only played kazoo throughout the show until “Being Alive,” where he sat down at the piano and accompanied himself. This was symbolic of his acceptance of his vulnerability, and during the course of the song the other characters gradually joined him on their own respective instruments. This resulted in what Sondheim said was “perhaps the first time in the history of the show the character moved the audience.”\textsuperscript{130}

In spite of any concerns regarding the character of Robert, *Company* was tremendously successful. This was the musical that began to develop Sondheim’s reputation as an innovative genius, and a respected composer for Broadway. The musical won several awards, including the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, as well as seven Tony Awards. *Company* was nominated for fifteen Tony Awards, which was a record at that time, and ultimately won Best Musical, Best Music, Best Lyrics, Best Book, Best Scene Design, Best Producer, and Best Director.\textsuperscript{131} The musical was a rousing success for Sondheim, Furth, and Prince, and the beginning of a fruitful collaboration. Martin Gottfried said “With *Company* he had quite simply arrived as a composer.”\textsuperscript{132}

\textsuperscript{130} Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 166.
\textsuperscript{131} Secrest, 204.
Cultural and Historical Influences

The avant-garde approach to Company was in tune with society in 1970, and the composition of the musical certainly reflects the era. The 1960’s were full of experimentation in the arts, particularly in novels and poetry. These genres abandoned antiquated forms and structures that were no longer current and fresh, which resulted in novels without a plot and poems without a theme. Music of the late 1960’s began to become more mathematical, solidifying use of the tone row, and dance became more like gymnastics and much more abstract.133

Company is an example of this new modern aesthetic because of the lack of plot and chronological structure, as well as the music with a more modern aesthetic. The lyrics were a stark contrast to what the American theatergoing public would have been accustomed because they were conversational, but sophisticated. Sondheim viewed the characters as sophisticated New York people, so he selected lyrics that seemed genuine to that lifestyle.134 Stephen Banfield said the lyrics “take their tone from the colloquial, casual bleakness of urban modernism [and] the music discovers new pastures…in rock and, to a certain extent, urban folk music.”135 The fear involved with Company was that the American public was accustomed to attending the theatre for escapist entertainment, and Company not only challenged their musical and artistic aesthetic, but also caused the audience to think and become disturbed with issues of their own lives.136

133 Secrest, 192.
134 Gottfried, 78.
135 Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 151.
136 Secrest, 192.
Some people consider *Company* to be outdated and irrelevant to society now, because of its obvious influences from the late 1960’s. This criticism is narrow-minded, and does not take into account the depth and complexities of the subject matter of *Company*. The 1970’s costumes and scenic design firmly place *Company* into that period, and it is one of the few Broadway shows that reflect on the lives and environment of the original audience, but the themes and undercurrents at the heart of the show still ring true in society today.

The issue of choosing bachelorhood over marriage is still prevalent, and perhaps even more so, because it is socially acceptable for women to make the decision to remain unmarried as well. In 1970, when *Company* premiered, the marriage rate in the United States was 10.6 annually per 1000 population, but in 1992 it had already dropped to 9.3 annually per 1000 population. This statistic proves that the number of people not getting married increased with time, giving relevance to the issue. Another topic presented in the musical, which has also become more prevalent, is the decision to stay married or to get divorced. This issue, along with the issue of cohabitation outside of the boundaries of marriage, is brought up through the vignette with Susan and Peter. In 1970 these ideas were progressive and often considered scandalous, but are now considered more common, making this subject matter more relevant to a contemporary audience.

Critics believe the content of the musical is more dated because of the scene where Jenny and David smoke pot with Robert. In 1970 marijuana use was still

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138 Ibid, 51.
emerging and was presumably “safe,” so for a societal couple like Jenny and David, it would have been considered fashionable for them to try it. To a more modern audience, it is less believable that Jenny would not have tried pot at that point in her life, because the mysteriousness of the drug no longer exists. Also, in that era, smoking pot was a province of youth, which is no longer the case, and that dates some of the dialogue in the scene.\(^{139}\)

The character of Joanne is also outdated because women like her do not exist as prevalently in today’s society. It is much more acceptable now for women to be career-driven, and the stereotypical “trophy wife” who does nothing with her life but become one of the “ladies who lunch” is not as common. It would be atypical in society today for a wealthy wife like Joanna not to become involved in a civic activity or assist with a charity. Therefore, it will be more difficult for modern audiences to identify with her character.\(^{140}\) April, one of Robert’s girlfriends, is a stewardess and is another outdated character. The fantasy of dating a stewardess is a particularly 1960’s notion, because stewardesses used to be all young women. Now, flight attendants are both men and women, and the stewardess fantasy has become a bit archaic.\(^{141}\)

Perhaps what makes Company feel dated is that most of the issues presented in the musical were contemporary in 1970, but are commonplace to an audience today. Audiences understand human relationships as portrayed in Company more in contemporary society than they would have in 1970, particularly the marriage

\(^{139}\) Olson, 54.
\(^{140}\) Ibid.
\(^{141}\) Ibid.
relationship. Society has become much more open about issues concerning marriage, and much more willing to accept non-traditional relationship viewpoints and situations. The unromantic view of relationships was new to the Broadway stage in 1970, but it is no longer revolutionary to audiences, so the topic of *Company* does not feel nearly as “edgy” and modern as it did in 1970.\(^{142}\)

The Development of the Character of Amy

*Company* is made up of a series of small vignettes, which involve one couple and Robert. Therefore, the development of any of the characters, other than Robert, happens rapidly, and is discontinuous. The character of Amy is fairly well-established from the beginning of the musical. In the beginning of the play, Amy gives a monologue that is supposed to be a message on Robert’s answering machine, where she gives away the surprise party and then attempts to backtrack.\(^{143}\) This mistake establishes Amy’s flighty personality and her inclination to panic. A little later in the play, she refers to Robert as “sweetheart,”\(^{144}\) which is indicative of the closeness of the friendship she and Robert share, and becomes important during her vignette with Paul.

In this vignette, it is Amy and Paul’s wedding day, and Robert is the best man. The scene opens with Amy shining Paul’s shoes, and when Paul comes in looking for them the scene progresses into the song “Getting Married Today,” which is a “miniature

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\(^{142}\) Olson, 53.


\(^{144}\) Ibid, 16.
and extremely funny drama.” 145 The song begins with one of the other women seen previously in the show, typically Jenny, dressed in church attire singing beautiful lyrics about the bliss and happiness that comes with getting married. Following this hymn-like, joyful segment, Paul continues with that sentiment by singing lyrics that are “overburdened with clichés of marital bliss and fidelity,” 146 after which he excitedly reminds Amy of their wedding. This moment is where Amy breaks into anxious and rapid patter, emulating nervous chatter.

After the song, Amy’s neuroses are present in her conversation with Paul. For instance, she becomes outraged at Paul for being kind to her on their wedding day. She serves Paul burned toast, and tells him if he thanks her she’ll go running out of the apartment. When she realizes how unfair she is being towards Paul, she apologizes and kisses him. However, she then begins a religious rant about how she never expected to marry a Jewish man, but she is thankful because when they divorce in a year, the sin won’t seem as terrible. 147 She then tells Paul she can’t marry him, and a disappointed Paul goes for a walk.

While Paul is gone, Robert proposes to Amy and says, “we’re just alike…marry me! And everybody’ll leave us alone.” 148 This proposal shocks Amy, and she realizes that her fear of marriage has nothing to do with Paul, and that she cannot picture her life with anybody else. She ultimately decides that her marriage to Paul is going to be okay, because she wants to marry him, and not just for the sake of getting married. As she

145 Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 157.
146 Gordon, Art isn’t Easy, 61.
147 Ibid, 65.
148 Furth and Sondheim, Company, 67.
walks out the door to go find him, Robert tosses her the bouquet, and she exclaims “I’m the next bride!”  

Once this vignette is over, Amy’s character development is complete, but her existence in Robert’s journey is not quite finished. One of the most touching moments for Robert’s character occurs during a line Amy says to him at the very end of the play. She says, “Blow out your candles, Robert, and make a wish. Want something, Robert! Want something.” This moment is an integral part of Robert’s story, as it clearly communicates Robert’s fatal flaw as a character—he does not want to get married, but he also does not want to remain unmarried. Robert’s fear of commitment equals his fear of loneliness. In this line, delivered by Amy, Robert is forced to face his uncertainty, and he learns that compromise is going to be the key factor in whatever he decides. As a character, Amy exemplifies nervousness and anxiety that climaxes in the comedic song “Getting Married Today,” but by the end of the vignette, Robert helps her find peace in her decision to marry Paul.

Musical Characterization of Amy in “Not Getting Married”

The song “Getting Married Today” is a trio between a church singer (usually played by the same person who plays Jenny), Paul, and Amy. Sondheim cleverly makes

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149 Ibid.
use of many different musical and lyrical devices in order to convey the differing emotions, as well as to convey Amy’s descent into complete and utter insanity by the end of the song. Sondheim, who is a master manipulator of motives, bases the entire song upon a few distinct melodic ideas, each portraying different emotional states. First, the church lady, who sings in a hymn-like fashion, as seen in Example 1, has three interludes which follow the same melody, but with new lyrics each time to update the audience on the deterioration of Amy’s psychological state. Her stoic and harmonious melody, which Banfield refers to as “ecclesiastical pastiche,” accurately depicts the beauty and serenity of finding happiness through marriage to the love of your life.

Example 1: “Getting Married Today,” m. 5-7

![Example 1 Sheet Music](image)

The second melody, seen in Example 2, belongs to Paul, who sings his clichés about love and marriage to a lyrical and soaring melody. This melody recurs later in the piece, juxtaposed against Amy’s psychotic melody, vividly depicting the difference between their mental states. The counterpoint of Amy and Paul with punctuating choral

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“Amen” statements at the end brings the climax of the piece, and accurately depicts the frenzy Amy is feeling in that moment.

Example 2: “Getting Married Today,” m. 17-22

For Amy, Sondheim uses three different melodies. The first, a patter melody, reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan, makes use of a great deal of repetition and neighbor tone activity; it is pictured in Example 3. This frenetic patter is a stark juxtaposition against the serenity of both the church lady’s melody and Paul’s melody, causing this melodic line to be referred to as “a bridal death rattle.” This repetitious patter with alternation of neighbor tones functions as a large-scale sequence, ascending chromatically throughout the verse, displaying the rising anguish and torment Amy feels. Sondheim chose to keep these melodic figures tight and unchanging to represent the

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155 Gottfried, 81.
energy of the character. The rhythm of the dialogue that George Furth wrote has the rhythm of the patter, and Sondheim used the tight melodic figures to represent that she is emotionally bound and confined.\textsuperscript{156}

Example 3: “Getting Married Today,” m. 32-33\textsuperscript{157}

Sondheim wants these patter sections to be sung in one breath, though he knows it is difficult. The lines are designed to alternate vowel and consonant sounds in such a way as to make them easy for the tongue, teeth, and breath to articulate. The sound productions and mouth shapes aide the ability of the mouth to smoothly transition between shapes, as one sound does not differ entirely in mouth shape from the next. Sondheim says, “In the best rapid patter songs, the faster you sing, the easier it is—you need less breath and the words flow trippingly off the tongue.”\textsuperscript{158}

There are a couple of exceptions throughout the song, including the text, “which he should” in the second verse, which has a series of line-breaking unvoiced consonants. Also, in the third verse there is a series of bilabial nasal consonant “m” sounds, which are

\textsuperscript{156} Horowitz, 204.
\textsuperscript{157} Sondheim, \textit{Company: A Musical Comedy}, 84.
\textsuperscript{158} Sondheim, \textit{Finishing the Hat}, 167.
difficult to articulate in rapid succession, where the text reads “he said to see him Monday, but by Monday I’ll be floating in the Hudson with the other garbage.” Additionally, there are combinations of words which require much different mouth formations for each successive word. A performer should be aware of these places, and work to navigate these more difficult speech patterns. Other than that, the performer should maintain a mouth position as close to neutral as possible, and allow the breath and the text to simply flow.

Also interesting to note in this song is the manner in which Sondheim chooses to use or avoid rhyme. In the patter section, rhyme is deliberately avoided. According to Sondheim, rhyme would have insinuated a sense of order and organization within Amy’s insanity, so he chose not only to avoid it, but to use sounds that are not even close to matching. The sounds are not just intentionally unrhymed, but intentionally opposites. Another facet of the lyrics worthy of mention is that even in her frenzy, Sondheim makes Amy believable as a sophisticated New York woman, so he even gives her an American literature reference. When she sings “why watch me die like Eliza on the ice,” she is referencing the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which portrays her as being someone well-versed in literature.

The next melodic section contains a series of repeated descending perfect fourths, which are melodically, textually, and rhythmically accented. Since the well-known wedding march is built on an ascending perfect fourth, one can conclude that these repeated descending fourths are an intentional display of Amy’s aversion to marriage. In

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159 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 167.
160 Swayne, 142.
these sections, there are also intentional and short rhyming patterns, exhibiting her progression into another state of hysteria. Amy’s final melodic idea is filled with even more rhyming, and not just line-ending rhymes, but rhymes that are internal within the sentence and break up the flow of text. For instance, “If you’re quick, for a kick, you could pick up a christening.” In performance, a singer should be aware of the rhyme, or lack thereof, and allow the natural rhythmic emphasis to showcase the differences in the flow of language in these contrasting melodic sections.

**Performance Considerations**

The preceding research contains several implications regarding performance practice of the song “Getting Married Today.” In order to accurately present the characters, staging must be considered. The three characters—Amy, Paul, and the church lady—should all appear on stage in different locations. Amy’s stage placement must draw attention to her as the main character of the piece. Each of the characters should face the audience, because none of them sings to the others. Lack of physical connection and eye contact between the characters on stage will convey to the audience that the characters are not able to hear each other’s thoughts. For example, Paul is not privy to the inner monologue Amy sings in her rapid patter sections, and this dynamic should be made clear through placement of the characters on stage.
The actress playing Amy must understand that her character transitions through three distinct phases of hysteria. The rapid patter sections of the first phase display Amy’s emotional confinement through tight melodic figures and hurried articulation. This confinement should be demonstrated by the actress through limited, if any, body motion. The actress may also choose to narrow her focus by using pointed eye contact toward one location for the duration of this section. Her facial expression should reveal Amy’s disturbed state, and she should remain virtually motionless throughout the patter portions. It will also prove advantageous for the vocalist to keep her mouth in a neutral position in order to facilitate the quick articulation necessary in these passages. Each verse of the patter sections is to be completed in one breath, presenting a challenge for the performer. Thus, the singer must be prepared to take effective breaths and manage the air efficiently.

The second stage of hysteria Amy experiences occurs in the passage with the repetitive descending fourths. In these segments, Amy grows increasingly emphatic about her apprehension toward marriage, and the performer can further highlight her amplified hysteria through slightly increased gesturing and facial expressions. The repeated phrase “I’m not getting married” can intensify the dramatic moment through increased body language, and the performer should sing with louder dynamics each time she repeats this phrase.

The third state of hysteria occurs twice in the piece, beginning both times with the text “Go, can’t you go.” Amy’s psychosis in this section can be heightened via special attention to the lyrics. In this section, Sondheim uses rhyme in a deliberate fashion, and
the performer must execute these rhymes equally deliberately. The performer should be aware of rhyming patterns, emphasizing the rhymed text while still recognizing the dramatic power available in the purposefully unrhymed lyrics. Here, Amy is at the height of her frenzy, and these portions of the songs should be viewed by the performer as impassioned pleas. These passages should be sung with fervor, and the body language should be more dramatic, reflecting Amy’s panic.

One final consideration for performances of “Getting Married Today” is in the concluding section, where Paul and Amy’s melodies are juxtaposed against one another in counterpoint. Paul sings a lyrical melody that soars in a higher tessitura, while Amy is singing her patter melody in a low, speech-like register. In performance, both singers must be aware of achieving a good balance with one another, so that Amy’s text stands out and is intelligible to the audience. The listener’s ear will likely be drawn to Paul’s melody because of the higher range, and the actor playing Paul must be conscious to not overshadow Amy dynamically. The actress playing Amy should be cognizant of this issue as well and incorporate slightly more chest voice and a raised dynamic level in comparison to the previous instances of this patter melody. For a performance example of “Getting Married Today,” please refer to Appendix B, track two.

Summary

*Company*, the first collaboration between George Furth, Hal Prince, and Stephen Sondheim, was a success. It was the first show for which Sondheim was truly acclaimed.
for the creativity and innovation that now defines his music in the American theatre. The musical earned a record number of Tony Award nominations, was critically praised, and was financially successful.

Perhaps the most important contribution Company made to the American musical was that it opened the door for Concept Musicals to become an acceptable dramatic form. Company forged the way for musicals to abandon the notion that the story must follow chronological order, or even have a linear plot line. This abandonment allowed for musical theatre to explore the realms of abstractions, and composers like Sondheim were able to approach the genre as a new type of art form, rather than writing for escapist entertainment purposes.

There are several aspects of Company that directly reflect the time it was written, which some critics believe makes the material dated. However, Company gives an introspective view of relationships between people, and does so in a way that causes thoughtful contemplation. The issues presented in Company may have been considered more avant-garde or “edgy” in 1970, when the show premiered, but they are enduring.

The character of Amy in Company defies many traditional gender roles, because she is the one who is terrified to get married. She sings a frenetic patter song that exemplifies her panic and insanity about getting married to Paul. Sondheim uses melodic motivic manipulation to contrast the three different characters involved in this piece: the church lady, Paul, and Amy. For the church lady, he uses a pastiche of church hymn music; Paul sings soaring lyrical melodies about being in love with Amy, and Amy sings sharp, direct, and confined patterns that starkly contrast those of her scene partners in
order to highlight her increasing emotional angst. Sondheim and Furth use the character of Amy as a reflection of Robert, the main character, who is scared of being alone but unwilling to get married. She is presented as the mirror image—scared of marriage but unwilling to be alone.

There are several important elements for performers to be aware of in their interpretation of “Getting Married Today.” For instance, melodic contrast between Amy’s three different stages of hysteria, Paul’s wistfully romantic melody, and the church lady’s hymn-like figures is vital to an effective dramatic rendition of this song. A mezzo-soprano singing the role of Amy should be prepared to communicate vastly different emotions through interesting body language, facial expressions, and attention to the lyrics. The different melody lines are not difficult to sing, and are fairly repetitive, so the dramatic power of this scene is heavily reliant on expert conveyance of the lyrics. A large amount of practice and skill will be required for the singer to effectively perform the rapid patter sections in one breath, as Sondheim desires. A successful performance of this piece requires the singer to recognize the patterns within the lyrics and be able to flawlessly execute those patterns.
After the success of Sweeney Todd, Sondheim was looking forward to another opportunity to collaborate with Hal Prince. In search of a project for Sondheim and Prince to work on, Prince’s wife suggested they collaborate on a piece about young people. The idea was that they should write an updated and modern version of Babes in Arms, so Prince began to peruse and consider several different options of youthful plays for subject matter for use in a new musical. Prince recalled reading the script of Merrily We Roll Along, written by George Kaufman and Moss Hart. The Kaufman and Hart play opened at the Music Box Theatre in New York in 1934, but only ran for 155 performances before it closed.

Prince remembered enjoying the script and the idea behind the show. One of the most appealing attributes of the show, which made it interesting in comparison to the others, was that it was a morality play told in reverse order. When Prince presented the idea of using Merrily We Roll Along and writing it as a musical version, but still in reverse order, Sondheim quickly agreed. According to Prince, this was the only

161 Secrest, 309.
collaboration they had where Sondheim said yes to a project almost immediately over the phone.\textsuperscript{162} George Furth was to be the book writer on the project, meaning this show would be a collaboration of the same team as in \textit{Company} a decade earlier.

Furth, Sondheim, and Prince discussed how the 1934 Kaufman and Hart script could be modernized and made relevant to the stage in the early 1980’s. In the Sondheim and Furth version of \textit{Merrily We Roll Along}, the plot begins in 1981 and goes backward in time to 1957.\textsuperscript{163} The story revolves around the friendship of three characters—Franklin Shepard, Charley Kringas, and Mary Flynn. Shepard, the main character, is a songwriter and movie producer. His character has been termed an “anti-hero”\textsuperscript{164} because of his decay from an aspiring young composer to becoming a disreputable sell-out. Mary Flynn is a writer and is secretly in love with Shepard, which drives her to become an alcoholic. Charley Kringas is a lyricist who is portrayed as having morals and integrity, while Shepard and Flynn’s morality seems to decay later on in their lives (earlier on in the musical).\textsuperscript{165} The show reviews their lives, focusing on Shepard and his relationships with Kringas and Flynn, as well as his relationships with his two wives, Beth and Gussie.\textsuperscript{166}

The show begins with Shepard giving a commencement address at the high school from which he graduated. In the address, Shepard urges the high school graduates to be ready to accept compromise in their lives and careers. In the next scene Shepard hosts a Hollywood party for his first movie, which turns out to be a flop. In this scene, we see

\begin{footnotes}
\item[162] Secrest, 309.
\item[163] Sondheim, \textit{Finishing the Hat}, 379.
\item[164] Secrest, 311.
\item[165] Ibid.
\item[166] Sondheim, \textit{Finishing the Hat}, 379.
\end{footnotes}
Mary Flynn shout at him, because she has been in love with him for years and has now become an alcoholic. The action continues backward to the early seventies, where Charley Kringas calls Shepard a money-driven fake on television, causing Shepard to end their friendship. The audience then travels backward in time to see Frank, Charley, and Mary reaffirm their friendship. This scene also shows Beth, Shepard’s first wife, divorcing him because he had an affair with Gussie. As the story goes further back in time, Gussie seduces Frank into writing a mindless show for her, instead of pursuing his goal to write intellectual and serious music, and Shepard, Kringas, and Beth perform at a night club. Towards the end of the musical, Shepard and Kringas meet Flynn on a rooftop in New York City. The musical ends with Shepard speaking at his own high school graduation, introducing a song he has written.167

The undertone of Merrily We Roll Along is a warning against the seductive powers of success.168 The character of Frank represents someone who has succumbed to greed and desire for fame and success, and has given up part of his goals and dreams in order to make money. The morality of the character of Charley Kringas casts a sharp contrast against Shepard. George Furth said the main characteristics of Kringas are purity of purpose, values, dedication, and the value found in simplicity. Furth believes Kringas is a literary representation of the collaborative team of himself, Sondheim, and Prince.169

169 Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 315.
This allegorical comparison is interesting, particularly in relation to Sondheim, because he has always chosen to write more serious intellectual music in the search of artistic gain, rather than popular theatrical music, in the search of financial gain. The character of Charley Kringas, as well as the theme of the entire show of *Merrily We Roll Along*, displays creeds that Sondheim himself has sought to uphold in his own life and career. Loyalty and integrity are two tenets that Sondheim lives by, and these are evident in several aspects of his career. His choice of collaborators displays these tenets—for example, when Sondheim enjoys working with someone, whether the show is successful or not, he almost inevitably works with them again. Throughout his career, several of the same collaborators have taken part in multiple shows; *Merrily We Roll Along* exemplifies that loyalty. Additionally, Sondheim commits to projects based on their artistic value, rather than on monetary gain. He commits to a vision, and while he works to make it appealing to the public, as any good Broadway composer would do, he does not compromise his own compositional values or artistic investment.\(^{170}\)

There are other ways in which *Merrily We Roll Along* symbolizes of Sondheim’s life and other aspects of his career. The song “Opening Doors” is the only song Sondheim wrote for the stage that was consciously autobiographical. However, the characters are not meant to directly mirror the artistic collaborators in any way, although it has been interpreted as such.\(^{171}\) With this project, he returns to the theme of failed hopes and ruined expectations, a theme he visited several times prior to *Merrily We Roll Along*. This theme appeared previously in *Follies, Climb High, All That Glitters*, and most notably in *Allegro*, which he worked on with Oscar Hammerstein and Richard

\(^{170}\) Cronin, 148.

\(^{171}\) Secrest, 311.
Rodgers. Both Allegro and Merrily We Roll Along show what happens when an artist loses sight of his goals.\textsuperscript{172} Other similarities with Allegro include the distortion of time as well as the similar theme of taking steps and trying different paths. The major love ballads of each show—“Not a Day Goes By” from Merrily We Roll Along and “You are Never Away” from Allegro—are both heard twice and have a similar theme of love’s obsessive nature. Allegro has also been said to be allegorical to Hammerstein’s life, in the same way Merrily We Roll Along parallels to Sondheim’s life. The major difference between the two shows is that integrity is presented as an integral aspect of Merrily We Roll Along, and it is not presented as such a strong central concept in Allegro.\textsuperscript{173}

Similarly to Allegro, Merrily We Roll Along did not experience a successful run on Broadway. The show opened in November, 1981 and closed after only 16 performances. The audience members walked out of the show in droves, and the New York Daily News printed an article about how walk-outs from the new Sondheim, Furth, and Prince collaboration were an epidemic.\textsuperscript{174} The reviews were scathing, and even attacked Sondheim and Prince directly. People felt that compromise, sell-out, and loss of integrity were becoming too common a theme in their shows. Though they never discussed what went wrong, Prince believed that he was to blame for the unsuccessful run of Merrily We Roll Along. He said Sondheim wrote a vulnerable score, and the music was obviously from the heart, and Prince felt that he had let Sondheim down with the fulfillment of the vision.\textsuperscript{175}

\textsuperscript{172} Secrest, 309.
\textsuperscript{173} Milner, 162-165.
\textsuperscript{174} Secrest, 317.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid, 317.


*Merrily We Roll Along* obviously was a financial failure and it hurt the pride of the collaborative team and the young actors and actresses on stage, but the most tragic casualty was the partnership of Sondheim and Prince. The two would not reunite to work on another project for twenty years. The professional separation of Sondheim and Prince has been compared to a couple divorcing after a child dies, in the sense that separation is the only way they were capable of dealing with the pain of losing something they held so dear.\(^\text{176}\) There are several theories about what went wrong with *Merrily We Roll Along*, but the consensus was that the problem lies with the book writing and direction, rather than the score. The score is masterful, and it was not the object of any of the criticisms, and actually received high praise.

A dramatic problem with *Merrily We Roll Along* lies in its reverse chronology. There is not a strong prompt at the beginning that helps the audience form an expectation. The opening of the show shows the post mortem of Shepard’s career, and the audience is essentially being asked to act as a psychiatrist, analyzing what made Frank become the way he did, without any explanation from the action.\(^\text{177}\) The *New York Times* Critic, Frank Rich, thought the problem with the book was that it showed the three friends parting, but it didn’t really explain why, and the reverse action left the audience questioning why it was all happening, and not feeling connected to the truly dramatic events of the plot.\(^\text{178}\)

There were multiple attempts to resuscitate *Merrily We Roll Along*, and most were unsuccessful. However, Furth and Sondheim finally got the result they wanted over a

\(^{176}\) Gottfried, 153.  
\(^{177}\) Ibid, 313.  
\(^{178}\) Secrest, 319.
decade after the original version appeared on Broadway. One revival of the show that was somewhat successful was the 1985 La Jolla production, directed by James Lapine. After the show closed with a tepid reception, Lapine suggested structural changes Furth and Sondheim could make to the show to improve it. With some adjustments, the new version of *Merrily We Roll Along* was well-received in Leicester, England; years later, in London, the show won the Laurence Oliver Award for Best Musical of the year.\(^{179}\)

### Cultural and Historical Influences

There are two major cultural and historical influences upon the creation of this show. First, the original play was presented in 1934, shortly after the Great Depression and stock market crash. The nation had not recovered from the detrimental effects of this catastrophe, which may have partially contributed to the lack of success that the Kaufman and Hart play experienced when it originally opened. The general public was likely wanting entertainment to provide a means of escape, rather than looking for darker subject matter and the portrayal of despair.

The conclusion of *Merrily We Roll Along* would have seemed extremely dark to the audience, especially because most people had experienced some kind of despair during the course of the depression. The average audience member who was willing to pay for a ticket to a show at that time was probably looking to experience something with a hopeful feeling. As author Meryle Secrest says, they were looking for something to

\(^{179}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 381.
remind them “that things could be worse: they might be down and out, but at least they had not sold their souls.”

According to some critics, neither the Kaufman-Hart play, nor the Sondheim-Furth musical made full use of the dramatic power available to them through use of the American postwar parallel. The musical is mistakenly perceived as being merely a cynical take on success, which could not be appreciated in the time period of the musical or the play. Undoubtedly, the show asks the question “what is success?” *Merrily We Roll Along* is concerned with how success can be reached while still maintaining personal values, like integrity and honesty. The aim of the musical is to display how integral honesty and consideration are to all human relationships, both professional and personal.

Another cultural influence can be found in the composition of the score of *Merrily We Roll Along*. When the collaborators began writing the musical, Sondheim was charged with writing a popular and commercial score. Writing a commercial score would make this score considerably different than Sondheim’s previous three Broadway musicals—*A Little Night Music, Pacific Overtures*, and *Sweeney Todd*—which were much more virtuosic. The score for *Merrily We Roll Along* is considered the most accessible and stereotypical Broadway score Sondheim composed.

*Merrily We Roll Along* progresses backward from 1981 to 1957, and outlines the lives of songwriters who were composing during a period of time when traditional song

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180 Secrest, 308.
182 Cronin, 149.
183 Secrest, 313.
185 Gottfried, 146.
form ruled. The most traditional song form used was a standard 32 Bar Song. This type
of song is built in four stanzas of text with equivalent lengths, which were most
commonly eight measures each, equaling 32 measures in length for the entire song. The
formal structure of the song generally followed an AABA or an ABAB pattern, with just
a slight variation at the end, in order to bring finality to the song. 32 Bar Song form was
prevalent in popular music, including rock and country music, because it has an element
of predictability, making the songs a little more “catchy,” and gives the listener a sense of
comfort, because the music rarely defies expectations. This type of song was not only
found in popular music, but also prevailed in Golden Age musicals.\(^\text{186}\)

Very few composers prior to Rodgers and Hammerstein experimented outside of
the parameters of the 32 Bar Song. There were a few exceptions, including Harold Arlen
and Cole Porter. George Gershwin occasionally experimented in works such as *Porgy
and Bess, Of Thee I Sing,* and *Let ‘em Eat Cake.* Jerome Kern was known for being
experimental, but his experiments were almost exclusively harmonic and not structural.
Richard Rodgers primarily used 32 Bar Song form until he began collaborating with
Hammerstein. The partnership of Rodgers and Hammerstein is what really began to
diminish the use of the 32 Bar Song form. The first of two prime examples are
“Soliloquy” from *Carousel,* which established a new way for characters to have an
internal monologue that either defines something about their character or something
about the plot. The second example is “If I Loved You” from *Carousel,* and all of the
fragments leading up to it. The use of dialogue interspersed with singing generated a new
compositional technique for musical theatre. Both of these new techniques, seen in

\(^{186}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat,* 379.
Carousel, were extensions of operatic conventions that were used previously, but had not been seen in American musical theatre.  

Of course, in true Sondheim fashion, he could not simply use the standard 32 Bar Song form in a straight-forward manner. He used contemporary harmonies and added other complexities throughout. For instance, he built the entire score into blocks with shared themes. The score was meant to be based on the relationships of the three principle characters, so he had ideas that were grouped together and put into thematic blocks throughout the score. These thematic blocks have been compared to modular furniture, in the sense that the blocks can be rearranged and pieced together in different ways, but each theme still has its own unique purpose.

One of the reasons Sondheim took this approach was because by 1981, when Merrily We Roll Along premiered, the compositional language of musical theatre had evolved and expanded, but the collaborators still thought it was dramatically important to write songs in the style the characters would have in the 1950’s and 60’s. Sondheim tried to make this older style more relevant to the 1981 audiences by updating the harmonic language and as adding complexity through thematic blocks.

Another interesting distinction between the musical form of Merrily We Roll Along and its predecessors is a direct result of the reverse chronology. The plot being presented in reverse order offers an unconventional opportunity for the musical events to be presented backwards, including reprises. Sondheim generally does not use reprises, but used them in Merrily We Roll Along because of his precept “Content Dictates Form,” because the content of this show offered an occasion for interesting utilization of a

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187 Sondheim, Finishing the Hat, 379.
188 Secrest, 313.
reprise. Prior to Hammerstein, hit songs were often discovered on the musical theatre or vaudevillian stage, so reprises were used only for plugging potential hits. This repetition phased out during the pop revolution of the 1960’s, and the necessity for a reprise in a musical diminished. Hammerstein, however, used reprises as integral parts of the story, which caused a reprise with new dramatic function to surface. Sondheim decided to use this type of reprise, but because the chronology in *Merrily We Roll Along* is in reverse, so are the reprises. Sondheim calls these “reverse reprises,” where the audience hears the reprise first, and the original version of the song later.\(^{189}\)

Sondheim also connects these reverse reprises as well as other musical material through presenting themes and motifs in reverse. The vocal lines in the early life sections are accompaniments in the later parts of the characters’ lives, but the audience hears the accompaniment first.\(^{190}\) Additionally, the verbal and musical motifs throughout the course of the show are modified by by extension, development, and fragmentation. Normally, an audience would hear the fragments first, full presentation second, development next, and extensions last, but in *Merrily We Roll Along*, the reverse chronology demands that the audience hears these in the reverse order, with extensions heard first and fragments last.\(^{191}\) All of these attributes demonstrate Sondheim’s unique ability to place his signature on an extremely familiar and outdated form, making it interesting and relevant to a new audience.\(^{192}\)

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\(^{189}\) Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 381.

\(^{190}\) Ibid.

\(^{191}\) Gottfried, 147.

\(^{192}\) Secrest, 315.
The Development of the Character of Beth

The character development of Beth is not nearly as extensive as the other characters selected for this research, because Beth is not one of the main characters in the story. Following Beth’s relationship with Shepard in correct chronological order, Beth get cast in the young Frank’s musical he is writing. They fall in love and get married, and Shepard’s musical is a hit. However, Gussie, another actress is very attracted to Frank and convinces him to write a less intellectual and more commercial musical for her. Frank then has an affair with Gussie, so Beth divorces him and sues for custody of their son, which is where she sings the song “Not a Day Goes By.”

Beth’s first scene is in is the most intensely dramatic, because of the coming custody battle with Shepard over their son; he tries to convince her to stay with him, and she sings the powerfully vulnerable song, “Not a Day Goes By.” Because this is her first scene, the audience does not experience any real build up or development of Beth’s character before this crucial and emotional moment. (This lack was one of the dramatic problems critics saw with the reverse chronology.) Therefore, a performer playing Beth needs to be able to convincingly present a wounded and bitter woman the audience can immediately sympathize with.

An interesting facet of the characterization of Beth that should be noted is that the song, “Not a Day Goes By,” is sung as a reverse reprise, meaning this first occurrence of the song would actually be the reprise in a typical musical that unfolds in correct chronological order. Sondheim says, “In any other musical, the reprise would be the
disillusionment, here it is the promise.” Since the characters are moving backward in
time, Beth is singing a song that occurs later in the time span of her life, but at a previous
time in the plot. She is singing bitter words because she is finally leaving her husband,
Shepard, who destroyed their relationship with his ambition. Later in the musical, the
same melody is sung with much more optimistic lyrics as a tribute to their love, right
after they are married. Shepard and Beth sing this song as a love duet, with Mary Flynn,
who is hopelessly in love with Shepard, singing the more bitter words in the background.
This song is central to the plot and overall theme of the musical. Author Joanne Gordon
says, “The central thematic focus on time is developed in this love song, which
ingeniously insists that love can endure through time; that it is in some way immutable
and eternal.”

Just like his mentor Hammerstein, Sondheim utilizes the reprise as an integral part
of the story. In this case, because of the inverted sense of time, Sondheim is able to
create a very poignant moment, because the audience has already heard the disheartened
version before they hear the happier version, making it bitingly sardonic. In the second
act version, words like, “where’s the day I’ll have started forgetting? So I just go on
thinking and sweating and cursing and crying and turning and reaching and waking and
dying…” are replaced with words like “That it can’t get much better much longer, but
it only gets better and stronger and deeper and nearer and simpler and freer and richer and
clearer.”

193 Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 397.
196 Ibid, 194.
Musical Characterization of Beth in “Not a Day Goes By”

Although Beth is only a supporting role, Sondheim still astutely uses the music to characterize her. The score of *Merrily We Roll Along* has a much more commercial feel than other scores written by Sondheim, but it still does have moments of what author Stephen Banfield refers to as “elegiac romanticism.”¹⁹⁷ Beth’s song “Not a Day Goes By” is an example of this type. The melody and harmonies are haunting and beautiful, and vividly paint the picture of Beth’s vulnerability at this moment in the story. Martin Gottfried says this song contains “harmonies so painfully beautiful that it creates a tension and poignancy most appropriate to the vulnerability in the lyric.”¹⁹⁸

As previously mentioned, Sondheim told as much of the story as possible through use of conventional form, most notably 32 Bar Song form, with some slight variations. The form of “Not a Day Goes By” follows a slightly different version of the 32 bar song form, and the main portion of the song is actually 40 measures long. The structure of the piece does follow an ABAB formal layout, which is a typical melodic format for the 32 bar song.

“Not a Day Goes By” also maintains the typical expectations of 32 Bar Song form by using nearly symmetrical phrase groupings. The A-section is comprised of 7 bars, and the B-section is comprised of 9 bars. An additional bar comes at the point of modulation, measure 27 in the score, just before the A-section begins in the new key. At this point the singer sings the text “And no,” which is not mirrored in the first occurrence of the A-section. The other seven additional measures come at the end as a tag, which brings a

¹⁹⁷ Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*.
¹⁹⁸ Gottfried, 149.
sense of closure, though not a strong cadence. There are other measures included at the beginning and end which underscore dramatic action and dialogue. The final cadence to a root position tonic does not occur until the final measure of the underscored portion of the song.

While “Not a Day Goes By” is predominately traditional in form, it fulfills a much more modern aesthetic in other musical aspects. Harmonically speaking, the final cadence is not in the same key as at the beginning of the piece, which is certainly atypical of the 32 bar song form (this song has been published separately in many collections, but the original key modulation is from F Major to G Major). Additionally, at the beginning of the piece, while dialogue is happening, there is a series of seventh chords that do not belong in the key or allude to the tonic at all. In fact, none of them is a tonic or dominant-seventh chord. After the dominant note of the key is sounded in the bass, the vocal melody enters in measure eight on the fifth of the dominant, or the second scale degree of the tonic key. Tonic is not established until after Beth begins to sing.

With regard to different treatment of melodic ideas, as seen in Example 4, the diatonic melody in the first A-section sits lower in the singer’s tessitura, which already gives a calmer timbre to the tone, and it also sits above a simple and easy ninth chord arpeggiation. However, when the A section recurs at measure 27, the accompaniment figuration is thicker and more dramatic. Also, the key modulates up a step, and the melody is raised a third above its relationship to the tonic in its previous occurrence. This upward movement clearly reinforces the heightened passion and increased emotional involvement of Beth’s character. Also interesting to notice at this point is the note in measure 29 on the word “Blessed.” It is raised a half step from the melodic
expectation. Sondheim takes an expectation that exists and blatantly breaks the expectation in order to highlight the character’s rising emotions and irrationality. The dissonance and unexpected melodic shape suggest that the singer should sing this phrase with a higher level of angst than in the previous phrase.

Example 4: “Not a Day Goes By,” m. 28-31.¹⁹⁹

At the end of the sung portion of the piece, during the tag, the most interesting rhythmic facets occur. In this section, the melodic line of the vocalist and some of the right hand of the piano are in duple rhythmic patterns, while the left hand in the piano part is broken into clear and accented triplet patterns, giving a feeling of unrest. At this point, the vocalist reaches a dynamic peak, and remains at a fortissimo level until 4 measures before the end. At this point the performer typically decrescendos on the final note into a mezzo piano, leading to a sense of resolution from the piano on the only true root position tonic chord of the entire piece. This resolution exemplifies Beth’s finality in her choice to leave her husband.

Example 5: “Not a Day Goes By,” m. 41-44.\textsuperscript{200}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example_music.png}
\caption{Example music notation for “Not a Day Goes By.”}
\end{figure}

Overall, the piece characterizes Beth’s angst in several different ways. At this moment in the story, Beth confesses that though she still loves Frank Shepard, she could never be completely happy staying with him. The general avoidance of tonic, mixed rhythmic patterns, and rubato passages very accurately depict Beth’s state of confusion and hurt. The sonorities also display a sense of vulnerability, which causes the hurt to resonate and linger with the audience.\textsuperscript{201}

Performance Considerations

“Not a Day Goes By” is a beautifully tragic song in which Sondheim offers the musical and lyrical complexity necessary for the development of a poignant dramatic moment. The previous research discusses several key elements an actress should be

\textsuperscript{200} Sondheim, \textit{Merrily}, 96.
\textsuperscript{201} Secrest, 315.
aware of when performing this song. When Beth sings “Not a Day Goes By,” she is still painfully in love with Frank Shepard, even though she has been deeply hurt by his infidelity. These conflicting emotions offer the actress an opportunity to show range with their characterization of Beth. It is important for the singer to contrast the anger and pain with tender moments of vulnerability in order to convey Beth’s brokenness and emotional conflict.

The reverse chronology of Merrily We Roll Along offers unique dramatic power to the lyrics of both versions of “Not a Day Goes By.” A singer should be conscious of the differences in the lyrics of Beth’s solo version of “Not a Day Goes By” and the trio that occurs later in the musical. The optimistic lyrics sung by the trio to the same melody in the second act intrinsically possess darkly ironic subtext because Beth’s solo version of this song in the first act gives the promise of a failed marriage. Sondheim only uses reprises when they have dramatic impact, so emphasis should be placed on lyrics that alter the meaning of the song in its two different occurrences. There are passages of lyrics, discussed previously in this research, that create contrast between Beth’s jaded version of the song and the hopeful version of the song Beth and Frank sing together. These passages should be noted and clearly articulated by the singer.

Several different musical skills, including dynamic contrast, tempo rubato, and emphasis on rhythmic juxtapositions and melodic dissonances, can be utilized to accurately depict Beth’s emotional turmoil. During this portion of the story, Beth explains to Frank that she cannot be with him, even though she still loves him. Therefore, the singer can use dynamic contrast as an expressive tool to display these
distinctively different emotions. For instance, at the end of the song, the singer could increase the dynamics to a forte belt voice on the text “Till the days go by,” which Beth sings three times in succession. On the third and final time she sings that text, the singer could utilize a subito piano dynamic, which would create an expressive moment of vulnerability that leads into the final harmonic resolution of the piece.

Tempo rubato can be utilized as another expressive tool in “Not a Day Goes By.” There are two places where rubato should be used prominently; the melody is the same in each place, but the text is different. These instances are sung on triplet patterns, the first time with the text “but I just go on thinking and sweating and cursing and crying and turning and reaching and waking and dying,” and also at the end while the singer repeats the text “I’ll die day after day after day…” In both occurrences of these repetitive patterns, the song moves into dramatically climactic moments. In the first incidence, the song moves to the point of modulation, which is one of the dramatically climactic moments of the song. If rubato is used on the triplet patterns as a means of creating musical tension, the point of modulation on the text “and no, not a day goes by” will be appropriately highlighted and intensified. Additionally, if the same musical tension is developed through use of rubato on the same melodic pattern at the end of the piece, a similar dramatic climax will be achieved on the text “till the days go by,” which should be the high point of the piece.

Emphasis on rhythmic juxtapositions and melodic dissonances can also be an effective means of expression of Beth’s character in the song “Not a Day Goes By.” There are three specific moments in the song that can be difficult to sing, but effective
when executed properly. The first moment is at the beginning of the piece, when Beth first starts to sing. There are a series of non-tonic chords preceding her entrance, and the tonic is not established until the word “by” in her first utterance of the text “Not a day goes by.” This ambiguity of the tonic at the opening of the piece can cause difficulty for the singer, but the avoidance of a tonal center creates an effect of unrest and emotional conflict. Also, as previously stated, Sondheim avoids the melodic expectation on the phrase “not a blessed day.” One note of the melody (on the first syllable of the word “blessed”) is displaced a half step from where it would be expected based on previous occurrences of the melodic line. This note should be emphasized, because it is different in order to highlight a dramatic lyric, displaying increased intensity in Beth’s angst. The third moment is at the end of the piece on the repeated text “till the days go by.” In these measures, the rhythmic pattern in the accompaniment has triplets that are juxtaposed against the duple rhythms of the vocal line. This rhythmic juxtaposition should be emphasized to strengthen the overall unsettled and emotionally conflicted tone of the piece. For a performance example of “Not a Day Goes By,” please refer to Appendix B, track 4.

Summary

In terms of sales and critical reception, Merrily We Roll Along was a failure. However, Sondheim and Furth had such a strong love for this show that the collaborators will probably never view the show as a failure, but perhaps will just look back at it as an artistic endeavor that had a flawed production. The initial run of the show on Broadway
was stunted, lasting a mere 16 performances. With many adjustments, rewrites, and a lot of determination, Sondheim and Furth were able to find success for *Merrily We Roll Along* in London, England, where it would go on to win the Laurence Oliver Award for Best Musical of the year.

There were several reasons for the failure on Broadway, ranging from inexperienced actors to faulty direction to a poorly written book, but the score remains highly revered as a successful endeavor for composer Stephen Sondheim. The reverse chronology of the musical is something that is often accepted as a clever artistic device and intellectual choice, but also as a dramatic flaw. The play moving in reverse gave the audience little time to connect with the characters, because the least empathetic versions of the characters were presented at the outset of the show.

The score, however, is revered as one of Sondheim’s most accessible and most beautifully written musicals. Due to Sondheim, Prince, and Furth’s desire to have a truly popular and commercial score, *Merrily We Roll Along* makes use of some traditional styles, though Sondheim’s fingerprint can be found throughout these familiar musical devices. One of the most notable traditions Sondheim followed was the 32 Bar Song form, although he adapts the form in interesting ways, utilizing contemporary harmonies, unpredictable melodies, and slight variations in the structure to make the music interesting and relevant to an audience who would have grown tired of such traditional compositional methods. The song “Not a Day Goes By,” sung by the character of Beth, is an example of this innovative borrowing. He uses tight modulations, heart-wrenching lyrics, and a beautifully haunting melody to display her angst and vulnerability. Though the basic structure of a 32 Bar Song form can be seen, it is altered in a way to make this
song fresh and inviting for the listener. Of *Merrily We Roll Along*, Joanne Gordon says, “The score is unquestionably worth cherishing.”\textsuperscript{202}

It is important that the singer carefully consider the dramatic power she can create through conveyance of Beth’s conflicting emotions in “Not a Day Goes By.” Sondheim provides many devices to express Beth’s character in the music and lyrics of this song. If the singer expertly employs devices such as tempo rubato, rhythmic juxtapositions, and dynamic contrast in order to highlight the lyrics, the dramatic moments in “Not a Day Goes By” will have heart-wrenching poignancy.

\textsuperscript{202} Gordon, *Art isn’t Easy*, 256.
CHAPTER SIX: THE BAKERS WIFE IN INTO THE WOODS (1987)

Into the Woods: Inception, Creation, and Reception

After the completion of Sunday in the Park with George, Sondheim and James Lapine decided to begin work on a new project. Sondheim’s initial idea was to write a fantasy quest musical, and Lapine brought up the idea of using a fairy tale, because he had always been fascinated with fairy tales. The psychology behind fairy tales was appealing to Lapine; he had used Jungian and Freudian theory many times before as a source, both as a director and as a writer. Sondheim, however, had not grown up with fairy tales, but was interested in the process of writing a fairy tale from scratch.

Upon beginning work on their own fairy tale, the collaborators discovered that writing one proved to be more difficult than they had thought. Sondheim reasoned that the difficulty was because it defied one of his three main precepts of composition: “Content Dictates Form.” Sondheim and Lapine wanted to write a fantasy quest similar

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204 Secrest, 352.
to a fairy tale, but they didn’t have any specific concept in mind, which made it difficult to narrow the scope into a solid plot line. The possibilities were seemingly endless.\textsuperscript{205}

In 1985, Sondheim and Lapine explored the possibility of writing a television series, in which characters from several situation comedies already on television would collide. They presented the idea to television executives, hoping to sell just the idea, but nobody would pay for the idea without an accompanying script. Thus, the idea was never developed. Lapine, however, had the idea of transferring that same concept into a new musical, using a collision of characters from different well-known fairy tales. The project was appealing to Lapine and Sondheim, because of Sondheim’s unique and meticulous wit with regard to his composition of musicals. They both thought it would be interesting to see what happened when well-known fairy tales were filtered through Sondheim’s bizarre and somewhat twisted perspective.\textsuperscript{206}

The team began writing the script, and Sondheim believed his experience working with Burt Shevelove on \textit{A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum} gave him a great deal of insight about writing a farce. He offered Lapine his assistance with the writing, but Lapine surprised Sondheim by not accepting the offer. In the end, however, Sondheim was pleased with the script, and even stated “The elegance with which he cross-cuts among the four stories simultaneously throughout the show still astonishes me. It is a lesson in play construction.”\textsuperscript{207}

The plot of the story is based on the stories of four different well-known fairy tale characters: Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Jack (of Jack and the Beanstalk), and

\begin{footnotes}
\item Sondheim, \textit{Look, I Made a Hat}, 57-58.
\item Secrest, 352.
\item Sondheim, \textit{Look, I Made a Hat}, 58.
\end{footnotes}
Rapunzel. Lapine wove these stories together by adding his own fairy tale characters, the Baker and his Wife. In act one of the musical, the stories of all four of the major fairy tale characters are told with elements that cause their stories to intertwine. Each one of them has a goal and a wish, and they will stop at nothing to achieve them. At the end of the act, there is a happy ending. All of the characters get their wishes in the style of a traditional fairy tale. However, just before the act curtain, the Narrator says “to be continued,” informing the audience that the “happily ever after” will not be as simple in this instance.

In typical Sondheim fashion, everything on the surface is not as it seems. The second act takes the characters back into the forest, where they will each face the consequences of their actions in the first act. Primarily, because Jack climbed the beanstalk, stole from the giants, and caused the male giant to die, the female giant has come down to seek revenge. The giant is angry, and wreaks havoc on the entire community, crushing homes and people in her pursuit of Jack. Many of the characters meet an untimely end before finishing the second act, which is not the typical happy ending one would expect to find in a fairy tale. The characters do find a sense of happiness, but they find it through learning difficult lessons. This type of happiness is different from typical fairy tales, because it is earned. It is an informed happiness, where the characters only got what they wanted in some respects; they have learned to appreciate what they do have, and to think about the consequences of their actions before committing them.\textsuperscript{208}

\textsuperscript{208} Gordon, \textit{Art isn’t Easy}, 309.
Playwrights Horizons Theatre, where *Sunday in the Park with George* was developed and premiered, offered Lapine and Sondheim the opportunity to use the theatre for their work with *Into the Woods* as well. In 1985, the first draft of the script of *Into the Woods,* with only major musical themes, was presented informally. Several months later, a second draft of the script was presented, along with all of the music from Act One. After one more informal presentation at Playwrights, *Into the Woods* went into previews, opening on December 4, 1986 at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego. The show ran fifty preview performances to mixed reviews.

After the previews in San Diego came to a close, rehearsals for Broadway were set to begin, and the show opened for New York previews at the Martin Beck Theatre in October, 1987. After 43 preview performances, the show opened on November 5, 1987. The show was well received overall, with only some slight criticisms. The critics felt that perhaps Sondheim and Lapine had been slightly too aggressive in teaching the characters a lesson in the second act. Most fairy tales allow the characters to learn their lessons symbolically. Here, Sondheim and Lapine not only have them learn their lessons literally, but quite brutally as well. Sondheim felt that people may have disliked the second act because it surprised them to find a fairy tale that did not end at the “Happily Ever After,” and people do not like to be surprised.209

Perhaps because fairy tales are linked to childhood memories, many critics looked for ways *Into the Woods* might have given insight into the parenting that Sondheim and Lapine received. One of the main criticisms of *Into the Woods* was that it is full of unpredictable and often angry women. The men throughout the show are portrayed as

209 Secrest, 355.
being weaker, and the women are portrayed as being brash and often impulsive. These traits are evident in the relationships between the Baker and his Wife, Cinderella and her Prince, and even Jack and his mother. Also, most of the characters that come to gruesome and untimely deaths happen to be women, so the collaborators were criticized a great deal for unfair treatment of women as characters.\(^{210}\)

This criticism, however, is perhaps short-sighted and narrow-minded. It seems more likely that Sondheim and Lapine were simply reacting against a typical fairy tale plot and outcome. In most fairy tales, the women are constantly in search of their prince, or in need of their husband. When fairy tales were originally conceived, women were exclusively viewed as the weaker sex, so their characters were generally beautiful, meek, and in search of a man to complete them. If they did not fit these criteria, they are generally portrayed as evil characters—the stepmother and stepsisters in Cinderella are prime examples of this. Sondheim and Lapine sought to defy these conventions and therefore it is not surprising that they have created strong female characters, who are not just self-sufficient, but who also have the same thoughts and desires of the typical male characters. For example, Cinderella evades her prince while he sings the comedic song “Agony,” about how much it hurts him to not be with her, which is a wonderfully comic reversal of gender roles that gives Cinderella the strength in the relationship.

Although Into the Woods received some mixed reviews, overall it did quite well and received many honors. The show ran for 764 performances after 43 preview shows, making it the second longest running Sondheim show for which he wrote both music and

\(^{210}\) Secrest, 356.
lyrics, second only to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. *Into the Woods* was named Best Musical of 1988 by the Drama Desk and the New York Drama Critics Circle. Additionally, it was nominated for ten Tony Awards. Unfortunately, Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Phantom of the Opera* won the majority of the Tony Awards that year. Sondheim did win Best Score, Lapine won Best Book, and Joanne Gleason as the Baker’s Wife won Best Actress. In 1989, *Into the Woods* won a Grammy Award for Best Original Cast Recording.\(^{211}\)

**Fairy Tale Inspirations**

Fairy tales were an interesting choice for Lapine and Sondheim to make with regard to content for a new and innovative musical in the 1980’s. Fairy tales have been used in other genres before, such as opera, ballet, television, and movies, but they had never been successful on the musical theatre stage.\(^{212}\) However, Sondheim and Lapine set common fairy tales in a unique and fresh way. Whereas, in most fairy tales, triumph over tribulations is where the emphasis lies, in this version, the stress is placed on the ethical content of the fairy tales. Morality is placed above the desire for a happy ending, and the sense of duty to one’s ethics shines in the forefront.\(^{213}\)

As previously mentioned, *Into the Woods* makes use of four already well-known fairy tale stories, and intertwines them through the use of the characters of the Baker and

\(^{211}\) Secrest, 358.
\(^{212}\) Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 382.
\(^{213}\) Ibid, 384.
his Wife, invented by James Lapine. Through research and discussion with experts in the matter, Lapine and Sondheim discovered that all of the selected fairy tales are universal stories that have their own version in each culture, except for Jack and the Beanstalk, which originated in the British Isles. The collaborators read several different versions of many fairy tales, and ultimately decided these would be the most conducive for writing a plot where they might encounter each other, but remain true to their own stories.

The story of Cinderella has thousands of different versions throughout the world, and though the name of the story might be slightly different in each culture, the basic events of the story remain the same. It begins with a girl, Cinderella, whose loving father marries an evil woman and then passes away. Cinderella is left to live with her wicked stepmother and two evil stepsisters, and they force her to basically live as a servant, even though all of the wealth and prosperity they have are due to Cinderella’s father. The prince, Prince Charming, decides to have a ball where he will select a wife from the women of the town, and Cinderella is desperate to go, but her wicked stepmother will not allow it. A fairy godmother comes to Cinderella and makes it possible for her to go, and provides her with a magical gown and golden slippers, but the magic will wear off at midnight. Ultimately, as Cinderella dances with the prince, they fall in love. However, at midnight, before the magic can wear off, she runs away from her prince, and loses a slipper, which he uses to search the kingdom to find her. Once he finds her, the shoe fits; they get married, and live happily ever after.

214 Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 58.
Little Red Riding Hood is a story about a young girl who sets off to go through the woods to take food to her sick grandmother. On her journey, she wears a red cloak, which is where the name of the story originates. Along the way, she meets the big bad wolf, who tries to entice the little girl because he wants to eat her. She naively tells the wolf that she is off to see her grandmother, and the wolf presents her with a distraction and goes on his own way to beat the little girl to her grandmother’s house. Upon arrival, Little Red notices some strange traits about her grandmother, and then discovers that the wolf has eaten her grandmother and is pretending to be her. By the time Little Red realizes what is happening, the wolf eats her as well. While the wolf is sleeping, a woodsman comes along and saves Little Red and her grandmother by cutting open his stomach, so they are able to climb out unharmed. The three fill the wolf’s belly with stones, so when he wakes up, he tries to catch them, but falls to the ground and dies. The three, rather expectedly, live happily ever after.

The story of Jack and the Beanstalk, as mentioned before, is a folktale originating in the British Isles. Jack is a young boy living with his widowed mother whose only income is the milk from their pet cow. When the cow stops giving milk, the mother sends Jack to the market to sell the cow. On his way to the market, Jack meets an old man who convinces him to trade the cow for magic beans. When he returns home with just a few beans instead of money, his mother furiously throws the beans out the window and sends Jack to bed without supper. In the morning, Jack awakes to find that the beans have caused a giant beanstalk to grow all the way up to the sky. Jack decides to climb the beanstalk, and at the top he finds a giant and his wife living in a castle. He steals a bag of
gold coins from the giant, and takes them back to his mother. He returns to the top of the beanstalk two more times, finding a hen that lays golden eggs and a harp that plays itself. On the third trip to the top, he is caught by the giant, who chases him back down the beanstalk. Jack chops the beanstalk down, killing the giant. He and his mother live happily ever after.

The final fairy tale that Lapine and Sondheim utilize in Into the Woods is the story of Rapunzel. This story begins with a man and his pregnant wife, who live next door to a witch. The wife is having pregnancy cravings for the vegetable rampion (a vegetable native to some European and Asian countries), and the man goes out and steals it from the witch’s garden. The witch, furious about the theft, tells the man she will spare him and his wife on the condition that their first born child is given to her. The man reluctantly agrees, and their daughter is given to the witch upon her birth. As Rapunzel grows older, she grows extremely beautiful, so the witch locks her away in a tower high in the air, so no man will find her and take her away. Rapunzel’s hair grows extremely long, and she has to let it down in order for the witch to climb it and get into the tower. One day, Rapunzel sings and attracts a prince to find her. He climbs her hair, and the two fall in love. Upon discovering her shift in affections, the witch cuts off Rapunzel’s hair, and casts her out into exile. She then tricks the prince into the tower. When the witch tells the prince he’ll never see Rapunzel again, he falls out of the tower and is blinded by the thorns at the bottom. He is left to wander the desert in blindness, but fortunately, is led to Rapunzel by her singing again, and her tears heal his blindness. The two go back to his kingdom and, of course, live happily ever after.
The original fairy tale, which James Lapine created, is based loosely around the story of Rapunzel. The man and his pregnant wife at the beginning of the story of Rapunzel are supposed to be the Baker’s parents. Not only does this antecedent make Rapunzel the Baker’s sister, but it also had an adverse effect on the Baker and his Wife. The story is that the man, who promised not to steal again, stole magic beans from the Witch’s garden when his wife grew pregnant with a son. This time, the witch cursed their family, saying that their child would be barren. Thus, the Baker and his Wife are sadly left barren for the mistakes of the Baker’s father. The Baker and his Wife learn from the Witch that she can lift the curse if they acquire four objects for her before three nights have passed.

The four objects previously discussed, which the Baker and his wife need to collect, are a cow as white as milk, a cape as red as blood, hair as yellow as corn, and a slipper as pure as gold. Obviously, these items are Jack’s cow, Little Red’s cape, Rapunzel’s hair, and Cinderella’s slipper. Lapine uses these objects to intertwine the stories of the different characters, while still remaining true to folklore. The Baker and his Wife go into the woods to find these items for the witch. First, the Baker and his Wife run into Jack, and they become the ones in the story who convince him to sell the family cow for magic beans. The Baker had just found the beans in his father’s jacket at the house, and the two did not know if they were magic at all. The Baker urged his Wife not to make the trade, as he felt it was an injustice to the young boy who loved his cow and needed the money, but the Wife would not allow this small dishonesty to get in the way of her becoming pregnant with a child.
The Wife is sent to take the cow back to their home, but along the way she crosses paths with Cinderella, who has the slipper they need for the Witch. In trying to convince Cinderella to give her the shoe, she loses the cow and Cinderella runs away. The Baker ends up finding Little Red in the Woods and with a little convincing from the Witch, he steals her cloak from her. The Baker’s Wife finds Rapunzel in her tower and yanks the hair off of her head. After several more events, the Baker and his Wife acquire all four items, and ethics and morals were compromised in order to get them.

For Sondheim and Lapine, the idea of ending the show at the point where all characters achieve their own respective “Happily Ever After” was too simple and misleading. Havoc is unleashed in act two because the female giant from atop Jack’s beanstalk gets loose in the village. As all the characters travel back into the woods and face the consequences of their actions from act one, they learn that one must be careful what one wishes for. Even this very dark turn of events is considered gentle for a Sondheim musical. However, Sondheim’s individuality and penchant for display of the complexity of characters is certainly not lost in this gentility.

Both Sondheim and Lapine have an interest in psychology, so there are many introspective moments in _Into the Woods_. Most of the characters have a soliloquy song, in which they face the dilemmas of deciding what is “right” or “good.” They all learn their lessons by making moral mistakes and by helping each other recover from the consequences of these mistakes. Once the giant comes down from the beanstalk, the

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215 Secrest, 354.
216 Gordon, _Art isn’t Easy_, 315.
217 Gottfried, 167.
characters become very dependent on one another. Self-interest and narcissism are punished, and are a liability to the characters. The success of family and community working together becomes a major theme throughout the second half of the story. Sondheim and Lapine are more concerned with the characters’ moral growth than with the psychological self-fulfillment or happiness each may find.218

The collaborators consulted many different psychological sources to decide on an approach to the creation of Into the Woods. Many scholars correlate the musical with Bruno Bettelheim’s book The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales, but Sondheim points out a major difference between their story and Bettelheim’s theories. Bettelheim postulates that children would enjoy fairy tales and grow from them because the protagonists trials always resulted in a “happily ever after.” The happy ending encourages the child that their own tribulations might result in triumph. In contrast to Bettelheim, Lapine and Sondheim were more interested in the little dishonesties the characters committed in order to get to the happy ending, and the catastrophic effects that this deceit might have in reality.219

Essentially, Bettelheim’s theory was an expansion of Carl Jung’s theory that fairy tales are a representation of the collective unconscious, and assist in the psychological development of children.220 Bettelheim proposes that believing in, or at least listening to, fairy tales gives children an opportunity to separate themselves from reality temporarily and find ways to deal with life situations that might otherwise cause anxiety and

218 Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 387-389.
219 Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 58.
220 Mankin, 49.
Lapine and Sondheim discussed fairy tales at length with a Jungian psychiatrist. Lapine felt drawn to Carl Jung’s original theories about the fairy tales being a sign of the collective unconscious, and he ultimately approached *Into the Woods* from an “Anti-Bettelheim” perspective, because of the danger that fairy tales may give children false hopes. Sondheim and Lapine did decide to stress the moral interdependence of the characters on one another, displaying that there are always consequences for one’s actions, which may also affect the lives of other people.

The Development of the Character of the Baker’s Wife

Lapine created the Baker and his Wife to be a contemporary American couple existing in a medieval world. The couple is in a medieval forest with medieval characters, but the problems they experience resemble the problems that a contemporary American couple in an urban society would have. Nothing about their marriage exists in the fantasy world; anyone who has been in a relationship can relate to it. The Baker and his Wife are recognizable to the audience. Therefore, they have been termed as “audience surrogates,” because the audience becomes actively involved in the story through this couple.

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222 Gottfried, 168.
224 Gottfried, 167.
Throughout the course of the musical, the Baker and his Wife are essentially meddling in the other fairy tales.\textsuperscript{225} The fairy tale characters and their stories are well-known throughout the world, so there are glimmers of familiarity as the Baker and his Wife get involved in these beloved stories. For instance, when the Witch tells the Baker and his Wife why they are barren, it is an inside joke for the audience because they realize that the Witch is referencing the story of Rapunzel.

One facet of the character of the Baker’s Wife that appealed to Sondheim in the midst of the rehearsal process came from actress Joanne Gleason, who premiered the role of the Baker’s Wife. One evening, during a conversation with Sondheim, Gleason made the comment that she felt like she was in the wrong story. That comment caused Sondheim to view the Baker and his Wife in an entirely different manner. In fact, that lyric was included in the script because Sondheim was so fascinated by the idea.\textsuperscript{226} The character of the Baker’s Wife can be viewed as a woman who exists in a world that she doesn’t belong in, which adds depth to the song “Moments in the Woods.” In that song, she is making a decision about whether she wants to continue to be drawn in by the allure of the fairy tale world, or if she wishes to return to her normal life with her family.

The Baker’s Wife is an extremely dynamic character, who experiences emotional turmoil throughout the story line. There are several facets of her character that are worth mentioning. The first important character trait is her desire for her husband to view her as an equal in the relationship. This desire is prevalent in both the good aspects of their relationship as well as in the burdens they encounter. In the beginning of the story, the

\textsuperscript{225} Banfield, Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals, 381.
\textsuperscript{226} Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 92.
Baker’s Wife is feuding with her husband about whether or not she will go into the woods with him. The Baker keeps telling his wife, “the spell is on my house,” and she keeps responding to him “no, the spell is on our house.” The couple continues to argue for most of the first act. The Baker’s Wife wants be part of the journey, but her husband does not feel comfortable with it, and he wishes to be able to provide the solution for his family.

Another important aspect to note is the Baker’s Wife’s determination to get everything she wants. In the first act, she wants a child so badly that she convinces the Baker to act immorally. She convinces him to talk Jack into selling his cow for what she thinks may be ordinary beans, which is obviously not in Jack’s best interest, but is a selfish act. The Baker’s Wife also tries to steal Cinderella’s slipper and pulls Rapunzel’s hair out of her head from the base of the tower in order to get a lock of her hair for the Witch’s potion. All of these events show the Baker’s Wife’s desperation to get a child. The Baker’s Wife has multiple lines that directly exhibit her ambition to achieve her goals. First, she sings, “Into the woods to get our wish, I don’t care how, the time is now.” The “I don’t care how” of this line strongly displays that she will do whatever it takes to get her wish. Also, she says to her husband, “If the thing you do is pure in intent, if it’s meant, and it’s just a little bent, does it matter?” This moment clearly portrays her willingness to be unethical or immoral in order to achieve her goals.

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228 Ibid, 20.
229 Lapine and Sondheim, Into the Woods, 30.
In act two, even though she has the child she desperately wanted, the Baker’s Wife continues to want more. She and the Baker want a bigger house because there isn’t room for their growing family. However, the giant steps on their house, and they are forced to go back into the woods to run from the giant. While in the woods, the Baker’s Wife has a romantic encounter with Cinderella’s prince, which is where the song “Moments in the Woods” takes place. The Baker’s Wife faces a decision of whether she wants a life of impulsiveness and romance, or if she will return to her child and her husband.

Sondheim and Lapine’s perspective on the Baker’s Wife’s question of “does it matter?” is that it does indeed matter when one bends his or her moral code in order to get what he or she wants. Moral integrity is a key factor in the story, and the Baker’s Wife exhibits some of the most sneaky and underhanded tactics of any of the characters. Yet she is still a likeable character, because people can relate to her yearning, and most of what she does in order to get a child, though dishonest, does not seem that outrageous to a contemporary audience. However, the entire village pays for her dishonesties, because without her involvement, Jack would never have had the beans, and the giant would never have come down from the sky. It is brutally ironic that at the pinnacle of her moral growth, when the Baker’s Wife decides to cease her deceitfulness, she is killed by a tree that the giant knocks over.
Musical Characterization of The Baker’s Wife in “Moments in the Woods”

Throughout the story of Into the Woods, the Baker’s Wife is in pursuit of her wishes and the desires of her own heart, with little regard for how it may affect those around her. Prior to “Moments in the Woods,” the Baker’s Wife ventures off in the woods and runs into Cinderella’s Prince. She had brief encounters with the prince in the first act where she gazes after him, obviously attracted to him, but is too wrapped up in her mission to get a child to even notice her attraction. In the second act, this attraction comes to fruition. Cinderella’s Prince begins to flirt with the Baker’s Wife and suddenly asks if he may kiss her. The prince does so, but she stops mid-kiss and says “This is ridiculous, what am I doing here? I’m in the wrong story,” and then resumes the kiss.

Though the Baker’s Wife temporarily resists, she eventually gives in to the allure of the prince. Afterward, the prince quickly leaves the Baker’s Wife, and she gets confused and asks if they will ever see each other again. The prince responds that it was nothing more than just a moment. He leaves, and she stands there stunned and then sings the song, “Moments in the Woods.” This song is where the Wife faces one of her most interesting and complex dilemmas yet. She has fought so diligently to get the family that she now has, only to find herself wanting more. With the prince, the Baker’s Wife found passion and adventure, but with the Baker she has security and stability. Sondheim believes this duality to be interesting because the fairy tale moment became a very contemporary problem, almost as though it had been taken out of a soap opera. This

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moment is also where the Baker’s Wife is truly caught in-between the world of fairy tale characters and reality.\textsuperscript{231} Interestingly, in the end she chooses reality, just before she dies.

The music of \textit{Into the Woods} is very connected to each of the characters, as well as the concepts and themes associated with the action. The idea and concepts involved in Sondheim’s composition hearken back to Wagnerian compositional styles, making use of a series of leitmotifs. The characters each have their own theme, and many events or objects do as well, including lies, wishing, the magic beans, the woods, and birds.

Sondheim selected the interval of a major second to begin almost all of the themes because of the inflection of the phrase “I wish.” According to Sondheim, “Of course the baker is the key character, but really \textit{wishing} is the key character.”\textsuperscript{232} Therefore, the phrase “I wish” was crucial to the creation of this project.

Since Cinderella is the first character with the theme, the major second was chosen based on what her character would be likely to sing, and Sondheim says, “I picked a second because she’s a repressed girl. She’s too repressed to sing a third, or a fourth, or a fifth…Cinderella would never raise her voice.”\textsuperscript{233} This interval of a second gets transformed and develops into several different themes, including a theme for the Baker’s wife that we see throughout her second act solo, “Moments in the Woods.” Example 6 shows the Baker’s Wife leitmotif, which is a descending major third followed by an ascending major second. The ascending major second is metrically accented in a

\textsuperscript{231} Sondheim, \textit{Look, I Made a Hat}, 92.
\textsuperscript{232} Horowitz, 84.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid, 83.
order to bring attention to it, which accentuates the wish theme. This theme occurs throughout the entire musical, but is especially integrated into this song. When the Baker’s Wife starts singing, she is singing repeated patterns of major seconds, again, the “wish” interval.

Example 6: “Moments in the Woods” m. 76-78.\(^{234}\)

Another notable musical event from the opening section occurs in measure 16, as shown in Example 7; the flowing arpeggiated motion of the accompaniment comes to a halt as a seemingly random chord is struck. Looking strictly at the intervallic relationship of the notes, the chord is an E-flat major triad in second inversion, with an added fourth. This chord, however, has a striking resemblance to the leitmotif for a Spell heard throughout the first act, which is essentially an a-minor triad in second inversion with an added fourth. Both chords double the fifth, and are inverted in such a way that it gives the listener the feeling of stacked triads, a timbre Sondheim often uses. This chord may

represent the “spell” the prince has over the Baker’s Wife during their moments together in the woods. It is also interesting to acknowledge that the final notes of these phrases are quarter notes, which are an indication of the speech-like pattern with which the performer should sing these phrases. It is also an indication of the mindset of the Baker’s Wife, with the short duration of notes emulating the rapid progression of her thoughts. Author Stephen Banfield said, “Sondheim knows when a note should fail to resolve, or when a monosyllable should lapse into silence.”

Example 7: “Moments in the Woods,” m. 14-17.

Metrically, the song begins in three-four time, one of Sondheim’s “patented French waltzes.” As mentioned before, the accompaniment figuration at the beginning is a flowing arpeggiation. However, as the wife comes out of this “spell,” the meter shifts, and she sings in four-four time, with a much more staccato accompaniment figuration; in this text she acknowledges the spell the woods have over her. The rest of the song stays in four-four time, but the lyrical accompaniment figuration is present

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237 Gottfried, 179.
throughout when the wife is thinking more dreamingly about the moment she had with
the prince, and the staccato accompaniments recur as she is facing reality. Sondheim
shows his great skill through metrical and rhythmic settings by illustrating her
assertiveness as well as her indecisiveness through the assertion of the music. 238

Another skill Sondheim is able to showcase in this song is his facility with verbal
tongue twisters. In this instance, the Baker’s Wife sings several lines with puns or plays
on words in them, and also sings many lines that have difficult series of consonants
involved. For instance, the line “First a witch, then a child, then a prince, then a moment,
no one lives in the woods,” does not roll off the tongue as easily as many other Sondheim
tongue twisters (such as “Getting Married Today” from Company) do. These tongue
twisters, or verbal dilemmas, are used intentionally in order to mirror the Baker’s Wife’s
confusion in this piece as she battles with her own morals. 239 Author Joanne Gordon said,
“The emotional turmoil of the characters, particularly the Baker and his Wife, is perfectly
conveyed in the melodic and harmonic development of the score.” 240 The song
“Moments in the Woods” is certainly no exception.

Performance Considerations

The Baker’s Wife is a contemporary and modern woman who finds herself
trapped in the dilemmas of a fairy-tale world. Sondheim gives several cues to display her

238 Ibid, 180.
239 Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 92.
character in both the music and lyrics of *Into the Woods*. The score of the musical makes use of Wagnerian-inspired leitmotifs, and some of these are present within the song “Moments in the Woods.” One instance of leitmotif a performer should be mindful of is the chord played in measure 16-17 that hearkens back to the Spell leitmotif from earlier in the musical. In this instance, it may be pertinent to display that the Baker’s Wife was under the spell of the charming prince. An actress may wish to emphasize this dramatic musical moment through facial expression or body language. The effectiveness of that moment can be enhanced through something as subtle as a smile, or a change of focus with the performer’s eyes.

The most prevalent leitmotif in “Moments in the Woods” is the motive representing the Baker’s Wife. This motive is a descending third followed by a metrically accented ascending second. As the previous research discusses, the ascending second is a significant interval in *Into the Woods*, because it is included to emulate the inflection of the spoken phrase “I wish.” Therefore the performer should be aware, when singing this leitmotif, that the important interval is the ascending major second, and she should accentuate the lyrics and notes accordingly. The song is written to aid in this pursuit, as most of the operative words in the piece are on the ascending second. For instance, in the phrase “back to life, back to sense, back to child, back to husband,” the words life, sense, child, and husband fall on the strong beat and the melodically ascending major second in the leitmotif.

In this song, the Baker’s Wife is struggling with the decision of whether to return to her family or to pursue adventure and romance in the woods. It is pertinent to note that
the Baker’s Wife leitmotif is mainly present in “Moments in the Woods” while she is singing about her husband and child and allowing logical discernment to guide her decision. During the portions of the song in which she sings about her moments with the prince, the melody strays from her leitmotif and becomes more lyrical. The Baker’s Wife leitmotif represents her character, and because the difference in lyrics coincides with the difference in melody it can be ascertained that the more lyrical melody signifies her doing something out of character. Each time she returns to her leitmotif, she returns to lyrics that emulate a devoted wife and mother. The performer should be aware of these melodic changes and should further accentuate them vocally through a more deliberate and marcato approach on the leitmotif and a more legato and flowing approach on the contrasting melodies.

The lyrics of “Moments in the Woods” provide many opportunities for the singer to create dramatic tension and energy. The song is a soliloquy where the Baker’s Wife is in conflict with her own thoughts. The lyrics clearly portray her internal battle between what she knows is right and what she wants in the moment. When performing this song, it is important to study the lyrics and understand where the shifts in the momentum of her decision occur. For instance, towards the beginning of the song, she sings “was it wrong? Am I mad? Is that all? Does he miss me? Was he suddenly getting bored with me? Wake up! Stop dreaming!” In this passage, the actress must be prepared to make a decisive shift between her wistful longing for the prince and her deliberate reminder of morality. There are many instances throughout the song where the gravity of her decision changes directions in mid-thought and the singer needs to be able to display this with precision via
contrast of vocal timbres and body language. While watching a performance of “Moments in the Woods,” the audience should be able to grasp the conflicted emotions of the Baker’s Wife and should also be able to clearly understand when her desire shifts within the song. For a performance example of “Moments in the Woods,” please refer to Appendix B, track six.

Summary

Into the Woods was the second successful collaboration between James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim. The work was originally conceived through Lapine’s fascination with classic fairy tales, and Sondheim’s penchant for exploring new territory. This musical expands the horizon of musical theatre through the musical composition and operatic influence of Wagnerian leitmotif, as well as through the writing, which challenges the traditional “happily ever after” structure of most familiar fairy tales. The story of Into the Woods concerns what happens when familiar fairy tale characters collide in the woods, and these well-known fairy tales are woven together through the original story of the Baker and his Wife, created by Lapine.

Into the Woods is a piece that displays some of Sondheim’s most intellectual and beautiful craftsmanship. The show itself cleverly weaves together story lines, not only through plot integration of the various fairy tales, but also through musical connections. The character of the Baker’s Wife is accurately portrayed through the piece “Moments in the Woods,” and the audience is able to be a part of her dilemma and self-discovery.
Sondheim utilizes metrical and melodic ingenuity to portray the choice the Baker’s Wife has to make between the romance and adventure of the woods and the stability and safety of her life with the Baker and their child. Author Martin Gottfried said of this piece, “Stephen Sondheim is the only figure in Broadway musical history who would write a charm song about moral compromise.”²⁴¹ This song is a display of obviously immoral choices being made by the Baker’s Wife, and yet it is charming and humorous. That concept sums up the characterization of the Baker’s Wife, as well as one of the main themes of *Into the Woods*: nice is different than good.

With regard to performance practice, it is crucial for the singer to be able to clearly articulate with her voice and body language the distinction between the two different options the Baker’s Wife is struggling with in the song “Moments in the Woods.” Sondheim provides several cues to aid in the portrayal of these differences, including change of lyrics, metrical shifts, and changes of melody. The singer should emphasize these different melodies and be particularly cognizant with treatment of the Baker’s Wife leitmotif, which appears throughout the song. Furthermore, the singer should be especially mindful of the changes in lyrics, and execute these changes in a way that allows the verbal dilemma to communicate the Baker’s Wife’s moral dilemma.

²⁴¹ Gottfried,179.
Assassins: Inception, Creation, and Reception

After Sondheim experienced success with Into the Woods, he wanted to explore his artistic freedom and was seeking to continually push boundaries and find fresh new ideas and approaches to composition of the American musical. In order to continue this goal, he set out to write a musical based on assassinations, which seemed like an outrageous topic for a musical, but Sondheim is often attracted to the bizarre and the seemingly impossible topics for musicals. He already put Sweeney Todd, a musical thriller about murder and cannibalism, on the stage, so it is not shocking that he found inspiration through the idea of writing a musical about assassinations.

Sondheim was initially inspired to write Assassins in 1979, while judging young playwrights’ entries for a Musical Theatre Lab. He came across a play written by Charles Gilbert, titled Assassins, and although he was not thrilled about the play itself, he was excited about the title. Years later, Sondheim presented the idea of Assassins to Weidman as a possible collaboration.

Originally, the concept of the piece was to write a musical based around assassins throughout history, dating all the way back to Julius Caesar. However, the idea proved to
be so broad in its scope that the team had to narrow the field to include only those who attempted or succeeded in assassinating a president of the United States, and even with that definition, some figures were left out. Sondheim and Weidman decided to leave out Richard Lawrence, who was the first to attempt to assassinate a president, when he tried to kill Andrew Jackson. His motivation closely resembled that of Charles Guiteau, the man who killed James Garfield, who is included in the cast of characters of Assassins, so Lawrence was easily removed from the story. Sondheim and Weidman also decided not to include Oscar Collazo and Griselio Torresola, who attempted to kill Harry Truman, because they were not as psychologically or dramatically complex and interesting as the other characters. Additionally, the character of John Schrank, attempted assassin of Theodore Roosevelt, was dropped during the rehearsal process, because the scene was too light and funny, and was not in keeping with the tone of the rest of the musical.

Not only do assassins make for interesting characters simply based on their warped views and altered psychological states, but from a literary perspective, an assassin is an ideal choice for a character. Each assassin comes with built-in motivations and a built-in arc to their story line. All of the assassins were motivated to take dire actions by different scenarios, and their assassination attempts, whether successful or not, are a built-in climax for their story lines. It makes each character what Sondheim refers to as “perfect theatrical fodder.”

The underlying theme that connects all the scenes together is the psychological make-up of the characters, specifically their shared misunderstanding of American ideals.

While all Americans are guaranteed the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of

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242 Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 112.
243 Ibid, 112.
happiness,” the assassins portrayed in this musical believe this guarantees them the right to happiness, not merely the pursuit of it. The lack of happiness in their lives, for whatever reason, has led them to anger, resentment, or sheer insanity. Many of the assassinations, or attempts thereof, were not meant as political attacks, but as a means to gain attention. Although there were some who criticized the show as being a thinly-veiled political platform, the idea of the musical is not to present a political statement or the ideals of any particular political ideal. In fact, though Weidman is a staunch liberal, it is difficult to perceive any sort of political preferences through the text or actions of the characters.

The opening of the show is the only image retained from the original Charles Gilbert play. It is a shooting gallery, where the assassins are told if they shoot the president, they’ll win a prize. This nightmarish display gives way to the true intention of the musical. It is not meant as an attack on any particular president, political party, or ideal, but is meant to show that these assassins’ warped perceptions of society and life have led them to believe that shooting the president is their opportunity to gain something to which they feel entitled. The commonality between the assassins is the belief in an “individualized manifest destiny,” where each citizen is entitled to unlimited opportunity and the guarantee of happiness. The intention behind the show was never to bring politics into the spotlight, but rather to put the centralized focus on the characters. The main concept behind the musical is not what took place, but rather why it did.

245 Secrest, 363.
Sondheim and Weidman initially considered using a linear plot, but since the stories were not happening in the same time period, execution of this idea would be virtually impossible. The problem that exists with using a revue format is that each song needs to be better than the song that precedes it in order to keep the audience interested. Weidman and Sondheim ultimately decided a combination of the two styles would be the ideal solution, and they used a revue loosely connected with a narrative. The story would be connected through the use of a similar mentality and idea, rather than through use of chronological sequencing. For example, there are scenes (such as “Unworthy of Your Love”) that would include characters that never met or even existed in the same time period. The show is structured as a dream-like vaudeville, which skips throughout different time periods, and incorporates several theatrical styles, ranging from burlesque comedy to melodrama.

Ultimately, Assassins is a pure concept musical, which is a musical built on a central concept instead of a linear plot. However, unlike Company, another example of a pure concept musical, Assassins lacks a protagonist in the story. Company follows the thoughts and actions of a man facing the daily challenges of loneliness and relationship struggles, which are familiar obstacles for many people. In contrast, Assassins deals with psychologically unbalanced characters who commit heartless crimes. There is no hero, and there is no one character with whom the audience can sympathize. It can even be surmised that with the assassins being presented as the main characters of the story, America is being presented as the antagonist.

246 Secrest, 362.
247 Sondheim, Look, I Made a Hat, 113.
Once Sondheim and Weidman selected a vaudevillian theme for the form of the show, it opened the door for Sondheim to do another pastiche musical (which he had done previously with *A Little Night Music*), and he based the music of each scene on the time period of each character. Sondheim utilized well-defined musical styles from different historical periods in order to further characterize these assassins historically. This musical characterization also aided in the success of incorporating different time periods throughout the musical. Authentic historical circumstances were used in the story, so it was only fitting for authentic musical compositional styles to be used as well.  

The song “Ballad of Booth” evokes nineteenth-century American compositional aesthetics through use of the banjo and harmonica. The mid-nineteenth-century composer Stephen Foster and his American camp songs influence this particular song, which showcases John Wilkes Booth. Additionally, a song resembling a John Philip Sousa march represents Giuseppe Zangara, who attempted to assassinate Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the early twentieth century. Another example is Charles Guiteau, a preacher from the mid-nineteenth century who assassinated James Garfield, whose character has a hymn-like song based on Guiteau’s own death-house poem. Part of what makes Sondheim’s music and lyrics so well-suited for this particular subject matter is the traditional and familiar American feel they have. American people are familiar with the ideas and music, but in *Assassins*, they are twisted in a way that evokes discomfort.  

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249 Knapp, 85.  
250 Knapp, 87-89.  
The score even includes excerpts from the well-known patriotic tunes “Hail to the Chief” and “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

*Assassins* did quite well during previews, and many hailed it as Sondheim’s most ingenious musical. However, when the show opened in the Playwrights Horizons Off-Broadway theatre in 1991, it did not fare as well. Critics did not review the show as a raving success, and audiences were divided. Unfortunately, the show never made it to Broadway. One contributing factor in the lack of momentum to the success of *Assassins* was that the opening coincided with the Persian Gulf crisis and Operation Desert Storm. This major political event was leaving the American public feeling extremely patriotic and a musical portraying the dark underbelly of the American dream was unlikely to succeed during this political climate. Some critics of the show felt Sondheim and Weidman avoided making a political statement, so the show was lacking in a clear viewpoint. Also, because the characters are presented in such a way that the audience is able to empathize with them, some critics believed the musical actually advocated assassination. Audiences often thought their applause might be taken as approval of the characters and the action. It put the audience in a strange and uncomfortable position where they were caught between being captivated by the theatricality of the characters and the dark material.²⁵²

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²⁵² Knapp, 87.
Political Inspirations and Influences

Prominent successful assassins included in *Assassins* are Charles Guiteau, assassin of President James Garfield and Leon Czolgosz, assassin of President William McKinley. The story also includes some who had unsuccessful attempts, including Giuseppe Zangara, who attempted to assassinate Franklin D. Roosevelt; Samuel Byck, who attempted to assassinate President Richard Nixon; John Hinckley, who attempted to assassinate Ronald Reagan; and Sara Jane Moore and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, who both attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford. John Wilkes Booth, the first American assassin, who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, is presented as the central figure. The show opens with Booth, and though it ends with Lee Harvey Oswald, Booth returns to the scene to influence Oswald’s decision to assassinate John F. Kennedy. This interesting use of the non-linear structure ironically highlights thematic and chronological links between Oswald and Booth, even though the two never actually met. However, in the suspension of reality provided by the world of *Assassins*, the dramatic effect is magnified through direct interaction of Booth and Oswald in the same cognitive space.\(^{253}\)

As previously mentioned, the basic foundation of the musical is not the assassinations themselves, but rather the characters’ motivation. The main characters are all people who were somehow driven to try to kill the president of the United States. Author James Clarke divides American assassins into four different types: those who are primarily motivated by political issues, those who have personal problems that seem

\(^{253}\) Miller, “*Assassins* and the Concept Musical,” 192.
unresolvable, those who have an obsessive need for revenge, and those who are delusional, have no awareness of actions, and are often completely mentally deranged.  

Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, an attempted assassin of Gerald Ford, exemplifies the third type of assassin. She was born in Santa Monica, California in 1948 and led a troubled childhood. As a teenager, she experimented with drugs and alcohol, and had a terrible relationship with her parents, particularly her father. Fromme was able to reconcile with her family by agreeing to attend a junior college after high school, but eventually, her father kicked her out of the house. The day she left home, she was approached by the American criminal Charles Manson, who invited her to come live with him. Thus, Fromme became a part of a commune known as the “Manson Family.”

The Manson Family was a group who formed a cult around the leadership of Charles Manson. Manson believed an apocalyptic war was imminent, and that he had prophetic insight into the details and outcome of the war. He brainwashed several people (called the Family) into believing his claims and following him. In the 1960’s, race discrimination was still prominent despite the gains of the civil rights movement. Manson suggested that a race war was going to begin with black people beginning to murder white people and writing on the walls in blood. He believed black people were going to win the war, but that they would not know how to rule, and anarchy would result. Manson also believed there was a hole underneath a desert somewhere, that he and the Family would reside in until the war was over, so that when anarchy began, he could come out of hiding and bring the world back into order. Manson convinced the

255 Clarke, 146.
Family that black people were not intelligent enough to know how to start the war on their own, and in order to bring Manson into power, they would have to begin the war on behalf of the black people. The result was the infamous Tate-LaBianca murders, where women from the Manson Family were ordered to go murder several innocent people. The women directly involved in the murders were all convicted and sentenced to death, but the state of California banned capital punishment, so all the sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. Manson, though he was not directly involved with the murders, was convicted for conspiracy to commit murder, and was sentenced to life in prison.

Though Fromme was a member of the Family, she was not involved in the Tate-LaBianca murders, and she was not convicted with the others. Instead, she remained outside of prison, still advocating on behalf of Charles Manson. She moved into an apartment with another Family member, Sandra Good, and the two of them worked to spread the message of Charles Manson. They began a group called the “International People’s Court of Retribution,” whose purpose was to terrorize and kill people who they considered to be “polluters” of society. Generally, the targets were corporate executives and their wives. Fromme went so far as to mail letters to friends in other states, asking them to kill specific targets. Although Fromme would generally say to kill the targets using whatever means necessary, the letters would sometimes include details of what to do to the bodies after murdering them. However, although the wives became targets as well, the letters were strangely clear that children should never be harmed.\textsuperscript{256}

\textsuperscript{256} Clarke, 150.
Fromme desperately sought attention from the media, in order to earn a re-trial for Manson. Her belief was that Manson had been wrongly convicted, and she felt that if he was given another trial, he might be released. Fromme even threatened Supreme Court Judge Raymond Choate. Choate was the presiding judge at Manson’s trial, and Fromme partially blamed him for the perceived injustice. Fromme sent Choate a threatening letter, but the authorities dismissed her threats. Nobody took her seriously, because she was considered a lunatic. Fromme was allegedly involved in another murder in 1972, but she was never convicted because of a lack of evidence.

In 1975, Fromme shot at President Gerald Ford with a gun that was loaded, but had no bullet in the firing chamber. She claimed the gun was intentionally unloaded, because her objective was never to kill President Ford. According to Fromme, she merely wanted to draw attention to Manson’s case, in hopes of earning the re-trial she had been seeking. With regard for this intensely desperate action Fromme said, “Well you know when people around you treat you like a child and pay no attention to the things you say, you have to do something.”

Manson fulfilled many different roles in Fromme’s life, which is why she followed him so devoutly. First, Fromme formed a very paternal bond with Manson, due in part to the timing of her meeting Manson, and her troubled relationship with her own father. Although she had a sexual relationship with Manson (as did many of the women who were part of the Manson Family), the paternal role he played in her life was more important than the romantic role. The era Fromme grew up in was politically and morally

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257 Clarke, 150.
258 Ibid, 154.
259 Ibid, 145.
confusing, and her broken relationship with her parents made the confusion worse. She psychologically needed a stabilizing force, which she found in Manson. In Fromme’s warped perception, Manson was the loving father she never had and she was convinced that he was making sense of her confusion. \(^{260}\) In the 1973 documentary film *Manson*, Fromme states “Every girl should have a daddy just like Charlie.”\(^{261}\)

Fromme also believed that Manson literally represented Jesus Christ. He had convinced her, through his alleged prophecies about the upcoming apocalyptic war, that he was the second coming of Christ that was predicted in the biblical book of Revelations. Manson persuaded Fromme, along with many others, to believe that their murders were religiously justified because the battle against evil foretold in the Bible had begun. This warped viewpoint was intensified upon Manson’s arrest, as Fromme and the other Family members believed his conviction was an injustice equal to the crucifixion. They would draw parallels between Manson’s release from prison and the crucifixion by making statements such as “take my Christ off of his cross.”\(^{262}\)

Fromme was arrested after the attempted assassination, and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Dublin, California. She was released on parole in 2009, and is believed to currently be living somewhere in the state of New York. She is still a follower of Manson and believes in his version of the truth. According to author James W. Clarke, “She would do virtually anything to spread the gospel according to Manson.”\(^{263}\)

\(^{260}\) Clarke, 148.
\(^{261}\) Ibid.
\(^{262}\) Ibid, 149.
\(^{263}\) Ibid, 156.
The Development of the Character of Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the characters in Assassins each naturally follow a character arc, with a built-in climactic event of an assassination, or attempt thereof. The characters are technically villains, though Sondheim and Weidman portray them in a way that generates conflicted feelings of sympathy and hatred. The story lines are interesting, and the complex facets of each of the characters are evocative, yet with each climactic event the audience is reminded that these characters are the villains of American society.

Author Raymond Knapp presents an intriguing viewpoint in his article “Assassins, Oklahoma!, and the Shifting Fringe of Dark Around the Camp-Fire.” In this article, Knapp postulates that Assassins is a musical whose characters all resemble the character Jud Fry from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s hit musical Oklahoma!. Knapp argues that the relationship between Sondheim and Hammerstein played a part in the creation of Assassins. Sondheim is well-known for choosing somewhat unexpected and at times rather dark subject matter for his musicals. These musicals display a partiality for complexity in characters, where subtext reigns supreme throughout each of their journeys. According to Knapp, Sondheim’s fascination with Oklahoma! likely would be focused on the character of Jud, the farm hand with a dark side, who falls in love with Laurey and dies in a fight with the protagonist Curly.\textsuperscript{264}

Assassins is a musical full of characters that resemble Jud Fry. Facets of Jud’s character that are visible in the majority of the characters in Assassins, including

\textsuperscript{264} Knapp, 77.
Fromme, are a sense of entitlement to their “fair share,” and the desperate search for a place to belong. In a musical like *Oklahoma!*, these characters are presented as the antagonist of the story, and are juxtaposed against the heroic qualities of a character like Curly. In *Assassins*, all of the characters are dark and twisted, there is no real protagonist, and there is not a hero. There is a strange contrast drawn between the traditional mainstream American musical composition styles Sondheim uses and the villain-like characters that sing the music. It allows the audience to be sympathetically drawn into the characters, which makes the content feel slightly uncomfortable.

Knapp states, “Sondheim’s penchant for giving musical life to the J"ud’s of the world…may arguably be understood as an extended homage to his mentor Hammerstein and his one-time collaborator Rodgers.” While Knapp draws an interesting conclusion, it is perhaps hasty to presume that these characters are a direct tribute to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Sondheim’s characters do tend to share a similar complexity to Jud Fry, but the notion that using assassins as characters in a musical was intended to directly reference Jud Fry is implausible.

There are several characteristics of Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme visible in her actions throughout the musical. In *Assassins*, Fromme is already part of the “International People’s Court of Retribution,” the group she was involved in after Manson was imprisoned. When she moved in with other members of the Manson Family, they became part of the hippie movement, and focused on saving the world from its “polluters.” In the musical, she is costumed in psychedelic clothing, and is on stage smoking marijuana. The lyrics are also very carefully selected to portray her ideology.

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265 Clarke, 83.
evidenced in places like the finale “Everybody’s Got the Right,” where her lyrics, in reference to what it means to live in a free country, say “grab ‘em by the collar.” These lyrics were likely selected intentionally to portray Fromme’s obsession with killing corporate executives.

Fromme’s character has gone past the stage of impressionable youth, and is fully brainwashed. Throughout Assassins, she consistently presents the opinions of “Charlie,” her nickname for Charles Manson, rather than her own viewpoint. Many of Fromme’s lines begin with “Charlie says,” and none of her lines share an opinion of her own that is not grounded in something she was told by Charles Manson.266 She also details Manson’s prophecy for the apocalyptic war, and says that he will come out of the war as King, and she will be at his side as his queen. Fromme presents a basic summary of Manson’s apocalyptic prophecy as well as some of his other viewpoints, and she presents them as though they are truth. It is evident through her lines in the show that she has a warped perception of society. An example occurs when Sara Jane Moore is discussing how awful her father is to her, and Fromme instantly suggests they kill him. Fromme begins to give a KFC bucket the “evil eye,” because she is focusing her negative energy towards Moore’s father at the Colonel Sanders pictured on the box. Manson told Fromme you can kill people by giving an image of them the “evil eye,” and she believed him.267

Another character trait established in Assassins is Fromme’s complete obsession with Charles Manson. Not only are all of the ideas she presents grounded in Manson’s

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267 Ibid.
ideology, but all of her actions and lines are driven by complete reliance on him. The song “Unworthy of Your Love,” which will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter, best displays her obsession and her willingness to do whatever it takes to serve Manson and carry out his mission. Fromme’s scene with Sara Jane Moore portrays this obsession through her continual mention of Charlie. Even in a discussion about Kentucky Fried Chicken, Fromme brings up Manson’s opinion of fast food and says she doesn’t like it because he thinks fast food is awful. When Moore asks about who Charlie is, it surprises her to learn that Fromme is actually referencing the well-known murderer Charles Manson. Moore asks Fromme if she knows him personally, to which Fromme replies “I’m his lover and his slave.”

This line, in the context of the show, typically gets a laugh, and it is not until the audience members allow these words to sink in that they realize how disturbing this line actually is.

Fromme’s outrageous actions are also very keenly portrayed in her scenes with Sara Jane Moore. The two scenes they share together display hilarity through words and actions. The two women bicker childishly in their second scene together, because Moore brought her son to the attempted assassination of President Ford. The argument escalates as Moore belittles Fromme for her love for a mass murderer, and Fromme responds with an insult about Moore having been married five times. Fromme says her love for Manson is justified, because at least he is the Son of God. In their first scene together, the two get so excited at the thought of killing Moore’s father, that after they have both given the Kentucky Fried Chicken bucket the “evil eye,” they proceed to shoot it multiple times, while squealing with laughter. This outrageous behavior is violent and disturbing, and

268 Weidman and Sondheim, Assassins, 40.
the audience cannot help but laugh at the absurdity. The two women come across as being so completely insane that they seem more like caricatures than real people. The exact events portrayed in these scenes did not ever happen, as Moore actually attempted to assassinate Ford weeks after Fromme, but both women’s psychological states are presented in a frighteningly accurate way, and the insanity is almost too much to grasp.

The comedy of the characters’ thoughts and actions brings a sense of humanity to the scenes, and certain aspects of history are altered slightly in order to add to this effect. For instance, although Moore did not actually bring her son to the assassination, it is presented that way in the musical to remind the audience that Moore was, in fact, a mother. When Moore was arrested for attempting to kill Ford, she discussed her day like a to-do list, citing dropping her son off at school, killing the president, and picking her son up from school. Often these types of characters would be presented purely as villains, but in the musical Assassins, Sondheim and Weidman are careful to give these touches of humanity to the characters in order to help the audience connect with the characters and feel invested in their story. With the Fromme and Moore scenes, the audience is drawn to them through humor, and it isn’t until the subject matter and the weight of the actions sinks in later that the audience may feel disturbed by what they found themselves laughing at during those scenes.
Musical Characterization of Squeaky Fromme in “Unworthy of Your Love”

The music of *Assassins* is differs from that of a typical Sondheim musical. Even Sondheim himself calls *Assassins* a collection of songs, rather than a true musical score, because it does not have the same kind of underscoring of dialogue and sense of through-composition his earlier musicals like *Into the Woods* and *Sweeney Todd* do. Sondheim does use some recognizable motifs, “Hail to the Chief” being the most recognizable one. However, there are no motifs representing the different characters.

As previously discussed, the music in *Assassins* is a pastiche, where each song is drawn from a different style. In this case, these styles represent the different time periods in which these characters lived. The song “Unworthy of Your Love” is stylized as a 1970’s pop ballad and is reminiscent of the style of Elton John or the Carpenters. The song is a duet between John Hinckley and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, which is an example of the way the show utilizes combining characters from different time periods and having characters interact on stage that would not have interacted in real life. The form of the song is verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge, chorus, which is an atypical structure for Sondheim to follow, but would have been common to the type of pop song he emulates with this piece. “Unworthy of Your Love” also incorporates a typical love ballad format, using interactive exchanges after their separate verses, which lead to a culminating chorus that is sung together in parallel harmonies. The form of this song breaks Sondheim’s typical conventions by using a refrain. In this case, as *Assassins* is a

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269 Horowitz, 57.
270 Knapp, 92.
271 Knapp, 93.
pastiche musical, the verse-chorus structure of this piece is likely used to evoke popular songs of that time period. The song is intended to sound like music an amateur song writer like Hinckley would have heard on the radio; most popular songs from the seventies and early eighties made use of refrains, therefore Sondheim did here as well.

In this scene in the musical, Hinckley uses a guitar to compose a song dedicated to Jodie Foster. In looking at the introduction, there is a small musical joke to indicate Hinckley’s inadequacy as a musician. In Example 8, it is notable that the music shows g-sharp instead of an f-sharp in measure 6. That is an intentionally written “wrong” note, where it is supposed to seem as though Hinckley played a wrong note on his guitar. Sondheim portrays an amateur composer making a mistake while writing the song. Sondheim said if this song was ever recorded as a pop number, he would probably prefer that the f-sharp be played, since the wrong note is written in solely for characterization purposes.272

Example 8: “Unworthy of Your Love” m. 5-8.273

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272 Horowitz, 57.
The characters involved in this number both have a celebrity they are trying to impress. Hinckley was obsessed with teen actress Jodie Foster, and he ultimately made an attempt on Ronald Reagan’s life in order to win her affections. Fromme is obsessed with Charles Manson, and hopes her assassination attempt will make Manson love her more. When Fromme begins to sing, the lights illuminate her, and she sings to Hinckley’s accompaniment, but she does not acknowledge him. It is a moment of suspended reality, in which they exist in the same psychological condition of obsession, but not in the same physical plane.

Knapp postulates that this song may be influenced by the song “People Will Say We’re in Love” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!*. There is falseness to both songs, and although it is a different type of falseness, the sentiment of “Unworthy of Your Love” is certainly reminiscent of its predecessor. Musically, the pair acts like a couple, but the lyrics and actions show that they are oblivious to one another. The unawareness is quite literal in “Unworthy of Your Love,” because the two are unaware of each other’s presence. Whereas in “People Will Say We’re in Love,” the two are simply oblivious to one another’s true intentions. The falseness of “Unworthy of Your Love” is different, in the sense that on the surface, they are merely singing that they would do anything to win love from Jodie and Charlie. What the audience knows is that their plan is to commit murder to earn love, and that gives the somewhat beautiful lyrics a twisted and dark undertone.

Knapp, 93.
The lyrics Fromme sings in “Unworthy of Your Love” are of devotion to Charlie, and even in this song the audience is able to get a glimpse of her reliance on his ideas. Her words are darkly contrasted to John Hinckley’s in places, showing that her strange obsession goes beyond his idolatry of celebrity. For example, in one place Hinckley sings “I would swim oceans, I would move mountains, I would do anything for you, what do you want me to do?” In the same melodic portion in Fromme’s verse, she sings “Let me feel fire, let me drink poison, tell me to tear my heart in two, if that’s what you want me to do.” In this instance, Hinckley’s lyrics seem like a normal young man in love, whereas Fromme insinuates that she would go as far as to kill herself just because Charlie asked her to.

In an earlier draft of the song, Sondheim actually wrote the vocal part for Fromme over an octave higher. Sondheim expressed, “I don’t know why I wrote it so high up. I have learned over a period of time not to take singers over a D or D sharp, even if they’re sopranos. The soprano sound is not my favorite sound anyway, and you get up around an F…boy when you start to hear them up there it gets hard to understand the lyrics, and, for my money, it’s not a pleasant sound.” In the published version of the score, the female part is much lower, in a more mezzo-soprano range, and the performer should realize the intention is to create text intelligibility.

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275 Horowitz, 57.
Performance Considerations

The pastiche structure of *Assassins* creates a score that is richly complex and incorporates a variety of American musical idioms. The song “Unworthy of Your Love,” sung by Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and John Hinckley, is reminiscent of a 1970’s pop ballad, so the form is simple and the melodies and harmonies are more accessible than in typical Sondheim music. The music of *Assassins* does not directly reflect the characters as strongly as it does in other Sondheim musicals. Instead, Sondheim uses familiar American musical styles from various eras, but enhances the intricacy through astute staging concepts and clever lyrics.

There are several elements singers should consider when performing “Unworthy of Your Love.” First, it is important to be aware that although Fromme and Hinckley sing this duet together, they are not singing to each other, and the staging should reflect this distinction. A strong suggestion would be for Hinckley and Fromme to stand in different places on the stage, and not make eye contact with each other during the song. Additionally, both characters should exhibit their own respective obsessions through their facial expressions and body language in a way that expresses their individual longing.

The obsessive nature of the characters is also prevalent in the lyrics. There are several instances where the lyrics very astutely portray the character of Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme by contrasting her lyrics to John Hinckley’s—her lyrics are similar to Hinckley’s, but they differ in important ways. When these subtle differences occur, the singer should emphasize the altered lyrics. For example, she describes Charles Manson as “wind and devil and god,” which contrasts Hinckley’s description of Jodie Foster as
“wind and water and sky.” In this instance, while Hinckley describes Foster as being everything in his world, Fromme describes Manson as being part of her world, and also compares him to deities. This lyric clearly exemplifies her belief that Manson is the Son of God, and a performer should place emphasis on them with clear articulation and vocal accentuation.

Another notable distinction between Fromme and Hinckley’s respective verses of “Unworthy of Your Love” occurs when she sings “let me feel fire, let me drink poison, tell me to tear my heart in two, if that’s what you want me to do.” These words darkly contrast Hinckley’s lyrics, which state “I would swim oceans, I would move mountains, I would do anything for you.” Fromme’s lyrics are considerably more self-destructive, mirroring Fromme’s obsessive need for Manson’s approval, and therefore, these lyrics should be prominent in the performance.

It is important for the singer to bear in mind that in the original manuscript, Sondheim composed Fromme’s passages in a much higher range, but he lowered the melody in order to make it easier for the singer to focus on text intelligibility. Therefore, articulation and emphasis on important lyrics should be the primary concern of the singer. For a performance example of “Unworthy of Your Love,” please refer to Appendix B, track eight.
Summary

*Assassins* was a revolutionary musical in many respects, which is not a surprise coming from an innovative composer like Stephen Sondheim. The musical was inspired by an idea from a play with the same title written by young playwright, Charles Gilbert. Although the musical retains very little of the original play, the concept of basing all of the characters around assassins, both attempted and successful, appealed to Sondheim. He and Weidman structured this seemingly bizarre idea as a dream-like vaudeville, with separate vignettes for the different assassins which did not occur in chronological order.

*Assassins* opened as an Off-Broadway musical, and never made it to Broadway, although it was fairly successful. One of the possible reasons it never reached the Broadway stage was because it was written during a time of war, and with the prevalent patriotic feeling, people were less inclined to support a musical that showed the dark side of the American dream. The characters were all attempted or successful assassins of United States presidents throughout history, and as a group, they symbolize a gamut of reasons for wanting to shoot the president.

Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford as a means of earning a retrial for Charles Manson, who was convicted for conspiracy to murder. Fromme was a part of an obsessive cult, called the Manson Family, whose members dedicated their lives to spreading the gospel according to Charles Manson. Although Fromme is displayed in *Assassins* as being obsessive and unable to think for herself, she is also presented as comic relief, making her psychologically twisted character disturbingly likeable.
The music of *Assassins* is a large-scale pastiche, where each song in the show represents the musical era of the events of that particular scene. Therefore, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, who shares a musical number called “Unworthy of Your Love” with John Hinckley, is given a 1970’s pop-music ballad, recalling the music of the era in which they both attempted to assassinate presidents. The music of *Assassins* does not directly reflect the characters through melodic motives in the same way of other Sondheim musicals—instead, the songs reflect specific eras of American music, giving a sense of familiarity to the music and characters. The melody and tessitura of Fromme’s song are approachable and pleasant, which furthers the audience’s desire to empathize with her character. Sondheim and Weidman have cleverly created assassins, with all of their intrinsic hatred and anger, who are likeable and with whom the audience can identify. The music, lyrics, and scenes of *Assassins* all unite to create humanistic villains that the audience can both enjoy and be disturbed by at the same time.
Throughout his life and career Stephen Sondheim has been acknowledged as one of the most innovative composers for American musical theatre. His contributions to the development of the musical include bringing the genre of the concept musical to maturity, experimentation with both classical and popular forms including Theme and Variations and 32 Bar Song form, and incorporation of operatic conventions like the leitmotif. Sondheim’s compositions consistently push the boundaries of traditional musical theatre, which has contributed to the expansion of the genre into new realms of intellect and ingenuity.

In contrast to mezzo-sopranos from the musicals of the Golden Age, mezzo-sopranos in the musicals of Stephen Sondheim take on many different forms. His mezzo-sopranos are realistic and complex women with whom audience members can identify or feel familiar. Mezzo-sopranos in his musicals include a woman like Amy, who has cold feet on her wedding day; a woman like Beth, who still loves her husband even though he was unfaithful; a woman like the Baker’s Wife, who wants desperately to have a child but grows tired of the life of a housewife and mother and seeks adventure; a psychotic woman like Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, driven to dire action because of an obsession; and many others.
The 1970 musical *Company* changed the face of musical theatre through its unconventional approach to a story line, now termed a “Concept Musical.” The character of Amy was an innovative example of the way women could be portrayed on the stage, by defying traditional gender roles. She sings a frenetic patter melody in the trio “Getting Married Today” that exemplifies her panic and insanity about getting married to Paul. Sondheim displays his mastery of motivic manipulation to contrast the three different characters involved in this piece: the church lady, Paul, and Amy. Sondheim uses a pastiche of church hymn music for the church lady, while giving Paul soaring lyrical melodies. The melodies for Amy are sharp, direct, and confined patterns that starkly contrast those of her scene partners in order to highlight her increasing emotional angst throughout the song.

The 1981 musical *Merrily We Roll Along* was a critical and financial disappointment, but artistically and musically the show can be revered as a gem in the standard musical theatre repertoire. The music inverts time, and the story unfolds in reverse chronological order, which creates some interesting difficulties with character development, but it also allows the complexity of Sondheim’s dramatic music to shine. Due to the content of the show, Sondheim elected to write the score in the popular 32 Bar Song Form, while still giving individual flair to the music that reveals his own unique voice, as found in the song “Not a Day Goes By.” Sondheim uses tight modulations, heart-wrenching lyrics, and a beautifully haunting melody to display Beth’s angst and vulnerability. The basic structure of a 32 Bar Song form is altered in a way to make this song fresh and inviting for the listener.
Drawing from fairy tale inspirations, Sondheim and James Lapine created the 1987 musical *Into the Woods*, which demonstrates what happens when the stories of several classic fairy tale characters collide in the woods. The show draws heavily from the folklore of each of the fairy tales, and weaves them together to create a delightful amalgamation of adventures. The composition of *Into the Woods* displays strong Wagnerian influences, making use of traditional leitmotifs throughout the score. All of the main characters have a leitmotif, and most begin with a major second, to emulate the speech inflection of the phrase “I wish.”

The Baker’s Wife, a character created by James Lapine, has her own leitmotif that appears repeatedly throughout the score, particularly in her song “Moments in the Woods.” This song characterizes the Baker’s Wife very clearly, through Sondheim’s lyric and melodic choices. “Moments in the Woods” occurs at the climax of the Baker’s Wife’s story line, where she ultimately makes the choice to go home and create her own “happily ever after” with her husband and child. This is a typical display of Sondheim’s unconventional perspective, where the characters do not get a “happily ever after” with no strings attached. Instead they achieve an informed sense of happiness and satisfaction with both the positive and negative circumstances of their lives.

Sondheim and John Weidman’s 1990 collaboration, *Assassins*, ranks among the most intellectual musicals Sondheim has written. The show very cleverly involves the true stories of several presidential assassins throughout the history of the United States. Therefore, Sondheim decided to create the score as a large-scale pastiche, where each song reflects the time period of the character who sings it. Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, attempted assassin of Gerald Ford, and John Hinckley, attempted assassin of Ronald
Reagan, share the duet “Unworthy of Your Love.” The duet is intentionally written to resemble a 1970’s popular love ballad, but in keeping with Sondheim’s aesthetic, it is not exactly as it seems. Fromme and Hinckley do not sing “Unworthy of Your Love” to each other, but instead, each character sings to a celebrity idol with whom they are infatuated. For Hinckley it is Jodie Foster, and for Fromme it is notorious criminal Charles Manson. Fromme’s lyrics mirror her obsession with Manson, as she sings about being willing to die for his love, and although the music is composed in a very straightforward manner, the unsettling content gives this simplistic melody its disturbing effect.

One of the unique contributions this research makes lies in its combination of a classical musicological approach and music from the American musical theatre idiom. A traditional scholarly music approach is not often taken with musical theatre works, but this type of process provided several discoveries that would not have been possible without this unique combination. Using a musicological approach was beneficial in order to understand the intricacy of Sondheim’s harmonic and melodic language. His music offers rich dramatic complexities made available through intelligent musical devices, and with careful consideration of his compositional language, some dramatic moments can be drastically enhanced. With the additional attention to character analyses through the employment of acting methods outlined by Michael Chekhov and Constantine Stanislavski, it became possible to identify possible places where music, lyrics, and acting could be synthesized to enhance the dramatic moment.

Each of the four characters—Amy from Company, Beth from Merrily We Roll Along, the Baker’s Wife from Into the Woods, and Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme from Assassins—give the actress a chance to utilize genuine and natural acting techniques,
derived from the Stanislavski Method, and Sondheim’s compositional prowess provides musical events to heighten the impact of the characterization. The previous research highlights important character traits, lyrics, and musical events that should all be taken into account when the actress prepares these songs. An actress will seldom find an instance where Sondheim’s music and lyrics are not conducive to the characterization of the role. On the contrary, Sondheim considers what the character would do or say prior to composition, so attention to musical events will strengthen the actress’s ability to portray the character.

This research is presented as an aid for performers, students, and teachers in preparation of the roles discussed in this paper. It is imperative when preparing one of these roles or songs that a performer understands the depth and complexity of each character. A Sondheim mezzo-soprano is multi-faceted, with a depth and intricacy that is unique to his perspective of the American musical. In order to do justice to the performance of a Sondheim character, it is vital that performers take the time to understand his intentions behind both the lyrics and the music, and the meticulous attention to detail for which he is acclaimed.

A unique attribute of this research is its exclusive focus on mezzo-soprano roles. Furthermore, a mezzo-soprano, or any other singer, may use this research in order to apply it to another Sondheim character; the interesting facets of the characters demonstrated in this research are by no means exclusive to mezzo-sopranos. With the intricacy of characters for all voice types in Sondheim musicals, it would also be possible for these to be included in future studies. Applying the implications of this research to other Sondheim roles would be advantageous because although Sondheim approaches
each of his musicals with a slightly different compositional process, a pattern does exist. This pattern is the attention to detail in Sondheim’s music with regard to characterization. One of Sondheim’s precepts with regard to composition is “God is in the details,” and is evidenced in his consideration of characterization when composing musical events. Sondheim’s compositional approach, regardless of the form he is using, places strong emphasis on accurate portrayal of the character. Therefore, using a similar approach to research other Sondheim roles would likely produce a similar result: an enlightened performance.

Another implication this research has deals with the synthesis of two different approaches. In this case, the research suggests using a classical musicological approach combined with Stanislavski and Chekhov’s method of acting to provide a character analysis, and applying both of these concepts to the musical theatre idiom. Other scholars could use the same musicological and acting approaches to other composers in the musical theatre idiom. It would be interesting to draw comparisons between composers from different eras and genres within the musical theatre idiom, including musicals from the Golden Age as well as Rock Musicals. Scholars could investigate composers and lyricists such as Jonathan Larson, Jason Robert Brown, Andrew Lloyd Weber, Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, or any other composers from this genre.

Given more research of this nature, it would then be possible to compare and contrast the different compositional approaches to characterization that composers of the American musical take. In the classical music idiom, these comparisons are frequently drawn between composers. For instance, word painting, treatment of the
accompaniment, and form are often compared between the major composers of the German Lied. Additionally, the music of operatic composers like Verdi and Wagner are often compared and contrasted. Yet another facet of operatic composition often taken into consideration is the era in which it was written; Baroque, Classical, and Romantic operas exhibit many varying traits that are commonly juxtaposed in scholarly writing. The rich history of compositional processes of the American musical offers a fresh opportunity for scholars to draw comparisons between the different approaches composers take and the manner in which it influences characterization.
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Cody Ricks, baritone
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“Keeping the ‘Concept’ Clear:
A perspective on performing selected
mezzo-soprano songs
from the musicals of Stephen Sondheim”

Not Getting Married Today........................................... from Company
with Keisha Cook and Cody Ricks

Moments in the Woods............................................ from Into the Woods

Not a Day Goes By............................................ from Merrily We Roll Along

Unworthy of Your Love........................................... from Assassins
with Cody Ricks

Send in the Clowns............................................ from A Little Night Music
There Won’t Be Trumpets........................................... from Anyone Can Whistle

Jennifer Arbogast is a student of Mei Zhong.

CHORAL HALL
Saturday, March 24, 2012
5:30 p.m.  

Series XLVI
Number 188

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