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"You're New, Or Else You're Through": How Collaborating with James Lapine Kept Stephen Sondheim Fresh and Youthful in His Fifties and Sixties

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**“YOU’RE NEW OR ELSE YOU’RE THROUGH”
HOW COLLABORATING WITH JAMES LAPINE KEPT STEPHEN SONDHEIM FRESH AND
YOUTHFUL IN HIS FIFTIES AND SIXTIES**

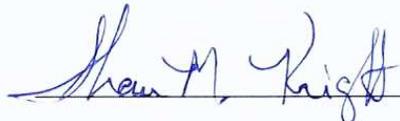
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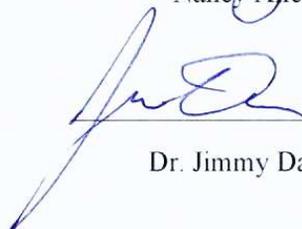
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“YOU’RE NEW OR ELSE YOU’RE THROUGH”

HOW COLLABORATING WITH JAMES LAPINE KEPT STEPHEN SONDHEIM FRESH AND YOUTHFUL IN HIS FIFTIES AND SIXTIES

Within the world of sports, it’s a universally accepted truth that athletes’ careers have an often severely limited life expectancy. While the average career length differs from sport to sport, athletes in every professional sport become less effective as they begin to age. It’s why you’ll never tune into a Major League Baseball game and see a 50-year-old pitcher on the mound. Similarly, you won’t find a 45-year-old catching the ball in the Super Bowl. It doesn’t take a scientist to understand why this phenomenon occurs—as athletes age, their bodies naturally lose strength. The peak physical condition that propelled them to the top of their sport dissipates, and they become slower and weaker.

A similar phenomenon, interestingly, has consistently manifested in a radically different discipline: musical theatre composition. While it has certainly had nothing to do with losing strength or speed, since the only physical requirements of writing music are the abilities to pluck away at a piano and hold a pencil, the most accomplished songsmiths of the theatre have historically failed to produce noteworthy, successful work in their senior years. Stephen Sondheim, the writer who *The New York Times* called “the theater’s most revered and influential composer-lyricist of the last half of the 20th century,”¹ pointed this out in a 2011 interview with fellow composer-lyricist Adam Guettel. “I really don’t know any composer from the theatre, I think, who’s written really good stuff after the age of fifty, which is a very young age,” Sondheim said.² He’s mostly correct. The age of fifty isn’t a hard expiration date for

¹ Bruce Weber, “Stephen Sondheim, Titan of the American Musical, Is Dead at 91,” *The New York Times*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/26/theater/stephen-sondheim-dead.html>.

² Stephen Sondheim, “The Art of Songwriting with Stephen Sondheim and Adam Guettel,” interview by Adam Guettel, Dramatists Guild Foundation, 2011, video, 1:04:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TofC3KD-h8M>.

composers—Cole Porter was fifty-three when *Kiss Me Kate* premiered on Broadway—but it’s close. And while most of the theatre’s top composers—Porter, Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, to name a few—continued writing beyond their golden jubilee, they didn’t continue writing hits. Most of those composers’ outputs after turning fifty were shows that, though not outright flops, were merely politely received by audiences and critics, at best, and made no lasting mark on the theatre canon in the manner of their earlier work.

Why has that been the case? Sondheim, on whom U.S. President Barack Obama bestowed a Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015, offered an explanation. “I think that, because of the nature of theatre music—meaning popular theatre music, commercial theatre music as opposed to opera—we all become superannuated,” he said. “Because music changes every twenty-five years, I think every generation, everybody becomes old-fashioned.” Sondheim, however, was one of the few stalwart composers who avoided that fate. While Rodgers spent his later years writing barely remembered shows like *Two By Two*, and Porter spent his on shows like *Out of this World*, which closed after 156 performances, Sondheim’s fifties and sixties yielded some of his most revered work. How did Sondheim manage it? He had an explanation for that, too: working with James Lapine.

Sondheim wrote three shows with Lapine, a playwright and director, that premiered on Broadway during Sondheim’s fifties and sixties, all of which have become staples of the musical theater canon. *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) follows French impressionist Georges Seurat as he completes his monumental painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. *Into the Woods* (1987) follows a collection of fairytale characters—some traditional, like Cinderella and Rapunzel, others invented by Lapine, like the Baker and his wife—as they embark on various quests. *Passion* (1994) explores the intense efforts of Fosca, a terribly ill

loner, to seduce Giorgio, a soldier, at a military outpost in Italy. All three shows have received major revivals, both in New York and London. The former two are almost universally considered classics; *Into the Woods* is among the most-performed titles in the Music Theatre International catalog,³ and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sunday in the Park with George*'s rise to classic status was the subject of a CBS Sunday Morning feature in March of 2022. Sondheim believed the shows were successful because Lapine, nearly twenty years his junior, helped him avoid losing touch with generational changes in popular, commercial music.

“I’ve been able to avoid that somewhat, but that’s because I don’t really have a style of my own—my style is so geared to different people—but that’s what happened when I worked with [James] Lapine,” Sondheim said. “Lapine infused me with something.

“My life changed when I started working with Lapine because, for the first time, I was working with a whole other generation. James represented a whole new way of looking at the theatre, a new way of playwrighting that was nowhere near as conservative as what I’d come from.”⁴

While the success of those shows had a lot to do with Sondheim being the same rigorously detail-attentive and profound writer he’d been in his thirties and forties when he wrote landmark shows like *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* and *Company*, his assertion that collaborating with Lapine allowed him to remain successful in his senior years is accurate. It was not, however, for the reason he articulated. It’s difficult to make a connection between Lapine and generational taste in the 1980s American musical theatre since, when Sondheim and Lapine premiered their trio of shows on Broadway, the industry was dominated by high-dollar, melodramatic West End transfers like *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables*, a phenomenon often colloquially known as the “British Invasion” of Broadway. On

³ Patty Craft, “2021 Annual Play Survey: The Most Popular High School Plays Revealed,” *Dramatics*, published 2021, <https://dramatics.org/2021-annual-play-survey/>; Stephen Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes, and Miscellany* (New York: Random House, 2011), 58.

⁴ Sondheim, “The Art of Songwriting with Stephen Sondheim and Adam Guettel.”

the surface, Sondheim and Lapine's shows have nothing in common with the Cameron Mackintosh British mega-musicals that defined a decade-and-a-half of Broadway history; Frank Rich, *The New York Times*'s chief theatre critic for most of that decade-and-a-half, even called it "absolutely coincidence" that shows by Sondheim and Lloyd Webber—who composed the 1980s hits *Evita*, *Cats*, and *Phantom*—coexisted during the same era.⁵ Thus, it's nearly impossible to argue that Sondheim's success with Lapine was the result of the youthful librettist helping him become, to use a Bert Shevelove phrase Sondheim often quoted, "Rip Van With-It."

Additionally, Sondheim and Lapine's trio of shows weren't runaway hits with audiences or most critics in their initial runs, mostly due to their complex subject matters and innovative but unfamiliar storytelling methods—hallmarks of the entire Sondheim canon. Only these days—now that Sondheim is almost universally considered an infinitely venerable legend rather than an unfeeling academic—are *Sunday*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion* seen as crown jewels of musical theatre composition. The shows premiered during an era when the reactions to Sondheim's musicals were, from those outside his cult following, often negative. As Rich wrote in 1984, Sondheim was often "dismissed by serious music audiences, reviled by conservative Broadway theater audiences for failing to write 'hummable' songs, and unknown to most hip young audiences."⁶ That makes it unfair to define the success of *Sunday*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion* based on the initial reactions they garnered.

While Lapine didn't explicitly make Sondheim more generationally relevant, he did infuse the composer with a sense of youth—specifically, freshness and originality—that the theatre composers who wilted out of relevance around their fiftieth birthday lacked. That

⁵ Frank Rich, interview with author, March 7, 2022.

⁶ Frank Rich, "A Musical Theater Breakthrough," *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1984, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/21/magazine/a-musical-theater-breakthrough.html>.

infusion began on a personal level; Lapine's youth and enthusiasm reinvigorated Sondheim and prevented him from running out of steam following nearly twenty-five years of writing for the theatre and *Merrily We Roll Along's* bitter failure in 1981. The impact extended to the makeup of Sondheim's shows. Tracking changes within Sondheim's writing is difficult since he famously tailored his style to the subject matter called for by each show, but his work with Lapine is indeed distinctly and demonstrably different from his work with his previous primary collaborator, the director Harold Prince. Lapine interrupted a thematic, stylistic, and tonal linearity Sondheim developed with Prince in three major ways, and that interruption prevented Sondheim's musicals from becoming stale or predictable as he aged; it kept them fresh.

“A VERY SMART PRINCE”

Before analyzing the specifics of Lapine's impact on keeping Sondheim creatively young, it's important to briefly introduce Prince and explain why comparing him to Lapine, despite their difference in roles (Lapine was a librettist and director, Prince merely a director) is appropriate. Prince, who won a record twenty-one Tony Awards during his six-decade directing and producing career, began working professionally with Sondheim when he produced *West Side Story*, for which Sondheim wrote the lyrics. Prince also produced the first Broadway show for which Sondheim wrote both the music and the lyrics,⁷ *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. Company*, which premiered on Broadway in 1970, was the first show of Sondheim's that Prince directed and, more than *West Side Story* or *Forum*, marked the true beginning of Sondheim and Prince's creative partnership. That partnership, which lasted over a decade, led to

⁷ The first professional show for which Sondheim wrote both the music and lyrics was *Saturday Night*, but the producer of the show died, and the production fell through. *Forum* was the first show with music and lyrics by Sondheim to premiere on Broadway.

some of the most beloved and revered shows in the history of the American musical theatre: *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), and, arguably, the pinnacle of Sondheim's collaboration with Prince, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979).

The impact of Prince on the shows he created with Sondheim extended far beyond simply working with designers, auditioning performers, and guiding stage movement—the typical responsibilities of a director. As Rick Pender wrote in *The Stephen Sondheim Encyclopedia*, Prince's role was “steering the artistic ship, employing an overall vision for each show that kept Sondheim and the book writers focused.”⁸ That steering manifested in many ways. The original idea and concept of two Prince-Sondheim musicals originated with Prince, who suggested turning playwright George Furth's seemingly disparate series of vignettes about married couples into *Company* and adapting George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart's play *Merrily We Roll Along* into a musical.⁹ Often, Prince had a hand in deciding which songs and scenes were cut from shows; notably, he championed the omission of Judge Turpin's “Johanna” from the first act of *Sweeney Todd* (though it did make its way onto the cast recording and subsequent productions) because he perceived it to be bawdy and to interrupt the flow of the story.¹⁰ Prince, at times, even directly impacted Sondheim's songwriting, such as when Sondheim turned Prince's suggestion to end Act One of *A Little Night Music* with “a mini-operetta about the reactions to Madame Armfeldt's invitation” into the grandiose and lyrically deft “A Weekend in the Country.”¹¹ And, in the case of *Sweeney Todd*, Prince helped Sondheim pick a librettist; he suggested tapping

⁸ Rick Pender, *The Stephen Sondheim Encyclopedia* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 420.

⁹ Harold Prince, *Sense of Occasion* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 145, 227.

¹⁰ Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Random House, 2010), 350.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 271.

British playwright Hugh Wheeler (also the librettist of *A Little Night Music*) after Sondheim failed to achieve his initial goal of writing the entirety of *Sweeney Todd*—music, lyrics, and book—alone.¹²

These may seem like insignificant distinctions, but directors often don't have nearly the impact on a show's story, structure, and, ultimately, text that Prince did when he worked with Sondheim. For example, Lloyd Webber and lyricist Tim Rice had already written the entirety of *Evita* before involving the show's director, who happened to also be Prince, and the only significant changes between that point and the show's West End premiere were replacing "The Lady's Got Potential," which Prince disliked, with "The Art of the Possible," and removing "Dangerous Jade."¹³ Though Prince never directly contributed to the texts of the Sondheim musicals he directed by putting pen to paper, he deeply impacted them. Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen discussed that impact in an article for *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*.

"Prince's work with Sondheim was very much a creative partnership and the shows themselves are the result of a close collaboration between the two," she wrote.

"It is important to acknowledge the central role of Prince in the creative process, given the exalted position Sondheim has acquired—sometimes to the point of viewing him as an auteur. For while there are certainly threads that run through Sondheim's work, there is also a very clear demarcation between the Prince shows and the later collaborations with librettist-director James Lapine."¹⁴

The level of input, authority, and influence Prince had on his work with Sondheim is precisely why comparing his impact on the composer and that of Lapine, a director and librettist, on Sondheim is more than fair.

¹² Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co*, Second edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 246.

¹³ Andrew Lloyd Webber, *Unmasked: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 232.

¹⁴ Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen, "The Prince-Sondheim Legacy" in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, ed. Robert Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

“WHO CHEERS US UP WHEN WE’RE BLUE?”

Sondheim and Prince’s immense success in the 1970s didn’t last. Their final collaboration of the twentieth century,¹⁵ 1981’s *Merrily We Roll Along*, was a flop that ran just sixteen performances. The failure of *Merrily* and its impact on Sondheim, both personally and professionally, is a key link to how Lapine re-invigorated his career. The original production of *Merrily* (music and lyrics by Sondheim, book by George Furth, direction by Prince) was unique in both concept and presentation, surveying the lives of three best-friend writers in reverse order; the show begins in 1976 when the characters are middle-aged and jaded, and it ends in 1957 when they’re young and optimistic. One of Prince’s primary directorial concepts for the show was to cast only very young performers, aged sixteen to twenty-five. “What we would do,” he said, “is we would have kids play themselves thirty years on and then back up, and you would find out where they started from—dewy-eyed and optimistic.”¹⁶ While Prince’s concept did lead to career breakthroughs for many of its young cast members—most notably future Tony-Award winner and *Seinfeld* star Jason Alexander—it didn’t lead to a successful production. “I believed it would be particularly touching to see how over the course of a lifetime we lose the glister and optimism of youthful ambition,” Prince wrote. “I was wrong. It was too damn complicated.”¹⁷ Many audience members who saw one of *Merrily*’s few performances agreed with Prince’s assessment of the show. “I remember singing to the backs of people walking out of the theater, and someone could say that was not a subtle cue that the show had problems,” original cast member Abigail Pogrebin said.¹⁸ Frank Rich called the show “a shambles” in his review, adding,

¹⁵ Prince reunited with Sondheim to direct the Chicago premiere of *Bounce* (music and lyrics Sondheim, book John Weidman) in 2003.

¹⁶ Lonny Price, dir., *Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened* (New York, NY: Atlas Media Corp, 2016).

¹⁷ Prince, *Sense of Occasion*, 229.

¹⁸ Price, *Best Worst Thing*.

“While Mr. Prince often finds brilliant unifying concepts for his shows, even the ones that don't work, he's come up with a flat one here.”¹⁹

Following *Merrily*'s failure, Prince and Sondheim split. “As a result of *Merrily*,” Prince wrote in his memoir, “Steve and I thought it would be advisable to sever our partnership.”²⁰ The fate of *Merrily* impacted Sondheim beyond forcing him to find a new collaborator, though; it had an immense effect on his personal life. Sondheim sensed that the theatre community in New York relished in his and Prince's failure since they had, as Sondheim put it, “committed the unpardonable crime of being mavericks who were successful.”²¹ That feeling led Sondheim to a place of significant melancholy, as Lapine recalled to Meryle Secrest in her biography of Sondheim: “When I first met Steve, he was very bummed out, in a very low state. He kept referring to himself as a dinosaur. He was complaining, very bitter.”²² Sondheim's “everyone is out to get me” feeling also made him want to leave the theatre entirely in favor of working on, of all things, video games.²³ Thankfully, Sondheim changed his mind and decided to continue writing for the stage instead of Nintendo, and the reason he changed his mind ties directly to Lapine. “I discovered the joys of Off-Broadway, and that revived me,” Sondheim said.²⁴ Off-Broadway's creative freedom and lack of commercial pressures gave Sondheim a much-needed reboot, and his discovery of those “joys” began when he attended a 1982 performance of the play *Twelve Dreams*, written and directed at the New York Shakespeare Festival by a 32-year-old Lapine.

¹⁹ Frank Rich, “A New Sondheim: Merrily We Roll Along,” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/11/17/theater/stage-a-new-sondheim-merrily-we-roll-along.html>.

²⁰ Prince, *Sense of Occasion*, 230.

²¹ Price, *Best Worst Thing*.

²² Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim* (New York: Random House, 1998), 326.

²³ James Lapine, *Putting It Together: How Stephen Sondheim and I Created Sunday in the Park with George* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 17.

²⁴ James Lapine, dir., *Six By Sondheim* (New York, NY: HBO, 2013).

Sondheim was taken by Lapine's concept, dialogue, and staging so intensely that he wanted to approach Lapine and propose the possibility of collaborating on a musical. Though Sondheim never made that approach, he wound up meeting with Lapine anyways after the playwright, coincidentally, reached out to Sondheim, wanting to collaborate on a musical version of a Nathaniel West novel, *A Cool Million*.²⁵ After meeting and discussing ideas, Sondheim and Lapine opted to forego musicalizing West's novel and, instead, chose to write a fictionalized backstory to French impressionist Georges Seurat's masterwork, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The result was *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Before *Sunday* opened on Broadway, it ran for a month at Playwrights Horizons, a non-profit Off-Broadway theater. During that month, Sondheim rediscovered the thrill of writing for the theatre, mainly because of Off Broadway's lack of commercial pressures; Playwright's Horizons' audiences were mostly comprised of subscribers, and critics weren't invited until near the end of a run.²⁶ That lack of pressure kept Sondheim from having to worry about the bitterness he perceived in the New York theatre community, a feeling he explained in Lapine's 2021 book *Putting it Together*. "What I also loved was that it wasn't a commercial vibe I was getting from you or that theater," Sondheim said. "You just put on the play. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. You're not letting sixty-four backers down. It's an off-Broadway, nonprofit, subsidized theater. I thought, 'this is the way I want to work for the rest of my life.' I loved it."²⁷ Two more Sondheim musicals premiered Off-Broadway before the composer's death in 2021: *Assassins* (Playwright's Horizons, 1991) and *Road Show* (The Public Theater, 2003).

²⁵ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 3-4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Lapine, *Putting it Together*, 109.

The pain of *Merrily*'s failure left Sondheim in dire need of a spark on a personal level, and that's what Lapine provided. He reignited a fire in Sondheim, who suddenly wanted to write another musical after seeing *Twelve Dreams*. Additionally, Lapine's background as an Off-Broadway writer allowed Sondheim to feel a sense of freedom he had never experienced in his career, and it refreshed him. That burst of energy continued into the pair's next collaboration; Sondheim "wanted immediately" to write with Lapine again because of the "exhilaration" of *Sunday*, and the result was *Into the Woods*.²⁸ The spark Lapine ignited in Sondheim was the first step in the process of the director-librettist keeping the composer-lyricist creatively young.

"MAKE A WISH. WANT SOMETHING!"

Lapine didn't just impact Sondheim on a personal level, though—he affected the composer's work, too. Specifically, Sondheim's work underwent three distinct, demonstrable changes when he began writing with Lapine, the first of which was thematic. As Lin-Manuel Miranda penned the book, music, and lyrics for his 2016 smash-hit musical *Hamilton*, he frequently sent updates to Sondheim, one of the first people to whom Miranda disclosed his outlandish idea to make an evening of hip-hop and show tunes based on the life of Alexander Hamilton. Sondheim, who believed Miranda to be a "master of the form" of rap,²⁹ always responded with the same admonition, which Miranda recounted in a 2017 piece for *The New York Times Style* magazine: "Variety, variety, variety, Lin. Don't let up for a second. Surprise us."³⁰

²⁸ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 57.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

³⁰ Lin-Manuel Miranda, "Stephen Sondheim: Theater's Greatest Lyricist," *The New York Times Style Magazine*, October 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/t-magazine/lin-manuel-miranda-stephen-sondheim.html>.

It isn't surprising that Sondheim stressed surprise and variety as he counseled Miranda. He believed surprise to be the "lifeblood" of the theatre,³¹ and he made variety a cornerstone of his canon. In his words, "If you know where you're going, you've gone, as the poet says, and that's death. That leads to stultified writing and stultified shows."³² The subject matters of Sondheim's musicals are certainly far-ranging—he wrote about everything from a lonely New Yorker with a fear of commitment, the nineteenth-century westernization of Japan and its consequences, and the lives of Americans who tried, successfully or not, to kill a sitting U.S. president. His words and music in *Sweeney Todd* gave voice to Sweeney, a singing serial murderer, and his cannibalistic partner in crime, Mrs. Lovett.

Sondheim's dedication to variety extended beyond his subject matters. Musically, he was extraordinarily versatile. Each of his shows has a unique musical language and style, tailored to each setting and subject matter. As Jonathan Tunick, Sondheim's principal orchestrator, remarked about the composer's five Broadway musicals from the 1970s, "The quality of these musicals is unsurpassed, and what's particularly impressive is that none of them sound alike."³³ *Merrily We Roll Along*, a show about Broadway writers from the 1960s, sounds like 1960s Broadway. *Follies*, a show about pre-World War II musical revue performers, is full of cleverly crafted pastiches of the style that those performers would have sung. The score of *Sweeney Todd* is big, romantic, and, at times, shrill³⁴—perfect for a show about, murder, revenge, and love.

While Sondheim's catalog is filled with diversity and variety as far as the music and subject matters are concerned, the shows he wrote with Harold Prince lacked thematic variety.

³¹ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, xxii.

³² Miranda, "Sondheim: Theater's Greatest Lyricist."

³³ *Sondheim! The Birthday Concert*, directed by Lonny Price, 2010 (New York, NY: Ellen M. Krass Productions), DVD.

³⁴ The musical crux of *Sweeney Todd* is the melody of the "Dies Irae" (literally: "the day of wrath"), a Roman requiem song that Sondheim frighteningly weaves throughout the score.

Five of the six Sondheim shows that Prince helmed, with *Pacific Overtures* as the exception, featured main characters whose boldest attribute was their disenchantment, often manifesting in feelings of being trapped, jealous, or disappointed. Walter Kerr, a theatre critic for the *New York Times* from 1966 to the early 1990s, picked up on that lack of thematic variety and criticized Prince and Sondheim for it in a column he wrote shortly after the failure of *Merrily*:

“I think they picked *Merrily We Roll Along* because it was precisely what they wanted to do, precisely what they had been doing for most of their distinguished, if not always rewarding, collaboration. *Merrily* offered them the one thing they seem determined to sell: disenchantment...

“Compromise, the sellout, loss of integrity—these are not so much fighting words to Prince and Sondheim as they are creative words, words that help them choose their materials, words that drive them to work...

“There is, increasingly to my mind, something wrong with the work. The insistence on a single theme, a single attitude, is becoming monotonous.”³⁵

Kerr’s tone when writing about Sondheim throughout his career was, often, negative; he called *Follies* “exhausting and tedious,”³⁶ criticized *Company* for being “overinsistent and lemony”³⁷ despite praising Sondheim’s score, and, of *Sweeney Todd*, he asked, “what is this musical about?”³⁸ Those opinions, it’s fair to say, haven’t stood the test of time.

Kerr’s single-theme criticism, however, holds up, and the truth of it can be demonstrated with a quick survey of the shows Sondheim tackled with Prince as director.

- *Company* (1970): Robert, the 35-year-old bachelor at the center of the show, spends most of the evening sour about his friends’ marriages and his loneliness. Yet, his

³⁵ Walter Kerr, “A Libretto Has to Face the Music,” *The New York Times*, December, 13, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/12/13/theater/a-libretto-has-to-face-the-music.html>.

³⁶ Walter Kerr, “Yes, Yes, Alexis! No, No, ‘Follies!’” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/11/archives/yes-yes-alexis-no-no-follies-kerr-on-follies.html>.

³⁷ Walter Kerr, “‘Company’: Original and Uncompromising,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 1970, <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/05/03/archives/company-original-and-uncompromising-company-is-uncompromising.html>.

³⁸ Walter Kerr, “Is ‘Sweeney’ on Target?” *The New York Times*, March 11, 1979, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-sweeney.html>

disillusionment toward romantic companionship makes him resistant to fixing his problem unless he can find a perfect partner (“Someone is Waiting” and “Marry Me a Little”³⁹). Robert’s disenchantment is never clearer than when he asks Harry, “are you ever sorry you got married?” He finally decides he wants to get married at the end of the show (“Being Alive”), but the lights go down before the audience can see him pursuing that goal.

- *Follies* (1971): The clearest example of disenchantment in the Prince-Sondheim catalog, *Follies* is full to the brim of characters who wish they had someone else’s life. Sally can’t stand her husband, Buddy, and would rather be with Ben; her ballad “Losing My Mind” might as well be the national anthem of disenchantment. Buddy knows he’s second place in his wife’s eyes and would rather be with his mistress, Margie. Phyllis, married to Ben, wants more than her stale relationship with her stilted husband but knows she can’t do better, a feeling she expresses in “Could I Leave You?” Ben wishes he had chosen Sally over Phyllis decades ago and, as a result, loathes himself; “I don’t love me,” is one of the final lines he speaks. *Follies* ends with all four of those characters in the same state; there is no real resolution or, certainly, redemption.
- *A Little Night Music* (1973): A “woe is me” attitude (i.e., disenchantment) pervades virtually the entire plot and almost every character of *Night Music*. Frederik begrudges his virgin wife, Anne, for refusing to consummate their marriage (“Now”). Desiree resents her profession, acting, for not being all it was cracked up to be (“The Glamorous Life”). Anne and Charlotte are disillusioned by their husbands’ respective affairs with

³⁹ Sondheim originally wrote “Marry Me a Little” to be *Company*’s Act Two finale, but later replaced it with the more apt “Being Alive,” keeping “Marry Me…” out of the original production. When *Company* was revived on Broadway in 1995, Sondheim re-instituted “Marry Me a Little,” but as the Act One finale.

Desiree (“Every Day a Little Death”). Henrik, Frederik’s son, spends most of the show in a near-depressive state, feeling the world has shortchanged him; he sings in his opening song, “Later,” laments that he’s “short,” “boring,” and “damned,” all the while playing the melancholiest tune imaginable on his cello. Some of those conditions improve by the end of *Night Music*; Frederik leaves his wife for Desiree, and Henrik finds love while on the verge of suicide. Most everyone else ends up similarly to how they began.

- *Pacific Overtures* (1976): This is the one exception to the disenchantment theme. Kerr argued that the show does indeed feature disenchantment, writing, “*Pacific Overtures* is harder to categorize: I think we can say, however, that the Japanese were duly disenchanted with their American guests.”⁴⁰ That’s at least a bit of a stretch, though, as the show primarily focuses on the larger cultural traditions surrounding and political implications of Commodore Matthew Perry’s 1853 trip to Japan, not anyone’s emotions.
- *Sweeney Todd* (1979): Sweeney is so disillusioned from his misfortunes at the hand of Judge Turpin that he becomes a mass murderer; he sings about London being “filled with people who are filled with shit” and declares that “they all deserve to die.” Mrs. Lovett’s disenchantment leads her to cook people into pies. Sweeney does exact revenge on Judge Turpin by killing him but ends the show more miserable than ever after accidentally killing his wife, too. Mrs. Lovett winds up being burned alive in what amounts to a crematorium.
- *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981): Each member of the trio of protagonists in *Merrily* is disenchanted for different reasons. For Frank, the most disenchanted of the three, his feelings derive from his failed marriage, not having a relationship with his son, and the

⁴⁰ Kerr, “Libretto Has to Face the Music.”

emptiness he feels about his uber-successful film career. Mary is a failed novelist and an alcoholic who hopelessly yearns to be with Frank. Charlie becomes a self-pitying curmudgeon when Frank, formerly a successful composer, abandons the musical theatre. Presented chronologically backward (each scene occurs at least a year before the preceding one), *Merrily* ends with its characters being bright-eyed and optimistic. It begins with them miserable and Frank practically on the verge of suicide.

When Sondheim began writing with Lapine, though, he shifted away from the theme of disenchantment. That's not to say there aren't characters in *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion* who don't feel trapped, jealous, or disappointed; those characters and those feelings are certainly present. The key difference, though, is that the driving force of each of the Lapine-Sondheim shows is desire, which is distinct from disenchantment. Additionally, the Lapine-Sondheim characters each go on a quest to achieve the object(s) of their desire, whereas the Prince-Sondheim characters are mostly left to wallow in their unfulfillment.⁴¹

The titular character of *Sunday* wants nothing more than to complete his monumental painting, and practically all he does throughout the first act is work on it. George is rarely seen doing anything other than sketching in the park or painting in his studio all in the service of, to quote the Sondheim lyric that has practically become synonymous with the composer, "finishing the hat." And while the second-act George, Seurat's great-grandson, certainly displays some disillusionment, especially as he interacts with Dot in the breathtaking duet "Move On," it is nowhere close to being the predominant theme or trait of the show.

⁴¹ The exception is probably *Sweeney Todd*, who embarks on a clear though unmeasurable goal to kill Judge Turpin and, eventually, as many people as possible to avenge his wife's death. Unlike the Lapine-Sondheim trio of shows, though, "woe is me" is equally or, perhaps, more prevalent than "I want" in *Sweeney*.

Into the Woods's fairytale characters embark on literal quests, which is the primary reason Sondheim was attracted to the show's concept in the first place. "I suggested [to Lapine] that we write a quest musical along the lines of *The Wizard of Oz*," Sondheim wrote.⁴² Lapine and Sondheim certainly achieved that goal, as each of the primary characters wants something and goes on a quest to get it in the first act. Cinderella wants to attend the king's festival and meet the prince; the Baker and his wife want to have a child; Jack's mother, for her son to sell his decrepit cow; the princes, to marry; Little Red, to bring her "poor old hungry granny in the woods" a loaf of bread; and the Wolf, to eat Little Red and her "poor old hungry granny in the woods." The Witch's extremely specific desires spurred the central quest of Act One, the Baker and his Wife's search for "the cow as white as milk, the cape as red as blood, the hair as yellow as corn," and "the slipper as pure as gold."

Those quests do, effectively, reach their conclusion just before intermission, and some would argue that *Into the Woods*'s second act centers merely on disenchantment. Sondheim bristled when he was asked about that theory.

"It's not so much disenchantment," he said in a 1990 interview. "What happens is that, in order to get their wishes in the second act, they each have to transgress a little bit, every single one of the characters... Each of these characters has a little transgression and all their transgressions add up into one huge transgression, and, in the second act, it's the consequences of that transgression that arise. What have they brought on themselves? And, having discovered what they brought on themselves, which is nothing more or less than the end of the world, they have to band together and become a community."⁴³

Sondheim was correct. The "woe is me" attitude so prevalent in the Prince-Sondheim catalog and so connected to disenchantment barely surfaces in the second act of *Into the Woods*. Rather,

⁴² Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 57.

⁴³ Stephen Sondheim, "Sondheim on Newsnight 1990," interview by Ned Sherrin, BBC Newsnight, 1990, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8ayR11VL9E&t=84s>.

as Sondheim asserted, the characters are too focused on solving their problems and defending themselves against the wrath of the giant.

The driving force of *Passion*, just as with *Sunday* and *Into the Woods* is a wish—specifically, Fosca’s desire to be with Giorgio. That desire certainly defines the character of Fosca, who spends the entire show relentlessly attempting to win Giorgio over and make him love her, a feat she accomplishes by the end of the evening. Fosca’s obsession with Giorgio manifests in many ways during *Passion*, such as when she follows him around the military outpost and onto a train as he departs for a leave of absence due to sickness. She even manipulates Giorgio to write a love letter to her, a scene cleverly musicalized by Sondheim (“I Wish I Could Forget You”). Fosca’s feelings for Giorgio are never clearer than when she sings the line, “Loving you is not a choice, it’s who I am.”

Whereas each of the Prince-Sondheim shows, save *Pacific Overtures*, carries a tone of “woe is me,” the three Lapine-Sondheim shows’ collective tone centers around “I want,” or, more specifically in *Into the Woods*, “I wish,”—something Lapine believes to be a cornerstone of the theatre. “Isn’t most drama driven by characters who want something?” he said. “Isn’t that what drives every story? It’s the actions they take that define the characters and make each story unique. The length they will go to win the lover, pay the rent, forge a new country, be a star, etc.”⁴⁴ That lens infused Sondheim’s work with something completely new, helping it to avoid becoming stale.

⁴⁴ James Lapine, email message to author, March 2, 2022.

“ME WITH MUSIC AND YOU THE WORDS”

The second major change Sondheim’s work underwent when he began writing with Lapine was a stylistic one; the three shows Sondheim wrote with Lapine blur the distinction between what is spoken and what is sung significantly more than any of the shows Sondheim worked on with Prince—or, for that matter, any other of his collaborators. Sondheim never plunged into the realm of operatic, sung-through musicals in the manner of the British invasion hits; he criticized through-composition in the theatre for its expedience: “I think one of the reasons so many people write sung-through pieces is that they’re easier. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re less effective, but they don’t satisfy me the same way.”⁴⁵ Still, Sondheim and Lapine’s shows have such a slight blur between what is spoken and sung that it’s difficult to decipher, at times, which words belong to the lyricist and which to the librettist.

Sondheim and Lapine accomplished that feat by seamlessly flowing between sung and spoken words, the best example of which, according to Sondheim, is the “Color and Light” scene from the first act of *Sunday in the Park with George*.

“If there is any song in the score [of *Sunday*] that exemplifies my change in writing when I began my collaboration with James Lapine, it would be ‘Color and Light,’” Sondheim wrote. “The flow between spoken and sung monologue, the elliptical heightened language, the stream-of-consciousness fantasies, the abrupt climactic use of unaccompanied dialogue, these are all musical extensions of hallmarks in Lapine’s playwriting.”⁴⁶

“Color and Light,” which takes up seven minutes of the original cast recording, begins with Georges Seurat in his studio hard at work on *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Off to the side is his mistress and model, Dot, who sits at a mirror powdering herself in

⁴⁵ Stephen Sondheim and Barbara Cook, “Stephen Sondheim & Barbara Cook Interview – 2004,” interview by Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*, 2004, video, 51:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHDE0dZRU0o&t=1069s>.

⁴⁶ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 17

preparation for what she expects to be a night at the follies with George. After a few minutes of George manically working alone on the painting, accompanied by Sondheim's brilliant pointillist harmonies, and Dot lamenting George's lack of attention and care for her, Dot arrives at George's studio. George, lost in his painting, has forgotten about his obligation to attend the follies with Dot and sends her home disappointed with the line, "I have to finish the hat."

Throughout that scene, George and Dot constantly switch between speaking and singing, both in dialogue and monologue. The following five examples (with lyrics italicized and dialogue in standard font) stand out. First, Dot speaks to herself as she contemplates her thoughts, pauses to sing as she applies makeup, then resumes speaking.

DOT:

The less I wear, the more comfortable I feel.

More rouge.

George is very special.

Later, George speaks to his painting as Dot sings to her mirror.

GEORGE:

And you, Sir. Your hat so black. So black to you, perhaps. So red to me.

DOT:

None of the others worked at night...

GEORGE:

So composed for a Sunday.

Here, George begins speaking criticisms of Dot before he begins to sing what he admires about her.

GEORGE:

Seeing all of the parts and none of the whole.

DOT:

So you want him even more.

GEORGE:

But the way she catches light...

Then, as George continues to work on his painting following Dot's angry departure, he sings colors and speaks feelings.

GEORGE:
Too green.
 Do I care?
Too blue.
 Yes.

Finally, as the orchestra plays the number's penultimate cadence, George doesn't sing the final word but, rather, speaks it: "Red."

Another example from *Sunday* of Sondheim and Lapine's intermingling of dialogue and lyrics is "The Day Off," an extended number that surveys the various figures in Georges Seurat's painting, each of which Lapine named and fictionalized. The number begins with what Sondheim and Lapine conceived as a moment of humor for George in which he both sings and speaks as he imagines the painting's dogs' thoughts. At one point, he speaks, "There's only so much attention a dog can take," before immediately singing, "Being alone on Sunday, rolling around in mud and dirt." Later, Freida and Franz both sing and speak about their perceptions of the ease of artistry. The two figures to whom Lapine gave the name "Celeste" then interact with the two soldiers, both singing and speaking throughout that interaction.

A key to understanding why *Sunday* and the other two shows Sondheim wrote with Lapine lent themselves so well to a closer connection between lyrics and dialogue is to understand the difference between a "song" and a "number," a distinction Sondheim deemed consequential. "It may seem to be a trivial matter, but it's an important distinction," he wrote in the second volume of his collected lyrics. "A song concentrates on one idea, one story, one emotion—it is a distillation. A number is an extension of ideas and/or stories and/or points of

view; it involves development.”⁴⁷ Most of the Sondheim shows directed by Prince, save *Pacific Overtures*, have scores primarily comprised of 32-bar-style songs. *Company* makes its hay on “Being Alive,” “Another Hundred People,” and “Getting Married Today.” The complex emotions of *Follies*’ main characters are expressed in short, tender moments like “Losing My Mind,” “The Road You Didn’t Take,” and “In Buddy’s Eyes.” The score of *Merrily We Roll Along* is Sondheim’s homage to 1960s Broadway; it’s filled with songs that have become cabaret standards like “Old Friends,” “Good Thing Going,” and “Not a Day Goes By.”

By Sondheim’s admission, none of his collaborations with Lapine were “song shows” in the same way. “Most of the shows I’ve written recently aren’t song shows,” Sondheim said in a 1997 interview. “The last song show I wrote, really, was *Merrily*. Both *Sunday in the Park with George* and, particularly, *Into the Woods*, have songs in them, but they’re not primarily song scores. *Into the Woods* is full of fragments that drift off and *Sunday in the Park* has extended sections.”⁴⁸ Sondheim’s self-assessment is correct. Though *Sunday* would be nothing without “Finishing the Hat” and “Children and Art,” or *Into the Woods* without “Giants in the Sky” and “On the Steps of the Palace,” the scores of those shows, as well as the score of *Passion*, are primarily comprised of longer, more extended numbers rather than songs.

Into the Woods opens with one of the busiest and most recognizable extended numbers in the musical theatre canon. The show’s prologue lasts nearly fifteen minutes, introduces every major character and storyline, and is almost entirely musicalized, driven by Sondheim’s persistent use of the show’s quarter-note motif in the accompaniment. “We wanted to tell as much exposition about the characters as possible and about their stories, but without spending

⁴⁷ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 64-65.

⁴⁸ Stephen Sondheim, “Conversation with Stephen Sondheim, Part 3,” interview by Mark Eden Horowitz, Library of Congress, 1997, video, 30:05, <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-10180/>.

too much time with any one so that the audience would not get bored. Therefore, we used a technique that's known in movies as 'crosscutting,'" Sondheim said in a conversation piece he and Lapine filmed for Music Theatre International.⁴⁹ As that crosscutting occurs, characters often drift between speaking and singing, such as when the Narrator frequently interjects to add exposition. Another example is when Jack's Mother, irritated with her dull-brained son, sings "I wish a lot of things" before screaming "you foolish child!" at Jack, an exclamation that begins a brief dialogue between the two. All the while, the orchestra continues to play Sondheim's quarter notes. Other examples of extended numbers in *Into the Woods* that feature both sung and spoken words include the opening of the second act, which mirrors the prologue; the second-act exchange between The Wolf and The Baker's Wife, which concludes with "Moments in the Woods;" and the show's finale, which includes one of Sondheim's most beloved tunes, "Children Will Listen."

The score of *Passion*, arguably, is simply one number that begins when the curtain rises and ends when it falls. Aside from "Loving You," which doesn't even end on an authentic cadence, the show doesn't have any music that easily fits into a recognizable song form.

"*Passion* is composed not so much of songs, but of arioso passages that sometimes take song form," Sondheim said. "The opening is sort of a song form, but it's fairly extended, and it's fairly loose. The idea of *Passion*, for those who don't know, is that nothing comes to a conclusion...Musically, the idea is to make it one long rhapsody so that the audience will never applaud. There are some perfect cadences in it, but not very many."⁵⁰

The relentless and unceasing nature of *Passion* allowed for its dialogue and lyrics to be significantly unified, as theatre critic and researcher Ethan Mordden noted in his book *On Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide*. "This is a very singing score, almost an unbroken flow, the

⁴⁹ James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim, "Into the Woods: A Conversation Piece," Music Theatre International, N.D., video, 52:31. <https://www.mtishows.com/into-the-woods-a-conversation-piece>.

⁵⁰ Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 6

spoken dialogue tipped into the music like mezzotints into an ancient collection of sonnets,” Mordden wrote.⁵¹

Sunday, Into the Woods, and *Passion*’s collective nature as primarily number-based scores rather than song scores was the reason Sondheim and Lapine could weave dialogue so easily into the music. No audience member who isn’t asleep would accept a verse of “Send in the Clowns” or “Broadway Baby” being delivered as spoken word, but an audience can easily accept a character pausing to speak briefly before resuming singing if it happens within the context of an eight-minute number that addresses multiple ideas and concepts. That technique is another example of the freshness that Lapine infused into Sondheim’s work.

“ONE IS LONELY, AND TWO IS BORING”

The third major change Sondheim’s work underwent with Lapine relates to subject matter and tone, and the best way to understand that change is by first taking a brief look at the career of William Finn, the Tony-winning composer of *Falsettos* and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*. Finn made his New York debut in 1979 with the Off-Broadway musical *In Trousers*, which was a flop. “Viciously panned” by critics, it ran for a total of thirty-two performances over two runs at Playwright’s Horizons.⁵² Finn’s next show, a sequel titled *March of the Falsettos*, was an Off-Broadway hit; Frank Rich called it “that rare musical that actually has something to be cocky about” in his review.⁵³ Finn later wrote a third installment to complete the series, *Falsettoland*, that he eventually combined with *March of the Falsettos* to create the

⁵¹ Mordden, *On Sondheim*, 134

⁵² Joe Brown, “The Truth About ‘Falsettos,’” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1992/05/10/the-truth-about-falsettos/866b1223-8673-4054-8a8a-5d540f8fcf7e/>.

⁵³ Frank Rich. “Stage: ‘March of the Falsettos,’ A Musical Find,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/10/arts/stage-march-of-falsettos-a-musical-find.html>.

two-act, full-length musical *Falsettos*, which found its way to Broadway in 1992 and earned Finn the Tony Award for Best Original Score. What changed between the poorly received *In Trousers* and the next two installments of the *Falsettos* trilogy, aside from them not having to deal with a lazy and dismissive review by Richard Eder?⁵⁴ James Lapine.

Lapine joined Finn, who wrote *In Trousers* alone, as librettist and director for *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*. Fresh off the Off-Broadway runs of his plays *Twelve Dreams* and *Table Settings*, Lapine's strength as a playwright gave *March of the Falsettos* a sense of structure and cohesion that *In Trousers* lacked. "He's linear and I'm totally all over the place," Finn told the Washington Post ahead of *Falsettos*' Broadway opening. "If he hadn't been here, it would not be the same show."⁵⁵ Lapine didn't just contribute structure and quality playwriting to the latter two installments of the *Falsettos* trilogy, though. He also added a kid. Whereas *In Trousers* features just four adult characters and focuses more on Marvin, the protagonist, as an individual, *March of the Falsettos* and, subsequently, *Falsettoland* introduced the character of Jason, Marvin's son. Through Jason, those shows spend a great deal of time exploring family dynamics in addition to Marvin's individual experiences. "I brought Jason into the *Falsettos* project because I thought the story needed that point of view to humanize these snarky characters and to make them less self-involved," Lapine said.⁵⁶

Lapine brought the same approach to Sondheim's work. Before writing with Lapine, Sondheim rarely explored interpersonal relationships in his shows; when he did, that exploration carried a tone of cynicism. Take *Company*, for example. Robert certainly spends much of the

⁵⁴ I had to read Eder's 1979 review of *In Trousers* multiple times to even understand what he was trying to say about the show. Its lede read, "'In Trousers' is 18 songs and a few barely suggested sketches setting out the fantasies and worries of a 14-year-old boy named Marvin." Marvin was really a full-grown adult.

⁵⁵ Post article

⁵⁶ James Lapine, email message to author, March 2, 2022.

show interacting with his friends, and the vignettes that comprise *Company* allow the audience to observe married life as a fly on the wall. Those interactions and those observations, though, are almost entirely spurred by librettist George Furth's mostly comedic dialogue. The couples are presented as over-the-top, manic, and selfish, and they're kept at a distance from the audience. It seems a fair guess that no human being has ever left a performance of *Company* feeling particularly inspired or moved by the marriages of Joanne and Larry, or Sarah and Harry. What does move audiences, though, is Robert's introspection about marriage and commitment, which mostly exists in solo ballads like "Someone is Waiting" and "Being Alive." *Company* isn't a study of relationships, it's a study of an individual's feelings about them.

Follies is similar. At the core of the show is a pair of married couples—Ben and Phyllis, Buddy and Sally. The show barely observes their marriages, though; Ben probably spends more time with Sally than he does with Phyllis, and Buddy more time alone than with his disenchanted bride. *Follies* is, instead, about broken dreams, regret, and dissatisfaction. Almost every song that one of its four protagonists sings fits those themes; "The Right Girl" is Buddy's lament about marrying the wrong person, "The Road You Didn't Take" is Ben's attempt to convince himself and Sally he doesn't regret virtually all of his life's decisions, "In Buddy's Eyes" is Sally's attempt at bargaining with her crappy marriage, and "Could I Leave You?" is Phyllis's effort at the same.

The other four Prince-Sondheim shows follow suit. *A Little Night Music* all but spits on the value of family and interpersonal relationships; it's about personal gain and infidelity. The only relationships depicted (with the ever-so-slight exception of Kayama and Manjiro's platonic relationship) in *Pacific Overtures* are those between Japan and western nations. *Sweeney Todd* features some romance—love at first sight between Johanna and Anthony juxtaposed with Mrs.

Lovett’s delusional obsession with Todd—but the show’s centerpiece is one man’s disenchantment and subsequent quest to increase his list of murder victims, which ultimately included Mrs. Lovett. *Merrily We Roll Along* was perhaps the closest Sondheim and Prince got to examining relationships, but, as in *Follies*, it was mostly through the lens of those relationships already being broken and shattered. Outside of a brief moment in “Opening Doors” and their pastiche number “Bobby and Jackie and Jack,” we only see Frank interact with his wife in a courtroom on the heels of their divorce hearing. And though the trio of “Old Friends” Frank, Charlie, and Mary takes center stage, their relationship plays second fiddle to their dreams, ambitions, and disappointment. *Merrily* is too cold and its depicted relationships are too fractured for it to truly be considered a show about relationships. Like the rest of the Prince-Sondheim catalog; relationships in *Merrily* are featured but not explored or emphasized. That omission of interpersonal relationships as a theme is certainly not a deficiency of those shows, but it is a distinct and observable trend.

That trend reached an abrupt end when Sondheim began writing with Lapine. One of the hallmarks of the Lapine-Sondheim catalog is its emphasis on relationships. As Mark Eden Horowitz, author of *Sondheim on Music*, wrote of Lapine in 2007, “His shows have a more organic quality, going to less predictable places. Relationships seem more nuanced, characters are less identifiable types. Lapine’s characters also tend to be more profoundly tied to their families—spouses, parents and children—than characters in librettos by other Sondheim collaborators.”⁵⁷ All three of the shows Sondheim wrote with Lapine highlight interpersonal relationships with a measure of optimism and warmth rather than cynicism. Specifically, that trio of shows emphasizes three major relationship types, the first of which is community

⁵⁷ Mark Eden Horowitz, “Biography of a Song: Children Will Listen,” *The Sondheim Review* 14, no. 1 (2007): 27. https://www.academia.edu/10478137/Biography_of_a_Song_Children_Will_Listen .

relationships. The best examples of community relationships in the Lapine-Sondheim trilogy are those found in *Into the Woods*, whose fairytale characters form a community that must unite to fight the enraged mother of the giant slain by Jack. Sondheim wrote “No One is Alone,” which has been unfairly criticized for being too sentimental, to illustrate the need for members of a community, large or small, to depend on each other. “It does not mean that ‘no one is alone’ as opposed to ‘we are all strangers and alone,’ it means that we are all responsible for each other, that every action we take—from the tiniest thing you tell your wife, your husband—has consequences and can spread,” Sondheim said.⁵⁸ That idea is never clearer than in the following section of the song:

You move just a finger
 Say the slightest word
 Something's bound to linger
 Be heard.
 No one acts alone.
 Careful.
 No one is alone.

Those lyrics, sung by the Baker and Cinderella, serve as a reminder to the children in their presence, Jack and Little Red, that their decisions affect not just themselves, but the community around them as well.

The second type of relationship the Lapine-Sondheim musicals emphasize is romantic ones, which are most apparent in *Sunday* and *Passion*. *Sunday* marked the first time a show with music and lyrics by Sondheim included a love duet⁵⁹ completely free of ironic subtext, the luscious and fiercely romantic “Move On.” It’s also the first show of Sondheim’s that observes a relationship from a non-cynical perspective; whereas, for example, *Follies* emphasizes its

⁵⁸ Sondheim, “Sondheim on Newsnight 1990.”

⁵⁹ The closest thing to an unironic love song in the Prince-Sondheim catalog is probably *Sweeney Todd*’s “My Friends,” which Sweeney sings to his obviously inanimate razor.

characters' disenchantment and lack of feeling, *Sunday* gives voice to George's and Dot's pure motivations for love. Dot, constantly shaken by George's lack of attention for her in favor of his painting, frequently reminds herself why she'll always be in love with him, singing lines like "But it's warm inside his eyes." George spends most of Act One wrestling with his conflicting desires to paint and be with Dot, a conflict best characterized by "Finishing the Hat."

Passion is, of course, about a romance and nothing else, though the romance is far from traditional; Fosca and Giorgio's interactions are starkly different than those of George and Dot, for example. As Sondheim put it, "*Passion* is about how the force of somebody's feelings for you can crack you open and how it is the life force in a deadened world."⁶⁰ In *Passion*, the sickly and strikingly unattractive Fosca pursues the initially unreceptive Giorgio to a nearly delusional level. Giorgio's mind begins to change, though, as he wrestles with his mistress's lack of commitment and her unwillingness to leave her husband in contrast to Fosca's unrelenting and unbreakable love for him. That contrast between conditional and unconditional love, Sondheim said, is one of the show's central themes. "[Giorgio] realizes that there are layers of love, and that unconditional love is the kind of love he's never had and never given, and it's the only kind of love that's worth having and worth spending your life on."⁶¹

The third category of relationship emphasized in the Lapine-Sondheim catalog is that of family. While the Prince-Sondheim catalog included hints of community and romantic relationships, familial ones were absent. That trend changed drastically when Sondheim began writing with Lapine, and it's undeniable that Lapine was the driving force behind the shift.

⁶⁰ Michiko Kakutani, "Theater; Sondheim's Passionate 'Passion,'" *The New York Times*, March 20, 1994, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-compassion.html#:~:text=%22%20'Passion'%20is%20about%20how,force%20in%20a%20deadened%20world.%22>.

⁶¹ Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, "Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine Interview – 1994," interview by Charlie Rose, Charlie Rose, 1994, video, 56:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoUARB9oOxw>.

“Family interests me,” Lapine said. “I am fascinated by families and how they influence who we become. Steve, on the other hand, didn't have much of a family, so that was not so much on his mind or of interest to him.”⁶² Lapine’s interest in families manifested most boldly in *Sunday* and *Into the Woods*, which spend considerable time observing the relationship between parents and children, and, more specifically, the responsibility parents have in raising children. Sondheim noticed that connection between his first two shows with Lapine and discussed it in a 1990 interview ahead of *Into the Woods*’s opening in London.

“I do see a thematic connection between the last two shows, which I’ve done with Jim Lapine, and I think that thematic connection comes with him,” Sondheim said. “There are similarities thematically—though not in any other way—between *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*. A lot of it has to do with parent to child, teacher to student—the passing on of knowledge, precepts, and a kind of emotional circularity that occurs from generation to generation.”⁶³

While Sondheim and Lapine wove that theme throughout the entire script and score of those two shows, it is expressed most clearly through two songs whose titles lend them no subtlety at all: *Sunday*’s “Children and Art” and *Into the Woods*’s “Children Will Listen.”⁶⁴ The setup for “Children and Art” is an infinitely profound line of dialogue, written by Lapine and spoken by Marie: “there are only two worthwhile things to leave behind when you depart this world: children and art.” A few moments later, Marie begins to sing to the twentieth-century George of her mother, Dot, as she points out her four appearances in *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. She gestures at the painting and tells George (through song), “This is our family, this is the lot. After I go, this is all that you’ve got, honey.” She recalls one of the precepts Dot passed to her, “A little less thinking, a little more feeling, I’m just quoting Mama!”

⁶² James Lapine, email message to author, March 2, 2022.

⁶³ Sondheim, “Sondheim on Newsnight 1990.”

⁶⁴ Interestingly, Bernadette Peters delivered the original performances of both songs.

She observes the beauty of the painting and art itself, “The child is so sweet, and the girls are so rapturous. Isn’t it lovely how artists can capture us?”

In “Children Will Listen,” *Into the Woods*’s witch, herself a mother to Rapunzel, summarizes every point Sondheim and Lapine sought to make about parent-to-child duty in their work; the songs’ lyrics serve as a bona fide parenting manual. Two phrases stand out above the rest:

- 1) Careful the things you say
Children will listen
Careful the things you do
Children will see
And learn.
- 2) Children will look to you
For which way to turn
To learn what to be.

Beginning to focus on interpersonal relationships, arguably, infused the three shows Sondheim and Lapine wrote with a sense of warmth and optimism that was mostly absent from the shows Sondheim wrote with Prince as director. The composer-lyricist discussed that contrast in the introduction to *Look, I Made a Hat*, where he wrote:

“When I look back at the shows I wrote before James and contrast them with *Sunday in the Park with George* and the others I wrote with him, it seems clear to me that a quality of detachment suffuses the first set, whereas a current of vulnerability, of longing, informs the second.

“Even more noticeable was the effect of my new partnership on the tone of the work. I have often been accused of writing ‘cold’ scores: intellectually acute but emotionally dispassionate, not-user friendly.

“When I think of songs like ‘Sunday’ or ‘Move On’ or ‘No One is Alone,’ I realize that by having to express the straightforward, unembarrassed goodness of James’s characters I discovered the Hammerstein in myself—and I was the better for it.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 6.

By “I discovered the Hammerstein in myself,” Sondheim meant that he discovered his senses of romance, warmth, and unabashed optimism—the hallmarks of Hammerstein’s work with Richard Rodgers. That wasn’t the only change that writing about relationships enacted in Sondheim’s work; it also caused his work in the 1980s and 1990s to have a sense of freshness. One could argue that the more cynical approach to relationships Sondheim took in his work with Prince, though it led to brilliance, had run its course—not so much with audiences, necessarily, but with Sondheim himself. After all, there are only so many ways to write “life is messy and most relationships turn out poorly” with the level of craft and genius expected from a Sondheim show. Thanks to Lapine, he didn’t have to.

“BRITAIN’S VARIOUS EMPORIA”

Sondheim’s work on Broadway with Lapine during the 1980s and 1990s is often seen as the antithesis to the popular British mega-musicals that the era came to be defined by, and that’s because Sondheim’s small-scale, artsy shows are wildly different than English pop operettas like *Cats* and *Miss Saigon* in numerous ways, primarily in terms of production design. Most of the hallmark productions of the British Invasion featured at least one major piece of stunning, though often somewhat excessive, scenery; *Evita* had the balcony of the Casa Rosada from which Patti LuPone’s Evita belted “Don’t Cry For Me Argentina,” *Cats* had the ridiculously ornate elevator that Betty Buckley’s Grizabella rode to the “Heavyside Layer,” *The Phantom of the Opera* had a chandelier, *Les Miserables* had a barricade, and *Miss Saigon* had a helicopter. *Sunset Boulevard*, Andrew Lloyd Webber’s costly 1994 musical that effectively marked the end of the British invasion, gave audiences perhaps the most unnecessary of spectacles: designer John Napier’s 33,000-pound mansion for Glenn Close’s Norma Desmond, which cost millions to

construct and moved entirely into and out of the flies as needed for each scene.⁶⁶ Aside from a few scattered pieces of theatre gadgetry, such as the self-removing dress Ann Hould-Ward designed for Bernadette Peters in *Sunday*, Sondheim and Lapine's work wasn't exactly heavy on spectacle.

There are, however, two noteworthy similarities between the trio of Lapine-Sondheim shows and the big British hits. Composers Claude-Michel Schönberg (*Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*) and Lloyd Webber lessened the distinction between what was spoken and sung in their shows just as Sondheim and Lapine did in theirs, though in a different way. Whereas Sondheim and Lapine created a smooth, seamless flow between dialogue and lyrics, Lloyd Webber and Schönberg eliminated spoken dialogue almost entirely from their shows in favor of singing the whole story. They blended popular songs, longer theatrical pieces of music, and recitative—short passages of speechlike, melodically repetitive music outside the context of a song or number—like the following one from *Evita*.

The image shows a musical score for a recitative passage from the musical *Evita*. It consists of two staves of music in bass clef, 6/8 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "For - give my in - tru - sion E - vi - ta I just have to see how you ad - mit you have lost a brand new ex - pe - ri - ence." The melody is characterized by a steady, repetitive eighth-note pattern, typical of recitative.

The other similarity between the Lapine-Sondheim trilogy and the British megamusicals—probably the more noteworthy one—is in the seriousness of the shows' presentations. Most of the British Invasion hits were melodramatic, serious stories mostly designed to tug at an

⁶⁶ Michael Riedel, *Singular Sensation: The Triumph of Broadway* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 10.

audience's heartstrings.⁶⁷ As University of Washington faculty member David Armstrong posited on his "Broadway Nation" podcast, "Like the operettas of the past, the Brit hits all feature romantic, melodramatic, often tragic storylines, and offer very little in the way of comic relief or jokes."⁶⁸ Armstrong is correct. Dozens of children die in *Les Miserables*, and each death seems to sting more than the last. Harold Prince once croaked during an early workshop of *The Phantom of the Opera* because he thought the audience was laughing entirely too much; in his words, "the audience was roaring from beginning to end, and I thought, 'That's not what we want. That's not what I want.'"⁶⁹ Even *Cats*, a musical revue starring dancing cats in skin-tight costumes, tries to be a tear-jerker at times, specifically during "Gus: The Theatre Cat" and the anthemic "Memory."

Similarly, Lapine and Sondheim's trio of shows are straight and, for the most part, serious. *Sunday* takes an arguably intellectual or highbrow look at, to quote a lyric from the show, "the art of making art." *Passion* features close to no comedic relief at all; it's the darkest show in Sondheim's catalog. *Into the Woods* could perhaps be argued as an exception, since its bright-eyed characters all present moments of comedy throughout the show, but one can't ignore the amount of tragedy that occurs throughout the second act when multiple major characters die at the hands of the murderous giant. Certainly, none of the Sondheim shows directed by Prince came close to the level of seriousness the composer reached with Lapine. Even *Sweeney Todd*, a show with murder and revenge at its center, lends more toward lightness than intensity, as Sondheim articulated in a 2008 interview. "It's not so dark, it's really kind of funny, that show,"

⁶⁷ The major exception is *Evita*. Though not a comedy, *Evita* really isn't dramatic until its final scenes depicting Eva Peron's death from ovarian cancer. Most of the show is highly sarcastic, even "Don't Cry For Me Argentina."

⁶⁸ David Armstrong, "Episode 28: Cameron Mackintosh & The British Invasion of Broadway (Or Sondheim vs. the Poperetta)," Broadway Nation, podcast audio, November 18, 2020. <https://broadwaypodcastnetwork.com/broadway-nation/episode-28-cameron-mackintosh-the-british-invasion-of-broadway-or-sondheim-vs-the-poperetta/>.

⁶⁹ Jamie Crichton, dir., *Behind the Mask: The Story of 'The Phantom of the Opera'* (London: BBC, 2005).

he said. “Nobody takes it seriously.”⁷⁰ It would have certainly been difficult for audiences to take *Sweeney* seriously in Prince’s original production,⁷¹ which featured Len Cariou and Angela Lansbury in costumes that Pia Lindstrom of NewsCenter4 described as “bonkers” in her 1979 television review.⁷²

Despite these similarities between what Sondheim and the Brits produced on Broadway in the 80s and 90s, it remains more than a stretch to argue that the similarities had any bearing on making Sondheim more generationally relevant. The similarities are so subtle that even the most attentive audience members likely would have never noticed them; they’re fodder for scholars, not your average person in line at the TKTS booth. Sondheim’s work is, indeed, radically different from Broadway’s renowned British imports. A good way to comprehend that would be to head to the Majestic Theatre to see the still-running original production of *The Phantom of the Opera* and, afterward, watch the 1986 PBS pro-shot of *Sunday*. You would have two vastly different experiences.

“NOTHING’S CHANGED, ONLY MAYBE SLIGHTLY RE-ARRANGED”

There’s one major question left to answer about Lapine’s impact on Sondheim: why did it breed success? After all, it would be reductionist to argue that simply collaborating with a youthful playwright or director can allow a theatre composer to outlive their artistic life expectancy. The best way to answer that question is to first observe the end of the career of Richard Rodgers and contrast it with Sondheim’s, starting from the point where their careers

⁷⁰ Stephen Sondheim, “Remembering Stephen Sondheim | NYT News,” *The New York Times*, 2008, video, 14:49, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-T4-g_x4NA.

⁷¹ Subsequent productions of *Sweeney Todd*, such as John Doyle’s 2005 Broadway staging and Tim Burton’s 2007 film adaptation, emphasized the darker and more serious sides of the story.

⁷² Pia Lindstrom, “Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou in SWEENEY TODD (1979, Broadway),” NewsCenter4, 1979, video, 5:10, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ot5juH2nrEE&t=128s>.

briefly intersected. The final musical for which Sondheim wrote only the lyrics was *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, which premiered on Broadway in 1965 and featured a book by Arthur Laurents (*Gypsy*, *West Side Story*) and music by Rodgers. With such an all-star trio of composer, lyricist, and librettist, *Do I Hear a Waltz?* had all the makings of a huge hit, but the show barely made a blip on the Broadway radar. It certainly wasn't a flop; it received three Tony-Award nominations and a polite review in *The New York Times* that called the show "romantic and bittersweet."⁷³ But *Do I Hear a Waltz?* ran for just 220 performances at what is now the Richard Rodgers Theatre. It's rarely performed these days and an oft-overlooked member of the Sondheim and Rodgers canons.

Sondheim presented a theory as to why the show was a failure in his 2009 interview with Adam Guettel: Rodgers's age caused him to doubt himself and, in turn, produce subpar music—music that Guettel, Rodgers's grandson, deemed "a medium to bad imitation of my grandfather's music."

"The discouraging and shocking thing to me was that he felt the well had run dry," Sondheim said. "I could not get him to re-write. He would write something, and I'd say, 'Look, can we just work on the release a little bit?' He couldn't do it. He had to write a whole new release if anything, but he resisted re-writing anything at all. I realized it wasn't me, it was himself. He really was afraid that he would wake up the next morning and have no ideas. Maybe that was true and maybe it was not, but he had convinced himself of that... That's what made it impossible."⁷⁴

Rodgers wrote the music for three other shows that made it to Broadway after *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, which premiered when Rodgers was sixty-two: *Two By Two* (1970, lyrics by Martin Charnin), *Rex* (1976, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick), and *I Remember Mama* (1979, lyrics by Charnin and Raymond Jessel). Like *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, none of those three shows were outright

⁷³ Howard Taubman, "Theater: 'Do I Hear a Waltz?' Opens," *The New York Times*, March 19, 1965, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/19/specials/sondheim-waltz.html>.

⁷⁴ Sondheim, "The Art of Songwriting with Stephen Sondheim and Adam Guettel."

flops, but they certainly weren't hits. Additionally, unlike the shows Sondheim wrote with Lapine in his fifties and sixties, Rodgers' later outputs are hardly remembered despite the celebrity of their composer; none of them has received a major revival. *Two By Two*, a theatricalization of the Biblical account of Noah and the ark, was perhaps most notorious for star Danny Kaye's bizarre nightly antics after returning to the show from a brief injury-related absence. "He began improvising his own lines and singing in the wrong tempos," Rodgers wrote in his memoir. "He even made a curtain speech after the performances in which he said, 'I'm glad you're here, but I'm glad the authors aren't.'"⁷⁵

The composer whose melodies in *Carousel*, *The King and I*, and *South Pacific* defined a generation of the musical theatre was relegated, in his senior years, to the types of shows where audiences politely clap and laugh as they spend most of the evening pondering their dinner plans. The man who composed the legendary tunes "Oh What a Beautiful Mornin'" and "Some Enchanted Evening" was, twenty years later, behind a show most notable for its injured star maneuvering the stage with crutches that he also used to goose the female performers.⁷⁶ Was Rodgers doomed to such a pitiful fate as he aged? Sondheim didn't think so. "It's possible that if [Rodgers], instead of writing with an old conservative like me, had really allied himself with John Guare, [for example], it's conceivable that, since he changed his style so much from Hart to Hammerstein, he might very well have found a Guare style. Because God knows the talent was there, but how do you do that?"⁷⁷

That illustrates precisely why collaborating with Sondheim (twenty-eight years Rodgers's junior) or the other younger writers Rodgers worked with late in his career like Harnick (twenty-

⁷⁵ Richard Rodgers, *Musical Stages* (New York: Random House, 1975), 323.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 323.

⁷⁷ Sondheim, "The Art of Songwriting with Stephen Sondheim and Adam Guettel."

two years his junior) didn't keep Rodgers creatively young: nothing changed about Rodgers's style during their collaboration. Sondheim's "old conservative" style purely as a lyricist wasn't different enough from Rodgers's style as a composer to exact any sort of discernable change in the way that a playwright like Guare may have been capable. It's the same reason that working with librettist John Weidman,⁷⁸ just three years older than Lapine, didn't affect Sondheim in the way that writing with Lapine did; as Sondheim wrote of the two playwrights, "They are only three years apart in biological age, but in theatrical terms John is my generation."⁷⁹ Andrew Lloyd Webber had a similar experience.

For two decades, Lloyd Webber could do almost no wrong on either the West End or Broadway. He exploded the box office with two mega-musicals in the 1980s: *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which premiered on Broadway in 1971 as Lloyd Webber's first show in New York, remains one of the most innovative and popular scores in the theatre canon, as does *Evita* (1979). *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* spawned multiple commercially successful sit-down productions and tours in addition to a film adaptation starring Donny Osmond in 1999. *Sunset Boulevard* (1994) lost money, but only arguably only because of its inordinate production costs; it ran for two years and received a critically acclaimed revival in 2017.

Then, Lloyd Webber turned fifty and, during the seventeen years that followed, his success began to greatly diminish. *The Music of the Night* became flat. Much like his idol (Rodgers), Lloyd Webber didn't start churning out flops but, instead, politely received shows with very little longevity that came nowhere close to the success of his earlier hits. How many

⁷⁸ Sondheim's work with Weidman (*Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins*, and *Road Show*) stands apart from the rest of his musicals in numerous ways. Rick Pender characterized that trio of shows as "a tryptic focused on the impact of the American Dream" in *The Stephen Sondheim Encyclopedia* (pg. 594)

⁷⁹ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 4.

theatre fans have even heard of *The Woman in White*, *Whistle Down the Wind*, or *The Beautiful Game*? Not even Lloyd Webber's *Phantom* sequel, *Love Never Dies*, could turn his luck around; it never made it to Broadway. Throughout the two decades between Lloyd Webber's fiftieth birthday and the reversal of fate he saw in 2015 with *School of Rock*, he worked with multiple members of younger generations, including librettist Charlotte Jones on *The Woman in White*. Yet, like Rodgers, none of those collaborations had any discernable impact on Lloyd Webber's style or tone; they didn't infuse the composer's work with anything fresh or new, and his shows continued to plod in a style reminiscent of musical theatre in the 1980s.

That changed for Lloyd Webber when he wrote and produced *School of Rock*, which fell victim to the 2016 *Hamilton* tidal wave during awards season but ran for over three years and 1,300 performances; it was the first Lloyd Webber show since *Phantom* to recoup its investment.⁸⁰ Unlike the shows Lloyd Webber wrote in the preceding twenty years, *School of Rock* was completely fresh and full of youth, thanks less to its authors (librettist Julian Fellowes is barely younger than Lloyd Webber) than its cast, comprised almost entirely of quadruple threat children who played various instruments live. And, unlike with *Merrily We Roll Along*, the inclusion of literal youth in *School of Rock* did not lead to audiences being confused. As Ben Brantley observed in his review for *The New York Times*, "Andrew Lloyd Webber has entered his second childhood, and it turns out to be a good career move... Youth, it would seem, is rejuvenating."⁸¹ With sharp direction from Laurence Connor, the show was fun and innovative, using a completely original storytelling technique—having on-stage child musicians play along with the band in the pit.

⁸⁰ Lloyd Webber, *Unmasked*, 484.

⁸¹ Ben Brantley, "Review: 'School of Rock' Teaches the ABCs of Power Chords," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/07/theater/review-school-of-rock-teaches-the-abc-of-power-chords.html>.

Lloyd Webber's next show, *Cinderella*, looks like it will see a similar fate; it premiered on the West End in 2021 and received multiple highly positive reviews, including one from *The New York Times* in which Matt Wolf said the show "feels like a happy corrective to grim times: Cinderella arrives at the ball, by which point the audience has had one, as well."⁸² Lloyd Webber's primary collaborator for *Cinderella*, in addition to lyricist David Zippel, was librettist Emerald Fennell, an Academy Award winner who Lloyd Webber gave credit for having "written something truly exciting and original" for the stage.⁸³ Fennell, thirty-seven years Lloyd Webber's junior, infused *Cinderella* and, in turn, the show's composer with vibrance, energy, and youth.

That's precisely the effect Lapine had on Sondheim, and it's the primary reason why the pair's relationship worked so well. It wouldn't have been enough for Sondheim to merely start writing with someone younger than him while remaining thematically, stylistically, and tonally the same; if he'd done that, his fate likely would've been the same as that of Rodgers or any of the other composers who failed to infuse their work with any sort of youthfulness as they aged. That isn't what happened, though. Rather, Lapine kept Sondheim fresh and forced him to consider new ideas and different ways of producing music and lyrics for the theatre. He also, by giving Sondheim the chance to write for Off-Broadway, gave the composer a spark in his personal life at a time when many of the mavericks of his profession, like Rodgers, ran out of steam.

⁸² Matt Wolf, "Andrew Lloyd Webber's Delayed 'Cinderella' is Worth the Wait," *The New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/19/theater/andrew-lloyd-webber-cinderella.html>.

⁸³ Chris Wiegand, "Killing Eve's Emerald Fennell and Andrew Lloyd Webber Create New Cinderella," *The Guardian*, Jan. 10, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jan/10/killing-eve-emerald-fennell-andrew-lloyd-webber-new-cinderella-west-end>.

“YOU’RE NEW, OR ELSE YOU’RE THROUGH”

Interestingly, Lapine, now seventy-three, said he doesn’t worry about this with his work. Though his newest show, *Flying Over Sunset* (2021), featured a score composed by 48-year-old Tom Kitt, Lapine’s first choice for a collaborator was much older. He initially offered the project to Sondheim, who said no.

“I don’t really clock age and, oddly enough, and I don’t think Sondheim did either,” Lapine said. “What Steve was speaking of was my style of writing. He learned about musicals from Hammerstein, I did my first musical with Finn—a generation thing. And certainly, his shows are timeless in their invention and subject matter.

“I worked with Tom Kitt when I did a workshop of *Next to Normal*⁸⁴ with him and Brian [Yorkey]. I just liked the breadth of his talent and his chill demeanor and wanted to work with him again.”⁸⁵

Sondheim may not have tracked his age, as Lapine suggested, but he never stopped trying new things. The final Broadway production of a Sondheim show during his lifetime was director Marianne Elliott’s 2021 staging of *Company*, in which the gender of several characters, most notably that of the central character was swapped (the male “Bobby” became female “Bobbie”).⁸⁶ Elliott approached Sondheim about the idea and, while many writers would have balked at the notion of their work changing in such a radical way, Sondheim, though skeptical, listened. After some persuading by Elliott and a successful workshop in London, Sondheim gave the idea the green light. He began rewriting lyrics that needed adjustment, not only because of the gender swaps but also because of cultural changes since *Company*’s 1970 premiere; for example, “the Seagram’s building” became “the Chrysler building,” and Sondheim switched “clutching a copy of *Life*” to “clutching a copy of *Time*.” The result was a fresh, exciting

⁸⁴ *Next to Normal* (music by Kitt, book and lyrics by Yorkey) won the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Its Broadway production was directed by Michael Greif of *Rent* and *Dear Evan Hansen* fame.

⁸⁵ James Lapine, email message to author, March 2, 2022.

⁸⁶ Additionally, Sondheim rewrote a straight female character from *Company*’s original incarnation as a gay male in the new version.

production that looked more like a new musical than a period piece. Why was Sondheim willing to make such drastic alterations to his work some fifty years later?

“My feeling about the theater is the thing that makes it different from movies and television is that you can do it in different ways from generation to generation,” Sondheim said. “Just as you can have many different actors play Hamlet, you can have many different ways of looking at a show without distorting it. Also, shows change their life according to what is going on in the world around them. *Assassins* now has an entirely different and ominous quality to it because of what’s going on with guns and violence. *Company* has a different flavor than it had before feminism really got a foothold.”⁸⁷

If there’s any message in Sondheim’s career for other aging theatre artists wanting to stay youthful, it’s that: be willing to reinvent and, at any cost, rediscover the fountain of youth. Doing so isn’t easy; Sondheim, himself, said it takes courage. It’s also not guaranteed to yield success. It is, however, worthwhile. If theatre writers refuse to infuse their work with something new and youthful in their senior years, their fate will almost certainly be like that of Rodgers or 1998-2015 Lloyd Webber. If they’re willing to try new things, though, they very well may continue to flourish as their hair turns gray. As Sondheim wrote in his poignant lyrics for “Putting it Together,” *Sunday in the Park with George*’s second-act showstopper, “you’re new, or else you’re through.”

⁸⁷ Michael Paulson, “‘I Was Skeptical.’ How Sondheim Agreed to Change ‘Company,’” *The New York Times*, Dec. 1, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/theater/company-stephen-sondheim-marianne-elliott.html>.

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