Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021), giant of American musical theater

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Stephen Sondheim, who died one week ago at the age of 91, left a lasting mark on American musical theater. He devoted his musical talent, his genius at wordplay and above all his creative passion and determination into producing 19 full-length musicals, writing both music and lyrics for all but three of them. Many of his shows are regularly revived on Broadway and elsewhere as well.

Sondheim was born in Manhattan into a well-to-do family on March 22, 1930. He showed musical interest and ability as early as the age of four. By a stroke of good fortune, for both Sondheim and the future of musical theater, these abilities were later nurtured by the famous lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, a family friend. Sondheim's parents' marriage had dissolved, and he had a very strained and bitter relationship with his mother for his entire life. Hammerstein became a strong influence on the young Sondheim.

While he was still in his 20s, Sondheim achieved fame as the lyricist for *West Side Story* (1957), with music by Leonard Bernstein and choreography by Jerome Robbins. His lyrics were welcomed as a major contribution to this reimagining of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* within the multiethnic working class of mid-20th century New York City. The musical became an immense and enduring classic. A new film version by Steven Spielberg, in fact, is set to open in the US on December 10.

The lyricist was next recruited to work with veteran composer Jule Styne on another successful musical, *Gypsy* (1959), loosely based on the memoir of striptease artist and burlesque queen Gypsy Rose Lee.

Sondheim considered himself not only a lyricist but also a composer—indeed, as he later insisted, primarily a composer. The first of the shows for which he wrote both words and music, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, starring the incomparable Zero Mostel, arrived in 1962. The musical, inspired by farces by the ancient Roman playwright Plautus, was another smash hit, running for about two years on Broadway. Like *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, it soon became a successful film.

After several efforts that were far less commercially successful, Sondheim embarked on a somewhat different stage of his nearly 70-year-long career. Although rooted in the tradition of musical theater that had developed in the early 20th century, the rest of Sondheim's musicals were more experimental—intellectually challenging, versatile and distinctive, both in subject matter and in their combination of words and music.

The decade of the 1970s, in collaboration with Hal Prince as director, saw the creation of *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976) and *Sweeney Todd* (1979). Later he worked with writer and director James Lapine in developing *Sunday in the Park With George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987) and *Passion* (1994). During this period, Sondheim also wrote film music, contributing to Warren Beatty's *Reds* (1981), as well as to the latter's *Dick Tracy* (1990).

Although none of the later musicals became smash successes on the scale of *West Side Story* and his other early work—some in fact did not recoup their original investment—Sondheim was determined not to allow commercial considerations to fundamentally alter his conceptions. Nor would he ever again consider giving up his dual role as composer and lyricist. In this latter respect he followed Cole Porter, Irving Berlin and only a few others, and was virtually unique in the last half of the 20th century.

The collaborations with Prince during the 1970s were all critical successes. Sondheim and the musicals he created were nominated for dozens of Tony and Grammy Awards over the years. Sondheim himself won eight Tonys, eight Grammys, an Academy Award and a Pulitzer Prize, among other honors. He was equally if not more well-known on the London stage.

The testimony of his collaborators and colleagues is a measure of Sondheim's impact. Over many decades, he served as a mentor, collaborator, teacher and inspiration for generations of young performers. About 18 months ago, just as New York City became an epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, a 90th birthday celebration was mounted for Sondheim online. The performers, singing a few dozen of Sondheim's most favorite and beloved songs, included Bernadette Peters, Patti Lupone, Audra McDonald, Donna Murphy, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Brian Stokes Mitchell, Michael Cerveris, Raul Esparza, Mandy Patinkin and many others. Other past performers closely associated with Sondheim include Barbara Cook, Elaine Stritch and Angela Lansbury.

Those who have appeared in Sondheim musicals speak with passion about what they learned from him. Patinkin, the well-known actor and singer, worked with Sondheim during the development of *Sunday in the Park With George*, the musical loosely based on the creative process of French pointillist painter Georges Seurat as he worked on the painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." Patinkin told a journalist for the *Financial Times*, after Sondheim's death, that the composer always wanted a full exchange of ideas with performers, and was generous with his time and suggestions.

Patinkin related a personal story of an hour-long conversation he had with Sondheim during rehearsals for the show. They discussed a song for George and his mother. Alluding to the well-known fact that Sondheim's mother had treated him badly, Patinkin discussed the profound way in which Sondheim showed that struggle and pain can become part of the creative process.

"One of the amazing things about Steve is how he took that pain and set about, for the rest of his life, using the piano, music, the word as the battlefield for his existence, to turn that darkness into light," said Patinkin. "That darkness, that trouble, was in the end a phenomenal gift to him. And it was a lesson to me for my life too, that the difficult moments in life are not the tragedies, they're the gifts. He changed my life, he defined my life, he gave me the words to speak and to sing for the rest of my life."

Those who worked with Sondheim considered his lyrics and his struggle to develop the characters in his musicals a great gift. They responded to the sincerity as well as the originality of his words. Sondheim wrote two books on the subject of his lyrics: *Finishing the Hat* (2010) and *Look, I*

Made a Hat (2011).

As Patinkin observed, "It's the clearest, simplest music to sing in the world because it's so emotionally clear. You never have to struggle to learn the words because they make such profound sense. When it's written from the gut and it's truthful and honest and generous, those are the things that you never have to look at twice."

In all of Sondheim's musicals there are examples of what this creative process produced. "Send in the Clowns," from *A Little Night Music*, is by far Sondheim's most famous song, recorded by Frank Sinatra, Judy Collins and literally hundreds of others. Its title, as Sondheim explained, is a theater reference to the fact that when things are not going well on stage, it is time to bring on the comedy.

In "I'm Still Here," from *Follies*, a Broadway veteran reminisces about the Depression ("I've slept in shanties, guest of the WPA, but I'm here…") and the Hollywood blacklist ("Been called a Pinko, commie tool…"; "I've gotten through Herbert and J. Edgar Hoover…"), among other experiences. "Finishing the Hat," from *Sunday in the Park With George*, is another prime example of Sondheim's craft. The famous painter acknowledges that art has to come first in his life, forcing him to disappoint those he loves ("But the woman who won't wait for you knows that / However you live / There's a part of you always standing by / Mapping out the sky, finishing a hat / Starting on a hat, finishing a hat / Look, I made a hat / Where there never was a hat").

It is particularly true that Sondheim's music cannot be separated from his lyrics. The songs have greater impact when seen within the context of the shows themselves. Some criticized him for subordinating music to words—as one critic said, for being "too influenced by his rhythmic facility and the fast syllabic flow of his clever lyrics." This is somewhat ironic, considering that Sondheim was quoted as preferring the work of composition to that of writing lyrics.

The composer was undoubtedly influenced, in one fashion or another, by more general trends in music, including classical music, during this period. While of course he did not reject tonality, he shared some of the criticism current during the 1950s, which perceived the music of the Romantic and the late Romantic eras as outdated or sentimental. Sondheim's musical language was generally more spare and austere, compared to those of predecessors like Hammerstein's famous partner Richard Rodgers.

There is plenty of variety and indeed also beauty in Sondheim's music, although in most cases it is not on the surface. His songs range from the ballad-like, to bolder and brassier numbers, to minimalist-influenced songs in *Pacific Overtures* and *Into the Woods*. A wide range of human emotions are expressed, including bravado, joy, determination, regret and resignation. "Broadway Baby," from *Follies*, is an irresistible paean to Broadway itself, and to the determined struggle of those who don't achieve all their dreams. "The Ladies Who Lunch" (a phrase that has become instantly recognizable since it was first used by Sondheim 50 years ago), from *Company*, brilliantly satirizes the empty lives of wealthy upper-middle-class women.

There was a grain of truth in Sondheim's criticism of some of his predecessors. The work of the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hammerstein and many others had earned its fame and was often revived (and continues to be revived today), but the old form could not simply be repeated under new circumstances. Sondheim grasped this, and, as Patinkin explained, turned his own pain into something new and meaningful.

The composer-lyricist was constrained, however, by the objective conditions in which he worked. He was writing for an urban middle-class audience, including many who drew pessimistic conclusions from the upheavals of the 60s, the end of their hopes following the assassinations of John and Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. This layer, which was enriching itself by and large, began to turn inward, and Sondheim's talent also went in this direction.

A comparison with the career of Sondheim's greater and somewhat older contemporary, Leonard Bernstein, is instructive. Bernstein matured in the mid-to-late 1930s and was politically shaped by the struggles of the working class. Sondheim matured in the late 1940s and early 50s, a time of relative retreat and political reaction symbolized by the rise of Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism, and was never politically active, as Bernstein was. Both composers, however, were inevitably affected by the political shifts that took place in the late 1960s and afterwards. Bernstein became increasingly discouraged and fell largely silent as a composer, while Sondheim found his voice with shows that featured personal and psychological themes.

Sondheim's musicals feature disappointment, even bitterness at times. Undoubtedly this reflected wider problems in social life. As he put it, "What makes 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.' Unfortunately that's seldom the kind of material that attracts me…" While Sondheim certainly dealt with issues arising from his family history, his reaction to changes in the broader political and social situation reinforced a pessimistic outlook. His musicals have been described with the word "ambivalence," reflecting a certain skepticism about knowing the world.

In the first three of his big successes of the 1970s, he turned to the exploration of personal problems—marriage, commitment, and personal fulfillment. In *Company*, the central character is a 35-year-old man whose reluctance to commit to a personal relationship is probed, alongside the marital problems of his friends. In *Follies*, veterans of an old musical revue patterned on the famous Ziegfeld Follies (1907-1936) reminisce and exchange regrets, also amid romantic complications. *A Little Night Music* takes its romantic entanglements directly from another source, Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film *Smiles of a Summer Night*.

Somewhat later, Sondheim occasionally focused on historical themes, with occasionally weak results. In *Pacific Overtures*, he dealt with the forced opening of Japan to the West in the 1850s. In *Assassins* (1990), he explored, in the form of a revue, the lives of killers and would-be killers of US presidents. The limitations of Sondheim's approach are illustrated by the following bit of nonsense from "The Ballad of Booth," the song on the assassin of Abraham Lincoln: "Every now and then / The country / Goes a little wrong / Every now and then / A madman's / Bound to come along…"

Sweeney Todd, from about the midpoint in Sondheim's career, is among the most famous of his musicals, and justly so. It has often been described as having operatic moments or qualities. It is also characterized by a somewhat dim view of humanity—a bit like Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* with almost nothing of its pointed social commentary.

In basing himself on the musical theater tradition, Sondheim stood apart, and correctly so, from the steady commercialization of musicals typified by the seemingly endless run of Andrew Lloyd-Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, as well as similar banal vehicles like *Miss Saigon* and *Les Misérables*—shows that relied on spectacle, superficial themes and music that assaulted the senses. They represented a turn away from the serious, clever, witty and politically aware shows that had appeared, at least part of the time, during most of the 20th century.

One more aspect of Sondheim's life and career should bear mentioning, although it has been passed over in the many articles in response to his death. Like some others of his generation, people whose formative years predated the backwardness that has been relentlessly promoted for many years, he does not appear to have participated in the identity politics campaign of recent decades. When a revival of *Porgy and Bess* was brought to Broadway in 2012 and it was suggested it would "improve" the original, Sondheim, then more than 80 years old, wrote a strongly worded letter to the *New York Times* in defense of the Gershwins and their opera.

Today it has become almost obligatory in certain cultural circles to refer to *Porgy* as “problematic,” since its creators, white men, allegedly could not understand the story of oppressed African Americans. Sondheim did not agree. As the WSWS reported in 2012, “Sondheim objected to the insinuation that *Porgy and Bess* was a seriously flawed work, that George and (lyricist) Ira Gershwin did not understand their own characters, and also to reports that the story line was being changed to provide for a happy ending in the new version.”

There is also the matter of Mr. Sondheim’s sexual orientation. Although he was openly gay for most of his adult life, this was an afterthought as far as his public career was concerned. Gay men are certainly heavily represented among Sondheim’s fans, but primarily as part of the urban middle-class audience for Broadway theater. Sondheim was a musician who happened to be homosexual, and not the other way around.

The musical legacy of Stephen Sondheim is on balance a serious one. While it is impossible to determine what he would have accomplished under conditions of mass social struggles, he creatively and intelligently reflected some of the currents of his time. This period saw much political ferment, but it remained heavily influenced by middle-class conceptions, and waned as rapidly as it had developed. Sondheim’s work, noted especially for the passionate response it has won from artists themselves, stands out amid much mediocrity in the last few decades of the 20th century. His best and most distinctive musicals will find an audience in the future.