

Stephen Sondheim: More than a Merry Melody Maker

by Phillip W. Weiss

Henry Miller wrote, “An artist is always alone if he is an artist. No, what the artist needs is loneliness.” Then does Stephen Sondheim, the winner of seven Tonys, an Academy Award, seven Grammys, a Pulitzer Prize and Kennedy Center honors, meet Miller’s definition of an artist? The answer to this question is an emphatic and resounding YES! Stephen Sondheim is one of the greatest, if not THE greatest, lyricists in the history of American theater. His accomplishments are legendary; his artistry apparent in his work.

The process whereby Sondheim formulates his lyrics is discussed in his autobiographical work, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. As the title suggests, Sondheim has much to say about his career and the people he has worked with and learned from over the years to develop and hone his craft. He talks about his friendships and professional interactions with some of the greatest and most iconic figures in the history of American musical theater – Oscar Hammerstein, Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents, Jule Styne – and the profound influence each of them has had on his work. But ultimately it has come down to working by himself on his couch at home, or in some other similarly solitary venue, to write the lyrics required of him for a show, and often succeeding, without fanfare or grand-standing, to create something new, unique, beautiful and

meaningful, something entirely his, hence meeting Miller's definition of an artist. As Sondheim himself points out, from time to time others have provided him with ideas for songs, and like a painter with a paint brush and canvas or a sculptor with a chisel and stone, Sondheim, using a pencil and note pad, has created a compendium of lyrics so vast and of such high quality as to give one cause to pause and ask, "How did he do it?" Each lyric is a carefully crafted literary masterpiece of incomparable quality, a work of art in the fullest meaning of the word, replete with subliminal meanings that stir the emotions.

Let's examine three of Sondheim's lyrics discussed in his book: "Maria" from *West Side Story*, "Everything's Coming up Roses," from *Gypsy*, and "Getting Married Today" from *Company*. The structure of the lyrics contains perfect rhymes and built-in rhythms; the material readily lends itself to musical interpretation. Further, Sondheim's use of phraseology evokes images that stimulate the imagination and keeps the audience emotionally engaged. In addition, they are viable commercial products too; in short, they sell. As the title of Irving Berlin's song "There's No Business Like Show Business" denotes, entertainment is a business and Sondheim is able to merge the two – the "show" and the "business" – into works that are not only popular but are of the highest artistic quality, which in today's market-driven culture is a rarity, with quality invariably being the piece sacrificed in the quest for the "all-mighty

buck.” Instead of pandering to the market, Sondheim, motivated by an unshakeable devotion to artistic integrity, has produced lyrics that are literary masterpieces, which touch the very core of our being, like beautiful and priceless diamonds, causing one to gasp in awe. Thus, in “Maria” Tony is elated; he is announcing to the world that he has met someone special; that his premonition that something good will be happening to him has come true, that he has found love; he is ecstatic and overcome with joy. (“Maria, Maria, I just met a girl named Maria, and suddenly I found how wonderful a sound can be.”) And because Tony is elated, we are elated; we feel his feeling. The same applies to “Everything’s Coming Up Roses.” In this song, Rose is proclaiming her optimism. (“Curtain up, light the lights, we got nothing to hit but the heights, we’ll be swell, we’ll be great, I can tell, can’t you wait, that lucky star I talk about is due.”) For her, the world is her oyster; she is convinced that things will turn her way because life is theater and she is destined to play center stage and be a star. And the audience believes it too. In “Getting Married Today,” Amy’s anxiety over the prospect of actually marrying Paul, her resistance stemming not from lack of love but from her feelings of low self-esteem, becomes apparent.

Pardon me, is everybody here?
 Because if everybody's here,
 I want to thank you all for coming to the wedding,

 I'd appreciate your going even more,
 I mean you must have lots of better things to do,

And not a word of this to Paul,
Remember Paul? You know, the man I'm gonna marry,
But I'm not, because I wouldn't ruin
Anyone as wonderful as he is—

But I thank you all
For the gifts and the flowers.
Thank you all,
Now it's back to the showers,
Don't tell Paul,
But I'm not getting married today.

Amy feels that she is not good enough for Paul; she believes she will ruin him, thus, lacking confidence in herself; she wants to flee, like a scared rabbit. Amy is frightened and may be ruining her life, and we are concerned.

All three songs draw us into the story and make us feel that we are part of these characters' lives, which makes hearing these songs an even more enriching experience. Once heard, these songs are never fully forgotten; their melodies enter our brain and meander through the recesses of the mind like a seemly spirit seeking sanctuary deep within the crevices of our psyche, reminiscent of a theme from another Irving Berlin song, "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody":

A pretty girl is like a melody,
That haunts you night and day,
Just like the strain of a haunting refrain,
She'll start up-on a marathon,
and run around your brain.

Not surprisingly, Berlin is one of Sondheim's role models. (203)

Of the three lyrics, "Getting Married Today" is in certain respects the most complex, not only in terms of structure and length, but also in terms of the mood being conveyed. Whereas "Maria" and "Tonight" establish a mood of happiness and anticipation, "Getting Married" creates a completely different mood, one that is negative, frantic, and disturbing, and could alienate an audience. Sondheim averts this problem by employing a fast tempo coupled with a lively and energetic staccato delivery by the actress performing the number which succeeds in keeping the audience's attention.

Sondheim's book also includes candid comments on his feelings about collaboration. For Sondheim, collaboration is more than just an intellectual or vocational process. Rather, it is like being part of a surrogate family; having lived alone his entire adult life, and having been an only child living in a single-parent home with a mother who was not nurturing, the collaborative process becomes a means for meeting his need for companionship, intimacy and support. Sondheim writes:

I have to work with someone, someone who can help me out of writing holes, someone to feed me suggestions when my inventions flags, someone I can feed in return. (30)

Thus, for Sondheim, collaboration means being able to nurture others and to be nurtured in return.

Also of particular interest are Sondheim's insights into the relationship between the director and lyricist. According to Sondheim, the person on

whom the lyricist most depends for inspiration is not the director but the writer. Yet it is the director who has the final authority in deciding how material provided by the lyricist will be used. Sondheim writes: “The director can throw my ideas out and often does, but at least he has a blue print to work from” (29). Accordingly, for Sondheim, the relationship between director and lyricist must be managed with great care so as to ensure that lyrics are properly used and not rejected.

For the theater aficionado or entertainment professional, *Finishing the Hat* will be an indispensable resource and a treasured companion; for the novice new to the work of Sondheim, it will be a gateway to an exciting and wonderful world where fantasies and dreams are transformed into reality, guided along the way by one of the most respected, honored, and cherished lyricists and creative artists in history, Stephen Sondheim.

Work Cited

Sondheim, Stephen. *Finishing the Hat – Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010. Print.