

# Excerpts from *Finishing the Hat* by Stephen Sondheim

Compiled by Phillip W. Weiss

**Content Dictates Form**

**Less is More**

**God Is in the Details**

**All in the service of Clarity (xv)**

**Theater lyrics are not written to be read but to be sung, and sung as parts of a larger structure; musical comedy, musical play, revue - "musical" will suffice. (xvii)**

**Lyrics, even poetic ones, are not poems. (xvii)**

**Some lyrics, awash with florid imagery, present themselves as poetry, but music only underscores (yes) the self-consciousness of the effort. (xvii)**

**Music straitjackets a poem and prevents it from breathing on its own, whereas it liberates a lyric. Poetry doesn't need music; lyrics do. (xvii)**

**Music doesn't understate, that is not its job; its job is to emphasize and support the words or, as in opera, dominate them. (xviii)**

**When it comes to theater songs, the composer is in charge. Performers can color a lyric with phrasing and rubato (rhythmic fluidity), but it's the melody which dictates the lyrics rhythms and pauses and inflections, the accompaniment which sets the pace and tone. (xviii)  
(xviii)**

**Under spoken text, music is background, atmosphere and mood, nothing more. In song, music is an equal partner. (xviii-xix)**

**Poets tend to be poor lyricists because their verse has its own inner music and doesn't make allowance for the real thing. (xix)**

**Most lyrics written in my generation and the generations before me do not make for good reading. (xix)**

**But it was Hammerstein ... who made the first serious attempt to focus on the unique feelings of individual characters in specific situations through the lens of realistic, although period, vernacular .... (xx)**

Even today, a lot of people (including critics) deplore the loss of what they see as the lighthearted silliness of the old musicals. For songwriters and playwrights, however, involving an audience in a story with singing characters who are more than skin deep is much more interesting work. (xx)

The vast majority [of lyrics] lie dead on the page until sung, at which point they spring instantaneously to life (some of them, anyway). (xxi)

Some songs, of course, are small scenes in themselves. (xxii)

Writing plays is, in my view, the most difficult of literary arts. A play has to be packed and formally controlled as a sonnet, but roomy enough to let the actors and the stagecraft in. (xxiii)

The immediate distinguishing difference between lyrics and dialogue is the conscious use of rhyme. (xxv)

The most effective kind for story-telling theater song is the first, so in what follows, when I say "rhyme," I mean "true rhyme." (xxv)

A true (or perfect) rhyme consist of two words or phrases whose final accented syllables sound alike except for the consonant sounds which precede them (home/roam, convey/dismay). (xxv)

An identity matches not only the final syllables but also the consonants that introduce them (motion/promotion). (xxv)

A near (false) rhyme comes in two flavors, assonance and consonance. In assonance, the vowel sounds are alike, the subsequent consonants different (home/alone, together/forever). Consonance is the reverse: the consonant sounds are alike, but the accented vowels are different (buddy/body) - this is sometimes called a slant rhyme.

There is nothing wrong with near rhymes. (xxv)

"I hate all true rhymes. I think they only allow you a certain limited range ...." (xxv)

The notion that good rhymes and the expression of emotion are contradictory qualities, the neatness equals lifelessness is ..."the refuge of the destitute." (xxvi)

A good lyric should not only have something to say but a way of saying it as clearly and forcefully as possible - and that involves rhyming clearly. A perfect rhyme can make a mediocre line bright and a good one brilliant. A near rhyme only dampens the impact. (xxvi)

Oscar Hammerstein wrote simple lyrics with "feelings that come across" and every rhyme he used was a perfect one or an identity. (xxvi)

Poets rarely have to deal with plot; novelists never have to deal with actors. A playwright has to deal with both and still make the result immediate enough to grip an audience for, on the average two and half hours. (xxii)

A perfect rhyme snaps the word, and with it the thought, vigorously into place, rendering it easily intelligible; a near rhyme blurs it. (xxvii)

Using near rhymes is like juggling clumsily; it can be fun to watch and it is juggling, but it's nowhere near as much pleasure for an audience to see the balls - or in the case of the best lyricists, knives, lit torches and swords - being kept aloft with grace and precision. (xxvii)

The most people West Side Story is about racial prejudice and urban violence, but what it's really about is theater: musical theater, to be precise. It's about the blending of mood, music, lyrics and, most important, dance into the seamless telling of a story. (25)

Part of what West Side Story was about collaboration. (25)

Many of the lyrics in West Side Story suffer from a self-conscious effort to be ... "poetic." (26)

Of all the things I gleaned from working with Arthur, the most pointed was an awed respect for the book writer. (28)

The most valuable asset a theater songwriter can have, apart from talent, is a good book writer. (28)

The book writer is the source from which the song writer ... takes character, diction, tone and style, and sometimes dialogue. (28)

I stage in my mind every song I write. (29)

Most of all, what I learned from the collaboration on West Side Story is how much I need a collaborator. Even if I were a skilled playwright, ... I wouldn't write my own librettos. I have to work with someone, someone who can help me out of writing holes, someone to feed me suggestions when my invention flags, someone I can feed in return. (30)

Hammerstein rarely has the colloquial ease of Berlin, the sophistication of Porter, the humor of Hart and Gershwin, the inventiveness of Harburg or the grace of Field, but his lyrics are sui generis, and when they are at their best they are more than heartfelt and passionate, they are monumental. (37)

The problem here was how to write a love song for two people who have just met. (37)

Gypsy was my first chance to write lyrics for characters of considerable complexity. (55)

Knowing something the character doesn't gives audiences the superior feeling of omniscience and helps to maintain their interest in the story; they wait in suspended anticipation of the inevitable moment when the character will be forced to face the truth. (56)

Often what is not being said {subtext}, the counterpoint underneath a scene, is what keeps the scene alive. Counterpoint, being a musical idea, is exactly what the composer can supply.

One the things that still astonishes me after all these years is the extent to which talented performers can bring songs to life - even songs good enough not to need much help - if you only leave them some space, some interstices to fill. (57)

I had been trained by Oscar Hammerstein to think of a song as one-act play which either intensifies a moment or moves the story forward. The song can have a sense of urging the show ahead even when it doesn't actually propel the plot: the principle is that the character singing undergoes an emotional change or expresses a feeling so powerful that it leads to an action. (79)

He [Oscar Hammerstein] tried to avoid writing lyrics that confined themselves to one idea, the traditional practice off virtually every lyricist in the theater and the standard function of songs before he came along and revolutionized the way writers thought about musicals. (79)

Unadorned by scenery and costumes, unrehearsed, sung (by me) with no refinement and only approximate pitch, the show was stripped naked, plain for all of us to see at both its best and worst, as well as the dangerous territory in between. (81)

But in that large, empty room we could see the show [A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum] for what it was; the scenes and songs that worked were greeted with enthusiastic guffaws (actors and authors are great audiences), the ones that didn't with pained glances, the in-between with tolerant smiles. (82)

The rawness of this adhoc reading, this unprotected headlong plunge into the unknown, and most of all the knowledge that there was time to fix things before going into rehearsal, gave us a burst of energy and confidence that eventually made the show as good as it turned out to be. (82)

Source: Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 2010. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2010.