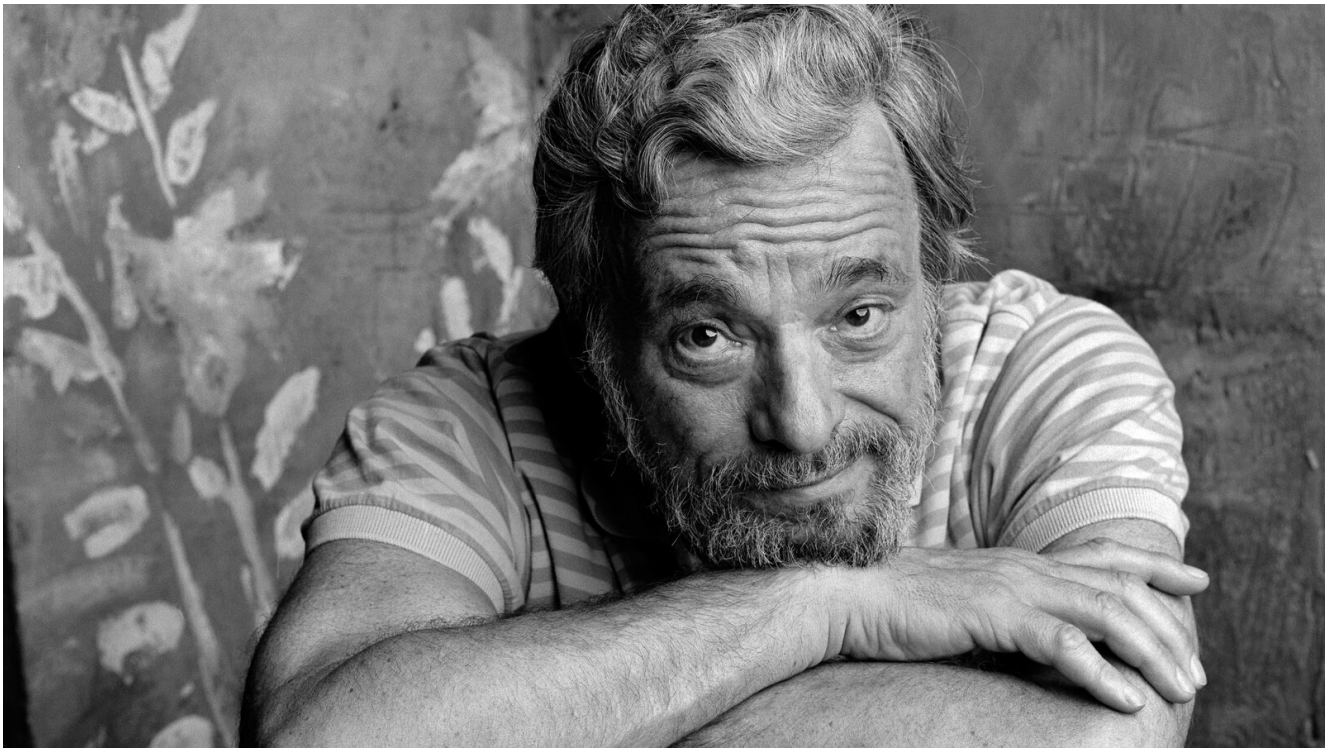
Sondheim: All the Things He Was



Must it all be either less or more? Either plain or grand? Is it always or, or is it never end?

A musical giant, the most controversial major figure, leading musical theater composer in modern American music, and the man who is said to have reinvented the American musical, died on November 26, 2021, aged 91. With his 15 musicals for the stage, Stephen Sondheim was a sophisticated figure and product of Broadway, though not the most commercially successful one and never sought commercial success. On his death ,lights on Broadway were dimmed for one minute in his honor.

Sondheim, born of Jewish parents, who manufactured dresses in New York City, gay, which he did not publicly acknowledge until middle age, he was an aficionado of puzzles, wrote crossword for journals, loved whodunits; his original ambition was to become a mathematician, and became, as he said, a composer largely by chance.

As composer, Sondheim was the heir of the masters of the Great American Songbook, the canon of the most influential and most played American popular songs and jazz standards, mostly written for Broadway musicals, Hollywood films, and Tin Pan Alley from the early 20th century through the 1950s and which have stood the test of time. Yet, even the most popular of Sondheim's scores do not have the wide impact of melodies by those masters, George Gershwin, (Our Love is Here to Stay), Irving Berlin, (Always), Rodgers-Hart, (My Funny Valentine,) Harold Arlen, (Over the Rainbow), Cole Porter, (Night and Day), and Jerome Kern, (All the Things You Are).. Interestingly, Sondheim was generous, appreciative, and fair towards those masters. Regarding the composer of "Over the Rainbow" and "World on a String," he spoke of Harold Arlen's ineffable qualities, a kind of yearning and sort of sadness.

Yet, as the contemporary lyricist Michael Colby has written, none of these musical theater masters had Sondheim's range, intricacies, and psychological depth, or range of unexpected subjects that went far beyond traditional ones, and which embraced ravages of time and beauty, in *A Little Night Music*, stream of consciousness in *Company*, revision of fairy tales in *Into the Woods*, westernization of Japan in *Pacific Overtures*, which mixes kabuki and vaudeville, violence in the U.S. *Assassins,* cannibalism in *Sweeney Todd,* the equivalent of Seurat's pointillism in *Sunday in the Park with George.*

Unlike composers of traditional popular musicals of his era, *Oliver, Hello Dolly, Fiddler on the Roof*, Sondheim, who began as a lyricist in *West Side Story* and *Gypsy,* did not compose linear musicals, created permutations, had no one musical style, and no repetition. His style, akin to the work of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill, is that of the "concept musical," one of concept and theme, whose book and score are structured, non-linear, around conveying a theme or message, rather than a narrative plot. The emphasis is on style,

message, metaphor, experiment in form, not on plot. If Sondheim is not alone in adopting this approach, the best example of it is his musical *Company* in 1970, examining the reflections of a middle aged single man in New York. Content he said dictates form.

Sondheim himself explained, "I always start with motifs, …partly because of the influence of Milton Babbitt who taught long line technique of musical development, whereby small musical ideas are expanded into large structural forms.

Further he explained. "Ambivalence is my favorite thing to write about because it is the way I feel, and I think the way most people feel." Sondheim links this with his confession of unexpected significant movements in his life, movements which happen entirely by chance, "Move your little finger and you can change the world." This outlook is perhaps best illustrated by *Follies*, in 1971, concerned with choices and their consequences, and *Assassins* which lacks a linear plot.

This approach is what makes his music too intellectual, not hummable music, for many people. The constant criticism is people do not leave the theater humming or whistling his songs.

Yes, he did write some songs, *Send in the Clowns, Being Alive, Someone in a Tree, Marry me a little, Too many mornings,* but none of them has the resonance as those Great American Songbook composers from Irving Berlin to Cole Porter and Jerome Kern.

Sondheim traced his first admiration for theater musicals to seeing the show, composed by Jerome Kern, Very *Warm for May,* when he was nine, and thought it was thrilling. Did it influence him, psychologically or otherwise? Sondheim was one the few people who saw the show which was a flop, with a flimsy, unbelievable, haphazard plot. Presented in November 1939, it lasted for only 59 performances and

sometimes very few were in the audience, only 20 on the second night. More pertinent, the lyricist was Oscar Hammerstein II.

After the very unpleasant divorce of his well to do parents, Sondheim at age 10 left NYC for Doylestown, Pennsylvania. There he became friendly with the son of Hammerstein who became his surrogate father, somewhat of a mentor and influence on Sondheim's early career. What may have most important for Sondheim is that the musical flop had included what many consider the greatest item in the Great American Songbook, *All the Things You Are*, a complex and daring song, with effective key changes, unusual modulations, a strong melody, a logical chord structure ,a verse that begins in a different key from the chorus, which is full of dissonances. Sondheim never wrote anything as hummable as this superb ballad.

Sondheim's music is most criticized for lacking humanity and affection, and his musicals were less successful ones than those of his contemporaries such as Marvin Hamlisch, and Andrew Lloyd Webber, composer of brash and bold and very popular musicals, in which everything turns out to happy in the end, and the audience goes out thinking "that's what life is all about ." Sondheim countered "that's seldom the kind of material that attracts me. No opulent spectacle like *Phantom of the Opera."* Oscar Hammerstein II believed there was a bright golden hazy in the meadow. Sondheim did not. There were no happy endings, if any at all, life was messy, ambiguous, a mixture of anxiety and joy. And art, as he said, in *Sunday in the Park*, isn't easy.

There was no finality in Sondheim's work. In *Into the Woods* he wrote, "sometimes I stand in , the middle of the floor, not going left, not going right." Yet sometimes, as if by chance, his work has relevance as in *Assassins* with its implicit warning of guns and the ordinary people who are killers. Assassins from John Wilkes Booth to John Hinckley who shot Ronald Reagan in 1984, were ordinary people, not like Macbeth

or murderers of Julius Caesar.

Sondheim in a forthright characterization of his work confessed he had been influenced by Professor Robert Barrow at Williams College, who was “cold and dogmatic, and took all the romance away from art. Instead of the muse coming at midnight and humming some enchanted evening, music was constructed. It wasn’t what other people wanted to hear, but it turned me into music major.”

Sondheim was a loner in several ways. He was one of the few, like Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Frank Loesser, and Jerry Herman who, after his early start, wrote both words and music. He received many awards, and he can be honored for his musicals on an amazing variety of topics, and different time signatures and forms. His music was not something to make my heart beat the faster, but he was adept an many musical forms. He is important for his lyrics and original ideas. How refreshing in this Hip Hop era that the language of his characters, if not always lovable, was literate, erudite, full of complex ideas. He did change musical theater.