Stephen Sondheim
1930-

(Full name Stephen Joshua Sondheim) American composer, lyricist, and scriptwriter.

The following entry presents criticism on Sondheim's dramatic works from 1978 through 2002.

INTRODUCTION

Widely considered to be one of the foremost composers and lyricists of modern musicals, Sondheim has revolutionized American musical theater, although his work has been only moderately successful at the box office. His productions typically include themes of disillusionment, despair, and disappointment—elements that were rarely incorporated into musicals before his era. In his work, Sondheim has spurned such long-standing traditions of musical theater as catchy melodies and linear plots, and instead worked introspective and thematic material into his compositions. Some critics have characterized his lyrics as stylistically sophisticated, while others have deemed them cold and unromantic. However, most drama scholars agree that Sondheim's innovative stagings, alternative dramatic resolutions, and explicit commentary on prominent social issues have expanded the possibilities for musical theater.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on March 22, 1930, Sondheim was the only child of an affluent New York City couple. His father was a successful clothing manufacturer and skilled pianist, and his mother was a talented dress designer. Sondheim's parents divorced when he was ten years old. Many critics consider Sondheim's dysfunctional relationship with his mother to be a major source of dark themes regarding love and marriage apparent in much of his work. Sondheim and his mother moved from New York to a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, three miles from the family of Oscar Hammerstein II, a renowned Broadway composer and lyricist, with whom he eventually became acquainted. As their relationship deepened, Hammerstein became a surrogate father figure for Sondheim, encouraging the boy's developing musical ability and influencing his later work. After two years at the New York Military Academy, Sondheim completed his secondary education at a Quaker boarding school and entered Williams College. Upon graduation in 1950, he accepted a two-year fellowship that allowed him to study with composer Milton Babbitt, another major influence on his work, and later moved to live with his father in New York City. There he met many influential artists who helped him to launch his career, including composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, who hired him to write lyrics for West Side Story in 1957. After completing the lyrics for Gypsy (1960), Sondheim composed his first original musical score and wrote the lyrics for the 1962 production of A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. In 1970 he collaborated with George Furt and Harold Prince to produce Company, which garnered national attention. In 1990 Sondheim accepted a visiting professorship at Oxford University, where he lectured on musical theater. In 1999 he premiered Saturday Night, a musical he wrote in 1955. Sondheim has won more Tony Awards than any other composer. Other awards for his work include the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Sunday in the Park with George (1984).
GENERAL COMMENTARY

Thomas P. Adler (essay date winter 1978)


[In the following essay, Adler utilizes a number of critical approaches, including generic, formalist, and thematic, to assess Sondheim’s dramatic philosophy as well as his contribution to American musical theater.]

In 1974 Stephen Sondheim and Burt Shevelove collaborated on a musical adaptation of *The Frogs*, which does for Aristophanes pretty much what they had done for Plautus eight years earlier in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. In it, Dionysos believing that we “lack passion” in our lives, journeys to Hades to bring Shaw back to earth; but after hearing a lively competition between him and Shakespeare, Dionysos decides that, instead of Shaw, who “stand[s] for the great abstractions: conscience, virtue, integrity” (*TF* [*The Frogs*], p. 116) what the world and theatre most need is “a poet . . . to lift [them] out of their seats” (*TF*, p. 120) so that they will be actively inspired to do something about salvaging the earth they have abused. In lyrics to a song entitled “The Sound of Poets” that might well express their writer’s own artistic credo, the Chorus charges the poet to

Bring a sense of purpose,
Bring the taste of words,
Sondheim has got great satisfaction from the extended sequences in *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George* (his 1985 show). He likes to pull together the recurring melodic and lyric cells in his music. 'It satisfies both things that I demand, linear dramatic development and song. One thing I find alienating about most operas is the endlessness of certain sequences that go past their dramatic value. It may be fine for an audience that is there to wonder at what the human voice can do. But I am very text oriented. I won’t sit through an evening just to hear a voice. It has to be the voice and a drama that I can get into.'

The two principal characters of *Sweeney Todd* conspire in mass murder. However, the motives that prompt them to their common venture differ considerably, and these differences make intelligible much of the play’s dramatic movement. The play reveals the terms upon which these disparate characters can unite without sacrificing their individual perspectives; at the culmination of the drama, both are presented as punished, in appropriately different ways, for their complicity.

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The story opens with Benjamin Barker’s return to London under the pseudonym “Sweeney Todd.” For fifteen years, he had been imprisoned in a penal colony because of false charges by Judge Turpin, who had coveted Sweeney’s wife, Lucy. But with the fortuitous assistance of Anthony, a young sailor, Sweeney has escaped.

Sweeney is bitter about his unjust imprisonment. He expresses his contempt for the society that allows such injustices to occur, and he is cynical about the ability of a good man to prosper. But these passions do not initially prompt him to plan acts of revenge. The matters of his primary concern are the circumstances of his wife and his daughter, Johanna.

An old acquaintance, Nellie Lovett, proprietor of a local meat pie shop, shatters Sweeney’s hopes with her tale of the merciless evils perpetrated by Judge Turpin and his Beadle—Lucy’s rape by the Judge, her taking of poison, and the Judge’s subsequent adoption of Johanna. Mrs. Lovett’s tale leads to Sweeney’s resolve to exact vengeance: “Let them quake in their boots—Judge Turpin and the Beadle—for their hour has come” (19).

Sweeney is now ready to act, but his passion is focused upon the two offending individuals. For him to become a mass murderer, Sweeney’s passionate resolve must become generalized. This occurs only after the failure of Sweeney’s initial plan for revenge.

Sweeney establishes a reputation as a “miraculous barber” in order to lure the Judge and the Beadle as customers (75). Circumstances favor his plan. Johanna has displayed unexpected reluctance to the Judge’s proposal of marriage, a reluctance that is attributed by the Beadle to the Judge’s “looking less than [his] best” (74). The Judge subsequently pays a visit to Sweeney’s barber shop, in order to increase his chances of success with Johanna. Sweeney attributes the visit to divine workings: “Providence is kind” (84). The Judge, seated in the chair with Sweeney’s razor at his throat, unwittingly provides Sweeney with his opportunity to exact vengeance. But Sweeney does not immediately inflict the fatal cut, choosing to draw out the pleasure of his revenge. The apparent approbation by “Providence” of
Cornell, Drucilla. "What is Ethical Feminism?" In Benhabib, 75-106.


Garber, Steven. The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief & Behavior During the University Years. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 1996.


Criticism


Collection of critical essays.


Full-length critical study of Sondheim's musicals.


Describes Harold Prince's collaboration with Sondheim.


Evaluates Sondheim's dramatic achievement.


Applies William G. Perry Jr.'s theory of intellectual and ethical development to Into the Woods.


Investigates the influence of the composer Aaron Copland on Sondheim.

Additional coverage of Sondheim's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Vol. 11; Contemporary Authors, Vol. 103; Contemporary Authors New Revision Series, Vols. 47, 67; Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vols. 30, 39, 147; DISCovering Authors Modules: Dramatists; Literature and Its Times, Vol. 4; and Literature Resource Center.