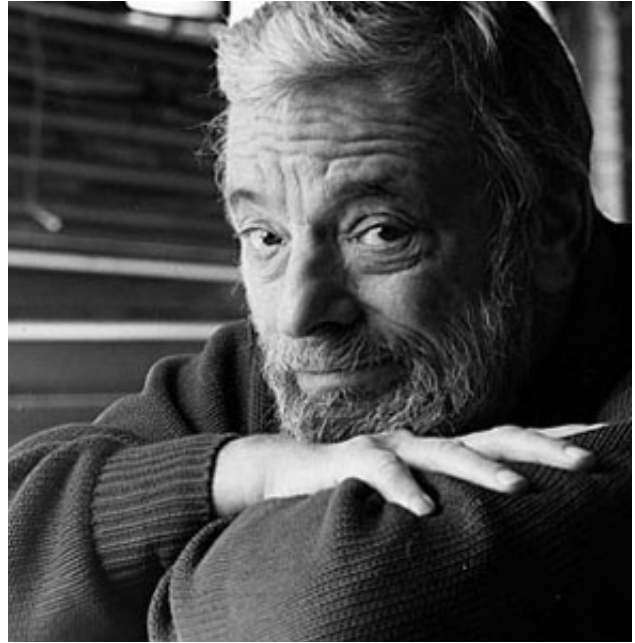


THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: STEPHEN SONDHEIM



Learning the Art of Making Art: Oscar Hammerstein's Influence on Sondheim

Sondheim's works for the musical theatre were influenced by British operettas, classical music, as well as many of the Broadway composers and lyricists who came before him. Most directly, however, it was lyricist and book-writer Oscar Hammerstein II who had an impact on the young Stephen Sondheim. The teenaged Sondheim's parents had divorced, and his mother Janet moved with her son to rural Pennsylvania, close to the Hammerstein farm. Sondheim became friends with James Hammerstein and grew close to Oscar and Dorothy, who served as surrogate parents for the young man. "I wanted to be whatever Oscar was," Sondheim has said. "I think if Oscar had been a geologist, I would have become one too."

At age fifteen, Sondheim penned a musical spoof for the high school he attended, George School, called *By George!* The budding musical theatre artist thought the show was brilliant and brought the piece to Hammerstein, thinking, Sondheim later said, that he would "be the youngest composer to ever make it onto Broadway." Oscar was less impressed with the piece than Sondheim had hoped, but saw real talent in the writing. He spent the day going through the script with the young artist, showing him every spot, from the first stage direction to the final curtain, where he had stumbled. He then schooled him in the foundations of the book musical, including how songs had to come out of the scene preceding them and how they had to move the plot and take the character from point

A to point B. Sondheim later said, "I learned more about musical theatre in an afternoon with Hammerstein than most people do in a lifetime."

Oscar then laid out an ambitious plan to give the young Sondheim a full education in musical theatre writing: the young man had to write a series of four different musicals. The first show had to be based on a well written play. The second musical was to be adapted from a badly constructed play. The third piece had to be taken from non-musical source material (Sondheim chose to adapt *Mary Poppins*). The fourth musical was to be entirely original.

Sondheim spent over four years on Hammerstein's assigned "curriculum" in musical theatre writing. During that time, Oscar also gave Sondheim his first opportunity to experience a Broadway musical up close and personal: he gave him a summer job as a gofer on the musical *Allegro*. Within a few years of completing the fourth musical on Hammerstein's list, Sondheim, who thought of himself primarily as a composer, was offered the job of writing lyrics for *West Side Story*. Sondheim wanted to turn it down, but Oscar advised him to take the gig, telling him that it would be invaluable to work with Arthur Laurence, Jerry Robbins, and, most of all, composer Leonard Bernstein. The next year Oscar gave Sondheim what proved to be more sage advice when he counseled him to again take a job as a lyricist, this time for *Gypsy*. With two Broadway credits under his belt, Sondheim was then able to go on to do what he really wanted: to write music *and* lyrics for his own Broadway shows.



Jonathan Larson



Duncan Sheik



Stew



Adam Gwon



Jason Robert Brown

Children Will Listen: Broadway Artists Inspired by Sondheim

“STEPHEN SONDHEIM IS THE HISTORY OF MUSICAL THEATRE.” —JOHN LAHR

Sondheim’s innovative shows, written over a span of forty years, have dramatically affected the lyricists and composers of musical theatre that came after him. Sondheim’s expansion of the musical allowed the form to sport deconstructed plot lines, darker subject matter and more ambiguous endings. Perhaps most importantly, however, Sondheim allowed the artists who came after him to feel they could bring *anything* to the musical stage. Composer-lyricist Jason Robert Brown was clearly inspired by Sondheim’s darker work when he created *Parade*, which tells the story of a Jewish man living in the South who is wrongly accused of murdering and raping a young girl who works in his factory; the show ends with a mob lynching the man. Jason Robert Brown later took a cue from Sondheim’s various unconventional plot structures in writing *The Last Five Years*, in which one character goes forward while the other goes backward in time.

Another composer-lyricist, Jonathan Larson, was not only influenced by Sondheim’s work – Sondheim actually served as his mentor. *Rent*, Larson’s one major work before his untimely death, would never have been possible without Sondheim’s legacy. Sondheim had brought a dark, gritty milieu to the musical stage, particularly in *Sweeney Todd*, allowing Larson to later bring a group of impoverished artists living in the grip of the AIDS epidemic on the Lower East Side into a Broadway musical. Also, Larson chose a rock sound for his show, a style Sondheim himself would never work in, but that he nonetheless made a possibility for the composers of the 1990s and 2000s. Many shows from the last few years, including Duncan Sheik & Steven Sater’s *Spring Awakening*, Stew’s *Passing Strange* and Adam Gwon’s *Ordinary Days*, all owe a debt to Sondheim’s unparalleled work in advancing the musical form.