GENIUS OF SONDHEIM

COURSE SYLLABUS

Instructor: Bonnie Weiss

Note: This schedule is meant as a general guide. If a significant amount of discussion ensues around a particular topic, material scheduled for the end of one class may be moved to the beginning of the following class.

CLASS 1  Segment A: A Taste of His Genius and Early Influences

We’ll begin with a superb video clip that gives an overview of his life and we'll explore Sondheim's unparalleled gift as a theatre composer for giving voice to the most complex dilemmas of the human condition.

We'll explore the impact of Sondheim's early mentors - musical theatre lyricist/librettist Oscar Hammerstein and classical composer/teacher Milton Babbitt. We'll also view a rare performance of a song 19-year old Sondheim wrote for a college musical. We'll then view and listen to songs from his first musical, Saturday Night (unproduced - until it's recent London and off-Broadway runs). And we'll hear Sondheim, himself, singing an amazing song he wrote to celebrate the birth of a friend's first child.

Segment B: Early Breaks - Sondheim as a Young Lyricist

We'll look at how working as a young lyricist with Leonard Bernstein (West Side Story) and Jule Styne (Gypsy), Richard Rodgers (Do I Hear a Waltz) and Mary Rodgers (The Mad Show) affected his work and his career.

Segment C: Early Triumphs & Failures – Sondheim as Fledgling Composer

From West Side Story on Sondheim was embraced by his critics as a supremely gifted lyricist. Yet he had a great deal of difficulty being accepted as a composer. Here, we'll take a look at his early efforts in this realm, why some succeeded and some failed. We'll also explore why it took so long for him to be equally recognized as a supreme master of both lyrics and music. Songs viewed or heard in this segment will be from A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (including a discarded number), Anyone Can Whistle and The Frogs, a musicalization of the Aristophanes play. A segment from Evening Primrose (his 1966 musicalization of a televised science fiction drama) will demonstrate his gift for writing soaring melody.

CLASS 2  Segment A: The Sondheim-Prince Years – 1969 to 1973

From 1969 to 1981 Stephen Sondheim and producer/director Hal Prince were a brilliant and unstoppable team in the development of "the concept musical". This collaboration challenged Sondheim to do some of his most innovative and diverse work, which won him and Prince three consecutive Tony Awards (unprecedented in the history of the Tonys). We’ll take a close look at these very different works: “Company”, “Follies” and “A Little Night Music” and discuss what makes each of them unique.

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Segment B: A side trip to Japanese Kabuki

We'll then look at Sondheim's collaboration with librettist John Weidman on what arguably was Sondheim's greatest challenge musically speaking - the composing of a believable and compelling score with a distinctly Japanese flavor for the musical Pacific Overtures. we'll have a chance to view a superb video clip in which Sondheim demonstrates, with three cast members from the original Broadway company, how he developed the song "Someone in a Tree".

CLASS 3: The Sondheim-Prince Years 1978 to 1981

Many music and theatre critics and musical theatre buffs (your instructor included) consider Sweeney Todd the pinnacle of achievement in the history of the Broadway musical. San Francisco Chronicle critic Rob Hurwitt has called it “a work of towering genius”. We'll delve into what makes this multi-layered tale of a barber gone mad so utterly compelling and moving. Included will be a TV interview of Sondheim describing how he created Todd's "Epiphany" sequence, and how the music he composed for this moment in the play, perfectly matches the emotional dynamics of a mind shattering and going mad. We'll also listen to Sondheim's recent comments on the musical at a press conference held last July during the Sweeney Todd in Concert run at the San Francisco Symphony.

Merrily We Roll Along is the troubled show that ended the Sondheim-Prince collaboration. Yet in it Sondheim produced some of his warmest, most hummable ballads and gave it a jazzy feel that let him express yet another aspect of his amazing versatility. We'll listen and learn what made and still makes this 1981 flop a cherished collector's item for Sondheim fans. And has resulted in ___ Broadway and London revivals.

CLASS 4: Segment A: The Sondheim-Lapine Years

With brilliant director/librettist James Lapine, Sondheim forged a partnership that allowed him to develop his musical & lyrical ideas in a whole new manner, which he continues to use to this day.

We'll look at this new way of working for Sondheim and how it influenced his creation of arguably his second greatest musical theatre piece the Pulitzer-Prize-winning Sunday in the Park with George. We'll demonstrate how Sondheim was able translate the visual art form of French Pointillist painter Georges Seurat into a compelling musical form.

We'll also look at how Sondheim transformed the simple children's fairy tale ditty into a work of art for Into the Woods. And we'll watch a performance of one of his most lyrically dazzling pieces and how it relates to his gift as a creator of crossword puzzles for the New Yorker and New York Times. We'll end this segment with his unique musicalization of anguished obsession vs. unconditional love in the exquisite 1994 tone-poem-like musical Passion.

Segment B: Sondheim on Film

In this segment we'll look at some of the writing Sondheim has done for the films “Stavisky”, “Reds”, “The Seven Percent Solution” and “Dick Tracy”

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CLASS 5: Segment A: Assassins”: A Savvy Look at the Ultimate Social Misfit

One of the most consistently recurring figures in Sondheim musicals is that of the social misfit. They appear in “West Side Story”, “Anyone Can Whistle”, “Sweeney Todd” and “Passion”. But his most depthful look at this of personality occurs in his 1990 musical “Assassins” (book by John Weidman). We’ll examine how Sondheim gives astute and riveting expression to the internal and societal forces that drive troubled people to take out their rage on United States Presidents.

Segment B: From “Wise Guys” to Gold” to “Bounce” to “Road Show”

For over 10 years Sondheim worked on a musical based on the lives of the Mizner Brothers, early 20th century builders, developers and con men. It’s gone through several transformations. Previously called "Wise Guys", “Gold” and “Bounce”, its newest incarnation is called “Road Show”. We’ll listen to songs from the various stages of this musical, see a rare video from “Gold” and hear a selection from its the most recent New York production, the Public Theatre’s 2010 staging of “Road Show”.

Segment C: Sondheim as Teacher, Mentor and Coach

In addition to being a consummate composer and lyricist, Sondheim is also a highly effective teacher and mentor. Here, we’ll watch as he shows both seasoned actors and young students how to approach his music and lyrics and perform his work to maximum effect.

Segment D: Satirizing Sondheim

Sondheim has said that he truly relishes and appreciates songwriters who cleverly parody his work. Here you’ll see some devilishly funny send-ups like “A Dress Like That”, “Another Hundred Lyrics”, a hilarious comparison between Sondheim and Lloyd Webber, and more.

Finale

We’ll end with segments from recent Sondheim interviews in which he expresses his feelings about his own accomplishments. This will be followed by scenes from six Sondheim musicals as performed at the 2002 Sondheim Celebration at the Kennedy Center, Washington, DC.

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