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CAREFUL THE SPELL YOU CAST

DISILLUSIONMENT AND MATURITY IN THE MUSICAL THEATRE OF
STEPHEN SONDHEIM.

BENJAMIN JAMES FRANCIS

GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE

THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Benjamin James Francis, hereby declare that this thesis and the work in it is my own. Where I have referred to the works of others this is clearly stated.

Signed

BEN FRANCIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis deals with Stephen Sondheim's work from a dramaturgical perspective. It argues that a major theme in Sondheim's work is the journey through disillusionment towards maturity. The thesis will use the word 'maturity' to mean the acceptance of the uncertainty of life, and the refusal to give in to cynicism or despair. This attitude is explicitly expressed in the songs 'Now You Know' from *Merrily We Roll Along*, 'Move On' from *Sunday in the Park with George* and 'Finale: Children Will Listen' from *Into the Woods*.

In 'Now You Know' Mary sings the lines: 'It's called letting go your illusions,/ And don't confuse them with dreams' (Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, Virgin Books 2010: 397). This thesis will argue that this process of separating illusions from dreams can be found in most Sondheim shows. Illusions are wrong dreams, such as Sally's obsessive love for Ben in *Follies*, Sweeney Todd's yearning for his idealised Lucy which blinds him to the woman she has become in *Sweeney Todd* or Cinderella's desire for the Prince in *Into the Woods*, and must be discarded in order for the character to find their real dream.

In the early shows the characters simply learn to endure the failure of their dreams and carry on (*Gypsy*, *Follies*) or take responsibility for themselves and die (*Sweeney Todd*). Later, in the shows written with John Weidman the characters are trapped in a state of disillusionment brought about by the failure of national ideals (*Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins*, *Road Show*) whereas in the shows written with James

Lapine, they discover positive goods: art in *Sunday in the Park with George*, family and community in *Into the Woods*, and romantic love in *Passion*. This shows that in Sondheim's work disillusionment is sometimes a necessary experience, which leads to maturity.

INTRODUCTION

One of the main themes in the work of Stephen Sondheim is the move past disillusionment towards maturity. As Mary sings in 'Now You Know' from *Merrily We Roll Along*: 'It's called letting go your illusions,/And don't confuse them with dreams' (Sondheim, 2010, 397). As Mari Cronin writes in her essay 'Sondheim: The Idealist': 'For Sondheim however confronting such concerns [such as a mid-life crisis or desire for revenge], even if unsettling, is not to be shunned. It leads to solace and maturity.' (Collected in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, edited by Joanne Gordon, Garland Publishing Inc. 1997: 144.) In the same book there is an essay by Leonard Fleischer on *Pacific Overtures* where he writes

Underlying this surface theme, [of Japan's metamorphosis], however, is a broader Sondheim concern which, despite the diverse source materials of his musicals and his collaboration with different book writers, seems to permeate his work. Such a preoccupation involves a movement from a state of innocence, self-delusion, or avoidance of reality to a cathartic shattering of illusions, and/or a more mature acceptance of the world (or people) as it (or they) really exists.

("More Beautiful Than True" or "Never Mind a Small Disaster": The Art of Illusion in *Pacific Overtures*', collected in the *Casebook*, 108-109.)

He later goes on to add: 'What seems evident, therefore, is that the price of disillusionment is a painful and heavy one, but necessary if reality is to be faced and truth told' (Ibid, 113). By a close textual analysis of the published books and lyrics of the shows the thesis will elucidate this theme of disillusionment and how it develops over Sondheim's work across the years.

This theme is so important to Sondheim because he values idealism: idealism in the sense of dreams that transfigure the lives of the people who have them, in the tradition of the Broadway musical. Many of his characters, as are many characters in

musical theatre, are defined by their dreams: dreams that go beyond everyday reality, dreams that might be tarnished by commerce with the rough day-to-day world:

Sweeney wishes to be reunited with his family; Frank, Charley and Mary want to be creative artists, as do Seurat and his descendant; Rose wants to be a star; Fosca wants to be loved.

For some characters the dream is a person that they idealise: Sally idealises Ben in *Follies*; Sweeney, Mrs. Lovett and Judge Turpin all idealise different characters in *Sweeney Todd*; Cinderella and The Baker's Wife both idolise The Prince in *Into the Woods*; John Hinckley dreams of marrying Jodie Foster and Squeaky Fromme dreams of rescuing Charles Manson in *Assassins*; Fosca idolises Giorgio in *Passion*, and Wilson Mizner's mother lives vicariously through her son in *Road Show*. With the single exception of Fosca, none of these characters find happiness through living vicariously with their dream character.

In a Skype question session with Sondheim I put to him the idea that a central theme in his work is that of coming through disillusionment and not giving in to it. He replied that disillusionment was a part of most stories, part of 'to use an overused word, the journey of the characters.'¹ It is true that it would hardly be possible to write a story that didn't involve disillusionment for some character at some point. Yet Sondheim's work goes much further than that. The spectre of ultimate disconnection, loneliness and death haunts the characters in his shows. They face the possibility that, as the Witch says in 'Last Midnight' from *Into the Woods*, everybody is: 'Separate and alone' (Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, Virgin Books, 2011: 98). Indeed, he often

¹ Sondheim in conversation with the author. 26 July 2014.

writes about the death of feeling. 'The Road You Didn't Take' from *Follies*, 'Last Midnight' from *Into the Woods*, 'Every Day a Little Death' from *A Little Night Music*, 'Good Thing Going' from *Merrily We Roll Along*: all are examples of characters singing about feelings that are dying, perhaps because of the character's apathy, or just because of the inevitable passing of time. Entropy, the end of everything, is expressed in Joanne's 'Everybody dies' in 'The Ladies Who Lunch' from *Company* (Sondheim, 2010: 193). This decay into chaos, which we can see embodied in the decaying theatre in *Follies* or the piles of junk that surround the dead body of Addison Mizner in *Road Show*, is a threat inherent in many Sondheim shows, but one which is never triumphant.

It is important to establish at the outset that, despite Sondheim's engagement with the theme of disillusionment, he is not fundamentally an ironist. Habitual irony is a form of defence against disillusionment, but not one that Sondheim relies on. As he has said of his relationship with the producer and director Harold Prince:

The truth is that Hal was the ironist (witness *Evita* and *Lovemusik*, among others, both of which he encouraged and directed), and I the romantic (*Sunday in the Park* and *Passion*, for example), which is one of the reasons that our collaboration was so good.

(Sondheim, 2010: 166)

Sondheim has never written a show as satirical, or indeed as nihilistic, as, for example, Kander and Ebb's *Chicago* (1975), where show business, justice and life and death are all nothing but a big sell. If Sondheim writes about disillusion it is precisely because he is a romantic: only a romantic can be disenchanted, because only a

romantic (in the popular sense in which Sondheim uses it) has dreams that can be destroyed.

Sondheim is in fact much closer in tone to Oscar Hammerstein than he is to Kander and Ebb. This fact has been downplayed by some critics: Anne Marie McEntee going so far, in her essay 'The Funeral of *Follies*' as to say:

Follies ushered in a new paradigm in the American musical theater, a treatment of the disillusioned American culture which jeered at the happy ending of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical rather than supported it.

(Collected in *Reading Stephen Sondheim*, ed. Sandor Goodhart, Routledge, 2000: 89-90).

This astonishing mis-reading, that assumes that all Rodgers and Hammerstein shows have interchangeable happy endings, seems to come from an assumption that Sondheim is hostile to Rodgers and Hammerstein. This ignores the huge influence that Hammerstein has had on Sondheim: an influence that Sondheim, even when he has been critical of elements of Hammerstein's work, has always acknowledged.

The work of Hammerstein will be referred to several times as it provides an illuminating contrast with that of Sondheim: both in its similarity and in its differences. Hammerstein admired naivete. As Nellie Forbush sings in 'A Wonderful Guy': 'And they'll say I'm naïve/As a babe to believe/Any fable I hear from a person in pants!' (Hammerstein, 1949: 87.) Her naivete means that she rejects the self-preserving cynicism of her friends: it is a source of strength. But for Sondheim naivete is a source, if not of weakness, then certainly of vulnerability. Sweeney Todd sings twice that he was 'naive', at the beginning of the show he sings that he was

'naive' to trust in mankind in general, and then at the end, he sings the same phrase while cradling his dead wife. The second time he has realised too late that Mrs. Lovett had lied to him. The word 'naïve' is set apart from the rest of the phrase, and sung on a low note that rises to a high keening. It is full of regret. Similarly Fosca says that Giorgio is naïve to speak to her of happiness. She is angry with him for his tactlessness. Later she says that she was 'naïve' when falling for the fraudulent Count Ludovico. Fosca's naivete drives her into an illness that undermines her strength and contributes to her dying young. Being disenchanted is necessary because otherwise you are vulnerable to liars and cheats, such as Mrs. Lovett or Count Ludovico. In Hammerstein's world one comes back *from* disillusionment and, though knowing that the world isn't perfect, one keeps a hold of first principles: the ability to express love and to form communities. In Hammerstein's world, if one trusts one's heart and one's instincts, one does not go far wrong.

This means that Hammerstein's audience usually know what the right choice is for the characters: it is clear that Laurey should marry Curly and not Jud, that Billy should treat Julie better, and that Lt. Cable should learn not to be prejudiced: the drama in the shows comes about because the characters are often blinded by pride or vanity. Sondheim, on the other hand, puts his characters in an uncertain world where choices are not clear cut. Should Dot leave George in *Sunday in the Park with George*? Should the giant's wife be killed in *Into the Woods*? One cannot simply, as one can with Hammerstein, trust one's heart and one's feelings. Sondheim's characters come *through* disillusionment, abandoning naivete *and* cynicism. They will always

have to live with uncertainty. As the newly-formed family sing at the end of *Into the Woods*:

ALL Into the woods – you have to grope,
 But that's the way you learn to cope.

(Sondheim, 2011: 105.)

One important difference between Rodgers and Hammerstein and Sondheim is that in a Rodgers and Hammerstein show, if you sing you are generally telling the truth. Even the villains tell the truth in song: for example Jigger Cranin mocks the pompousness of Enoch Snow in 'Stonecutters Cut It on Stone' from *Carousel*. But in many of Sondheim's shows characters lie to themselves, and to other people, through song: in *Gypsy* Madam Rose uses song to manipulate everyone around her; in *Follies* Ben sings a love song to Sally, but he is idly dreaming of her younger self; Mrs. Lovett sings to Sweeney to lead him to believe that his wife is dead when she isn't; Charles J. Guiteau sings that he killed President Garfield as an agent of God but inadvertently reveals his real motivation: that he desires fame.

If deceit is a possibility in Sondheim's world it follows that disillusion is sometimes *necessary*, so that one can face the truth. In *Gypsy*, in the song 'Rose's Turn', Rose is forced to admit the fact that she hasn't made Louise a star for Louise's sake, she has done it for herself. Rose's world collapses around her as she realises that she herself will never be a star and this realisation enables her to have a (troubled) reconciliation with her daughter. In *Follies* Sally must realise that Ben is a fantasy

figure in her own mind, and in reality a charlatan, before it is possible for her to put her life back together (whether or not she manages to do this is left ambiguous). In *Into the Woods* Cinderella wishes for a Prince, who, she later discovers, has cheated on her. Instead of becoming bitter she learns that her original dream was false and that she must leave, not only her sisters' house, but the enchanted palace as well. With the mature characters, disillusionment leads to a greater understanding. Because in Sondheim's world true happiness involves letting the world *in*, not shutting it out: the dream is integrated with reality.

Echoing this theme of disillusionment sometimes the shows themselves seem to break down by the admission of elements that would usually have been suppressed. We see a musical comedy revue where a singer cracks-up in mid-song because he realises that he has wasted his life (*Follies*), or a fairy tale where the Narrator is killed by one of the characters (*Into the Woods*), or a revue where a Balladeer is forced from the stage by a band of angry murderers (*Assassins*). This fragmenting of the formats means that in some, but not all, of Sondheim's shows there is a deliberate disparity between the story being told and the form it uses. *Follies* and *Into the Woods* comment on musical revues or fairy tales while, conversely, *Sweeney Todd* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* do not comment on melodrama or farce. That is to say *Sweeney Todd* and *Forum* do not bring in material that is incongruous to melodrama or farce, while *Follies* shows a character having a nervous breakdown on stage, something unthinkable in a Ziegfeld Revue, and *Into the Woods* has random death and destruction, items which are totally absent, not from the original tales, but from the Americanized popular versions of them.

Sondheim's shows dramatise what happens when people's dreams meet the real world. Many of his characters (Madam Rose, Sweeney Todd, Sally Durant) break down as their dreams are destroyed or proved to be unworthy. Others (Ben Stone, Kayama, Franklin Shepard, Addison Mizner) betray their dreams for a false idea of worldly success. But Dot, the younger George, and Cinderella learn from their disillusioning experiences. Sondheim and his collaborators show how it is possible to let go one's illusions and not confuse them with dreams.

The thesis will analyse all of Sondheim's musicals, and a film and a play script, but it will focus mainly on the shows where this disillusionment/moving on theme is a central dilemma for the characters. The shows will be dealt with in chronological order. There are many other groupings one could use, but precisely because there are so many others it would be difficult to choose one. One could divide the shows according to the book-writer: shows with Lapine, shows with Furth, shows with Weidman, but one could equally group together the shows with Harold Prince which were produced on Broadway, and the later shows which were produced off-Broadway. Rather than be unjust to one or other of Sondheim's collaborators, a straightforward chronological approach seems the fairest method to adopt.

This thesis will not attribute every element of the show solely to Sondheim: he is, as he was called in the title of a conference held on his work, a collaborator and an auteur.² Directors such as Prince or James Lapine, and book-writers such as George Furth, Hugh Wheeler, James Goldman, and again James Lapine, have all been

² 'Stephen Sondheim: Collaborator and Auteur' held on November 25-27 2005 at Goldsmiths College.

essential to the success of the shows, and significant contributions have been made by performers, arrangers, choreographers and so on. But Sondheim has, since the success of *West Side Story*, been in the position to choose his projects and his collaborators: he has never had to take on a project he felt unsure about, and has only ever expressed regret at writing lyrics for *Do I Hear a Waltz?* which he took on out of a sense of obligation to the wishes of Oscar Hammerstein. Throughout Sondheim's career one can discern his unique sensibility, and a set of thematic concerns that recur with different collaborators. Throughout this thesis I shall be working on the general assumption that spoken words are by the librettists and that the song lyrics are by Sondheim, while recognising the fact that in the hectic business of creating a musical the collaborators do not always remember who was responsible for what.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The musical as a specifically American product has been examined by Raymond Knapp in *The American Musical and the Performance of National Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2005) and its companion volume *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Oxford University Press, 2006). These books help put the shows in a historical and cultural context. Geoffrey Block, with *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (Oxford University Press, 1997), and Joseph P. Swain, with *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (The Scarecrow Press, 2002), also contain valuable insights into the canon of the musical as does *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (eds. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris and Stacy Wolf, Oxford University Press 2011). The work of Ethan Mordden is, although voluminous in its scope, often disfigured by judgements of staggering virulence, as when he discusses *Gypsy* in *Coming Up Roses: The Broadway Musical in the 1950s* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and describes Madam Rose as 'a selfish, stupid, destructive piece of junk'. (245.) Of Mordden's *Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2016) little need be said – the essays are by turn vituperative and stuffed with irrelevancies.

The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies (eds. Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin, Oxford University Press, 2014) contains a wide variety of essays on aspects of Sondheim's work, for instance Dominic Symonds, in his essay 'You've Got To Be Carefully Taught' gives a useful account of Hammerstein's influence on Sondheim, and Olaf Jubin's essay on doubling in *Sunday in the Park with George* has some valuable insights.

Mark Eden Horowitz's *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (The Scarecrow Press, 2010) has a number of in-depth interviews with Sondheim, concentrating on the compositional process. Joanne Gordon's *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim* (Southern Illinois University Press, Da Capo Press, 1990, 1992) has some interesting information but is thin on analysis, mostly concentrating on contemporary press reaction to the shows. Meryl Secrest's *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (Bloomsbury, 1998) is similarly useful on background detail but shows no critical insight. Craig Zadan's *Sondheim & Co* (Da Capo Press, 1994) does not attempt to analyse the shows but has many interviews with Sondheim and his collaborators. Martin Gottfried's *Sondheim* (Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1993) is more of a pictorial celebration than a critical overview.

Steve Swayne's *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (University of Michigan Press, 2007) has an excellent chapter on Hollywood *film noir* and its influence on Sondheim. Swayne also fruitfully looks at the influence of European cinema on Sondheim's work, especially the films of Alain Resnais. Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (University of Michigan Press, 1993) is a thorough examination of Sondheim's work up until that point. Its focus is musicological rather than dramaturgical but he throws up many useful points of discussion.

Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook has a variety of essays, which vary in quality. *Reading Stephen Sondheim* is similarly variable, and many of the essays, as do many in the *Casebook*, show an extraordinary hostility to the Broadway musical, as if desiring to make Sondheim intellectually respectable by rescuing him from the tradition he works in.

Robert L. McLaughlin's *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (University Press of Mississippi, 2016) has many intelligent insights but is dedicated to putting Sondheim in a post-modern framework that pose epistemological problems that marginalise the stories that the shows actually tell – for instance McLaughlin reading of *Passion* is of two people who try and fail to find a reality beyond language. This reading goes against Giorgio's rhapsodic acceptance of Fosca's love as something that has broken through his carapace of caution. He also sees *Sunday in the Park with George* as rejecting the idea of artist as transcendent genius outside of time, an idea which the show clearly endorses.

In 1974 Harold Prince wrote *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-six Years in the Theatre* (Dodd, Mead and Company) and in 2017 revised and updated it with *Sense of Occasion* (Applause Theatre & Cinema Books) which provide a great deal of insight into the making of the shows.

Unless otherwise stated, Sondheim's lyrics are taken from *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*.

CHAPTER ONE

Saturday Night (1954) and *West Side Story* (1957)

Sondheim's first show, *Saturday Night* (1954, unproduced professionally until 2000) was a fairly conventional musical comedy, based on an unproduced play by Julius J. and Philip G. Epstein called *Front Porch in Flatbush*. Gene, the main character, is a social climber from Brooklyn who tries to impress a girl by pretending he is rich, which leads to a spiralling series of complications before everything is sorted out and there is a happy ending. In the show we are in the world of escapist musical comedy and behaviour that would be obnoxious or repulsive in real life is acceptable because we know that nobody is actually going to get hurt. This is common in many shows, for example, in *Guys and Dolls* (1950) Sky Masterson gets Sarah Brown drunk by slipping rum into her milk so that he can seduce her to win a bet – but of course he starts to care for her and doesn't seduce her after all. There is a similar moment in *Saturday Night*: in the song 'Exhibit A' one of the neighbourhood boys, Bobby, boasts of his seduction techniques, which include getting girls drunk. Of course Bobby is revealed to be lying, and is in fact a virgin.

Although the show does not seriously engage with the idea of disillusionment it is set in 1929, just before the Wall Street Crash. Gene, the main character, dreams of making it big by investing in stocks and shares, and so the audience knows that his dream is doomed from the start. Chaos is just around the corner, and Gene is only saved from it by the love of a good woman. There is one song, 'In the Movies', which hints at some of the later themes in Sondheim's work. It is sung in a scene where the

boys are out on a date with their girls: the boys squabble pettily about splitting the bill for the night's entertainment while their dates look at the movie posters on the outside of the cinema. The girls playfully contrast the dreams peddled by the movies with what life is actually like in Brooklyn.

CELESTE In the movies, life is finer,
 Life is cleaner.
 But in Brooklyn, it's a minor
 Misdemeanor.

(Sondheim, 2010: 9.)

The girls good-humouredly accept that life will never be like the movies and conclude:

CELESTE, MILDRED Never trust
 MGM.
 Keep your hips in
 And settle for the dream.

(Sondheim, 2010: 9.)

In later shows the characters cannot simply accept, as Celeste and Mildred do, that life will not measure up to one's dreams. There the clash between the dream and reality will be painful.

Sondheim's first theatre credit was as the lyricist for *West Side Story* (1957) where he wrote lyrics to Leonard Bernstein's music. In recent years Sondheim has been rather dismissive of the show: '*West Side Story* [...] was a fantasy which took place in a romantic never-never land' (Sondheim, 2011, 146). Yet this criticism is needlessly harsh: it is rather that Tony and Maria want to live in a romantic never-never land, and cannot. The dream place that Tony and Maria imagine escaping to in 'Somewhere' is revealed as a fantasy. Tony dies before they can get there, and anyway there was nowhere for them to go to.

Tony and Maria have the ability to make the world vanish for a brief while. Their first meeting, at the dance at the gym, is described thus:

The lights fade on the others, who disappear into the haze of the background as a delicate cha-cha begins and Tony and Maria slowly walk forward to meet each other. Slowly, as though in a dream, they drift into the steps of the dance, always looking at each other, completely lost in each other; unaware of anyone, any place, any time, anything but one another.

(Arthur Laurents, *West Side Story*, 1958, 1959, 34.)

Later, the lovers duet on 'Tonight'.

MARIA: All the world is only you and me!

(And now the buildings, the world fade away, leaving them suspended in space)

(Laurents 1958, 1959, 44.)

But, as the show progresses, the world moves in. In the 'Quintet' we hear Tony and Maria sing of their desire to see each other again, and this is contrasted with the Jets and the Sharks plans for the rumble. In Act Two, in the song 'Somewhere' the desire to escape from the world becomes active:

[...] the two lovers begin to run, battering against the walls of the city, beginning to break through as chaotic figures of the gangs, of violence, flail around them. But they do break through, and suddenly – they are in a world of space and air and sun.

(Laurents, 1958, 1959, 97.)

The lovers imagine a world without violence, though this vision doesn't last long. For Tony has already killed Barnardo, and this act of violence has set in motion the events that will lead to Tony's death.

Romeo and Juliet hovers over the show as an ironic memory. Society has broken down and instead of being encased in rigid codes of honour, the characters are trapped in a brutal world, partly of their own making, but partly because they are at the bottom of the heap socially and economically. When Tony and Maria marry, they perform the marriage ceremony themselves: they do not recognise any outside authority. They do not seem to be rebelling against it, it is not there any more.

Bernstein wrote in a log chronicling the creation of the show that he wanted to create 'a musical that tells a tragic story in musical-comedy terms, using only musical-comedy techniques, never falling into the 'operatic' trap.' (*Playbill*, September 1957. Quoted in *Leonard Bernstein*, Humphrey Burton, Faber and Faber, 1994: 187.) The 'operatic trap' would be using operatic music to demonstrate that the show is to be taken seriously. The kids gain strength by refusing to take themselves tragically. In the song 'Gee, Officer Krupke' they make fun of all the liberal platitudes about their deprived backgrounds: making a joke of having bad families, menial jobs and psychological problems. The song is a musical-comedy number and at the end of the song, on the words 'Gee, Officer Krupke - Krup you!' (Sondheim, 2010: 51.) Bernstein quotes the musical phrase known as 'Shave and a haircut', that goes *Ba-da-da-da-daa-da BOM-BOM*, which was often used after the pay-off for a vaudeville sketch. This makes the characters seem more resilient – they do not ask for our pity – but also possibly more naïve, in that they don't really understand that their situation is tragic. If Tony and Maria are naïve in *West Side Story* in believing that they could get away and be happy together, the show does not criticise them. The fact that they have a dream that is shattered by the cruel world that they live in, it is entirely the world's fault. Their love, the dream that unites them, is unambiguously seen as good, and the futile violence of the Jets and the Sharks, is bad.

This was the first show on which Sondheim would collaborate with the book-writer Arthur Laurents. Laurents was a playwright (*Home of the Brave*, 1945) and screenwriter (*Rope*, Alfred Hitchcock, Universal, 1948) who had been attached to the project since its inception, and who suggested Sondheim as a lyricist. They were to

collaborate on three more shows, *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (Sondheim was also to write incidental music for Laurents' 1973 play *The Enclave*).

Raymond Knapp describes their shows as

[...] creating a situation in which redemption can happen, not *through* community, but only by opposing or standing apart from community. All of the Laurents-Sondheim shows involve this kind of necessary estrangement.

(Raymond Knapp, 'Sondheim's America, America's Sondheim', collected in Gordon and Jubin, 2014: 442.) We can see this estrangement in each of these shows: in *West Side Story* Tony and Maria try to break away from the cycle of hate that surrounds them; in *Gypsy* Louise learns to play a cynical game with audiences in order to escape her mother; in *Anyone Can Whistle* Fay and Hapgood rebel against the conformist world of Cora Hoover Hooper and her minions; and in *Do I Hear a Waltz?* Leona Samish tries not to act like a typical tourist. With all Sondheim's shows with Laurents self-assertion is against a community, whereas, as we shall see, in the shows Sondheim writes with James Lapine, the characters develop by becoming part of a community.

When Tony is shot by Chino he is cradled by Maria, and says 'I didn't believe hard enough.' (Laurents 1958, 1959, 126.) A belief in a better future is at the heart of many American musicals, and indeed American mythologies. But, in *West Side Story*, these hopes don't come to fruition. In the song 'One Hand, One Heart' Tony sings 'Only death will part us now' but when he and Maria duet the line changes to 'Even death won't part us now' (Sondheim, 2010: 44). But this dream, of love transcending death, (a frequent motif in opera, for example the *liebestod* from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*) fails them when Tony is shot. They do not duet as he dies: instead Maria,

unaccompanied by the orchestra, sings a reprise of 'Somewhere'. He tries to join in with the song but he dies and Maria weeps.

It is important that Tony does not rail against an unjust fate or ask for our pity, instead he blames himself for not believing hard enough. This might seem ironic: surely Tony had believed in Maria enough and is hardly to be blamed that Chino shot him. But it is appropriate that Tony believes in the possibility of change. He commits to life rather than death – in that regard it is important that he is murdered and does not, as Romeo does in *Romeo and Juliet*, commit suicide. The show's creators wanted to overturn the audience's expectations. The Shakespearean scholar Bertrand Evans has referred to the knowledge that an audience has of a story that the characters in the story do not have, as 'discrepant awareness', (Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, Clarendon Press, 1960, quoted in Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, University of Michigan Press, 2001: 29). In other words the audience, for the most part, knows that the show is based on *Romeo and Juliet* and so knows, as the characters do not, that the show must end tragically. The show, to some extent, breaks these expectations - Maria, unlike Juliet, survives – thus preventing the show from being taken as simply another retelling of a familiar story.

If the show is about characters learning to break damaging patterns of the past, it is appropriate that it breaks the pattern of *Romeo and Juliet* to make the audience aware that things don't have to be that way. In the show, it is only as the two gangs join together in carrying Tony's body from the scene, that there is a hope of reconciliation

– though it is hardly a joyful one, rather the two groups are stunned into co-operation out of shame at what they have inadvertently brought about.

After the show's countless revivals and a successful film it is hard to recapture how unusual this ending must have been to audiences seeing it for the first time in 1957. Characters had died in musicals before: in *Carousel* (1945) and *The King and I* (1951) Rodgers and Hammerstein had killed the male lead character, but in no Broadway show previous to this did the music fail the characters. The charm doesn't work. Not that the show, unlike Bernstein's previous show, *Candide* (1956), is primarily ironic. It would be a better world, the show seems to say, if the music *did* work, if we did believe hard enough. As Knapp puts it: 'In the world of *West Side Story*, only the difficult is real, and anything that comes easily or seems too secure is automatically suspect.' (Knapp, 2005: 214.) That remark could be applied to almost all of Sondheim's work. Happiness, if it is to come at all, must be earned.

CHAPTER TWO

GYPSY (1959)

After *West Side Story* Sondheim was initially reluctant to write just lyrics again, despite his admiration for *Gypsy*'s composer, Jule Styne. But Oscar Hammerstein persuaded Sondheim to change his mind. 'He thought it would be valuable for me to learn how to write for a star, a specific and predictable personality who makes an audience feel as if they are greeting an old friend.' (Sondheim, 2010: 56.) The star in this case was Ethel Merman. By the time Merman appeared in *Gypsy* her persona was well-established from shows such as *Annie Get Your Gun* and *Call Me Madam*: a Merman character had guts, determination and indomitability. But instead of simply tailoring the material to suit Merman's persona, Sondheim and Arthur Laurents, the show's librettist, investigate the whole notion of the dream of stardom. *Gypsy* is a star vehicle about the madness of stardom.

Rose's dream is to be a star. As McLaughlin points out:

Styne's four-note I-had-a-dream theme recurs at key moments throughout the show and reminds us of the importance of dreams – in this case, dream as a vision for the future – as a motivating force for the character of Rose and as a fundamental part of the American experience.

(McLaughlin, *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*, University Press of Mississippi, 2016 2016: 41.)

The idea of 'The American Dream' is enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which states that 'all men are created equal' with a right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit

of happiness'. This idea leads to a popular belief that everything is possible; that if you have a dream you can make it a reality if you have determination. It is the embodiment of the frontier spirit as defined by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 essay 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History'. This put forward what became known as the Frontier Thesis, that stressed the action of the settlers in expanding America as more formative of the American notion of democracy than the ideals of the original settlers who came over on The Mayflower.

When they first meet, Herbie tells Rose: 'You looked like a pioneer woman without a frontier' (Laurents, *Gypsy*, 16). But Rose's dream to conquer new territory is ultimately frustrated. This is partly because she is a woman: the show subtly criticises the restrictions put on women by the society of the time – Rose is held back because she is expected to be a home-maker and nothing else.

POP: God put you down right here because He meant for you to stay right here!

ROSE: God's like me, Pop: we both need outside assistance.

(Laurents, 9.)

Rose rejects the role that is imposed on her: she even says 'Goodbye/To blueberry pie!' (Sondheim, 2010: 58), a very unAmerican sentiment, attacking motherhood and domesticity. This line has an ironic echo of Hammerstein's 'I'm as normal as blueberry pie' (Hammerstein, 1949: 88) from 'A Wonderful Guy' in *South Pacific*. Nellie Forbush happily embraces a feminine role of adoring lover, feeling that this

makes her normal. This idea of normality is something Rose rejects. And stardom is Rose's means of escape.

There are innumerable musicals about the theatre, and many shows seem to take it as axiomatic that everyone wants to be a star, and that the most important thing in life is to override everyone else's personality and hog the spotlight. What Sondheim does is make Rose brazenly display the contempt for other people that is implicit in that desire. In the song 'Some People' she sings of her desperation to get out of her home. Staying at home is: 'peachy for some people,/ For some/ Hum-/Drum/People to be,/But some people ain't me!' (Sondheim, 2010: 58.) She spits in the face of the audience. Yet the show's many revivals prove that audiences through the years have loved her.

Perhaps they love her because she has 'a total absence of self-censorship' (Sondheim, 2010: 66). While many of Sondheim's later characters are not sure who they are, Rose has no doubt whatever, and, until near the end of the show at any rate, goes flat out for what she wants. In 'Some People' Sondheim gives us a hint of Rose's monomania in an unexpected word: when one hears Rose sing: 'When I think of/All the sights that I gotta see yet,/ All the places I gotta -' one expects to hear the word 'go'. But she doesn't say 'go', she says 'play'. (Sondheim, 2010: 58.) This tiny verbal jolt reminds us that Rose sees the world mostly as a series of venues. And she sings as if she is the one who will be playing them, not her daughters. In her own mind, she is the star. And the song is a sell. Although she is telling the truth about how she feels, she is singing the song to try and persuade her father to give her his retirement

plaque so that she can sell it. The dramatic subtext transforms our knowledge of the song: it's not simply an expression of Rose's brash personality, it shows her ruthlessness. As Knapp points out: 'the idealistic triplets motive is forced to carry the mundane "eighty-eight bucks"' (Knapp, 2006: 223). Does this mean that all that Rose really cares about is money? No, rather it shows that she *has* to think of money, in order to keep her dream alive. This reuse of the musical motif subtly hints at the impossibility of keeping one's dream unsullied when one is poor.

Sondheim has said (Sondheim, 2010: 55) that *Gypsy* had characters of more dimension than had been seen in a musical before (if one didn't count *Porgy and Bess*.) But it isn't that Rose is a particularly complex character, she has one ambition: to be a star. As she cannot achieve this herself she tries to make it happen through her children. What is complex is the way the audience feels about her: they can sympathise with her as a victim of a restrictive upbringing, or see her as a monster who would destroy her daughters. For instance in Scene Six we see Rose both as a caring mother, she has arranged a birthday party for June, and as a tyrant when she refuses to put more than ten candles on the cake: 'ROSE: As long as we have this act, nobody is over twelve and you all know it!' (Laurents, 1959, 24.) Rose's denial of the reality of ageing leaves June confused about her identity, as expressed in the poignant 'Little Lamb' with its refrain: 'I wonder how old I am...' (Sondheim, 2010, 63.)

Rose's grotesque behaviour is made acceptable to the audience because it is comic. Her meanness, her stealing, her bullying, her inability to listen, are, for the most part, played for laughs. Her behaviour is outrageous (she pretends that a hotel

manager tried to rape her, just so she can avoid being thrown out for keeping animals on the premises) but ultimately everybody gets away from her. The Newsboys all leave and start up their own act, Herbie leaves her and June and Louise both escape. Rose hurts no other person as much as she hurts herself.

She hurts herself because she is deluded. Sondheim has said that it was the character's self-delusion that drew him to the material: 'Best of all for both Arthur and me, Rose was that dramatist's dream, the self-deluded protagonist who comes to a tragic/triumphant end' (Sondheim, 2010: 56). A character who cannot see the mistakes that they are making, while the audience can, creates tension on stage. This tension underpins all of Rose's songs, and makes them dramatic events rather than recitations. The audience is made aware that, before the end of the evening, Rose will snap.

Sondheim and Laurents suggest that her desire for the kind of stardom that cannot be shared with another performer is a form of madness. This is not an idea that is unique to *Gypsy*, but few shows have taken it to such an extreme. Rose thinks of nothing but stardom, and this fixation in the end drives her to a breakdown. She puts all her imagination into twisting everything to her advantage. In all of her songs she is manipulating someone. In 'Some People' she tries to get her father to give her eighty-eight bucks, in 'Small World' she persuades Herbie that they should get together, in 'You'll Never Get Away from Me' she persuades Herbie to stay with her, in 'Everything's Coming Up Roses' she tries to sell the idea of becoming a star to an unwilling Louise, even the buddy number 'Together Wherever We Go' is sung with an

ulterior motive: to keep Louise from quitting the act. Every song she sings is an 'I Want' song.

Her inability to connect with reality is shown in the way she treats the act she creates. The boys are dressed as newsboys, singing: 'Extra! Extra! Hey, look at the headline!' (Sondheim, 2010: 61.) Then they become farm boys, so that Rose can incorporate the pantomime cow. (Perhaps Jack's cow in *Into the Woods* is a sly reference back to this show.) But they still sing 'Extra! Extra!', though why they should when they are farm boys Rose doesn't explain. Then she changes the act so that they become city boys, so that they can sing about Broadway, but they still start their song by singing 'Extra! Extra!' This is a comic way of showing how bad show business works: it gets less and less to do with reality, and more to do with clichés, with trying to replicate its effects. Just as Rose is mean with material (the blanket in her hotel room is cut up for costumes for June and Louise, and for her pet dog), so she is mean with written material: recycling it beyond its natural lifespan. And just as the act gets further and further from reality, so, it might be said, does Rose. This denial of reality will culminate in her disillusionment in the show's finale.

In the routine that Rose has written (and that she claims came to her in a dream) June's character is a farm girl who gets the chance to go to Broadway, but who turns it down as she can't leave her pet cow. The character chooses friendship over stardom. We see Rose is hiding what she really feels from the audience (Rose would not only leave the cow, she'd sell it for hamburgers) behind a mask of conventional sentiment. Not that Rose would think of it as a lie. Show business to her is just a series of

numbers: the stars and stripes that the boys fire from their canes at the end of the act, (to a musical quotation from Sousa's 'The Stars and Stripes Forever'³) is another display of platitudinous sentiment. But the whole act is a denial of reality: the kids in the troupe have to go on pretending to be kids while they are growing into adults. They must deny growing up and getting older. Performance is seen as a denial of ageing, as a denial of reality.

Rose is not the only character in the show to be in the grip of a dream. Tulsa, one of the boys in the troupe, dreams of having his own act. In the song 'All I Need Is the Girl' we see him rehearsing a number of his own and telling Louise about it. He narrates what he will do, and what he will wear: he will play the typical debonair man-about-town. Once again there is a tension between what we see, a hard-working, underpaid dancer in a bad act who is dreaming of escape, and the song he's singing: about how he is: 'smooth and snappy' (Sondheim, 2010: 66). Here, though, it is not the performer who is in danger of being disillusioned. The number creates dramatic tension, first by showing Tulsa narrating his act as he rehearses it, thus revealing the work behind being debonair, and secondly, and more importantly, by the fact that Tulsa does the act with Louise, not noticing that she is beginning to fall in love with him. A more conventional show would have had Tulsa doing the dance with June, with whom he will soon elope, but there is more tension in making his partner Louise. When she dances with Tulsa Louise dances well for the first time in her life. Tulsa is so intent on making an impression as a performer that he doesn't realise just how deep an impression he's making. He sings 'All I Need Is the Girl' without noticing that the

3 Sondheim was to take this device much further later on, when he based a whole song around Sousa marches in 'How I Saved Roosevelt' in *Assassins*.

girl is right in front of him. His act represents something real to Louise: the world of sexuality and maturity has been tantalizingly held out to her and then snatched away. Tulsa isn't being cruel, merely oblivious, but once again the show questions the whole idea of performance. It can be a tease, that arouses desires that can't be fulfilled. Which is precisely the business that Louise herself later goes into. Strip-teasing (the term is significant) is about a performer simultaneously being available (i.e. naked, or seemingly so) and unavailable (on stage, out of reach). The desire is stimulated but cannot be acted upon.

We have seen Tulsa take apart his song and dance routine for Louise: as he sings 'Strings come in', (Laurents, 1959: 54) we hear exactly that. The music that we hear is Tulsa's fantasy, what he dreams is made audible to us. This is not the first instance of this device being used: the title song in Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes* (1936) does the same thing. But in *On Your Toes* the song works as it usually does in musical comedy: it brings the hero and heroine together. In *Gypsy* the song does not bring the couple together, rather it emphasises the distance between them. As so often in Sondheim's later shows it is the silent listener (in this case Louise) who is the important one, the one who is affected by the song. We can assume that when Tulsa says 'Strings come in' she can imagine them too. It is this acknowledgement of the power of music that means one must be careful how one uses it; one must, in the words of a later show, be careful the spell one casts.

Once June and the boys have left the act Rose has to believe that she can make Louise a star, and so sings 'Everything's Coming Up Roses', a phrase that Sondheim

invented himself, but wanted to sound like a phrase that was already part of the language. In the song Rose tries to sell the idea of stardom to Louise. Once again there is disparity between what we hear, Rose's unstoppable confidence, and what we know: that Louise isn't particularly talented and doesn't want to be a star. Rose, like Tulsa, is selling an idea, trying to convince herself as well as the audience: 'All you need is a hand' (Sondheim, 2010: 66). A hand of course, can mean both help and applause, two things that Rose gets mixed up. Rose sings: 'That lucky star I talk about is due!' (Sondheim, 2010: 66), (words that are reminiscent of Tony's: 'I got a feeling there's a miracle due,/Gonna come true,/Coming to me!' [Sondheim, 2010: 35] in *West Side Story*). The song is a typical uplifting show-biz ballad, but, seen in its dramatic context, it is a sign of incipient madness. Rose doesn't make Herbie or Louise share her vision. Throughout the show songs are contradicted by what actually happens. 'You'll Never Get Away from Me' does not come true: Herbie does finally leave Rose, albeit reluctantly. 'Together Wherever We Go', a buddy number, is not true: in the end Herbie does not stay with them. 'If Momma Was Married', which articulates Louise's dream of a house and family, never comes true either.

But Louise does become a star, though not the kind Rose had dreamed of. In a conventional show Louise would get her big break in a Broadway show, and live the dream that her self-sacrificing mother had always had. But in *Gypsy* Louise's big break is in burlesque. This in itself is a kind of disillusionment. Burlesque, a mixture of female strip acts and lewd male comics, existed on the edges of the American theatrical scene; disreputable but persistent. Burlesque was a shameful byway, not

part of the mainstream⁴. The show confronts an unseemly side of America not often seen in musicals. However, the strippers in this show all cling to a kind of dignity by having stage names which suggest high art and 'class'.⁵ Tessie Tura suggests opera, Electra is a heroine from Greek tragedy and Mazeppa is the title of a poem by Byron.⁶ This foreshadows Louise's own attempts to be sophisticated by learning French and hanging around men of letters. This clinging to the trappings of culture by a crew of jaded and disillusioned strippers in a third-rate burlesque joint only brings home how desperate their plight is.

And, by the time they reach burlesque, Rose and Louise are themselves desperate. They have hit the lowest of the low. They are going nowhere. Near the beginning of the show Rose's father said of Louise: 'Nothin' wonderful is going to happen to her or June – or to you' (Laurents, 1959, 10). Rose angrily denies this, but, when they arrive in the burlesque house Rose says to Herbie '...nothin's gonna turn up for us, is it?' (Laurents, 1959: 77). Rose is, it seems, finally facing up to reality. *Gypsy* focuses on the excluded, 'the ones who might have been' as *Assassins* will later put it (Sondheim, 2011: 136): old strippers, and the mothers in the background who never got a break.⁷

4 See for example Bob Fosse's film *All That Jazz* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1979) where the young Joe Gideon (Keith Gordon) gets a job as a dancer in a burlesque house. Teased by strippers while waiting in the wings, when he goes on stage to do a dance routine he is unable to hide the fact that he has ejaculated into his trousers.

5 The ironic use of a high-class name can also be found in *Merrily We Roll Along* with Gussie Carnegie, the musical comedy star. Although she is called Carnegie, reminiscent of the world-famous concert venue Carnegie Hall, she helps to deflect Frank Shepard from composing serious music.

6 The Byron poem was dramatised as a play in 1866, with the actress Adah Isaacs Menken playing the (male) title role. She created a scandal by appearing apparently nude (though really in flesh-coloured tights).

7 It is perhaps significant that Rose, while clearly the star part, is not the character who has their name in the title. *Gypsy* refers to Gypsy Rose Lee, i.e. to Louise. Rose doesn't get her name in lights. *Gypsy* is also a slang term for a travelling player, which is what Louise becomes: a gypsy who dreams of a home that she never gets.

Something does turn up for Rose and Louise, however, though hardly what they expected. Just as Rose is about to capitulate and marry Herbie and settle down, Louise gets a chance at the star strip. There is an ironic contrast between what we might expect to see in a musical – the nervous beginner who saves the show as in the film *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, Warner Brothers, 1933) – and what is actually happening: a mother pushing her daughter to strip in a burlesque house. But Louise discovers herself. 'Momma... I'm pretty... I'm a pretty girl, Momma!' (Laurents, 1959: 94.) It is important to note that when she realises that she is pretty she tells her mother. She doesn't think, at that point, about impressing men.

The song she uses in her act is a version of the first song that we hear in the show: the number that had been sung by the young June and Louise when auditioning for Uncle Jocko's Kiddie Show, 'May We Entertain You'. This is an innocent song about children wanting to make an audience happy. Later the song is quoted briefly in 'If Momma Was Married' where the girls sarcastically reprise their act while dreaming of escaping show business. Then it reappears as 'Let Me Entertain You'. The change in title is subtle, but suggestive. The song has been corrupted. In a way reminiscent of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where the innocent lamb is contrasted with the terrible tiger, the innocent children's song that we saw in the first scene becomes at the end of the show, a strip number. As Robert Gordon puts it

Structurally, the transformation of Louise and Baby June's cute kiddie number "May We Entertain You?" into Gypsy Rose Lee's (Louise's) striptease routine, "Let Me Entertain You," sexualises the innocent clichés of the little girls' vaudeville song and dance to become the typically risqué lyric accompanying the bump and grind of a burlesque act, while at the same time emphasizing the irony of Louise's ascent from failed vaudeville performer to burlesque star[.]'

(Robert Gordon, footnote 22, 'Old Situations, New Complications' collected in

Gordon, R. and Jubin, O. 79.)

'Let Me Entertain You' is staged as a montage sequence of Louise playing different venues. Rose's dream of touring the country has come true for Louise. The scene is like the montage scenes found in many biographical films of stars (e.g. *The Jolson Story*, Columbia, dir. Alfred E. Green, 1946) rising to the top of their profession. But Louise is not being acclaimed as a singer or an actress, but as a stripper. When Louise becomes famous she, like Tessie and the other strippers, tries to give herself a little class. She shows off with some choice vocabulary: 'At these prices, I'm an ecdysiast!' (Laurents, 1959: 97) she says, twitting the audience with how much they have paid.⁸ When Louise becomes a star she is taken up by the *beau monde* as an amusing bit of rough. Finally Rose and Louise have the confrontation that has been coming since Louise became a star. And Louise is perhaps more like her mother than she realises (she has after all taken Rose's name to be part of her stage name). At the beginning of Act One Rose had lost her temper with Uncle Jocko, who had laughed at June and Louise's act: 'Don't you laugh! *Don't you dare laugh!*' (Laurents, 1959, 6) and then, in Rose and Louise's confrontation in Act Two, Louise says: '*Nobody laughs at me – because I laugh first!*' (Laurents, 1959, 101). Louise has learned not to care: she is disillusioned, not so much with show business (she always knew that she had little talent) as with life: she treats it all as just a game, because it is the only way she has found to escape from her mother. She doesn't get the family she dreamed of, but she will survive.

⁸ The term ecdysiast (one that sheds its skin) was coined by H.L. Mencken in a letter to a stripper called Georgia Sothern, who had asked him to think of a more acceptable alternative to 'strip-teasing'. The letter was dated April 5, 1940, when the real Gypsy Rose Lee was 29, and so its inclusion in this scene is an example of dramatic license. (Accessed from the website *World Wide Words* 30 July 2019. www.worldwidewords.org/weirdwords/ww-ecd.1.htm)

If the show had ended on 'Let Me Entertain You' then *Gypsy* could be seen as a dark nihilistic joke, an ironic post-modern deconstruction of the story of the rise to stardom: Rose pushes her daughter into being a star, but she becomes a star in burlesque and survives by laughing at the audience. But 'Rose's Turn' takes the show to a new level. Rose, in a state of shock, realises that she is not a part of Louise's life any more, a painful moment for any parent, but far worse for Rose as she has been living vicariously through Louise.

The breakdown that Rose has been heading for since the beginning of the show now happens in spectacular fashion, brought on by Louise's rejection of her. The show, by creating a character that allows a talented performer to give a bravura performance, both celebrates *and* questions the whole idea of stardom. After all, as Sondheim has said, Rose comes to 'a tragic/triumphant end.' The show embraces the *ambivalence* of stardom. If there are stars there are also people, like Rose, who want to be stars and never get there. And this is who the show focuses on.

Rose could have been a standard comic character: a pushing, stealing, lying, cheating, lovable stage mother – lovable because she makes audiences laugh. Light comedy often takes place in a kind of limbo where the normal rules of living are suspended and characters who in life would be insufferable or tragically frustrated can be presented as entertaining. *Gypsy* could have ended on Rose once more dreaming of success, and the audience could laugh indulgently and shake their heads because Rose never learns, but never knows defeat. But Rose does not finally live in the

world of musical comedy. Instead, unlike most comic characters, she grows older and has to confront the fact that her dream isn't going to happen. In 'Rose's Turn' we see her fantasy collapsing in front of us. Reality breaks in on her, shockingly, in the first and one of the most powerful of Sondheim's nervous breakdowns in song.

The title itself has three possible meanings: it is Rose's turn in the sense of it being Rose's go, her turn to be famous. Turn also, of course, means a vaudeville act. And turn, as in funny turn, can also refer to a bout of illness. All of these meanings apply to the song. As with *Company* the 'I want' song comes at the end of the show. Of course, all of Rose's songs have been 'I want' songs, but for the first time in the show she isn't trying to manipulate anyone, she actually admits what she wants to herself. It is an 'I Want' song for Rose that ends in a realisation that she won't get it. In this song we hear the 'I-had-a-dream' motif again and this leads Rose into confronting in her head each of the people she feels abandoned by.

ROSE I had a dream -
 I dreamed it for you, June.
 It wasn't for me, Herbie.
 And if it wasn't for me,
 Then where would you be,
 Miss Gypsy Rose Lee?!

(Sondheim, 2010: 75.)

Rose doesn't call her daughter Louise, instead she uses her stage name. This is the source of Rose's resentment. After pushing and pushing to make her daughter a star,

she finds herself pushed out.

Right at the top of the show Rose's first entrance had been from the audience onto the stage (see Laurents, 1959: 5). This shows us that Rose is, so to speak, one of us: she is a member of the audience who climbs on stage. In her final song she claims the stage, but the theatre is empty, and the audience is all in her head. In effect, we the audience have become her illusion. She *wants* us to be there, but we aren't. Of course the audience is there, watching a potentially barn-storming performance, but in the world of the play, the audience is not there. This may confront the audience with the fact that there are many people like Rose who want to have an audience, but who are stars only in their own head.

The scene regurgitates the show we have just seen. In some kind of Oedipal nightmare, Rose⁹ starts to act out a striptease. Then, from the lines: 'Hold your hats and Hallelujah,/Momma's gonna show it to ya!' (Sondheim, 2010: 75) she says the word Momma, 'Momma's talkin' loud,/Momma's doin' fine!...' no fewer than nineteen times: the nineteenth time is when she says: 'Momma's gotta let go!'. (Sondheim, 2010: 75.) This word reminds her, not only of Louise's jab: '*Momma, you have got to let go of me!*' (Laurents, 1959: 102) but also of Rose's desertion by her own mother. (Though this point could perhaps have been made more firmly, we know nothing about Rose's mother, so her absence is hardly felt.) Rose breaks down on the word, and then starts to say what she really feels. She says: 'Well, someone tell me, when is

⁹ The character is often referred to by commentators as Momma Rose, but she is called this nowhere in the show. The girls call her Momma, Herbie calls her Rose and everyone else calls her Madam Rose. But it is significant that audiences identify her principally as a mother. She could be seen as a Gentile version of a Jewish mother.

it my turn?' (Sondheim, 2010: 75). Her anger finally forces her to confront the truth: she did it for herself, not for her children, as she screams to some dissonant chords:

ROSE This time for me!

For me!

For me!

For me!

For me!

FOR ME!!

(Sondheim, 2010: 75.)

She is disillusioned as she must face up to the fact that she has only thought of herself, and also to the fact that she will never get what she wants. To survive she has had to be aggressive and competitive. And that, inevitably, leads to loneliness, which might be seen as the psychological condition of American capitalism: ruthless competition that alienates the competitor. Rose cannot admit her need for other people and instead has to dominate everybody around her.

Sondheim has said, of his own ability to compose music while in a busy restaurant: 'When the cocoon is self-created, the surroundings matter not at all' (Sondheim, 2011: 30.) This remark could also apply to Rose, to whom the world is simply a series of venues to play. She lives in a cocoon of her own imagination: as June says with cold anger: 'Momma can do one thing: She can make herself believe anything she makes up. [...] She even believes the act is good.' (Laurents, 1959,

47.) This is the downside of having a dream, one that Hammerstein didn't examine in his shows. In his shows characters must stay true to their dreams: not to do so is a kind of emotional death. This is also true in Sondheim's work, but sometimes, as in this show, a character can have the wrong dream, can have an illusion rather than a dream, and must cast it off.

In this song Sondheim dramatises Rose's change from comic persona to dramatic character. Rose, who up to this point could have been taken as a comic personality, whose outrageous actions can be laughed at as they have no serious consequences, becomes a three-dimensional character: that is to say a person whose actions have consequences, who must take responsibility for her own life; a person whose naïve dream that everything will come up roses has to be rejected. Rose's partial reconciliation with Louise at the end shows Rose at least admitting that stardom will never happen to her, which is a gain in knowledge. But the final image, of the lights of the runway going out in her face, shows that knowledge has not become mature acceptance. She is still trapped in false desire.

Sondheim has said: 'Our lives aren't scripted' ('Sondheim's Passionate "Passion" Interview with Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times Arts and Leisure Section*. March 20, 1994. 1, 30-31), but Rose's mistake is to think that hers is, that she is fated to be a star, or at least the mother of a star. She made her daughters' lives a nightmare by thinking that her life was destined to take a certain path. As we will see in future shows, Sondheim will help to create characters who often learn to accept uncertainty, and in that acceptance be able to create themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1962), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965), *Evening Primrose* (1966)

Sondheim's first professionally produced score was for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), with a book by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, based on characters invented by Titus Maccius Plautus. In 1958 Sondheim, a friend of Shevelove's, suggested they collaborate on a musical, and it was Shevelove who suggested Plautus as a basis for the show. Shevelove brought in Gelbart as they had both written for a television series starring the comic Red Buttons, and Shevelove had directed some television shows for Art Carney that Gelbart had written. (See 'Savoring a Moment: A Conversation with Stephen Sondheim.' Interview by John Guare. *Lincoln Theater Centre Review*, Summer 2004, Issue 38. 8-10.) Sondheim's other book-writers all have had experience as playwrights, whereas Shevelove and Gelbart were, at that time, mostly sketch writers. An Authors' Note (*Four By Sondheim*, Applause Books 200: 11) refers to the piece as 'a scenario for vaudevillians', and the title of the show is a play on a traditional lead-in to a joke used by many vaudeville comics: 'A funny thing happened to me on the way to the theatre...'

The opening number, 'Comedy Tonight', sets the tone of the show by, as it were, proclaiming a holiday, a respite from seriousness. 'No royal curse,/No Trojan horse,/ And a happy ending, of course!' (Sondheim, 2010: 83). The lyric explicitly announces that it is a show and what kind of show it will be: 'Nothing with kings,/ Nothing with crowns,/Bring on the lovers, liars and clowns' (Sondheim, 2010, 83).

The shadows of horror are evoked, only to be dismissed: 'Tragedy tomorrow,/Comedy tonight!' (Sondheim, 2010, 83). The song tells us that the show is escapism, with the implied qualification that escapism is harmless, as long as one recognises that it is a momentary respite.

Sondheim has said:

Forum is not generally recognised as being experimental [...] but I find it very experimental. *Forum* is a direct antithesis of the Rodgers and Hammerstein school. The songs could be removed from the show and it wouldn't make any difference...

(Quoted in Zadan, 1994, 68).

Looking through the show one can debate this: most of the songs do serve a purpose in the plot. 'Love, I Hear', reminiscent of a Lorenz Hart lyric in that it likens love to an illness, establishes that Hero is falling in love; in 'Free' Pseudolus has a classic 'I want' song – he wants to earn his freedom; in 'Lovely' Hero and Philia are falling in love; in 'Pretty Little Picture' Pseudolus is selling the idea of escaping to an island to Hero and Philia; 'Bring Me My Bride' establishes Miles Gloriosus's desire to take Philia; the reprise of 'Lovely' serves the function of persuading Hysterium to keep in drag, and the 'Funeral Sequence' sets up Hysterium's mock funeral. In Act I only 'Everybody Ought To Have a Maid' and possibly 'I'm Calm' serve no function in the story. But perhaps the show is experimental because none of the characters *need* to sing, they have no deep emotions – even the young lovers are a couple of amiable dimwits.

As Gordon points out: 'The pastiche of the form renders Roman comedy as camp, inviting the spectator to revel in a ritualized rehash of the oldest comic clichés in Western theater.' (Robert Gordon, eds. Gordon and Jubin, 2014, 64.) There is no disparity between the form of the play and the story that it tells. Pseudolus treats life, and invites the audience to treat life, as a farce. He spins wild lies on the spur of the moment and he manipulates events to a happy conclusion. Pseudolus draws us into his confidence the way Groucho Marx would directly address the audience in a film: 'Well, all the jokes can't be good, you've got to expect that once in a while' (*Animal Crackers*, Paramount, Dir. Victor Heerman, 1930). This breaking of the fourth wall assures the audience that the comic is in control. Pseudolus is in control of the story, at the end of Act One, when his life is threatened, he buys time by shouting 'Intermission!' (Shevelove and Gelbart, 1962: 78.)

Although the show might seem to be cynical, as its hero is a wily manipulator, yet Pseudolus ultimately has a dream. His dream is to no longer be a slave, as we can hear in the song 'Free' where he even dreams of having a slave of his own. 'Can you see him?/Well, I'll free him!' (Sondheim, 2010: 89.) Unlike Rose in *Gypsy*, who dreams of dominating others, Pseudolus dreams of taking responsibility for his own life.

It is a nostalgic show (vaudeville was more or less over by 1962) that harks back to a world of red-nosed comics and good-looking women: a kind of idealised Broadway vaudeville that will never degenerate (as it does in *Gypsy*) into burlesque. The women in the house of Marcus Lycus gyrate suggestively but don't do a

striptease. It also harks back to a pre-Rodgers and Hammerstein type of show. Broadway musical comedy as produced by Florenz Ziegfeld, relied a lot on spectacle, on lavish sets prodigiously peopled with extras. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* makes fun of this tradition by drawing attention to its own cheapness – in 'Comedy Tonight' we are promised: 'Hundreds of actors out of sight!' (Sondheim, 2010: 83). All the walk-on parts are played by a small group of players called the Proteans. Thus the show, whether the production is really cheap or not, celebrates tattiness. Also in 'Comedy Tonight' Pseudolus tells us, of the actress playing Domitia: 'She plays Medea later this week,' (Sondheim, 2010, 83). This evokes memories of provincial theatres, where actors would learn parts quickly and runs were short. Although the original production was on Broadway the jokes provoke memories of threadbare touring companies. The show is in effect a celebration of actors and the tenuous lives they live.

Thus the audience is disillusioned in a sense that they are told that the show is cheap, only this disillusion is not serious, it is part of the fun. But there is a hint of Sondheim's more serious concerns to come in the fact that the characters are able to lie in song. Sondheim is not the first composer to write songs where the singer is a liar: 'It Ain't Necessarily So' from *Porgy and Bess* is an example of a song that is sung with malicious intent. But Sondheim unusually allows his heroine to lie, both to Hero and perhaps to herself in the song: 'That'll Show Him'. In the song, Philia, a courtesan, says that she must go with the braggart soldier Miles Gloriosus because he has bought her. But she assures Hero that, when she kisses Gloriosus, she'll really be thinking of Hero. The gag is, of course, that she is actually imagining what it would

be like to be made love to by the grotesquely macho Gloriosus.

In her duet with Hero, Philia sings 'Lovely is the one thing I can do' (Sondheim, 2010: 93). That she uses the word 'do' rather than the word 'be' shows that being lovely is about putting on an act. We see the absurdity of the act when later the male slave Hysterium has to dress up as a woman, and finds that he starts to feel lovely, especially when Pseudolus reassures him that 'I can't take my eyes off you' (Shevelove and Gelbart, 1962: 100). Sondheim starts to disillusion us about the nature of traditional feminine beauty, a subject he will go into in more depth in *Follies*.

Forum makes gentle fun of musical spectaculars, but it doesn't rework the genres of farce or vaudeville the way that *Gypsy* questions the underlying assumptions of the musical that celebrates the ascent to stardom. The characters are stock comic figures: soppy young lovers; henpecked dirty old man; harridan wife; braggart soldier. They are not intended to be real and so do not go through the process of disillusionment that characters in later shows will.

Anyone Can Whistle (1964), with a book by Arthur Laurents, is a satire where two people, Fay Apple and J. Bowden Hapgood, try to expose the machinations of a corrupt mayoress, Cora Hoover Hooper, who has faked a miracle (water springing from a rock) to drum up business for her town. Fay is a nurse who prides herself on her rationality but who actually, in the song 'There Won't Be Trumpets', reveals that she harbours a dream of a hero who will come and rescue her. She accepts that the

man she dreams of won't look like a hero. But she believes he will *be* one.

Throughout the course of the show she learns to abandon the idea of a hero, someone who will solve her problems for her, and instead takes responsibility for living her own life.

In Act One Fay sneers at the phoney miracle, and by extension all miracles, but later Hapgood accuses her of wanting to believe in it the same as the populace do. She admits it: her scientific training does not satisfy every longing and she needs something more. She sings the title song, expressing her regret at her inability to be spontaneous. The idea of whistling is perhaps a reference to the famous scene in Howard Hawks' film *To Have And Have Not* where Slim, played by Lauren Bacall, tells Harry Morgan, also known as Steve, (played by Humphrey Bogart)

SLIM You know you don't have to act with me, Steve. You don't have to say anything and you don't have to do anything. Not a thing. Oh, maybe just whistle. You know how to whistle, don't you, Steve? You just put your lips together and blow.

(*To Have and Have Not*. Warner Brothers, dir. Howard Hawks, 1944.)

In the film it is the woman who is confident, and brings out a cagey man. But in the musical it is the woman who can't whistle and, by analogy, cannot let go emotionally. She learns to trust Hapgood, and then thinks he has betrayed her, and she sings 'See What It Gets You', a song of disenchantment. But this disenchantment brings on an important discovery for Fay.

FAY And when the hero quits,
 Then you're left on your own,
 And when you want things done,
 You have to do them yourself alone!

(Sondheim, 2010: 134.)

This realisation that one must take responsibility for one's own life is one that many of Sondheim's characters will have in future shows. Those who cannot learn it, such as the assassins, are doomed to a life of frustration.

The play is like a troubled revisiting of *The Wizard of Oz* (MGM, dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). The opening number (that appears in the published script of the show, but not in *Finishing the Hat*) is 'I'm Like the Bluebird': an echo of the line from 'Over the Rainbow' where Dorothy sings: 'If happy little bluebirds fly/Beyond the rainbow,/Why, oh why, can't I?' This last line is echoed in the lines from the show's title song: 'It's all so simple:/Relax, let go, let fly./So someone tell me why/Can't I?' (Sondheim, 2010: 129). In a sense both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Anyone Can Whistle* are about characters learning to not rely on magic from outside, but rather on one's own powers. This will also be the lesson of *Into the Woods*.

But if one doesn't look for help from heroes then one must do without the certainty that they offer. The title of Fay and Hapgood's love duet is 'With So Little to Be Sure Of', which is about embracing the uncertainty of life. When Fay and Hapgood embrace, the rock finally does miraculously spurt water. They didn't wait

around for miracles but went ahead and learned to live for themselves, and it is precisely this that makes the miracle happen.

On the CD of the Original Broadway Cast album one of the bonus tracks is a recording of Sondheim singing an earlier version of this song. There the lyrics include the lines: 'If there's anything at all/I want it forever' and later 'Tell me, it's forever./It's forever./What we have we have forever./And forever.' These lines had been rewritten by the time of the recording and become: 'Everything that's here and now and us together!' (Sondheim, 2010: 138). The idea of a love affair being eternal is one that Sondheim backs away from, though there is still a hint of the idea in the final version of the song: 'None of it is wasted,/All of it will last' (Sondheim, 2010: 138). 'Forever', an idea that was central to the romantic imagination, and indeed the popular love ballad, is not a word that Sondheim uses a great deal. His world is more uncertain.

Another line that was changed between the demo recording and the performance was the plea that they 'Then stay for ever here with me./And shut the world away'. This dream of being away from the world is always exposed in Sondheim as a dream. There is no sequestered place away from the world. Happiness, and we shall see that this is always true in Sondheim's work, can only be achieved by letting the world in, not shutting it out.

Sondheim said of the show:

On another level, it's about the difficulties of maintaining idealism and romanticism as well as the dangers of them. Our two principal characters were

an idealist who turns out to be a cynic and a cynic who turns out to be a romanticist. [...] The show also dealt with the need for miracles in people's lives. The hero and heroine tried to expose the miracle for what it was, out of different motives. Though organised religion may be dead, there is an enormous need in people to think that something beyond them and not explainable in terms of ordinary human activity is going on... which is another form of idealism or romanticism, contrasted with that of the two characters.

(Zadan, 1994: 88.)

In each of the shows we have seen so far the main characters have, for the most part, been romantics or idealists. The distinction between the two terms is not always clear, but I shall use 'idealist' to mean someone with a vision of what life can be like, and a romantic to mean someone who lives a life of feeling. Tony and Maria are romantics; their love is the most important thing in their life, Rose is an idealist who has a dream while her daughter is rather more pragmatic, and even the otherwise cynical Pseudolus has his dream of being free. Here Fay is an idealist, she dreams of defeating Cora Hoover Hooper, and Bowden a romantic, in that he helps Fay get in touch with the emotions that she has denied. Ultimately they triumph in a hostile world, and defeat the forces of conformity as represented by Cora and her henchmen. The ease with which Fay and Hapgood make fools of their enemies weakens the drama, however: Hapgood especially, in Laurent's book, comes across as inordinately pleased with himself. Sondheim has acknowledged this weakness.

Arthur and I had written the piece as if we were the two smartest kids in the class (in the back row, of course), wittily making fun of the teacher as well as our fellow students, demonstrating how far ahead of the established wisdom we were [...]

(Sondheim, 2010: 111.)

In future shows the characters' search for meaning will be taken more seriously.

Sondheim's last show as just lyricist is *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965). With music by Richard Rodgers and book once more by Laurents, it is also about an uncertain woman who cannot open up emotionally. A middle-aged American, Leona Samish, holidays in Venice and finds love with an Italian, Di Rossi. As with Fay, Leona is looking for a 'Magical mystical miracle'. (Sondheim, 2010: 158.) In the song 'Stay' Di Rossi sings that she should learn to let go her illusions.

DI ROSSI I am not the dream come true,
 But stay.

 Not perfection, nor are you,

 But stay.

 Who is brilliant, who is witty?

 Am I handsome? Are you pretty?

 Throw the dream away,

 Stay and stay and stay!

(Sondheim, 2010: 158.)

She should learn to accept imperfections, a lesson that many of Sondheim's characters will learn. Leona must throw away her dream because it is a false one: one of a perfect lover.

This learning to live with imperfection is also the theme of the song 'We're Gonna Be All Right', sung by two supporting characters: an American couple called Eddie and Jennifer. This sour-sweet look at marriage prefigures the scores of

Company and *Follies*. The original version is very much darker than the one that was finally used – it hints at the death of feeling:

EDDIE One day the ache is gone -
 There's nothing like senility[...]

(Sondheim, 2010: 155.)

And the marriage might degenerate into violence.

EDDIE Lately, he tends to
 Hit her.

JENNIFER Sometimes she drinks in bed,

EDDIE Sometimes he's homosexual,

BOTH But why be vicious?

 They keep it out of sight.

 Good show!

(Sondheim, 2010, 158.)

Morality does not matter as long as no-one knows. Not that Eddie and Jennifer are like this themselves, they are imagining what they might become. Richard Rodgers loved the lyric and then abruptly changed his mind, guided by his wife Dorothy. (See Sondheim, 2010: 155.) The lyric that finally was used is fairly innocuous, but, in the staging, becomes sinister. Eddie and Jennifer sing a few verses, and then:

(The music now becomes hushed and they are in a position reminiscent of Grant Wood's "American Gothic." Their faces are dead; their voices are thin. They sing) (Laurents, 1965, 109.) They sing the same words again, but the reassurance has grown thin. Simple reassurance never works in any Sondheim show. Eddie is in fact being unfaithful to Jennifer, but she forgives him and their marriage survives.

Leona, as does Fay, finds that the miracle happens when she accepts reality, which is to say she accepts the fact that the ideal man, like Fay's hero, will not arrive, and she will have to accept what she can. With Di Rossi she accepts a 'little but lovely time' (Sondheim, 2010, 161), similar to the 'marvellous moment' (Sondheim, 2010, 138) shared by Fay and Hapgood. If one accepts that life won't be perfect, and the miracle may happen after all.-

Yet the show never really gains any dramatic momentum: in all future shows by Sondheim the characters have to decide how they will live the rest of their lives. Leona only has to decide whether or not she will have a fling with a man, which isn't going to make very much difference to her life in America. Venice in the show is treated stereotypically: all the Italians are sex-mad and enjoy life to the full, and the Americans are all hypocritical, censorious and unhappy. Leona's choice is too lightweight to matter very much. Sondheim's unhappy relationship with his composer and the fact that he worked on the show out of a sense of obligation to his late mentor Hammerstein rather than a need to write it, led to a show that Sondheim has referred to as 'not a bad show, merely a dead one' (Sondheim, 2010: 142).

More substantial is *Evening Primrose* (1966) a television musical Sondheim composed with a script by James Goldman, dramatised from a 1940 short story by John Collier about a colony of people who live in a department store and disguise themselves as shop dummies. Collier was a novelist and short story writer nowadays best remembered for his elegantly macabre stories such as 'Back for Christmas'. Goldman's work as a playwright and screenwriter often dwells on faded glories: *The Lion in Winter* (Haworth Productions, dir. Anthony Harvey, 1968), *Nicholas and Alexandra* (Columbia Pictures, dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, 1971), *Robin and Marian* (Columbia Pictures, dir. Richard Lester, 1976). In each of these films an era is coming to an end: whether it is the reign of Henry II, the reign of the Romanoffs, or the lives of the legendary figures of Robin Hood and Maid Marian. The underlying attitude of these works is remarkably pessimistic: Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, despite all their plotting and counter-plotting, end up unable to defeat the three sons who hate them; The Czar and Czarina cannot save themselves or their family; and Robin and Maid Marian die, as (presumably) do most of the Merry Men, and the evil King John is victorious. Action is seemingly futile, except as an assertion of self in a world that doesn't care, and the films mostly end either on a departure (*The Lion in Winter*) or the death of the main romantically linked couple (*Nicholas and Alexandra*, *Robin and Marian*). This pattern continues in his work with Sondheim: *Evening Primrose* ends in the double death of the romantic couple and *Follies* ends in departure as everyone leaves the theatre.

Sondheim remembered:

Occasionally, as in the case of *Follies*, I've gone to a writer and said "Let's do a musical"; I went to James Goldman because I'd read a play of his called *They*

Might Be Giants that bowled me over. And I said, “Have you any ideas?”
(‘The Musical Theatre’ A talk given by Stephen Sondheim in 1978 at a session of The
Dramatists Guild Special Projects. Collected in *Broadway Song & Story*, Edited by
Otis L. Guernsey Jr. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1985. 230.)

They Might Be Giants, which was filmed with a screenplay by Goldman, (Universal
Pictures, dir. Anthony Harvey, 1971), tells the story of an unhappy psychiatrist being
liberated by one of her patients who thinks that he's Sherlock Holmes. The show is
very reminiscent of *Anyone Can Whistle*, even the ending where, it is implied, the
patient's fantasies are coming true and he is really Sherlock Holmes in a battle with
Professor Moriarty.

Evening Primrose concerns a poet, Charles Snell (Anthony Perkins), who
means to live in the store permanently, undiscovered. Almost his first words are ‘Am
I alone?’ (Sondheim, 2011: 388). To be alone is something that Sondheim's mature
characters dread. In his first song the music hints at the hollowness of Charles'
victory in hiding himself away from the world. He sings: ‘If you can find me – I'm
here’ (Sondheim, 2011: 389). He repeats the phrase ‘I am here’ triumphantly, but the
orchestra stops while he is singing and his voice, unaccompanied, goes on singing ‘I
am here’ until he hears the night-watchman moving and he dives for cover. The
triumph Charles feels is all in his head.

As with *Anyone Can Whistle*, the show is an oblique criticism of conformity: the
society of dummies is a sad and decrepit one, that lives in terror of being discovered.
It is run by the autocratic Mrs Munday (Dorothy Stickney), who herself is lost in a

fantasy of the past. She was in love once with a man who left her in 1896, and she still wonders if he will ever come back for her. She nurses a hopeless romantic dream, but this does not make her behave any more kindly; it is she who calls in the dark men - the murderous dwellers of a mortuary who come and dispose of anyone who threatens the community.

Charles falls in love with Ella (Charmian Carr) a maid who is forced to work for Mrs Munday. Ella sings of her desire to join the world in her song: 'Take Me to the World'. Tony and Maria had wanted to escape from the world, Rose wanted to dominate it, Pseudolus wanted to be free, and Fay and Hapgood wanted to assert themselves against it. But Ella sings of her desire to belong to the world, a sign that she has reached maturity. Over this song Charles speaks, claiming that he is wiser and he will make the decisions. Then he sings in counterpoint with her, still trying to dissuade her, but the fact that he is singing indicates that he is coming round to her way of thinking. Despite his claim to be the one to make the decisions, she wins him over. He is disillusioned with the world, but this is shown to be the immature response: Ella, although seemingly naïve, is the wiser of the two. This depiction of the instinctive wisdom of the female which is favourably compared to the cold egotism of a controlling male who finally opens up to the woman's generosity of feeling is very much in the tradition of Rodgers and Hammerstein.

What is unlike the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition is the fact that it is Charles's emotional opening up that dooms him and Ella. For it is when he agrees to help Ella escape that he sings. But an intercom system has been left on, and Mrs.

Munday and all the other members of the community overhear Charles' promise to help Ella escape. 'We shall have the world/Forever/For our own!' (Sondheim, 2011: 393.) The word 'Forever' is sung on a triumphant high note. We hear this song repeated at the end: it is played over the final scene, when Charles and Ella have been turned into shop dummies and are in a window display.

As we have seen, Sondheim is sparing in his use of the word 'Forever.' The idea of love lasting forever, is undercut by the gruesome deaths Charles and Ella suffer. While this might be read as hostile to the very idea of love lasting forever, and to the Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition, it is more a sort of ironic recoil; a recognition that sometimes the forces of oppression win. In an opera the repetition of the love theme would work as an assertion of love surviving death. Here that assertion is ironic; the abiding image is of Ella and Charles as wax models of a bride and groom – they are trapped forever in the shop window. The only other 'forever' that seems to be true in the show is the sad statement of Mrs. Munday who says ruefully: 'We're here forever.'

We do not see the capture of Charles and Ella: in the show's final minutes we see them hiding in a delivery van, hoping to escape. The next scene is outside the shop, we see a couple on the street outside looking in the shop window. The couple are similarly dressed to Charles and Ella, and at first one might think it is them. Then they are seen in close-up, and are revealed to be a different couple. We then see that Charles and Ella have been turned into the dummies in the window display. The disillusionment is forced on us as we realise that they didn't get away. Instead, with a grim irony, they have been dressed up as a bride and groom at a wedding

ceremony: an image of love lasting forever.

We hear Charles and Ella's voices sing, but their song mingles with the noise of traffic on the street,¹⁰ this reminds us that the world cannot be so easily stifled. The world carries on indifferent to the tragedy that has been enacted within the shop. This disillusionment, so to speak, is for the audience: undercutting the idea that love triumphs even in death. Yet the triumphal sound of the song cannot be completely undercut by irony. The echo of so many duets of love surviving death means that the show, even if it seems to be despairing, doesn't *feel* despairing. The completeness of Charles and Ella's defeat does not invalidate their action in trying to escape. The dark men are an embodiment of the dark forces surrounding every mature Sondheim show: the spectres of failure, negation and death that hover at the edge, so to speak, of the action, and yet never finally win. Charles and Ella have made their choice and the show does not demean them for it.

¹⁰ Such is the powerful effect of music, however, that I didn't notice the traffic noise until after several viewings

CHAPTER FOUR

Company (1970)

Sondheim established himself as a mature artist with *Company*, with a libretto by George Furth. Furth tended to write contemporary stories with a New York setting: this was to be the first of two books he would write for Sondheim, the other being *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981/1985). They also collaborated on a thriller, *Getting Away with Murder* (1996) and Sondheim wrote incidental music and a song for Furth's 1971 play *Twigs*. Furth's tone tends to be lighter than Goldman's, and he does not show the same interest in the legendary past. In *Company* Robert, a single man in his thirties, observes five married couples who are his friends, and is abandoned by three girlfriends. At first glance the show might seem a cynical account of the imperfect nature of marriage: Walter Kerr, writing in the *New York Sunday Times*, said that: 'the mood is misanthropic, [...] the attitude middle-aged mean' (quoted in Joanne Gordon's *Art Isn't Easy*, Southern Illinois University Press, Da Capo Press, 47). In fact this chapter will argue the opposite point of view: that the show is fully in favour of marriage, and that the only alternative that it imagines to marriage and commitment is loneliness.

The show doesn't have a plot as such: '*Company* does have a story, the story of what happens inside Robert; it just doesn't have a chronological linear plot.' (Sondheim, 2010: 166). This lack of a plot reflects the emptiness of Robert's life: nothing much (at first) is happening inside, so nothing can happen outside. The scenes are fragmented: the framing story is a birthday party that might be one party or

four parties over a period of years. But there are no clearly defined flashbacks: this is perhaps because Robert hasn't really got a past because he has never really connected with anyone. And the classical Rodgers and Hammerstein model, where a character finds an emotion too big for mere speech and so starts to sing, is broken up as well: we see Harry and Sarah having a playful karate fight that has some real animosity buried in it, but they don't sing. Instead it is Joanne, the most cynical character in the show, who sardonically sings 'The Little Things You Do Together'. This song is not motivated in the usual sense, Joanne was not in the scene in the apartment, but it is as if all the characters know each other: Joanne can *guess* what their marriage is like because all her friends' marriages are like it and, by implication, so are all other marriages. They are based on small deceptions, irritating habits and odd quirks. But, crucially, all the marriages that we see in this show work, after a fashion.

All the husbands agree that they are 'Sorry-Grateful' that they got married. David, one of the husbands, says: 'You hold her, thinking, "I'm not alone."/You're still alone.' (Sondheim, 2010: 175). This expresses the fear that everyone is ultimately alone: that even marriage cannot cure that. Not that Robert, at first glance, seems to be alone. He is surrounded by friends who insist 'We looooooooooooooooooove you!' (Sondheim, 2010: 173.) They do, but it is the sort of love people have for familiar friends: it is an indulgent, slightly gushy emotion. It is a love that knows how to keep its distance. It is not the kind of love that Robert has to admit that he needs.

He needs it because the only alternative is isolation and, ultimately, death. This makes the show sound more stark than it seems to be when it is performed, but the

isolation of living in a big city without friends is the subject of 'Another Hundred People'. New York is no longer the exciting playground of, say, Leonard Bernstein's *On the Town* (1944): it is 'a city of strangers.' (Sondheim, 2010: 179.) The lyric pictures New York as an alienated cityscape of 'crowded streets', 'guarded parks', 'rusty fountains' and 'dusty trees/With the battered barks' (Sondheim, 2010: 179). This is a disenchanting view of New York, where loneliness potentially waits for everyone.

When Joanne sings 'The Ladies Who Lunch' she expresses despair at her meaningless existence: listing the different kind of middle-aged women that she knows. At one point she seems to be about to lose control.

JOANNE Aaaaahhhhhh -

(A scream which degenerates into:)

I'll drink to that.

(Sondheim, 2010: 193.)

She is on the edge of despair, her irony and cutting wit (and her drinking) are her ways of keeping the horror at bay, of dulling the edge of reality. 'Look into their eyes/ And you'll see what they know:/ Everybody dies.' (Sondheim, 2010: 193).

The spectre of death is at the end of the process of getting older, which Joanne has already referred to in 'The Little Things You Do Together.'

SUSAN, PETER, JOANNE, LARRY Becoming a cliché together -

JENNY, DAVID, AMY, PAUL Growing old and gray together -

JOANNE Withering away together -

(Sondheim: 2010: 174.)

Robert seems to be exempt from this ageing process. Larry says, during the song 'Side by Side by Side':

LARRY It's amazing. We've gotten older every year and he seems to stay exactly the same.

(Furth, *Company*, 1996: 80.)

But Robert is not ageing because, as Kathy, Marta and April say in 'You Could Drive a Person Crazy', he is a zombie. (Sondheim, 2010: 177.) He is a zombie because he is fundamentally alone. To be alone, to not connect, is the nightmare that haunts many of Sondheim's shows. As Harry says: 'You've got so many reasons for not being with someone, but Robert, you haven't got one good reason for being alone.' (Furth, 1996: 114.) Even Joanne isn't entirely cynical: when Robert refuses to become her lover she isn't hurt or indignant, she is glad. Glad because Robert's reality has changed and he has admitted that he needs a real relationship.

JOANNE Oh, I just heard a door open that's been stuck a long time.

(Furth, 1996: 111.)

The friends voices can all be heard speaking to Robert during the final number, 'Being Alive'. They are encouraging him to admit his need for another person. All of his friends have their flaws but ultimately they are all good friends to him. As Peter says: 'Don't be afraid it won't be perfect... the only thing to be afraid of really is that it won't be!' (Furth, 1996: 115.) Robert learns the same lesson that Leona does in *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, they both learn not to look for perfection. One lets go the illusion of perfection to gain the dream of a fully-developed relationship.

The show comes down squarely on the side of marriage: in this regard it is a great deal more traditional in its outlook than a show such as Galt MacDermot's *Hair* which envisages a 'tribe' that can encompass an alternative way of living to marriage and family. *Company* has a traditional chorus line number in 'Side by Side by Side' although the title, with its extra 'by Side', warns us that something is a little out of kilter. There is an extra one that is out of place. The song gives an opportunity to have an extended dance number in the show. At one point Harry does a brief dance break and Sarah answers it, then Paul does a brief dance break and is answered by Amy, and Larry does one that is answered by Joanne. Then Robert does a dance break, which is followed by silence. (See Furth, 1996, 84.) At first glance this is ironical: the dance, usually a celebration of togetherness in a musical, is broken up. Robert '*stands stunned as the others look at him; after a brief pause, they continue singing vigorously*' (Furth, 1996: 84). This breaking up of debonair performance will go much further in Sondheim's next show *Follies*, but here the number is telling Robert something. Far from ironising the traditional Broadway teeth'n'smiles number,

rather the show makes this number force a realisation on Bobby, a realisation that he needs to have. The role of the traditional Broadway musical number in *Company* is ultimately positive: when Robert can't live up to its ideal, so to speak, he realises that there is something missing in his life.

Ultimately the spectres of futility and death, are defeated. Maybe it is the fear of being alone that keeps the couples together, but this does not make the marriages any less viable. In the song 'Getting Married Today' Amy panics and imagines telling the congregation at the church that they should all go home as there is going to be no wedding. Her panic-stricken verbosity contrasts with the wedding hymn and with her husband's praise of her. It is another of Sondheim's nervous breakdowns in song, and seems to express hostility to the idea of marriage: 'A wedding, what's a wedding?/It's a prehistoric ritual' (Sondheim, 2010: 181). She keeps using the phrase 'I'm not getting married,' but this is not the title of the song: the title is 'Getting Married Today', as if to say 'This is what getting married today is like'. Everybody panics, but then everybody does it. And Amy, once her panic attack is over, does marry Paul.

In fact, as Sondheim says, the show is:

[...] the most pro-marriage show in the world. It says very clearly that to be emotionally committed to somebody is very difficult, but to be alone is impossible; to commit is to live, and not to commit is to be dead. Every marriage on that stage has its problems, but every one is a good marriage. It's the central character, Robert, who is cold, who chooses to see his married friends at their worst moments. He's a type one sees more and more these days, a product of a depersonalised society, unable to commit himself.

(Quoted in Joanne Gordon, 1990, 1992: 47).

What is true is that Robert has no pre-destined partner. He has three girlfriends: April, Marta and Kathy, but none of them is right for him. For Hammerstein, dreams meant certainty: 'And somehow you know,/You know even then' (Hammerstein, 1949: 17). Whereas , in the song 'Wait' Robert wonders: 'Would I know her even if I met her?/Have I missed her? Did I let her go?' (Sondheim, 2010: 179.) Sondheim has the same belief as Hammerstein in commitment, but not the same certainty.

In *Company* Robert's final song is 'Being Alive.' In the place where many shows would have a man and woman commit to each other we see a man alone on stage. But he is committing to the *idea* of marriage: in fact he can see no alternative. 'But alone is alone, not alive.' (Sondheim, 2010: 195). None of the characters is disillusioned at the end: most of the characters are already somewhat disillusioned at the start, but are making the best of things. Robert, at the beginning of the show, avoids commitment, and it is only in his final song that he learns to have a dream at all. In fact he changes during the song: he begins by thinking that a wife would be 'Someone to hold you too close/Someone to hurt you too deep,' (Sondheim, 2010: 193) but then decides that this is what he wants and prays: 'Somebody hold me too close,/Somebody hurt me too deep' (Sondheim, 2010: 195). He doesn't sing his 'I Want' song until the end. As Amy says to him when he is on the verge of his breakthrough:

AMY Blow out your candles, Robert, and make a wish. *Want* something, Robert!

Want *something*!

(Furth, 1996: 116.)

To want, of course, means taking the risk of not getting; to want leaves one open to the possibility of disillusion. Robert accepts, before he has met the woman, that he may be hurt, but he decides to go ahead anyway.

To see characters who made the commitment while still unable to tell dream from reality, we need to go to his next show, *Follies*.

CHAPTER FIVE

FOLLIES (1971)

Songs of Innocence and Experience.

Follies is about the disillusionment of getting old, and about the collapse of a dream. The form, a musical revue, is deliberately at odds with the subject matter. Instead of a cast of beautiful young chorines, we see older people: the 'Beautiful Girls' of the chorus are now middle-aged matrons. The characters sing but forget their lines, get out of breath, and regret the past, instead of anticipating a wonderful future. The show displays a constant awareness of the gap between the world that the songs portrayed, and the lives that the characters actually live. The enchanted world of revue ages in front of the audience.

Follies was the second collaboration Sondheim had with James Goldman.

The show, like many Goldman scripts, dealt with the end of an era. Sondheim explained:

The reason that Jim [Goldman] chose that place for the reunion was that the *Follies* was a state of mind which represented America between the two world wars; up until 1945, America was the good guy and everything was hopeful and idealistic. Now the country is a riot of national guilt. The dream has collapsed. Everything has turned to rubble and that's what *Follies* is about – the collapse of the dream. How all your hopes tarnish, but if you live in despair you might as well pack up.

(Quoted in Gordon, J, 1992: 80.)

Although the action of the play takes place in the early seventies (the characters having lived through the Depression and the Second World War) the script says that

the action takes place in 'The Present'. When they are young they yearn for a future that will be successful; when they are old they look back to when they were young. The present is what constantly eludes them. *Follies* does not mention race riots, Vietnam or the counter-culture: the characters are mostly suburban, middle-aged and 'square'. *Follies*, certainly where Buddy and Sally are concerned, might be said to be about the sort of suburban couple who come to New York to see a show. *Follies* is the show where the musical meets its audience.

Sondheim and Goldman, just as Sondheim and Furth did with *Company*, experiment with chronology. We do see flashbacks, but not long coherent scenes as might be seen in classical Hollywood movies, but sudden short flashbacks: painful splinters of memory. In this the show's collaborators were influenced by European cinema of the 1960s. Harold Prince remarked of *Follies*:

Its hero, Ben Stone, is the perfect 1970s monolith approaching menopause on the cusp of a nervous breakdown. Little wonder that I was reminded of *8½*.

(Harold Prince, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-six Years in the Theatre*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1974. 159.)

8½ (Federico Fellini, Cineriz, 1963) is about a film director (Marcello Mastroianni) who has a creative block.

Follies is a title that has many meanings. The action of the show takes place at a reunion for people who were involved in the Weismann Follies, but follies of course, are also foolish actions: it is often a wistful word that an older person might ruefully apply to the things that they did in their youth. But, more ominously, the French word

folie means madness. Follies can also refer to architectural follies, meaning something grand but useless. This last meaning could refer to Weismann's theatre itself, that created glorious but ephemeral dreams. And perhaps the worst folly is to waste one's maturity regretting what one did or didn't do in one's youth. In the song 'The Road You Didn't Take' Ben claims that 'Ignorance is bliss' (Sondheim, 2010: 211), a quotation from Thomas Gray's poem 'Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College'. The line from the poem is 'No more; where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise.' (Gray, 1742: lines 99-100.) Ben tells himself that the ultimate folly is to face up to yourself. But he is lying: despite what he claims in that song the longings haven't died, as we hear in the nervous questions that Ben keeps asking himself in that song.

Printed on the inside front and back covers of both *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat* is the phrase 'Content dictates form'. At first glance, the idea that the content has dictated the form of *Follies* is a strange one. How can a story of middle-aged disappointment and regret dictate the form of a musical revue, a form that is dedicated to youth, beauty and optimism? Yet the content does dictate the form: it dictates it by its very inappropriateness. By seeing these middle-aged to elderly people recreating the shows of their youth we see the gap between what they dreamed of being when they were young, and what they have now become. This disparity makes us feel the contrast between youthful optimism and middle-aged compromise.

The show begins with an overture, which starts confidently, but soon turns into an anxious echo of itself. The overture is based on a theme that was to have been reused

in a song called 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', but the song was cut. It is appropriate, however, to have an overture based on a song we never hear. Unfulfilled promises are to echo throughout the show. On stage stands Dimitri Weismann, a one-time impresario, surveying his abandoned theatre: *'from the dark auditorium rises the ghostly sound of audience applause.'*¹¹ (Goldman, 2001: 1.) Weismann himself is, it turns out, a minor character. Rather, it is the theatre that is coming alive. Unnoticed by Weismann there is the figure of a showgirl: *'Slowly she comes to life, as if she were a ghost who had been waiting in the theatre for years in anticipation'* (Goldman, 2001: 2). When Sally makes her first entrance the ghosts regard her, as if to see what they will become.

Theatres often seem to be haunted by the many performances that have taken place there. Marvin Carlson, in his book *The Haunted Stage*, writes

There appears to be something in the very nature of the theatrical experience itself that encourages [...] a simultaneous awareness of something previously experienced and of something being offered in the present that is both the same and different, which can only be fully appreciated by a kind of doubleness of perception in the audience.

(Carlson, 2001: 51.)

Carlson is writing of theatrical performance in general and the audience's knowledge that a performance, unless it is a world première, has been performed before. But here the 'doubleness of perception' is more noticeable because the disparity is greater. Instead of the performances we see in the present being like the ones we imagine that took place in the past, we see the older characters in the present being haunted by

¹¹ This chapter will refer to the 2001 libretto, as it is the one that is currently licensed for performance. The show was given a 1987 London production where Ben's song 'The Road You Didn't Take' was cut, and 'Live, Laugh, Love' was replaced with the dramatically inert 'Make the Most of Your Music'. The drama of Ben's breakdown in 'Live, Laugh, Love' was lost, and replaced with a mild contentment. This version of the script is no longer licensed for performance.

their past selves. We are encouraged to see the difference between what they were and what they are.

The older characters are also, in a metaphorical sense, ghost-like: Phyllis refers to herself as 'virtually dead' in 'The Story of Lucy and Jessie' (Sondheim, 2010: 236). Ben says to his younger self: 'You killed me – I've been dead for thirty years'. (Goldman, 2001: 60.) In the original version Sally, referring to her unsuccessful suicide bid, says 'I should of died the first time.' (Quoted in Banfield, 1993: 196.) If the characters are like ghosts, they are also themselves haunted by memories of what was done wrong and what was never done. As with many Sondheim shows, (*Company*, *Evening Primrose*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Passion*) the story is about the characters coming back to life and accepting the pain that entails.

Disenchantment is embodied on stage in a number of ways:

- 1 a. In the book and lyrics. Characters fail to complete their thoughts, both in speech and in song lyrics. Buddy Plummer cannot finish his song 'The Right Girl' because he doesn't know what he wants any more, while, in 'Live, Laugh, Love', Ben Stone cannot keep up the façade that he has made of his life.
- b. In addition, the lyrics include phrases and ideas that would have been unacceptable in Golden Age musical comedies. Buddy's spoken 'Ah, shit...' (Goldman, 2001: 51) at the end of 'The Right Girl' expresses a despair (and a swear-word) that would have been unacceptable in the Depression Era escapist musical.

2. In the choreography. For instance with the 'Bolero d'Amour' we see Theodore and Emily Whitman recreating the dance routines that they used to do, while in the background we see their younger selves doing the same routine effortlessly without the careful kicks and energy-preserving steps that they use when they're older. The show displays a constant awareness of the gap between the world that the songs portrayed, and the lives that the characters actually live, which is a kind of disillusionment. We can also see this in the way the characters' younger selves pass unnoticed amongst the older selves, maybe embodying their memories, or their idealised memories of how they would have liked to have been. This reminds us of how time has passed and how much has changed for the performers.

The choreography also shows dance expressing rage, (Buddy's furious tap dance in 'The Right Girl'), a bitter emotion that Buddy can hardly control, and not the pleasure and elegant control that dance expresses in the traditional musical comedy of the 20s and 30s. This show gives the audience both the glamorous illusions of the younger characters and the less than glamorous reality; the supple dreamlike young dancers and their elderly counterparts. This gives the show a kind of layered effect, where one sees the girls as they once were, or how they would like to have been, and also sees them as they are now. In this way one experiences the passing of time: a kind of disillusionment as one is forced to accept the haziness of memory and bodily infirmity.

3. In the placing of songs: instead of having unmotivated songs that don't relate to character, as in a depression-era musical, or seamless changes from story to song, as in the later Rodgers and Hammerstein integrated model, there are jarring juxtapositions of song and dialogue. Songs are interrupted by painful memories ('The Road You Didn't Take', 'In Buddy's Eyes') that show the singer is not necessarily to be trusted. This also shows that the songs don't always work, they don't necessarily soothe the person who is being sung to. Sondheim collaborated with book-writer James Goldman, orchestrator Jonathan Tunick, and producer Harold Prince, who also co-directed the show with choreographer Michael Bennett, to create a show that is an aesthetic unity, where its disjunctions of style are deliberate.

The guests arrive at the reunion that Dimitri Weismann has arranged at his theatre for his old performers, before the building is torn down to make way for a parking lot. (In the version staged at the National Theatre in 2017 it is to become an office block.) Weismann introduces an old-style tenor called Roscoe who sings the song 'Beautiful Girls', which had served as the opening number of the Weismann Follies. Sondheim refers to the songs as pastiches rather than parodies: 'To define the term, at least as I use it: pastiches are fond imitations, unlike parodies or satires, which make comment on the work or the style being imitated.' (Sondheim, 2010: 200, footnote.) We can both enjoy the song in itself, and then realise that it is not necessarily as simple as it might have seemed at first. Songs can have troubling subtexts, just as speech can.

With the song 'Beautiful Girls' Sondheim pastiches Irving Berlin's 'A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody', a theme song for many of the Ziegfeld Follies. As with Berlin's number, the song is sung by a man: while he sings the women offer themselves up to be admired. But Sondheim's lyric destabilises this confident attitude: 'Careful,/Here's the home of/Beautiful girls,/Where your reason is undone.' (Sondheim, 2010: 202.) Here is already a hint of the madness to come, which will culminate in what Sondheim describes as 'a sort of group nervous breakdown' (Sondheim, 2010: 231) at the end of the show.

Many standards of the Pre-Golden Age were sung by men gazing adoringly at women: 'You Were Never Lovelier' (by Jerome Kern and Johnny Mercer, 1942), 'The Way You Look Tonight' (by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields 1936), 'Moonlight Becomes You' (by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke 1942). Roscoe performs the song as the one-time girls parade the way they used to thirty years ago: '*it feels as if an entire era were coming down the stairs.*' (Goldman, 2001: 5.) The song 'Beautiful Girls' offers the chorines up to the excited male gaze, only we see that the girls have grown old. If the singer of 'The Way You Look Tonight' pleaded with the woman to 'Never, never change', then the staging of 'Beautiful Girls' reminds us that such a wish is impossible. Thus there is a disparity between what we are hearing: a song about girls, and what we are seeing: a line of women in late middle or old age. Sondheim takes the young hopefuls beloved of many musicals and simply ages them. Performance is often meant to be, as we will see in Loveland, a place where 'Time stops, hearts are young,' (Sondheim, 2010: 229). *Follies* sets time going again and sees what happens to the chorus girls.

As Knapp put it: 'Sondheim thus invites us to acknowledge the critical distance between us and the stylistic pastiche while enjoying the type itself, often with a new appreciation for its possibilities.' (Knapp, collected in Gordon, R. and Jubin O., 2014: 435). In other words, why not sing about being a beautiful girl, even if you're old? The one-time chorus girls are not pretending to be young, they are simply performing the song that they performed in the past. But the number ruefully acknowledges the passing of time. Or rather, what we see acknowledges it, while the lyrics do not, though the slightly strained voice and old-fashioned delivery of Roscoe hints at how different things are now: singing styles change and his voice is not what it was.

The male gaze cannot be relied upon to keep them young. In the song 'In Buddy's Eyes' Sally will claim that 'Nothing dies [...] In Buddy's eyes.' (Sondheim, 2010: 217).¹² But she is lying. She is getting old and she no longer cares about Buddy. The song could be taken out of context and sung 'straight': i.e. as a tender love song from a wife to an adoring husband, but when we see it in *Follies* we realise that we cannot trust the singer, because we have seen her use the song to tell lies.

The anxiety caused by ageing can be heard in Sally's first song 'Don't Look at Me', when she meets Ben again after so many years. She is conflicted in her feelings – she wants Ben to notice her and then she begs him not to look at her; her agitated contradictory feelings are reflected in the rapid changes of tempo. She puts on an act to cover her feelings. This act is reflected in the lyric, where she self-mockingly

¹² Contrast this with Joanne's statement in 'The Ladies Who Lunch' from *Company*: 'Look into their eyes/And you'll see what they know:/Everybody dies.' (Sondheim, 2010: 193.)

introduces herself as if she were a star: 'Now, folks, we bring you/Di-rect from Phoenix,/Live and in person,/Sally Durant!' (Sondheim, 2010: 204). As McLaughlin points out, she is using her maiden name, (see McLaughlin, 2016: 85) eradicating the past years, and her marriage to Buddy into the bargain.

When we hear the opening verse of the song for the first time Sally sings it directly to the audience. But in mid-verse she is interrupted by Phyllis. Again there is a sudden disjunction between speech and song. This disjunction reveals that the song, like many in the show, is a private fantasy of a character, in this case a fantasy of Sally's. The song isn't being sung to anyone: it doesn't create a new reality for the characters, instead it stays inside the character's head. Sally chats with Phyllis and then goes on to meet Ben, where, this time, she sings the whole song. It becomes clear that when she was singing the first time she was rehearsing, gearing up to meet the man she thinks she loves.

Sally is not the innocent she first appears to be. In a Hammerstein show, for instance *South Pacific*, the girl who loves the hero is seen as generally a good person (albeit not perfect; Nellie has to confront her own innate racism). Nellie, like Sally, also gets nervous, at the thought of meeting a man, as we can hear in the 'Twin Soliloquies'. Nellie's nervousness, however, is perfectly natural, and she expresses it directly, while Sally's good-hearted naivete is an act: she can be seen as somebody who is selfish and manipulative, somebody who has put Buddy through years of hell.

BUDDY The mess, the moods, the spells you get, in bed for days without a word.

Or else you're crying, God, the tears around our place – or flying out to
Tom or Tim and camping at their doorstep just to fight.

(Goldman, 2001: 51.)

As Philia, in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, sings: 'Lovely is the
one thing I can do', (Sondheim, 2010: 93) so we might suspect that naivete is
something that Sally can do, when it suits her.

When Ben and Sally meet again there is another brief flashback. We see Ben
and Carlotta (with whom Ben has had an affair) talking and Sally watching them from
afar.

SALLY (*Watching from a distance*): Ben?

(*Young Sally enters as Carlotta goes back to the party.*)

YOUNG SALLY: Ben. Ben Stone, I want a reason. Look at me, damn it. You turn
around and look at me!

SALLY (*Quietly*): Ben, it's me.

(*The memory fades as Sally, working up her courage to confront Ben, starts to sing:*)

(Goldman, 2001: 11-12).

The memory fades quickly, after only a couple of sentences, but it is enough to warn
us that underneath Sally's act there is the memory of bitterness and rejection. The
flashbacks are presented in snippets, rather than in longer scenes: we have to piece
them together. They are of memories that hurt, that the protagonists maybe don't want

to remember. Sally's memory of Ben's rejection is also a warning to her of what happened last time: during the course of the evening Ben is to trifle with her and reject her again. .

This is the sort of effect that Banfield referred to as 'a deliberate dimension of self-criticism, a "cubism" of perspective' (Banfield, 1993: 258, following Hirsch 1989: 116). What we hear is different from what we see. Only when one contrasts what one sees with what one hears, does one get the whole picture. The Rodgers and Hammerstein type of show usually aimed to be seamless, to achieve a unity of song, dance and dialogue – this is the meaning of the term integrated. Although Rodgers and Hammerstein could write songs where characters struggled with emotions that were too big for them (for instance 'People Will Say We're in Love' from *Oklahoma!*) they didn't write scenes where characters deliberately used music to drown out the truth. *Follies*, one might say, is a dis-integrated musical. The elements quite deliberately do not match, song often contradicts dialogue. This means that we do not always know what to trust. This might imply a disenchantment with the whole genre of musical theatre, but it is not so much that Sondheim is saying we shouldn't trust it, rather he is making the audience aware of performance, how it doesn't *necessarily* tell the truth.

Although *Follies* is in one sense the opposite of an integrated musical, in that its various elements are deliberately set against each other, in another sense it is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in a way that few musicals are. The songs cannot be taken out of the show without changing their meaning. Sondheim is not the first composer to

embed a song thus: Kurt Weill's 'September Song' (with a lyric by Maxwell Anderson) seems to be a gentle song about an old man making the best of the time he has left. It is often thought to be a romantic song, but, in the context of *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938), the show in which it first appeared, we hear that it is a song sung by a cynical roué, Peter Stuyvesant, who thinks he can buy women. Sondheim employs this device of embedding a song in a context which changes its meaning more consistently than any other Broadway composer.

We hear the the opening line of the song 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs' first sung by Young Buddy as an off-stage voice. It is as if a memory is stirring in Buddy's head.

YOUNG BUDDY'S VOICE (*Sings*): Hey, up there...

BUDDY: I even carved my name here some place.

YOUNG BUDDY'S VOICE (*Sings*): Way up there...

YOUNG BUDDY AND YOUNG BEN'S VOICES (*Sing*): Whaddaya say, up there?

(Goldman, 2001: 15).

In the song Young Buddy and Young Ben are calling to Young Sally and Young Phyllis to come down from the dressing room and meet them. But it is also as if Buddy and Ben's younger selves are calling to their older selves from across the years. After a few more lines of dialogue Buddy sings up to the flies:

BUDDY Hey, up there!

Way up there!

Whaddaya say, up there?

(Sondheim, 2011: 204.)

It is as if Buddy is returning the call, trying to call down the past.

Just as 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs' is beginning, Buddy says:

BUDDY: I see it all. It's like a movie in my head that plays and plays. It isn't just the bad things I remember. It's the whole show.

(Sondheim: 2010: 204.)

It is noticeable that Buddy says 'bad things' rather than 'good things'. This gives us a clue to Buddy's character: beneath his bonhomie there lurks an inability to be happy - a desire, we will see as the show develops, to fall for the woman who doesn't love him. It also shows that all four characters are unable to escape from the past and neither are they able to lay it to rest.

'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs' is a book song where the four main characters reminisce about how the boys used to wait for the girls to get changed so they could go on the town. The tone is ruefully nostalgic: 'Life was fun, but oh, so intense./ Everything was possible and nothing made sense'. (Sondheim, 2010: 207.) This couplet captures both the sweetness of youth and its confusion. While young people still aren't sure who they are it gives them a sense of possibility. The boys are shown

to be slightly dishonest: having talked big about taking them to a nightclub called Tony's,¹³ they then try and take them somewhere else, presumably cheaper. But the girls insist on Tony's and finally get their way. It is significant that the song is about the moment of anticipation, rather than fulfilment. The four main characters remember waiting, the girls 'Stalling as long as we dare'. (Sondheim, 2010: 206.) The big moments: Sally and Ben's lovemaking, the angry scenes that took place when Ben's treachery was found out, Sally's attempted suicide, are only shown in glimpses. Trapped between fantasy and memory the characters are hardly ever there in the moment.

Perhaps few of the other guests are, either. Take for instance the medley of 'Rain on the Roof' 'Ah! Paris!' and 'Broadway Baby'. '*Showgirl ghosts look on as the Whitmans, Solange and Hattie appear in separate pools of light.*' (Goldman, 2001: 23.) At the end of the medley, the other party guests do not respond, instead: '*The memory is shattered by a noisy return of the party guests.*' (Goldman, 2010: 27.) It would have been easy to have shown the characters performing the numbers to other guests at the party, but isolating the songs like this, taking them out of the real world, makes them less celebratory and the performers more isolated. At the end the three songs compete discordantly rather than in counterpoint. The fantasies do not come together; the characters remain separate.

13 Tony's is referenced in Lorenz Hart's lyric for 'Too Good For the Average Man' (from *On Your Toes*): 'When England was Tudor/The King and his cronies/ Had cocktails at Tony's./The poor had baloneys,/And that's how England grew!' (Hart ed. Hart and Kimball, 1986: 222.) However, it may not have been an actual restaurant, just a generic name for one. In American slang 'tony' means something similar to 'ritzy' or 'high-class'.

'Rain on the Roof' is a novelty number like 'When the Red, Red Robin (Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along)' (by Harry Woods, 1926). It embodies a philosophy found in many songs: making the best of it. Rain in songs often represents misery, but one that the singer transmutes into happiness by his attitude: as in 'Pennies from Heaven' (by Arthur Johnston and Johnny Burke, 1936) and 'Singin' in the Rain' (by Arthur Freed and Nacio Herb Brown, published in 1929). It also is an excuse for lovers to remain together, as it is in 'Till the Clouds Roll By' (by Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton and P.G. Wodehouse, 1917), and 'Isn't This a Lovely Day (to be Caught in the Rain?)' (by Irving Berlin, 1935) and in Sondheim's song the lovers transmute the pitter-patter of raindrops into kisses. 'Ah! Paris!' is a pastiche of Cole Porter in what Sondheim calls his 'I've-been-all-over-the-world mode' (Sondheim, 2010: 209). Such songs include 'Paree, What Did You Do to Me?' or 'You Don't Know Paree' both written for the 1929 show *Fifty Million Frenchmen*. The third song, 'Broadway Baby', is a number about a young actress dreaming of getting the big break. Seeing an old lady perform the number makes it seem as if she has pounded 42nd Street for forty years. She hasn't, of course: Hattie is simply singing the song that she sang when she was young, but Hattie never did get the big break. Sondheim wrote about 'Broadway Baby' that

To see "Broadway Baby" sung by a tough old lady, superannuated and slightly down on her luck, made our show's point about surviving the past as clearly as any moment of the evening.

(Sondheim, 2010: 211.)

Time is the enemy of all the characters: its fleeting nature is captured in lyric after lyric. Carlotta sings: 'Top billing Monday,/ Tuesday you're touring in stock,' (Sondheim, 2010: 221) and in 'Who's That Woman?' Stella sings 'She thought that/ Love was a matter of/ "Hi, there!"/"Kiss me!"/"Bye, there!'" (Sondheim, 2010: 219).

'So life is ducky/And time goes flying,/And I'm so lucky/I feel like crying,' sings Sally in 'In Buddy's Eyes' (Sondheim, 2010: 217), when of course she really feels like crying for what she hasn't had. Time passing is an inevitable form of disillusionment. Nothing lasts. Ben is obsessed by the thought of time passing, as evinced by the repetition of the word 'time' in 'Too Many Mornings.' 'How much time can we hope that there will be?/ Not much time, but it's time enough for me,/If there's time to look up and see [...]' (Sondheim, 2010: 224.) In this song Ben claims that he has spent too many mornings dreaming of Sally (he hasn't) but what he is really upset about is that too many mornings have gone by: he is getting old. In 'The Road You Didn't Take' he sings about how 'The decades fly'. (Sondheim, 2010: 211.)

Ben sings 'The Road You Didn't Take' on meeting Sally again. At the top of the song he posits the choice: 'You're either a poet/Or you're a lover,/Or you're the famous/Benjamin Stone' (Sondheim, 2010: 211) to the same tune that we have heard Sally introduce herself with: 'Now, folks, we bring you/Di-rect From Phoenix' (Sondheim, 2010: 204). In a conventional show this would be a sign that they are right for each other, because they are singing the same tune. Here it is a sign that they are both liars. If Sally pretends to Ben, Ben pretends to himself. That he refers to himself in the third person indicates that he sees himself as a construct, as an image; not as a person. In his song Ben pretends that he never looks back on the past. But his uneasiness is betrayed by his constant questions. The song swirls obsessively around its theme of denial. The lyric's short lines, frequently ending in questions, (there are twelve in total, in a song that lasts less than three minutes) give the song a nervous impetus. He tries to persuade himself that he doesn't care. 'I don't

remember,/ I don't remember/At all' becomes 'You won't remember,/You won't remember/At all,/ Not at all...' (Sondheim, 2010: 211). Statement becomes reassurance. But we have already heard his mounting hysteria in the repeated question: 'The lives I'll never lead/Couldn't make me sing,/Could they?/Could they?/ Could they?' (Sondheim, 2010: 211.) And when he sings: 'And oh, the peace,/the blessed peace...' (Sondheim, 2010: 211) this peace is contradicted by the nervous underscoring.

At the end of the second verse, when he sings: 'I don't remember,/I don't remember/At all,' we see a brief flashback to Young Ben borrowing Young Buddy's car and some money. This flashback shows that he is lying, he *does* remember. He is using the song to drown out painful memories. He sings another verse and there is another brief flashback. In this one Young Ben tells Young Phyllis that:

YOUNG BEN Some day I'm going to have the biggest goddamn limousine.
(Goldman, 2001: 29.)

He doesn't say 'We're going to have' - an indication that Ben cares more about status than he does about Phyllis. When Phyllis tells him that it doesn't matter he disagrees. The memories are presumably real (otherwise Ben wouldn't need to fight them down): the cracks are appearing in Ben's façade.

Throughout the song he doesn't talk of what he's done, but only what he hasn't done, as he will do again later with 'Live, Laugh, Love'. The song ends with the

question: 'The Ben I'll never be,/Who remembers him?'. (Sondheim, 2010: 217.) Ben is trying to exorcise himself of his dreams. Although he might be Benjamin Stone (that is, a successful public figure) he is not Ben (i.e. a fulfilled man.) Ben could have married Sally, but didn't, so it is appropriate that he sings the song to her: *she* is the road he didn't take. But Sally remembers the Ben who'll never be: in fact she's in love with him. Not the Ben who is, but the image of himself that he projects.

If Ben is not honest with Sally neither is she with him. She sings 'In Buddy's Eyes' ostensibly to praise Buddy. But she is singing it, not to Buddy, but to Ben, to put the needle in him for having abandoned her. In this song Sally gets the chance, in the words of Dimitri Weismann, to lie about herself a little. This dishonesty is hinted at in Jonathan Tunick's orchestration: when Sally refers to Buddy the backing is dry woodwind, and when she refers to herself we hear romantic strings. (See Zadan, 1994: 156-157.) We know this song is a lie because it is interrupted by flashbacks, not of Sally and Buddy enjoying an idyllic marriage, but of Young Sally angrily confronting Young Ben. Half-way through the song Sally has a catch in her throat – she cannot perform for a moment. On the line 'And I'm so lucky/I feel like crying,/ And...!' (Sondheim, 2010: 217) she breaks off and we see Young Sally angry with Young Ben because he has given a ring to Phyllis while still messing around with Young Sally. This is the painful memory that the older Sally is fighting down, trying to sugar over with the song. Significantly, in the flashback, we do not see Ben and Sally break up. In her mind they never really have.

As Sondheim described it:

So Dorothy [Collins, the actress who originally played Sally] sings the whole song with a sub-text of anger. She could kill him, but it's a very sweet, pretty ballad; and she's lying through her teeth. She's doing it to get a knife into his groin, and the fact that it doesn't work is even more frustrating. But the point is, it's a *scene*, rather than a pretty ballad.

(Max Wilk, *They're Playing Our Song*. W. H. Allen. 1974: 235.)

A scene, in this sense, is created by allowing the words and music to contend with each other, which means that there is always an undercurrent of tension. By pretending that Buddy idealises her Sally keeps her ideal of herself alive. Unlike Ben, she has found a way of hanging on to the person she'll never be.

The former chorines then get together and perform 'Who's That Woman?' The song, about somebody recognising themselves, reflects the theme of uncomfortable self-discovery that is present throughout the show. Later on, the two main couples are made to confront themselves in the Loveland sequence. The song has an echo of 'I Feel Pretty' from *West Side Story*: in that song Maria had sung: 'See the pretty girl in that mirror there,/Who can that attractive girl be?' (Sondheim, 2010: 47). That is the voice of innocence, whereas conversely the voice of experience in 'Who's That Woman?' sings 'Mirror, mirror, on the wall,/Who's the saddest gal in town?' (Sondheim, 2010: 217) and comes to the realisation that 'That woman is me!' (Sondheim, 2010: 219).

'The vision's getting blurred./Isn't that absurd?' (Sondheim, 2010: 219) the lyric goes, referring, presumably, to the singer dissolving in tears. But when the older chorus girls sing it it could refer to the short-sightedness brought on by age. The lyric takes on a new resonance - it could also be about growing old - but this does not

obscure the original meaning. This is another example of the 'cubism of perspective' that Banfield speaks of, and the duality that Knapp speaks of: the song can be both enjoyed for what it is *and also* seen ironically. This is a more mature attitude than simple sarcasm or satire. The process of disillusionment is not complete; there is still an echo of the former glory.

One example of what happens to a chorus girl who gets older is the story of Carlotta Campion who sings 'I'm Still Here'. Sondheim worried that Carlotta shouldn't have a book song when her character is no more developed than that of the other supporting characters, (see Sondheim, 2010: 221) and yet it is appropriate because she has more self-awareness. While the other ex-Follies members sang the songs that they sung back then Carlotta acknowledges the passing of the years. Unlike the other women, she has succeeded and, maybe because of this, she is more disenchanted than they are. She doesn't still dream of being a Broadway Baby. In fact, while Hattie Walker can sing that 'Some day, maybe,/All my dreams will be repaid' (Sondheim, 2010: 211) Carlotta says that she has 'Seen all my dreams disappear'. (Sondheim, 2010: 221.) Carlotta has learned not to rely on a mythical 'some day.'

'I'm Still Here' recalls Cole Porter's 'Anything Goes' or 'You're the Top' (both from *Anything Goes*, 1934) in that both Porter songs refer to many of the people in the headlines at the time. 'I'm Still Here' also refers to figures who were famous in the 1930s: the Dionne quintuplets, Brenda Frazier, (sometimes this lyric is amended to 'Shirley Temple'). But in Sondheim's song they are listed precisely because they are

forgotten. They place Carlotta in a bygone time. Coincidentally or not, Cole Porter himself referenced Beebe's Bathysphere, in 'Gather Ye Autographs While Ye May' (Porter ed. Kimball, 1992: 187) and the Dionne babies in 'Good Morning, Miss Standing' (Porter ed. Kimball 1992: 188-189). Both of these songs come from his 1935 show *Jubilee*. Similarly Carlotta's line 'I got through *Abie's/Irish Rose*'¹⁴ (Sondheim, 2010: 221) with its rhyming of 'Abie's' with 'babies' recalls Lorenz Hart's line in 'We'll Have Manhattan': 'Our future babies/We'll take to *Abie's/Irish Rose*./I hope they'll live to see/It close'. (Hart ed. Hart and Kimball, 1986: 33). Carlotta has lasted so long she has seen it close. The time has gone past.

Carlotta's looks are fading:

CARLOTTA I've gotten through "Hey, lady, aren't you whoozis?

Wow, what a looker you were."

Or, better yet, "Sorry, I thought you were whoozis -

What ever happened to her?"

(Sondheim, 2010: 221.)

She no longer gets the admiring gaze bestowed on the Beautiful Girls. Despite this she has learned to deal with life. One cannot get much more disillusioned than her remark that she has 'Seen all my dreams disappear,' but she follows it up with 'But I'm here.' (Sondheim, 2010: 221). She has got through her sense of disillusion and can face the good and bad in life. Appropriately this is the only song of the show that

¹⁴ *Abie's Irish Rose* was a comedy by Anne Nichols that ran on Broadway from May 22nd 1923 to October 1st 1927, in a run of 2,327 performances, a record at the time.

mentions the Depression: the painful reality that the Broadway shows of the time (with a few exceptions) didn't deal with. 'I've stood on bread lines/With the best,/ Watched while the headlines/Did the rest'. (Sondheim, 2010: 221.) With that single word 'watched' Sondheim conjures up the helplessness of somebody caught up in a national disaster they can do nothing about. Carlotta goes on to say: 'I've run the gamut,/A to Z./Three cheers and dammit,/C'est la vie.' (Sondheim, 2010: 221.) This is a reference to the famous quip about Katharine Hepburn running the gamut of emotions from A to B.¹⁵ (This reference gives a sense of period and is also perhaps a sly joke at Hepburn, who at that time was Sondheim's next door neighbour.) Carlotta hasn't just been through the gamut on screen, she has been through it in life. The song is, in a sense, a two act play as indeed, it may be argued, 'Losing My Mind' is. The first half describes the times that Carlotta was on the breadline. In the second half she becomes a success and finds that that is not much better. In Dominic Cooke's 2017 revival, Carlotta sang the first half of the song to a group of hangers-on and reporters; then they all left and she sang the second half of the song, where she reflects on the emptiness of success, to herself, as if we see her real anxieties when the crowds have gone home. It might be that the number suddenly focuses on her in the second half precisely because she has become a success. She no longer has to sit around and watch while other people do things. Her success, however, is marked by persecution, insecurity and alcoholism: 'Been called a pinko/Commie tool,/Got through it stinko/ By my pool'. (Sondheim, 2010: 221.) To be labelled a 'pinko' in the era of the House Un-American Activities Committee could easily have ended a career.

¹⁵ The line is usually attributed to Dorothy Parker, but appears nowhere in her published work.

The headline/breadline rhyme can also be heard in the song 'The Gold Diggers' Song (We're in the Money)' (by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, 1933). This echo is highly appropriate. Al Dubin's lyric is 'We never see a headline/About a breadline today', and the song is the opening number of *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Warner Brothers, dir. Mervyn LeRoy, 1933). The song suggests that the depression is over but, in the film, the number is ironically undercut by what is happening on screen: a troupe of chorus girls are rehearsing the song when the sheriff's men arrive to take away the costumes which have not been paid for. As one of the chorus girls (played by Ginger Rogers) wryly observes: 'It's the depression, dearie.'

Ben and Sally have been circling round each other during the first act: Sally nervously approaching him in 'Don't Look at Me', Ben denying his feelings in 'The Road You Didn't Take', Sally digging at him in 'In Buddy's Eyes' and then finally they seem to come together in 'Too Many Mornings'. Ben claims to still dream of Sally. But, cruelly, he does not sing this song to Sally; he sings it to Young Sally. As Banfield puts it: 'Sally's tragedy is that she cannot see that Ben is desiring what she was, not what she is'. (Banfield, 1993: 195.) Sally and Young Sally simultaneously say 'Oh my sweet Ben'. (Goldman, 2001: 43.) This shows that Sally has not been able to move on, she is still stuck in the same place that she was when she was in her twenties.

'We can always feel this happy...' (Sondheim, 2010: 224) sings Ben: as usual he is singing what the other person wants to hear. In this song Sally admits that her behaviour has all been an act:

SALLY How I planned:
What I'd wear tonight and
When should I get here,
How should I find you [...]

(Sondheim, 2010: 224.)

and now that her dream seems to be coming true she has doubts. She sings the line 'And my fears were wrong!', with the word 'wrong' on a triumphant high note. But immediately after that she sings:

SALLY Was it ever real?
Did I ever love you this much?

(Sondheim, 2010: 224.)

Finally '*The couples are in identical embraces.*' (Goldman, 2001: 45.) But it didn't work last time either.

Buddy is observing them, just as Young Buddy observes Young Ben and Young Sally and just as, earlier on, Sally observed Ben and Carlotta. First Sally was shut out by Ben and Carlotta, now she is shutting out Buddy. This is a motif that reappears in many Sondheim shows: the duet, or song sung to someone else, where a third, often silent, character hears the song, but isn't a part of it. This makes them the dramatic focus on the stage. We have already seen this in 'All I Need Is the Girl' in *Gypsy* and

will see it again in 'My Friends' in *Sweeney Todd*, where Sweeney sings to his razors while Mrs. Lovett sings to him; in *Merrily We Roll Along* Frank and Beth sing 'Not a Day Goes By' as a wedding song unaware that Mary is miming the words as well, expressing her hopeless devotion to Frank; in *Road Show*, the Mizner's mother sings 'Isn't He Something!' in praise of Wilson Mizner, who isn't there, while unthinkingly excluding Addison, who is.

Here it is Buddy who is left out of the music: he silently watches Sally and Ben embrace. Angry and frustrated he sings. But his song isn't about how Sally has betrayed him, instead he sings 'The Right Girl.' Buddy is trapped between two women: Sally and his mistress Margie. On the surface the right girl would seem to be Margie. She manages the delicate trick of seeing Buddy as he is without being disillusioned: 'She sees you're nothing and thinks you're king'. This acceptance makes everything seem possible: 'You still could be - hell, well anything' (Sondheim, 2010: 225).

But, as with 'Don't Look at Me', the song's sudden changes of tempo dramatise the character's mental turmoil. Buddy is less smooth than Ben: his vocabulary is more restricted, and he needs time to think: 'Instead of - what? - like a rented tux.' (Sondheim, 2010: 225). But the right girl, like the right man, doesn't exist. 'When you got- yeah!/The right girl-/And I got...!' (Sondheim, 2010: 225). We expect to hear the word 'You' here, but we don't. Songs about the right girl are usually sung to the right girl herself but Buddy sings this song to himself: he doesn't know which girl he wants to sing to. Buddy cannot scream in rage and so he does a tap-dance. His

anger disappears, however, when he thinks of Margie. She is his dream of domesticity. One of the tropes of the popular song was for the singer to imagine the little home that the couple will live in, e.g: 'The Folks Who Live on the Hill' (by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, 1937), 'My Blue Heaven' (by Walter Donaldson and George A Whiting, 1927), 'I've Got a Crush on You' (by George and Ira Gershwin, 1928). This trope is upended in Sondheim's song: it is Margie, the mistress, who lives in the little house. The simple dream of many songs is unattainable.

Just as Time is an important concept for Ben so Home is for Buddy. But he doesn't know where his home is – with Sally or with Margie. When he imagines coming home to Margie he says 'I'm home'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) He starts to tell her about his work problems and then ditches that so that they can kiss. Then he sings 'You wanna stay home!'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) Then he imagines time passing and tells Margie to 'stay home' as she only cries when he leaves, and then he admits 'I gotta go home'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) 'Home' has now changed to become the house he shares with Sally. He imagines returning to Margie once more and saying 'I'm home' but then he breaks down as he admits 'I don't love the right girl'.¹⁶ Here he is speaking to Margie. It seems that when he says 'I don't love the right girl' he means he doesn't love Margie any more. He loves Sally, who, though she is his wife, is not the right girl for him. If Sally has one dream figure, Ben, Buddy lives in a muddled dream, always wanting to be where he is not – wherever he is, he dreams of somewhere else. Buddy, in a state of hopeless confusion, stops singing and speaks a

¹⁶ In Goldman (2001:51) Buddy sings this line, but not in Sondheim.

frustrated 'Ah, shit'¹⁷ (a word certainly not found in the popular song of the era.). The music, instead of reaching a climax, seems to let out an embarrassed little trill and shuffles off. Buddy is, despite having two women, fairly honest, and so, when he cannot sing, the music stops. Ben, on the other hand, as we will see in the Loveland sequence, will fight the music.

But before we arrive there we are given two extremes. 'One More Kiss' is sung by one of the chorus girls, Heidi Schiller. This was the first song that Sondheim wrote for the show, and it was the only one that he wrote with hostile intent. The song parodies Noël Coward, a composer Sondheim calls 'The Master of Blather' (Sondheim, 2010: 229) and uses Coward's harmonic language, 'which is the kind I usually avoid like dengue fever'. (Sondheim, 2010: 228.) Once again the song changes once we see it staged: the conventional lyrics of lovers sorrowfully saying goodbye contrast ironically with the fact that we have just seen Ben cheating on both Sally and Phyllis with Carlotta, while Phyllis herself picks up a waiter. But it is a mark of Sondheim's generosity that the song, with its flowery sentiments, yet allows Heidi to express a maturity that the main characters have not found. With the line: 'All things beautiful must die' (Sondheim, 2010: 225) we hear an acceptance of the inevitability of passing time that Sally has failed to learn. Sally, on the contrary, pretends that 'Nothing dies'. (Sondheim, 2010: 217.)

This line 'All things beautiful must die' articulates a major concern of Sondheim's, that recurs in show after show: the idea of beauty, and how transient it is.

¹⁷ 'Ah, shit' is on the cast album of the original Broadway cast of *Follies*, and in the 2001 libretto (51), but in *Finishing the Hat* it is 'Ah, hell.'

(We will meet this theme again in *Sweeney Todd* and *Sunday in the Park with George*.) We have already seen that the 'Beautiful Girls' are girls no longer, and Carlotta has been told that her looks are fading. Beauty doesn't last, and Heidi uses this song to come to terms with this fact. The older Heidi duets with her younger self on the song.¹⁸ With the song the present-day Heidi says goodbye, not to a dream lover who could never be real, but to her own younger self. The spell must be broken. As the song says: 'Dreams are a sweet mistake./All dreamers must awake'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) And, in the Loveland sequence, this is what will happen. The characters awake. 'One More Kiss' warns 'Never look back'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) The song is about saying farewell to a lover, but it also delivers a warning to the four main characters not to look back. They may not like what they find.

'Could I Leave You?', Phyllis's bitter attack on Ben, is the opposite, emotionally, of the dreamy idealism of 'One More Kiss', as it is blazingly, scathingly vituperative. If 'One More Kiss' is innocence, 'Could I Leave You?' certainly represents experience. Phyllis is no longer the adored woman of 'Beautiful Girls', and admiring glances have become 'the evenings of martyred looks,/Cryptic sighs,/Sullen glares from those injured eyes' (Sondheim, 2010: 228). Phyllis is similar to Eleanor of Aquitaine in Goldman's play *The Lion in Winter*: sharp-tongued and cruel, but still in love with her husband, even though she can now see him for what he is. Phyllis exposes Ben's shallowness, 'And your shelves of the World's Best Books',¹⁹ (Sondheim, 2010: 228)

18 The director of the 2017 National Theatre production, Dominic Cooke, said in an interview with David Benedict at the National Theatre (October 18, 2017), that he had imagined that Heidi, played by Josephine Barstow, knew that she was dying.

19 The capital letters of The World's Best Books give away that this is a series of books from one publisher. Phyllis is referring to the Modern Library's series 'The Modern Library of the World's Best Books'. Ben, it seems, buys his culture by the yard, and the books sit on the shelves and become 'The books I'll never read' that 'Wouldn't change a thing'. (Sondheim, 2010, 211.)

near-impotence, 'Passionless love-making once a year', (Sondheim, 2010: 228) and general nastiness, 'Leave the quips with a sting, jokes with a sneer' (Sondheim, 2010: 228). She lists Ben's faults and then asks: 'Could I leave you?/Yes./Will I leave you?/Will I leave you?' and the music reaches a climax before she spits out a final contemptuous 'Guess!' (Sondheim, 2010: 229.) This seems to be simply a neat punchline, a way of avoiding the expected repetition of 'Yes.' But it is more than that. We find at the end of the show that she will not leave him. If youthful idealism doesn't last, cynicism doesn't stay in place either. The characters, some of them anyway, can change.

Phyllis sings 'Could I Leave You?' and Young Ben and Young Phyllis enter and we see how much she had wanted to impress him. Young Phyllis promises that she will walk up and down and get an education at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: to Young Phyllis art was something to be admired, not just collected like 'the Braques and Chagalls and all that'.²⁰ (Sondheim, 2010: 228.) Then, in the present day, Buddy enters, furious that Ben has, once again, played with Sally's emotions. We see that history is repeating itself as Young Buddy enters, and he is angry at the way Young Ben has had a fling with Young Sally. Soon all four of the older main characters are screaming, but not at each other. They are screaming at their younger selves for making the wrong choices, while the younger selves lie. Unlike Heidi Schiller, the four main characters are unable to say goodbye to their youth.

²⁰ Ben is rather like Gene from *Saturday Night* (1957). Gene, a social climber, sings, in the song 'Class': 'I'd like to own a Rolls-Royce,/A Braque, a Dufy,/All things expensive and choice/And rare.' (Sondheim, 2010: 7.) Like Ben, Gene sees art in terms of possessions, as a way of displaying wealth. Gene, however, lives in the world of musical comedy, and he is saved by the love of a good woman. Ben does not live in a conventional musical comedy and must face who he is.

Just when the screaming has risen to a hysterical pitch and the tension seems to be unbearable the costumed boys and girls of a Weismann extravaganza suddenly appear and sing about a place called Loveland: 'Where everybody lives to love'. (Sondheim, 2010: 229). The Loveland sequence is, possibly, a fantasy conjured up by the characters. It is a place where they can express their anger, frustration, pain and rage in an acceptable, entertaining manner. In Loveland we see them how they'd like to see themselves, or how they'd like the world to see them, as entertaining and lovable. Buddy, who, when we first saw him in the show had told a joke as a means of winning popularity, comes on as a baggy pants comic: Sally is a lovelorn torch singer and Phyllis stylish and sophisticated. Although they all put on an act, it is only Ben who really lies: the others can admit at least part of the truth about themselves as they sing.

In this extravaganza Young Ben and Young Phyllis sing 'You're Gonna Love Tomorrow' with its promise: 'Each day from now will be/The best day you ever had'. (Sondheim, 2010: 231.) Young Buddy and Young Sally have the slightly more realistic vision of 'Love Will See Us Through' where they admit that troubles lie ahead, but believe that love will suffice to overcome them. Young Buddy sings 'I may play cards all night/And come home at three', to which Sally replies 'Just leave a light/On the porch for me' and they duet on the line 'Well, nobody's perfect!' (Sondheim, 2010: 232). Thus the imperfections in a marriage are acknowledged and yet played as a gag. This exchange is in fact remarkably similar to one that Will Parker and Ado Annie have in 'All 'Er Nothin'" from *Oklahoma!*. Annie sings to Will: 'So I ain't gonna fuss,/Ain't gonna frown,/Have your fun, go out on the town,/Stay up late and don't come home till three,/And go right off to sleep if you're sleepy -/ There's

no use waitin' up fer me!' (Hammerstein, 1943: 105-106.) Having established a measure of independence, Ado Annie settles to being Will's wife. Buddy and Sally reach no such accommodation.

Buddy, in 'The God-Why-Don't-You-Love-Me Blues' makes a burlesque of his situation. Sondheim has said the title of the song was inspired by his first hearing of the Gershwin's 'The Half of It, Dearie, Blues'. (See Sondheim, 2010: 235). The song is also reminiscent of Lerner and Lane's 'How Could You Believe Me When I Said I Loved You (When You Know I've Been a Liar All My Life)' in that it takes a situation that would be painful but plays it as burlesque. Lerner and Lane's song, however, composed for the film *Royal Wedding* (MGM, dir. Stanley Donen, 1951) was written to be only an act. In the film Fred Astaire plays a dancer called Tom Bowen, and the song is one of Bowen's routines. Thus the audience can enjoy the spectacle of Fred Astaire playing a heel without having to dislike him. Sondheim, as it were, takes the guard off. Buddy really *is* a two-timer, and his situation is painful. But although in Loveland Buddy has managed to transform his pain into burlesque we are still uncomfortably aware that his unhappiness is real. A remark Sondheim made about Ethel Merman is relevant: 'She was able to tap into the reserve of anger that fuels every comedian, high or low.' (Sondheim, 2010: 68.) In 'The Right Girl', we have already seen this anger openly displayed. If Buddy is now able to burlesque his pain he hasn't made it go away. Performance, maybe, does not solve one's problems, but it makes them bearable.

Sally's song 'Losing My Mind' speaks of her hopeless love for Ben. Time, which has passed so much in this show, seems to slow down and we hear it creak as it goes by hour by hour in agonising and pointless longing. Sally isn't just growing old, as all the characters are doing, she is hearing time go by. Ben pretended, in 'Too Many Mornings' that he dreamed of her every day. Here, Sally says the same thing about Ben, but it is true.

The theatre director John Ellis has written of this song:

It's a two act play [...] and no-one ever observes that. The first verse is in the 'present' state of love when she was young, the transition is an awakening to its loss and the reprise is a bitter reaction to the loss – as 'Not a Day Goes By' is, though sectioned out over different scenes in the reverse time structure of 'Merrily'.²¹

Sally repeats the last two verses, and that, it could be said, is her older voice talking. Her situation hasn't changed except that she has grown more desperate. When she says the line 'Or were you just being kind?' (Sondheim, 2010: 235) is she referring to Young Ben's vows of love from thirty years ago, or the older Ben's vow earlier that evening? Unlike Carlotta's 'I'm Still Here', in 'Losing My Mind' the singer has not moved on. She has simply become more desperate.

The song pastiches George and Ira Gershwin's 1924 song 'The Man I Love' but with a Dorothy Fields lyric (see Sondheim, 2010: 235). But Sondheim has not just pastiched the Gershwin song, he has both paid homage to its artistry and subtly criticised its underlying idea. In 'The Man I Love' a woman dreams of a hero-figure. 'Some day he'll come along,/The man I love;/And he'll be big and strong,/The man I love...' (Gershwin, 1977: 3.) Sondheim shows a woman doing the same thing,

²¹ Personal communication on The Forgotten Musicals Facebook Site.

dreaming of an idealised man, and moves her thirty or so years later in her life. The song demonstrates what hopeless dreaming can do. It isolates one. It makes one resigned to a futile life. And she gets more and more deeply mired in illusion. At the end of the first verse she sings: 'It's like I'm losing my mind', but by the end of the song the simile has become a distinct possibility: 'Or am I losing my mind?' (Sondheim, 2010: 235). But in this song she admits the truth that she had denied in 'In Buddy's Eyes'. In that song Sally had boasted of the pleasures of domesticity: 'Gourmet cooking and letter writing,' (Sondheim, 2010: 217) but here these everyday tasks are mundane, they have become 'every little chore' (Sondheim, 2010: 235). Buddy himself is not mentioned in 'Losing My Mind'. She has obliterated him.

Phyllis gets to perform a pastiche Cole Porter number, 'The Story of Lucy and Jessie'. This song shows that, like Buddy, though in a different way, she is betwixt and between. She isn't trapped between two women: rather she is caught between her older and younger selves. Lucy is the younger Phyllis and Jessie is herself as she is now. Phyllis wishes they could combine so that she could be innocent as Lucy while being as poised and confident as Jessie. She wants to go back to being young, but with the knowledge that age brings, so that she won't make the same mistakes: "Cause getting it together is the whole trick!". (Sondheim, 2010: 236.)

In their songs Buddy admits to his love for both Sally and Margie, Phyllis admits her conflicted feelings and Sally sings of her obsessive love for Ben. But Ben, in 'Live, Laugh, Love', simply pretends that he is fine. His tone is insouciant. This is a pastiche of the kind of devil-may-care number that Fred Astaire sang: as if Ben is a

debonair, carefree charmer who never lets life get him down. Ben sings about all the things that people spend their lives on, while claiming that 'Me, I like to live,/Me, I like to laugh,/Me, I like to love!'. (Sondheim, 2010: 238.) But this is the way that Ben wishes he had been, not the way he actually is. His insouciant pose is something that he can't maintain.

Many songs recommend that one takes life less seriously. 'Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries' (by Henderson, De Sylva and Brown, 1931) is a prime example. The lyric says that people rush around trying to make a living, and yet they can't take the money with them. One should realise the transience of life: 'And live and laugh at it all'. Ben pretends that this has always been his philosophy. The reason for using a happy-go-lucky song like this (see Sondheim, 2010: 241) is that it makes it more of a surprise when Ben breaks down; a torch song or an up-tempo number would have contrasted less with the breakdown. And the audience needs the surprise, we need the fabric of Ben's life to tear in front of us. Ben doesn't understand the point of songs like 'Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries'. Songs like that are a respite from responsibility, they are not a replacement for it. Ben has denied all that really matters throughout his life. We saw this in his earlier song 'The Road You Didn't Take' where he pretends that he has no regrets. In 'The Road You Didn't Take' Ben fights against the music, the music that in a way represents his unspoken feelings. In 'Live, Laugh, Love' he tries to deny his feelings and so the music becomes discordant and finally breaks down completely.

He breaks down during this verse:

BEN Some break their asses
 Passing their bar exams,
 Lay out their lives
 Like lines on a graph...
 (He stumbles)
 One day they're diplomats -
 Well, bully and congrats!

(Sondheim, 2010: 241.)

Ben cracks up and starts to shout about his loneliness and self-loathing, while the chorus breaks up around him. *'The Chorus line, although broken up, is still dancing, as if in a nightmare.'* (Goldman, 2001: 85.) The warning that we heard near the beginning, in the song 'Beautiful Girls', comes true: 'You may lose control'.

(Sondheim, 2010: 202.)

Many of the songs in *Follies* are about a decision taken or about to be taken. The decision might have been fudged in the past ('The Road You Didn't Take') or fudged in the present ('The Right Girl') or the wrong decision is made in the present ('Too Many Mornings') or a decision is seemingly made that is later reversed ('Could I Leave You?'). But Ben tries to deny responsibility; he has always taken the path of least resistance and now he falls apart. On the original cast album Ben can be heard repeating: 'What's the point in shovin'/Your way to the top?/ What's the point in shovin'/Your way to the top?' (*Follies*, Original Broadway Cast album, Track 17) as if he was a broken record.

Sondheim said of the original production:

The Pirandello effect fooled the audience completely: they thought it was the actor (John McMartin – whose performance, incidentally, was as thrilling as any I've ever seen in the musical theater) rather than the character who had forgotten his lyrics, thereby blurring the line between theater and reality just as Ben had.

(Sondheim, 2010: 241.)

It is intensely embarrassing for an audience to see a performer dry; they might be angry, or sympathetic and feel the performer's embarrassment, but either way, this is a disillusioning experience. It jolts them out of being absorbed in the story and reminds them how precarious performance is. But Ben does reach a realisation. At the moment of breakdown he shouts 'Phyllis!'. (Goldman, 2001: 85). Not 'Sally', 'Phyllis'. He can no longer deceive himself about who he really needs. Sally would idolise him, but Phyllis can comfort him.

Then the dawn comes up in the theatre. The Loveland sequence is not a dead end. All the characters go through it, and come out on the other side. And what is on the other side? Tomorrow: the tomorrow that the characters had looked forward to and then learned to dread. As with *Evening Primrose*, Sondheim's previous collaboration with Goldman, the show ends with sunlight dispelling the shadows of the shut-in building that has kept the characters under a spell. In *Evening Primrose* the characters were dead. But, in this show, the characters, with the possible exception of Sally, are not destroyed when daylight comes. Sondheim brings sunlight into the magic world of the musical, letting go its illusions without destroying its dreams. As Harold Prince put it:

[...] as the evening wore on, the people got crazier and crazier until the last

fifteen minutes which turned into a metaphorical Follies... the rubble disappeared and *through* the Follies they were able to make an adjustment to each other. I think that we have a terrible tendency in life, when things are going wrong, to look into the past and moon over it. The point of the show was that you should *use* the past to look into the future.

(Quoted in Zadan, 1994: 138.)

But what would they have done with their lives if they had been wiser? Banfield makes a valid point when he says:

As long as the ghosts remain ghosts, we never really get to know them, and all the talk about *Follies* being about the loss of youthful idealism cuts little ice without us being able to see it in action.

(Banfield, 1994: 193.)

Could Ben have been a serious statesman? Could Buddy and Sally have made a go of their marriage? It would have been good to have had more information so that the audience could have pondered these questions.

When daylight comes, Sally casts off Ben, not lightly, but finally. She says to Buddy that 'there is no Ben' (Goldman, 2001: 86). She does not say 'I don't love Ben,' but 'there is no Ben'. This language is reminiscent of someone losing their belief in God, and Ben had been like God to Sally: somebody whose existence made her mundane life transcendent. This remark of hers is one of the most deeply disillusioned lines said by any character in a Sondheim show. Earlier on, Buddy had sung, in 'The Right Girl' that the right girl: 'sees you're nothing and thinks you're king'. (Sondheim, 2010: 225.) During his breakdown Ben cries 'Look at me. I'm nothing'. (Goldman, 2001: 85.) All the characters feel empty: as if they are projections of images rather than people. It is only when the image is destroyed, as it is with Ben, that they can start to live.

But why does Sally suddenly realise that there is no Ben? The last we saw of her, in 'Losing My Mind', she was still hopelessly in love with him. Has she seen Ben's breakdown? If she has been in love with him for thirty years would his breakdown stop her loving him? And how has she seen it? Unlike 'Rose's Turn' in *Gypsy*, where we are still definitely in an empty theatre, in the Loveland sequence we are somewhere suspended between where the characters are (a theatre that is due to be demolished) and where they imagine themselves to be (a magical theatre where they can express themselves). This vital moment is left in a dramatic hinterland, and its effect is somewhat muffled.

Harold Prince, talking of the first production, thinks that Sally hasn't learned: 'Dorothy Collins's Sally learned nothing from the evening. Stripped of her lie, she went mad.' (Prince, 2017: 162.) In later Sondheim shows community will be formed when the characters sing together ('Sunday' from *Sunday in the Park with George*, 'No One Is Alone' from *Into the Woods*, even, in a twisted way, 'Another National Anthem' and 'Something Just Broke' from *Assassins*) but here it doesn't. There is no musical equivalent of *Sunday*'s 'Move On' where the characters can sing together and accept who they are and what has happened to them.

It as if life has caught up with the chorus girls. And yet Sondheim is not attacking the tradition that he loves, because he also shows how some characters, Carlotta and Heidi Schiller, can use the Broadway popular song to come to terms with life and death. If all of the main characters are disillusioned; after Loveland, they are

able to continue into an uncertain future. Neither couple breaks up: their bonds may be fragile, but are at least a little stronger.

The final words in the show are a repeat of a snatch of dialogue we have heard twice before:

YOUNG SALLY: Hi...

YOUNG BEN: Girls...

YOUNG PHYLLIS: Ben...

YOUNG BUDDY: Sally...

(Goldman, 2001: 87.)

The first time we heard it was during 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs', and the second time was when Young Ben and Young Phyllis were introducing themselves in the Loveland sequence to Young Sally and Young Buddy. The memory is turned into fantasy, and then, at the end, it is heard again. In the final moments the confident certainty has been stripped away, instead the speakers are hesitant: Young Buddy's final 'Sally' (on the Original Cast Recording) sounds like a question, rather than a greeting.

Are the main four characters still trapped in the past? Or are they leaving their young selves behind? They sound confident at the opening, and anxious at the end. The show's creators do not reprise this dialogue to bring the show to a harmonious conclusion, but to destabilize the confidence that the characters seemed to have at the beginning. But, as we do at the end of *Company*, we realise that that embracing

uncertainty is part of being alive. If they don't embrace it with the same passion as Robert does, that's probably because they are older and have fewer options.

It is the showman Dimitri Weismann who is under no illusions about the past: 'If nothing else, I know when things are over.' (Goldman, 2001: 86.) This is something that the four main characters have to learn. This time they leave the Weismann theatre for good. This time, they can't go back.

CHAPTER SIX

A Little Night Music (1973) *The Last of Sheila* (1973) *Getting Away With Murder* (1996) *The Frogs* (1974) *Pacific Overtures* (1976)

Sondheim's next show, *A Little Night Music* (1973), deals once again with the illusions of youth and age. The show was the first collaboration between Sondheim and the book-writer Hugh Wheeler. Wheeler had written (sometimes in collaboration with Richard Wilson Webb) detective stories under the name Patrick Quentin, Q Patrick and Jonathan Stagge, and had also had the play *Big Fish, Little Fish*, a comedy about a closeted homosexual, performed on Broadway. His screenwriting work has some similarity with that of Goldman's: as he seems drawn to larger than life women characters: *Something for Everyone* (Cinema Center Films, dir. Harold Prince, 1970) with Angela Lansbury as a German aristocrat, and *Travels With My Aunt* (MGM, dir. George Cukor, 1972) with Maggie Smith as a bohemian fantasist. In both Sondheim shows where Wheeler is the only book-writer there is a larger-than-life woman – Madame Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music*, Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* - who verges on the grotesque. His taste seemed to veer towards the comic and bizarre: *Something for Everyone* is about a young man (Michael York) seducing both men and women and committing murder in order to get his way into an aristocratic family, and *Travels With My Aunt* is about an eccentric woman who gets a staid bank manager involved in international crime. A later film, *Nijinsky* (Paramount, dir. Herbert Ross, 1980), dramatised the doomed relationship of Nijinsky and Diaghilev.

A Little Night Music was 'suggested by' rather than adapted from Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night* (Svensk Filmindustri, 1955), and is about three mismatched couples who, after a series of farcical encounters, end up with the right partners. Sondheim wrote: 'I thought the show could be about the danger, and inevitable failure, of trying to maneuver people emotionally'. (Sondheim, 2010: 252.)

The possibility that there is no such thing as fidelity is teasingly suggested by the use of the Quintet, a chorus of characters who are all given names in the script but who, however, play no part in the story. They sing songs that are cynical about love: for instance the song 'Remember?' which describes an old liaison.

QUINTET The tenor on the boat that we chartered,
Belching "The Bartered Bride" -
Ah, how we laughed,
Ah, how we cried.
Ah, how you promised,
And ah, how I lied.

(Sondheim, 2010: 260).

This song ends on the lines:

I'm *sure* it was -
You...

(Sondheim, 2010: 261.)

In other words the quintet are old (their memories are suspect) and also duplicitous.

They have been having liaisons with more than one person, and now cannot even remember who their partner was.

Sondheim explained:

This is the lyric equivalent of a *trompe l'oeil* painting – it fools the mind not through the eye but through the ear. It is certainly possible that Desiree and Fredrik's long-ago affair involved the incidents mentioned in the song, but the climactic lines “I think you were there” and “I'm *sure* it was you” imply two promiscuous people, which they decidedly are not.

(Sondheim, 2010: 261.)

In other words the Quintet seem to embody the corrupt society that Desiree and Fredrik live in, rather than expressing what the two old lovers actually feel. The Quintet, if anything, represent the cynicism that Desiree²² and Fredrik ultimately escape from.

In the Prologue to the show Madame Armfeldt explains to her granddaughter Fredrika about the three smiles the summer night gives:

MADAME ARMFELDT The first smile smiles at the young, who know nothing.

(She looks pointedly at Fredrika)

The second, at the fools who know too little, like Desiree.

[...]

And the third at the old who know too much – like me.

(Wheeler, 1973, 180.)

²² The name Desiree is printed with an acute accent over the second e in Wheeler's script, but without an accent in *Finishing the Hat*.

These are, according to Madame Armfeldt, the three stages of life. Those who know nothing, (Fredrika, Henrik, Anne), those who know too little (Desiree, Petra, Fredrik, Count Magnus) and those who know too much (Madame Armfeldt, Charlotte.) Or to put it another way: the virgins, those who are experienced but still trying to find love, and those who are disillusioned.

Desiree, the actress, is on the edge of disillusion: she finds that the thrill of 'The Glamorous Life' is dying and that it is becoming an exhausting round of tours in provincial towns. Her daughter Fredrika, on the other hand, thinks it is thrilling, a point brought out more clearly in the version of 'The Glamorous Life' written for the 1977 film version directed by Harold Prince. There Fredrika gives expression to the idea that dreams are more important than day-to-day living. She compares her mother to 'ordinary mothers' and decides that she prefers Desiree.

FREDRIKA Mine's away in a play,
 And she's realer than they...

(Sondheim, 2010: 281.)

This, of course, might be Fredrika's way of dealing with a sense of abandonment. This attitude, of finding dreams more important than what's in front of you, has already been seen in Madam Rose, and will be encountered again in Sondheim's later works. In this respect it could be said that Fredrika is the daughter that Madam Rose should have had.

This is ironic, as Anne has not yet experienced sex, and the considerate Fredrik is the opposite to the brutal and oafish Carl-Magnus.

It is Madame Armfeldt who embodies the darkness and chaos that waits at the edge of almost every Sondheim show. When all her guests are assembled at her manor Madame Armfeldt, like Joanne in *Company*, proposes a toast.

MADAME ARMFELDT: (*Raising her glass*)

To Life!

(*The guests all raise their glasses*)

THE GUESTS: To Life!

MADAME ARMFELDT: And to the only other reality – Death!

(*Only MADAME ARMFELDT and CHARLOTTE drink.*)

(Wheeler, 1973: 293.)

Madame Armfeldt and Charlotte drink because they are the ones who know too much, they are embittered.

Death is the spectre that haunts the play. It is ever-present, even for the younger characters. Henrik, the seminarian, is afraid that he will never live.

HENRIK Though I've been born, I've never been!

How can I wait around for later?

I'll be ninety on my deathbed

And the late, or rather later,

Henrik Egerman!

Doesn't anything begin?

(Sondheim, 2010, 257.)

Petra, the earthy maid, the opposite of the spiritually-inclined Henrik, has her own solution to this knowledge of the finiteness of life.

PETRA And there's many a tryst
 And there's many a bed.
 There's a lot I'll have missed,
 But I'll not have been dead
 When I die!

(Sondheim, 2010, 280.)

In fact Petra's song, 'The Miller's Song' shows her spiralling through fantasy to an acceptance of reality. In the first verse she plans to marry the Miller's son, and 'Pin my hat on a nice piece of property'. (Sondheim, 2010, 279.) Like Madame Armfeldt she has no qualms about equating sex and financial gain, although it could be argued that, as she is not wealthy, she has more excuse to be practical. Then she dreams of marrying a businessman, and ultimately the Prince of Wales.

But at the end of the song she returns to facts: the last line of the song is

PETRA And I shall marry the miller's son.

(Sondheim, 2010, 280.)

In the course of one song Petra has lived through fantasy and returned to reality without bitterness, a journey that takes most of the characters the whole play. Not that Petra's affirmation of life is wholly admirable: she is certainly less befuddled than the other characters, but she is also duplicitous.

PETRA: It's a very short day
Till you're stuck with just one
Or it has to be done
On the sly.

(Sondheim, 2010: 280.)

Time, as Sondheim's characters are so often aware, passes rapidly.

It is Madame Armfeldt, who expresses the deepest cynicism. Not that she thinks of herself as cynical. In her song 'Liaisons' she complains about the foolish younger generation for their sentimentality, for not knowing how to take their lovers for all they can get. She knows too much, although of course her remark is not to be taken literally, she knows too much only in the worldly sense: she knows how to manipulate people in order to get what she wants. She despairs of Desiree for not following in her footsteps.

And Madame Armfeldt embodies death because she has abandoned love – she tells Fredrika that she threw over one lover because he gave her a wooden ring, and she thought he was poor. 'He might have been the love of my life.' (Wheeler, 1973: 313.) In other words, like Desiree, and her former lover Fredrik, and his tormented seminarian son Henrik, Madame Armfeldt had a romantic dream buried deep inside her. But she destroyed her dream through greed. At the end she dies while the other characters are waltzing: 'at last with their proper partners'. (Wheeler, 1973: 319.) This is a change from the Bergman film, where no character dies. As she dies, Madame Armfeldt's wig falls off, a final disenchantment. Maybe she dies because she has fulfilled her purpose – she has, without really planning to, brought the couples together, or maybe she dies because death, as we have seen, is at the heart of the show, shadowing all these lovers, and finally comes to claim the one who had rejected love.

Here it is necessary to take issue with Joseph Swain's assessment that *A Little Night Music* is Sondheim's 'cynical operetta'. Swain writes:

There is no reason to believe that Fredrik and Desirée, Carl-Magnus and Charlotte, Petra and Frid, and even the delirious Anne and Henrik will stay together for long, not even in their fantasy world.

(Swain, in Gordon, R. and Jubin, O. [eds], 2014: 317.)

But there *is* a reason to believe it: the music tells us. Desiree faces disillusionment when she thinks Fredrik will not leave his wife for her, and she sings 'Send In the Clowns', a song where, even though she uses the metaphor of performance and acting, she is being honest about her feelings. At the end of the show, in traditional Broadway fashion, her honesty is rewarded: the song becomes a duet, with Fredrik

and Desiree laughing at their own foolishness - one of the few duets of fully expressed love in Sondheim's work.

DESIREE Me as a merry-go-round.

FREDRIK Me as King Lear.

(Sondheim, 2010: 280.)

Fredrik sees that he himself has been playing a part: that of the abandoned tragic hero, and he laughs it off. They let go their illusions and accept each other for who they are. As we will see in *Sweeney Todd*, one character picking up another's tune (the way Mrs. Lovett picks up the tune of 'The Barber and His Wife' and sings it back to Todd) is a sign that the singer is trying to tell the listener that they are right for each other. But in *A Little Night Music* they *are* right for each other. As Geoffrey Block writes about the song 'You Must Meet My Wife': 'everyone else knows that these foolish former lovers will be reunited in the end'. (Gordon, R. and Jubin, O. [eds], 2014: 266.) As orchestrator Jonathan Tunick points out: 'The reprise is scored for the full orchestra in what I refer to as the "Max Steiner" section, a most gratifying romantic climax in the honored Hollywood tradition.' (Quoted in *Four by Sondheim*, 1990: 170.)

Max Steiner was a composer of scores for films such as *Gone With the Wind* (MGM, dir. Victor Fleming, 1939). The 'Max Steiner' reprise for full orchestra then is a celebration of romantic love. Like the characters *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It* the characters of *A Little Night Music* pass through trials and

misunderstandings to finally discover their true partners. Because, unusually for Sondheim, this is a show where the characters do have pre-destined partners. At the beginning of the show Fredrik sings 'Now' about the possibility of making love to his wife Anne, but at the end of the song, in his sleep, his subconscious, wiser than he, names his true love: Desiree. Henrik is in love with Anne, whom he will finally win. And Carl-Magnus, after betraying his wife Charlotte, ultimately goes back to her.

In the Bergman film Henrik prays to God to relieve him of his torturing virtue. Henrik is about to hang himself but he slips and accidentally bangs his head on a concealed button which activates a device whereupon the bed containing Anne slides into his room. Henrik and Anne declare their love and run off to get married. This scene is not in the musical version. Just as Laurents omitted the fate motif from *Romeo and Juliet* when he wrote *West Side Story*, and as Sondheim and Lapine will not let the fairy tale characters resort to spells to get them out of trouble in *Into the Woods* (where the spells are mostly curses), so Sondheim and Wheeler omit the prayer that lets Henrik get his wish. This would seem to reinforce Sondheim's belief that lives aren't scripted. Henrik runs away with Anne, although this is technically speaking not adultery as Anne's marriage to Fredrik is not valid as it hasn't been consummated. (A point that is made in the film but is not stated in the play.) Henrik never rejects God but he does accept temptation, perhaps rejecting the strict puritanism he had been struggling with rather than religious belief as such. He learns, as they all do, to accept human weakness.

But the show seems to want to have it both ways: there is no fate or destiny in the characters' lives, yet somehow they all have a right partner. They don't really have to deal with disillusionment for long: apart from Madame Armfeldt they all, as in a traditional romantic comedy, get what they want, though they may not at first realise that they want it. Nobody has to find out that their fantasy was wrong to begin with. Disillusionment, therefore, although the possibility of it is always there, is not at the heart of the show.

Sondheim and Anthony Perkins, both devotees of murder mysteries, collaborated on the screenplay of *The Last of Sheila* (Warner Brothers, dir. Herbert Ross, 1973). Although it is a murder mystery, not a musical, the film shares some thematic concerns with Sondheim's stage work. In the film Clinton Green, a sadistic film director (James Coburn), invites six guests aboard his yacht so that he can humiliate them by playing a game that reveals their secrets.

We are led to believe that Clinton is playing the game to take revenge on the person who killed his wife in a hit-and-run accident, and that the denouement will be his revelation as to who the killer is and what revenge he will take on them. But Clinton is murdered. At the end of the film one of the guests, Philip (James Mason), realises that the real killer is Tom (Richard Benjamin), a frustrated screenwriter. Clinton, it turns out, had no plans for revenge and merely wanted to embarrass his guests. Philip correctly deduces that Tom has improvised, taking advantage of the game that Clinton was playing to murder both Clinton and Tom's wife, Lee (Joan

Hackett). The grand narrative is a bluff: instead life is lived by improvisation, by taking advantage of circumstances.

Tom is a scriptwriter whose inspiration has dried up. Like Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along* he has sold his talent for Hollywood success: he is a rewriter of other people's scripts. Tom's two murders are, in their own way, rewrite jobs: rewriting Clinton's game and twisting it for his own ends. And his punishment, ultimately, is to be blackmailed into being a rewrite man for the film that Philip will make of Clinton's murder. He will never be a serious writer.

The film, like many films, especially in this genre, plays a game with the audience. But it also reveals the limitations of treating life as a game: it is Clinton and Tom who are the major game players in the film and both of them ultimately lose. Just as Sondheim exposes the 'danger, and inevitable failure, of trying to maneuver people emotionally' (Sondheim, 2010: 252) so he reveals the futility of trying to play life as a game. This approach is shallow and only leads to disillusionment. The film plays a game with the audience to prove that games are not how life is lived.²³

Although it was not written until 1996 Sondheim's other murder mystery, *Getting Away With Murder*, is worth considering here. Co-written with George Furth, librettist for *Company* and *Merrily We Roll Along*, like them it has a contemporary New York setting. The setting is oddly reminiscent of *Follies* in that the play is set in

²³ Interestingly Anthony Shaffer's play *Sleuth* (1970) has a similar theme: the two characters are so determined to win their game that they would rather risk death than lose. Shaffer was inspired to write the play by the elaborate clue-hunting games that Sondheim devised for his friends, and the producer's working title of the play was *Who's Afraid of Stephen Sondheim?* See 'Of Mystery, Murder and Other Delights'. In Conversation with Anthony Shaffer. *The New York Times*, March 10, 1996.

a building in New York that is due to be torn down to make way for an office block. Gothic gargoyles and wood carvings intrude in this modern office, just as the past intrudes in the present in *Follies*. There are seven people in group therapy who meet in this building and when their analyst, Doctor Bering, doesn't appear one day, they run the therapy session on their own. They 'act like a family' (Sondheim and Furth, 1996: 28) working together to have a therapy session, and then to solve the murder of Doctor Bering, whose battered body they discover on a couch. Unlike *Into the Woods* however, the characters do not overcome their selfishness, and everyone in the group dies. Before they die they discover that the Doctor selected the people in the group because each one represents one of the seven sins: one is vain, one is gluttonous and so on. They hear Bering's voice on a tape recorder (the Doctor had been making notes on a book he is planning to write on them) and the Doctor confesses to his own sin: 'The Sin of Control. Of Power. The Sin of Manipulation. [...] It is the sin of playing God -' (Sondheim and Furth, 1996: 118). This was the sin of Rose in *Gypsy*, and will be the sin of many characters in future shows. It is a dream that is always futile, the attempt doesn't work.

Clinton Green is similar in a way to Madame Armfeldt: both are cynical people who seem to be in control of the people around them, but in fact are not, and who die before the end of the story, as does Dr. Bering. This death of the controlling figure also occurs with the death of The Narrator in *Into the Woods*. This similarity, despite the fact that the scripts were written by different writers (Hugh Wheeler, Sondheim and Perkins, Sondheim and Furth, and James Lapine) shows that this is a structure that appeals to Sondheim. It is related to disillusionment: total control is

shown to be impossible, and the people who attempt it do not get what they want and end up dead or mad.

In *The Frogs* (1974, revised 2004) a musical version of the satire by Aristophanes, with a libretto by *Forum* librettist Burt Shevelove, Dionysos and his slave Xanthius are sent to Hades to collect the playwright who would be most useful to the modern world. On their way there they pass the chorus of frogs, who represent complacent conformity and, ultimately, the forces of chaos and death.

CHORUS Leave the world alone and count the weeds.

While the world may not know what it needs,

It proceeds,

And in time

Will be

Sublime:

All bogs

And weeds

And frogs,

And beautiful slime.

(Sondheim, 2010: 295.)

Dionysos thinks that George Bernard Shaw is what the world needs to combat this.

He tells Shaw: 'You will write again. In your best manner. And they will listen.'

(Shevelove, 1974: 85). But Shaw and Shakespeare battle it out to be allowed to

return to earth. And when Shakespeare sings a setting of 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun' from *Cymbeline* Dionysos changes his mind and decides to take Shakespeare back instead.

Dionysos goes on to say:

DIONYSOS The theatre needs a *poet*. A great big poet. A star of poets. That's what audiences are waiting for. Someone to lift them out of their seats, to get them going.

(Shevelove, 1974: 120.)

The play's message is that head-on didactic theatre will not do the work of changing the world, but that poetry might. Shakespeare suggests wryly that his purpose is to 'work exceeding miracles on earth', (Shevelove, 1974: 121, quoting *Henry VI, Part I*, V, iv, 41) which is another instance in a Sondheim show of a character discovering that miracles must be performed by men and women and not merely waited for. And one cannot make miracles unless one faces reality. That's why Shakespeare must 'lift them out of their seats, to get them going'. He must inspire people to actively engage with the world, not just to sit back and be enchanted. Facing reality, which often entails disillusionment, then can lead to making the miracle.

Earlier, in the Parabasis (or the author's message to the audience), the Dionysians had sung a song with the title and refrain 'It's Only a Play'. This is different to the parabasis of Aristophanes' play. In Aristophanes the chorus sing of the

need of a poet who is also an educator. In Sondheim's version, however, the parabasis is an expression of despair:

DIONYSIANS Well, words are merely chatter,

And easy to say.

It doesn't really matter,

It's only a play.

(Sondheim, 2010: 298.)

This is hardly the author's message to the audience, rather it is an expression of the total dissolution of all values and all action into impotence and apathy. Shakespeare and his poetry are a rebuttal of this despairing attitude: at the end of the show, in the Exodos, the Dionysians have found a new sense of purpose and they sing a hymn:

DIONYSIANS Dionysos,

Bring a sense of purpose,

Bring the taste of words,

Bring the sound of wit,

Bring the feel of passion,

Bring the glow of thought

To the darkening earth.

(Sondheim, 2010: 300.)

As they sing this chorus we hear again the chorus of the frogs, but this time it dies out. Poetry has triumphed over apathy and disillusionment.

Just as Aristophanes's play had an agon or debate between Aeschylus and Euripides, where Aeschylus represented weight and defeats Euripides' wit and clever talk; so, in Sondheim and Shevelove, Shakespeare the weighty wins over the witty Shaw. It is a romantic position, that art can instruct through delight, and may have an effect on the world: an effect all the more profound for not being a direct assault on the audience's ideas. This is the same position that Sondheim will take when working with James Lapine on *Sunday in the Park with George*.

In *Pacific Overtures* (1976) Sondheim collaborated for the first time with John Weidman, (Hugh Wheeler was brought in to do some rewrites). Weidman is probably the most politicised of Sondheim's collaborators: their other shows together are *Assassins* and *Road Show*. All three shows criticise the notion of entitlement, as can be found sometimes in American life. *Pacific Overtures*, produced in America's bicentennial year, takes a critical view of America's cultural expansionism. The show begins in Japan in 1853; the opening song: 'The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea', describes Japan's isolation where 'The realities remain remote' (Sondheim, 2010: 305). As ever, there is the threat of chaos outside, but the Reciter does not believe it will affect them.

RECITER Gods are crumbling somewhere,

Machines are rumbling somewhere,

[...]

Not here.

(Sondheim, 2010: 305.)

In Japan they are content to live believing that their way of life is immutable and that nothing will ever change.

RECITER We sit inside the screens
And contemplate the view
That's painted on the screens
More beautiful than true.

(Sondheim, 2010: 305.)

Here we see Sondheim's concern with the loss of beauty: in this show beauty is destroyed by cultural expansionism, just as it is ruined by evil in *Sweeney Todd* and by time in *Follies*. In this show a society that is rigidly stratified and full of exploitation is brought down, but what is beautiful about it is destroyed as well. The screens are torn down and, by the final song, Japan has become a modern Western power making novelty souvenirs and is choked with pollution.

The two main characters, Kayama and Manjiro, represent the two opposite reactions to the cataclysmic changes in their country. Kayama becomes totally Westernised while Manjiro, who, when we first see him, is under sentence of death for having been to America, is the one who becomes a Samurai and who finally kills Kayama for his perceived treachery. In the song 'A Bowler Hat' we see Kayama,

become westernized, purely for expediency. However, unlike Ben in 'The Road You Didn't Take' or Franklin Shepard in 'Growing Up', Kayama doesn't have to stifle any regrets about sacrificing himself in order to succeed. 'One must accommodate the times/As one lives them' (Sondheim, 2010: 328) he sings, words reminiscent of Edmund's in *King Lear*, when he incites a soldier to murder Cordelia.

EDMUND [...] know thou this, that men
 Are as the time is [...]

(*King Lear*, V, iii, 31-32.)

This is the diametric opposite of idealism. Kayama goes from singing 'I must remember that' (Sondheim, 2010: 327) to 'One must remember that.' (Sondheim, 2010: 328.) We can also see this in the treatment of his marriage in three lines: 'I have no wife [...] I have a wife [...] I've left my wife'. (Sondheim, 2010: 327-328.) She hardly impinges on his consciousness at all.

'A Bowler Hat' is a montage song that covers several years, and we see Kayama moving up in the government service. In a series of recurrent images we see both the increasing Western influence on Japan and the increasing corruption of Kayama as he discards his Japanese ancestry. At the beginning of the song he looks at a bowler hat that he has just taken from a box. He is unfamiliar with it. In the second verse he is wearing it and by the end of verse five he decides that the Dutch ambassador is a fool as 'He wears a bowler hat'. (Sondheim, 2010: 328.) The hat has gone from exotic object to out-of-date embarrassment in five verses. We see Kayama's increasing

worldly importance and increasing confidence, and also his essential shallowness and temporising nature.

Compared to Kayama's lack of feeling Manjiro's determination to cling to the past in becoming a samurai seems more principled, even though this leads to murder. The abandonment of ideals, even imperfect ones, is seen by the show's creators as a tragedy. Manjiro finally kills Kayama but his gesture is futile. He is made to give up his samurai ways and fades from the story. He has the glamour of every lost cause, of a man fighting against the inevitable, yet he is also a murderer.

The encroachment of the West is portrayed entirely negatively: Commodore Perry arrives in a gunboat and hypocritically pretends to be making 'pacific overtures' (Weidman, 1976: 54). Then, in the song 'Please Hello', four ambassadors from different countries: Great Britain, Holland, France and Russia, arrive and pretend to be friendly, when they really want to claim Japanese territory. Sondheim uses pastiche for satirical purposes: the British ambassador sings in the style of Gilbert and Sullivan (a style Sondheim dislikes – see Sondheim, 2010: 324), the Dutchman does a vaudeville 'Dutch act', the French ambassador dances a can-can and the Russian official sings a cod-Russian folk-song. Pastiche here warns us of cultural imperialism. All of the ambassadors use performance to hide their true intentions. This is something that the Shogun's mother also does in the song 'Chrysanthemum Tea', where she sings to the Shogun while feeding him tea which is poisoned. We are never simply to trust performance but always to look at what is happening.

As the Narrator cannot control events in *Into the Woods* so the Reciter cannot control the story in *Pacific Overtures*. Instead Japan becomes a Frankenstein's Monster: out of control it threatens the power that first created it. In 'Next' there is the line: 'Let the pupil show the master'. (Sondheim, 2010: 329.) This refers to modern-day Japan outdoing America in rampant materialism and pollution. But this phrase also echoes Anna Leonowens' reflection that: 'It's a very ancient saying,/But a true and honest thought,/That "if you become a teacher/By your pupils you'll be taught"'. (Hammerstein, 1951: 43.) Again we see the huge importance of Oscar Hammerstein for Sondheim, and also how different Sondheim's sensibility is. Both *The King and I* and *Pacific Overtures* are about the meeting of East and West but *Pacific Overtures* decentralizes its story: denying the audience an identification figure such as Anna Leonowens. Hammerstein believed that good will and emotional honesty, though they couldn't solve all the problems of the world, could at least enable people to communicate with each other. When Tuptim performs 'The Small House of Uncle Thomas' to the delegation of British visitors the effect is comically incongruous, but the show does not denigrate the ballet or the tradition it came from. Instead it shows it to be possible that East and West can meet and culturally enrich each other. *Pacific Overtures* has a harsher and more disenchanting view: in Sondheim and Weidman's show there seems to be no possibility of cultures mutually enriching each other. Instead Western music signifies corruption and represents the death of the old Japan. Instead of 'Getting to Know You' we have 'Please Hello' with its ironic reference to *détente*, (a word that had resonance for the 1970s audience, as it reminded the audience of Nixon, and the spectre of Vietnam). Instead of *The King and I*'s scene with Sir Edward Ramsay, where the British are seen as overbearing but at least open

to reason, in *Pacific Overtures* the British diplomat delivers a pastiche Gilbert and Sullivan number: an unconvincing show of friendliness that hardly hides the brute force behind it.

The King and I had slyly reflected the position of 1950s world politics in the song 'Puzzlement'. There is a prefiguring of the threat of nuclear war.

KING Is a danger to be trusting one another,
One will seldom want to do what other wishes...
But unless some day somebody trust somebody,
There'll be nothing left on earth excepting fishes!

(Hammerstein, 1951: 38.)

If Hammerstein shared the optimism of the Eisenhower era, he did not share its complacency. Instead he focused on the moments of human interaction where people find that they can communicate despite cultural boundaries: most famously in the song 'Getting to Know You', where a teacher is able to reach her young charges. Hammerstein focuses on the things that people can do for each other: his shows are about encouraging audiences to express their feelings ('Something Wonderful') and not to give up on life ('Whistle a Happy Tune'). Sondheim often has the same message but not the same confidence.

Pacific Overtures was written at a time when the Vietnam War was still fresh in people's memories, and, as we have already seen in *Follies*, America was no longer

'the good guy'. *Pacific Overtures* covers one hundred years of history and dwarfs the personal stories that it tells. Manjiro and Kayama's stories are swallowed up in the larger picture, and so the individual seems helpless in the face of large historical movements. Manjiro is forced to surrender his top-knot and abandon being a samurai but then he drops out of the show and we never learn his reaction to the punishment. This means that personal disillusionment is only a secondary theme of the show.

For his next show, Sondheim was to write about his most disenchanted, and murderous, character.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET (1979)

Demons'll Charm You

This show can be viewed as both a celebration and a criticism of the 'dream' that we have seen in *Gypsy* and in *Follies*. In *Gypsy* the dream takes over Rose's whole life, everything is subordinate to making one of her daughters a star, while in *Follies* Sally keeps her dream of Ben separate from her day-to-day life and consequently is never really there for Buddy. But one cannot apportion oneself like that: to have a hard everyday self and a dream self for the beloved will tear one apart. And in *Sweeney Todd* the consequences are worse because the characters have no pity. Rose at least meant well, wanting to be a star as much as she did she assumed that her daughters did also, and even Sally does not nurse any desire to kill Ben. In *Sweeney Todd* we see the bloody consequences for those characters who have a dream in their heart, but no pity.

Like *Follies* and *Gypsy*, *Sweeney Todd* is, in a way, about how it is impossible to stay naïve. Unlike *Follies*, however, there is no disjunction between the form of the show and the story that it tells. In *Follies* a musical revue format is used to tell a story of middle-aged bitterness and regret: emotions that would not have been found in a traditional revue. But revenge, betrayal and murder are the staples of melodrama. *Sweeney Todd* was inspired by Christopher Bond's adaptation of the nineteenth-century melodrama *Sweeney Todd*, which Sondheim saw at the Theatre Royal Stratford East in 1973. Hugh Wheeler wrote the book for the show: Sondheim explained: 'Hugh was also a mystery story writer and British born and therefore he

understood the whole tradition. He was perhaps the only person in the United States to whom I could say “Sweeney Todd” and who wouldn't say “Who's that?”

(*Melodrama* edited by Daniel Gerould: New York Literary Forum, 1980: 6). The book follows the play quite closely, the main change being to expand Mrs. Lovett's role.

Although the show's plot has its roots in Victorian melodrama, its emphasis on romantic obsession and hard-won self-knowledge means that its sensibility is closer to that of *film noir*. The term *film noir* refers to films about crime with characters whose motivations are often a combination of greed and sexual obsession. Film critic

Michael Walker wrote:

Although almost always concerned with crime, they differ from earlier crime films in the hero's entanglement in the passions of the criminal world. Although usually located in an urban milieu, they differ from the gangster movies in the types of criminal activity involved and their focus on a lone, often introverted hero.

(*The Movie Book of Film Noir* Ian Cameron (ed.), introduction by Michael Walker, Studio Vista, 1992: 8.) Walker goes on to add '*film noir* nevertheless took over from nineteenth-century melodrama the sense of the city as a dangerous, hostile place [...] the hero tends to take to the streets uneasily, aware of himself as an outsider.'

(Walker, 1992: 30.)

This is true of Todd, who decides

TODD: There's a hole in the world
 Like a great black pit
 And the vermin of the world
 Inhabit it,

And its morals aren't worth
What a pig could spit,
And it goes by the name of London.

(Sondheim, 2010: 338.)

In this show, as in many *films noir*, the tragedies are caused by characters not understanding the situation they are in until it is too late: in *Double Indemnity* (Paramount, dir. Billy Wilder, 1944), Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) doesn't realise that Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck) is a double-crosser; in *Build My Gallows High* (RKO, dir. Jacques Tourneur, 1947) Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) doesn't know that Kathie Moffat (Jane Greer) has lied to him about stealing her lover's money;²⁴ in *Vertigo* (Paramount, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958), Scotty Ferguson (James Stewart) doesn't figure out until too late that Judith and Madeleine (both played by Kim Novak) are the same woman; in *Chinatown* (Paramount, dir. Roman Polanski, 1974), Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) is blind to the fact that Noah Cross (John Huston) has committed incest with Evelyn Mulwray (Faye Dunaway). To be naïve, in the *film noir* world, is to be the patsy, the fall guy, the sucker. *Vertigo* is especially relevant, not only because it is about an obsessive who inadvertently drives the woman he loves to her death,²⁵ but also because it is scored by Bernard Herrmann. Herrmann also scored the melodrama *Hangover Square* (Twentieth Century Fox, dir. John Brahm, 1945) the film which the teenage Sondheim saw twice in one day so that he could memorise part of the score (see Sondheim, 2010: 331). In his article

24 See Steve Swayne, 2005, 166-174, for an interesting, if over-stretched comparison between the plots of this film and *Sweeney Todd*.

25 And who, maybe, he loves better because she seems to have come back from the dead. Otto Preminger's *Laura* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1944) has a similarly twistedly romantic murderer in Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) and indeed a twisted detective (Dana Andrews) who is accused by one of the suspects as having fallen in love with Laura on the mortuary slab.

'Sondheim's use of the 'Herrmann Chord' in *Sweeney Todd*' (*Studies in Musical Theatre* Volume 6, Issue 3 291-312) Craig M. McGill points out that Sondheim uses the Herrmann chord (i.e. a major-minor seventh, heard in many of Herrmann's scores including *Vertigo* and *Psycho*) throughout the score, but, significantly, that it is not used on the word 'beautiful'. This shows that 'Todd's love for Lucy is unambiguous, and of the purest kind'. (McGill, 2012: 303.) But the dream is corrupted. As Todd slashes the Beggar Woman's throat the chord is played triple forte. (See McGill, 2012: 307.) The chord does not resolve in a way familiar to Western ears and can generate suspense and uncertainty. According to McGill, in *Hangover Square* this chord represents 'the blurring of his [i.e. George Harvey Bone's] conscious and unconscious worlds', (McGill, 2012, 295). But Todd, unlike Bone, is fully aware that he is a murderer: Todd may be mad, but not so mad that he is not responsible for his crimes.

Christopher Bond's version of *Sweeney Todd* is, in itself, a rather unusual melodrama in that Anthony Hope,²⁶ the nominal hero, is shown to be too weak to fulfil that role. When he goes to rescue Johanna from the asylum, he cannot kill the evil Dr Fogg: it is Johanna herself who does so. Also, there is no detective figure to restore order: what justice there is, is done by the vengeful Todd himself and then by a boy sent mad by the horrors he sees around him. The revenge theme was added by Bond (in the original story Sweeney merely kills for gain), and he created the character of the corrupt Judge Turpin, giving the story a basis in the British class system.

²⁶ His name indicates his optimistic nature, and is also the name of the author of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, (1894), a novel of chivalry, a quality which is in short supply in *Sweeney Todd*.

This class-based animus is hinted at in the very first image of Harold Prince's original production of the musical version. We see a stage curtain with a picture of a beehive on it: it is a symbolic picture from the Victorian era where the beehive represents England and the queen bee is Queen Victoria. Organ music creates a solemn funereal atmosphere, then the curtain is whisked away to a sound which is half factory siren and half scream and we see revealed a set that resembles a giant factory. The society we saw represented on the curtain, where everyone knows his place and everyone is in the service of a greater good, is revealed as a lie: society is not a benevolent cooperative but a brutal world of dehumanized labour and ruthless competition.

It is precisely because society creates powerlessness and alienation that many people are driven to have compensatory dreams; something that the world cannot touch. 'The world will never touch you,' (Sondheim, 2010: 349) sings the Judge of his captive Johanna, (although, of course, he desires to touch her himself). This desire of a character to keep somebody away from the world and its defiling touch makes that character into a jailer. Todd, although he plans to rescue Johanna from Turpin's clutches, would also keep her away from the world in his shop. In effect he would imprison her as surely as Turpin has done.

The whistle that we hear is harsh and discordant. It reminds us of the world of work, and also the world of law and order (we hear whistles blown when Anthony is being chased by the police) which, at this time, was entirely in the hands of the ruling class. We also hear it when Todd uses his razor to despatch his victims. The last time we hear the whistle is when Tobias uses the razor on Todd. By combining the sound

of the scream with the sound of the whistle we are reminded of both automation and the human suffering that it causes. It was Prince who was keen to emphasise the brutality of the Industrial Revolution. As Sondheim said:

I was most concerned that we not soap-box it. He [Harold Prince] was too, because we both like didactic theatre but don't like soap-boxing. I try to do it by just inserting here and there throughout the lyrics words like "engine," basic images, not just inserting the words but using them as little motivating forces to make a slightly wispy connection with the industrial revolution.

(Quoted in Guernsey (ed), 1985: 356.)

Sondheim, as ever, downplays the idea of a message in his work. It was Harold Prince who was keen to relate the story to the Industrial Age while Sondheim saw the show as a story about revenge isolating the revenger (see McLaughlin, 2017: 119-120). However the themes of revenge and industrialisation complement each other in this story, as Todd takes his revenge by using the capitalist-industrialist system to sell his fellow men to each other. The manner by which he gets rid of his victims is, significantly, a machine. He pulls a lever and the body shoots straight to Mrs. Lovett's cellar where it is chopped up and cooked. Sweeney's name is even made to rhyme with machine: 'Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned./Like a perfect machine 'e planned' (Sondheim, 2010: 349). Sweeney's revenge is an engine that he can turn on but cannot turn off.

The show's traditional construction helps disguise the fact that *Sweeney Todd* overturns one of the principles of musical theatre. The world the show creates is one where people cannot be trusted when they sing. Time and again characters in the show use song in order to lie or at least withhold important information. Some

characters lied in song in Golden Age musicals, but never to this extent. In 'The Barber and His Wife' Sweeney narrates his tale in the third person so he doesn't have to reveal his true identity to Anthony; in 'The Worst Pies in London' and 'Poor Thing' Mrs. Lovett sings to Todd, while knowing all along that he is really Benjamin Barker; 'Pirelli's Miracle Elixir' is a song for a worthless tonic sung by a reluctant shill; 'The Contest' is sung by the boastful Pirelli (a false identity) who brags of his skill as a barber while Todd quietly wins the contest, and then he brags of his skill at painless tooth-pulling while yanking the tooth of the suffering Tobias; 'Wait' is sung by Mrs. Lovett ostensibly to soothe Todd though really in the hope that he will forget all about taking revenge on the Judge; 'Pretty Women' is a duet where one singer is preparing to kill the other; 'Letter Sequence' is written by Todd to Turpin as a trap; Tobias declares his love in 'Not While I'm Around' but Mrs. Lovett decides that he must die, even as she sings the song back to him; and the 'Parlor Songs' are sung by Mrs. Lovett to drown out Tobias's cries as he is trapped in the cellar. After all, the chorus informs us that even Todd's razor can sing, at least in his imagination: 'Hear it singing, "Yes!"' (Sondheim, 2010: 374). As we will see, this has wide-reaching implications for musical theatre. If a character can sing to evil intent, if even a razor can sing a song in a man's imagination encouraging him to kill, then one needs to pay attention; something that we are told in the very first line of the show. One must not let the music lie to one.

A chorus advises us to 'Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd.' (Sondheim, 2010: 333.) To attend is not only to listen but also to take advice from a cautionary tale which, in a way, is what *Sweeney Todd* is. The opening number of the show is similar

to a street ballad: a kind of song written in the nineteenth century about topical news events, very often celebrated murder trials. (See, for instance, the traditional songs 'McCafferty' and 'Sam Hall'.) The hero of this ballad is also the hero of the show. Sweeney's dual nature is expressed in this song: 'Sweeney was smooth, Sweeney was subtle,/Sweeney would blink and rats would scuttle.' (Sondheim, 2010: 333). In this juxtaposition Sweeney seems to be a normal person, and then is suddenly terrifying: like a wax figure from the Chamber of Horrors (or even from the shop in *Evening Primrose*) that suddenly turns and looks at us. This reminds us not to trust first appearances. 'What happened then - well, that's the play,/And he wouldn't want us to give it away' (Sondheim, 2010: 333) sings the actor playing Sweeney, commenting on a) the fact that it is a play and yet b) treating Sweeney as if he were a real person - a real person, moreover, whom the actor is afraid of. Without wanting to make too much of this throwaway gag it does hint that the audience should take the show in a double sense: both as entertainment and yet also take the character as real, not just as a comic-book ogre.

Harold Prince said: 'The reason that the ensemble is used the way it is, the unifying emotion for the entire company, is shared impotence.' (Zadan, 1994: 245.) It might be said that the chorus represent the down-trodden society in which Sweeney lives, and that, although he cares nothing for social justice, he is acting out their desire for revenge.

COMPANY: Lift your razor high, Sweeney!

Hear it singing, "Yes!"

Sink it in the rosy skin

Of righteousness.

(Sondheim, 2010: 340.)

The chorus function like The Proteans in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*: they take different parts in the story. They are the crowd witnessing the contest between Todd and Pirelli, and the customers in the restaurant in 'God, That's Good!' and, in the 'Letter Sequence' they are the voices in Todd's head, where they can be heard jeeringly repeating the word 'Honorable' on a quavering note (Sondheim, 2010: 369). They also provide narration, but although they slip in and out of the story they don't distance the audience from the events on stage. Rather the narration, which concentrates on Todd and mentions the other characters only in relation to him, creates a sense of mystery about the character, it makes him a figure of legend. 'He trod a path that few have trod,/Did Sweeney Todd' (Sondheim, 2010: 333).

In some ways they function like a Greek chorus but, unlike a Greek chorus, they don't express trepidation and horror at the cruelties to come. Instead they encourage Todd in his crimes. When the chorus sings: 'Back of his smile, under his word,/Sweeney heard music that nobody heard' (Sondheim, 2010: 333) they could mean the music that they themselves are singing, that they are the mad voices inside Sweeney's head. They do not coolly detach themselves from the action: at Todd's first appearance, they screech repeatedly 'Sweeney', reaching a climax of shrieking frenzy to contrast with Todd's baritone.

Todd seems, at the opening, to be a totally disillusioned character. In 'No Place Like London' he tells Anthony: 'You are young./Life has been kind to you./You will learn.' (Sondheim, 2010: 334.) The word 'learn' is sung on an ominous low note, as if the learning will not be pleasant. Yet we come to see that, deep inside Todd's mind, he carries an idealised figure, that of his wife Lucy, who was 'So soft,/So young,/So lost,/ And oh, so beautiful!' (Sondheim 2010: 338) and whom he hopes to meet again. He sings the word 'beautiful' on a high note expressive of agonised longing. Significantly, Mrs. Lovett will use the word 'beautiful', similarly on a high note, to describe Todd (Sondheim, 2010: 339), while Judge Turpin will use it to describe Johanna (Sondheim, 2010: 349). Each of them uses it to describe their dream: a dream that none of them will achieve.

Todd, like many fictional murderers,²⁷ is a romantic, pursuing an ideal figure. Living in his dream of the past he hardly notices the present. While he sings of Lucy as he remembers her, he shoos away the beggar woman that she has become. Anthony, too, has a dream woman: singing of Johanna he says: 'I was half convinced I'd waken./ Satisfied enough to dream you./ Happily, I was mistaken' (Sondheim, 2010: 342). For Anthony the dream comes true. But Todd's dream isolates him from the people around him.

27 Examples of romantic idealist murderers in fiction include Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Moose Malloy in Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), Humbert Humbert in Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), and possibly Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), who is at least rumoured to have 'killed a man' (Penguin edition: 128). In the world of film, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro) in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (Columbia, 1976) is a notable example of an idealistic murderer, who kills to preserve the purity of a young girl, Iris (Jodie Foster). In musical theatre the Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* is similarly homicidal in pursuit of his romantic ideal Christine.

In show after show of Sondheim's we see characters who are not able to connect because they have a romantic dream or ideal that they are holding onto. Sally in *Follies* has her imagined Ben and this destroys her relationship with Buddy. In *A Little Night Music* Fredrik has Anne whom he idealises, and he sings of her to Desiree, who is actually the right partner for him. Sweeney has his memories of Lucy whom he finally unwittingly kills as he does not recognise her: she doesn't match up to his dream. Mary in *Merrily We Roll Along* has her memory of Frank and how he used to be and she becomes an alcoholic, and Frank has his memories of the past which torment him as he has become a sell-out. In *Into the Woods* Cinderella dreams of a prince, which helps her to cope with the bullying and drudgery of her home life, but when he finally arrives he is a disappointment and she learns to live without him. In *Assassins* John Hinckley and Squeaky Fromme both idealise people they have never met. It can hardly be overstressed how important it is that none of these characters can successfully communicate their love in song to the dream figure. When Sally expresses her love of Ben in *Follies* she sings 'Losing My Mind' to herself, but when she sings to Ben it is to describe her supposedly happy marriage to Buddy. This is to punish Ben for having rejected her all those years ago and maybe also to preserve her self-esteem. Mary cannot sing of her love to Frank, only joining in silently with 'Not a Day Goes By' while Frank and Beth get married. Sweeney only sings to Lucy when he is broken with regret because he has killed her. Cinderella never sings to the Prince, and Hinckley and Fromme sing to Jodie Foster and Charles Manson who are not there. The dreams expressed in the songs are exposed as false by the fact that they are addressed to the wrong person, or to a person that isn't there.

To keep a dream sequestered from the world is impossible. Judge Turpin plans to lock Johanna away where: 'The world will never touch you' (Sondheim, 2010: 349.) This desire makes Turpin keep her as a prisoner and, as we hear in her song 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird', she wants to escape. Like Ella in *Evening Primrose* Johanna wants to experience the world (and also to escape the designs of the Judge). Todd, on the other hand, has kept an image of Lucy and Johanna in his mind, and he cannot adjust to the reality. 'If only angels could prevail,/We'd be the way we were' (Sondheim, 2010: 367) Todd sings, wishing that he could stop time, so that Johanna would never grow up and always be dependent on him. At the end of the show the chorus tells us that: 'Sweeney wishes the world away,/Sweeney's weeping for yesterday' (Sondheim, 2010: 375).²⁸ Like Sally Durant he cannot move into the present. The sense of fragility of beauty is tragic in *Sweeney Todd*: there is no more beauty for Lucy except in death. Death is often, in the romantic imagination, a double recognition of both the end of beauty and its preservation: an ideal locked safely in the tomb cannot be defiled. This show is at once romantic and critical of some of the manifestations of romanticism.

In 'The Barber and His Wife' Todd sings that the barber (i.e. himself) was 'Naïve'. (Sondheim, 2010: 338.) This word is sung on a low note that is full of foreboding. He is 'naïve' because he is a dreamer, while the world he lives in, destroys beauty.

TODD At the top of the hole
 Sit the privileged few,

²⁸ In this he is like A-Rab in *West Side Story* who, after the deaths of Barnardo and Riff, says 'I wish it was yesterday.' (Laurents, 1959: 100.)

Making mock of the vermin
In the lower zoo,
Turning beauty into filth and greed.

(Sondheim, 2010: 338.)

Significantly his next words are 'I too', as if he realises that he too will turn beauty into filth and greed, while dreaming of a woman whom he cannot reach.

Because of these ideals, and because of his naivete, Todd also describes himself as 'A foolish barber' (Sondheim, 2010: 338). Later, when he meets Mrs. Lovett but hasn't yet told her who he is, he asks what Benjamin Barker's crime was that led to his being transported. 'Foolishness' (Wheeler, 1979: 391) she answers, a crime that Lucy is also guilty of according to Mrs. Lovett, who calls her a 'Silly little nit'. (Sondheim, 2010: 339). But for Mrs. Lovett all transcendent ideals are foolishness (apart from her own love for Todd), and she wants to bring him into the present so that they can have a future together.

MRS. LOVETT: Can't you think of nothing else? Always broodin' away on yer
wrongs what happened heaven knows how many years ago -
(Wheeler, 1979: 428.)

For Mrs. Lovett, life is a practical business.

As with many heroes and villains in thrillers, (for instance Bruno Antony and Guy Haines in Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* [Transatlantic Pictures/Warner Bros., 1951]) Anthony and Todd seem to be reflections of one another. This emphasises

both their similarity and their differences. It shows us what Todd was once like, and how far he has fallen. Both men idealise a woman: Sweeney idealises Lucy, the mother, and Anthony Johanna, the daughter. Both are propositioned by Lucy and both reject her, though we see the difference in personalities too in that Anthony gives her money out of compassion, but Todd doesn't. Throughout the show Todd and Anthony's words often echo each other but take on different meanings; although they agree that 'There's no place like London' (Sondheim, 2010: 334) Anthony only sees beauty while Todd sees only corruption. In 'Ah, Miss' Anthony sings eagerly of 'the rubies of Tibet' (Sondheim, 2010: 341) whereas Todd sings to his razors that they will 'drip precious/ Rubies' (Sondheim, 2010: 340). Anthony says 'I trust him [Todd] as I trust my right arm' (Wheeler, 1979: 523) while Todd says, when he is reunited with his razors: 'My right arm is complete again!'²⁹ (Sondheim, 2010: 340). Anthony is the person that Todd might have been, but Todd is the bitter voice of experience to Anthony's innocence.

Anthony sings of the 'wonders' he had seen around the world, (Sondheim, 2010: 334) and later describes Johanna as 'a wonder' that is better than any of the others he has seen (Sondheim, 2010: 341). Todd also believes in wonders: he thinks that 'the cruelty of men/Is as wondrous as Peru' (Sondheim, 2010: 338). Todd sings to his razors that they will do 'wonders' (Sondheim, 2010: 340). He also sings that 'Pretty women/Are a wonder' (Sondheim, 2010: 354) a conventional sentiment but made sinister by the context: he is duetting with the Judge whose throat he is planning to

²⁹ The phrase is reminiscent of Psalm 137 v5: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.' (King James Version.) This is appropriate as it is one of the psalms of exile, and Todd has just returned from exile. He has now remembered his cunning in the modern sense of the word, that is to say deviousness and criminal intent. On the Original Cast Album the line is 'At last my arm is complete again' as Len Cariou, the actor who played Todd, was left-handed.

slit. At the end, when Todd realises that Mrs. Lovett had lied to him, he sings, in the 'Final Sequence': 'You're a bloody wonder' (Sondheim, 2010: 374.) She has joined the lists of the wondrously cruel. It is as if the very word itself has been corrupted, from Anthony's innocent praise, to being a euphemism for blood-letting, to a lie told to the Judge to keep him quiet while Todd savours his impending revenge, and finishes incarnated in the horrific form of Nellie Lovett.

In this show repetition of a key word is never merely reiteration, each time the meaning is slightly changed. There are three different songs called 'Johanna': the first is a pure-hearted love lament sung by Anthony, the second is the perverted monologue of the Judge, and the the third is Todd's plaintive lament for his lost daughter which he sings while calmly slitting the throats of some of his customers. In this way Todd is linked to both the hero and the villain, as if he could have been like Anthony when he was young but has instead become as cruel as the Judge. Anthony's 'Johanna' is a love song for a woman whom he may never be able to speak to, the Judge's 'Johanna' ends with a plan to dominate the woman by force, and the third song is a lament for a woman Todd feels he will never see again. It is almost as if through these three songs we trace the course of a love affair: desire, attainment and subsequent loss. Each man represents one of the stages of love. Attainment seems only to lead to disillusion, but then, in the Judge's case, it would have been an attainment by force.

For a show so filled with lies and disguise it is not surprising that even Barker's true name must be kept secret. There is a practical reason for keeping it secret, of course: if Todd is discovered he will be executed for returning to the country. Pirelli

recognises Todd as Barker and becomes his first victim. And Lucy dies when, confronting Todd in his shop, she says 'Hey, don't I know you, mister?' (Wheeler, 1979: 526). When he finally sinks his knife into the Judge's throat Todd gleefully reveals his true name, which becomes the last words of the terrified Judge. Just as Turpin unmasked himself before his assault on Lucy, able to show his true face as she was powerless to protect herself, so Todd reveals his true identity when he has the Judge in his power. 'But then, I suppose, the face of a barber - the face of a prisoner in the dock - is not particularly memorable' (Wheeler, 1979: 528-9) gloats Sweeney. Turpin didn't remember him because he didn't care, and is punished for his indifference to the men whose lives he has ruined. Like Todd, one might say, he dies because he doesn't notice the world around him.

The first meeting between Todd and Mrs. Lovett is full of unexpressed emotion. Todd doesn't tell her who he is and she doesn't admit that she recognises him. Instead she explains how Lucy has been raped and abandoned by the Judge: so the telling of the story is not just a straight piece of exposition, it is also a dramatically charged moment. Mrs. Lovett isn't just telling Todd the story, she is trying to get him to confess his identity. Her pretence of sympathy for Lucy, expressed by the repeated phrase 'Poor thing', is a psychological weapon she uses to needle Todd. As is often the case in Sondheim's work, the hearer of a song is as dramatically important as the singer. Finally she drives him to scream 'Would no one have mercy on her?' (Wheeler, 1979: 394). The scream might be said to be where the song breaks down. Instead of the character feeling so much emotion that they have to sing, sometimes they feel so much emotion that they have to stop the music.

The unexpressed emotion in this scene makes Todd and Mrs. Lovett's meeting as packed dramatically as the Bench Scene from *Carousel*. The comparison between the two scenes shows how much more uncertain Sondheim's world view is. In the Bench Scene Julie and Billy come near to admitting that they are falling in love with each other, but can't quite say it. There is subtext to the scene but it is fairly straightforward: the audience knows that Billy and Julie should declare their love openly - the drama and emotion resides in the fact that they can't do this. The Bench Scene gives us all the relevant information: the music itself tells us 'Billy and Julie are falling in love'. But first-time viewers of *Sweeney Todd* do not have all the information at this point. Mrs. Lovett deliberately misleads Todd about Lucy, allowing him (and the audience) to think that she is dead, when Mrs. Lovett knows that she isn't.

There is a musical clue to the secret that Mrs. Lovett is keeping from Sweeney. The minuet that plays at Judge Turpin's house is also the basis for the Beggar Woman's cry of 'Alms! Alms!/For a miserable woman' (Sondheim, 2010: 334). One might argue with the musical-dramatic logic here. While Mrs. Lovett is singing 'Poor Thing' the minuet is taking place in the background. But neither Todd nor Mrs. Lovett were there and presumably the broken Lucy didn't describe the scene to Mrs. Lovett. For subsequent productions Sondheim added a nursery rhyme, 'Beggar Woman's Lullaby', that Lucy keeps singing to the same tune as 'Poor Thing'. We can assume that Lucy sings this song to herself a lot. But even if Mrs. Lovett had heard Lucy sing it, how would she know that it was the tune that Lucy had heard at the

Judge's house? Similarly, how did Mrs. Lovett pick up Todd's tune of 'The Barber and His Wife?' She hasn't heard Todd sing it. This kind of question wouldn't occur in most musicals, where one accepts that songs are in the ether and can be picked up by any of the characters just as one accepts the convention that characters will burst spontaneously into a song complete with invisible orchestra. But with Sondheim one does ask this question because music is not a resource that can be called upon by all of the characters at will.

In a Hammerstein show the musical affinity between Todd and Mrs. Lovett would be a way of signalling to the audience that they are right for each other. To refer again to the Bench Scene: Julie's best friend Carrie sings 'You're a Queer One, Julie Jordan,' and later in the scene Billy Bigelow picks up the same theme, although he wasn't on stage to hear Carrie sing it. This is Rodgers and Hammerstein's way of letting us know that Julie and Billy are right for each other, even though they don't yet know it themselves. In *South Pacific*, in the 'Twin Soliloquies', Emile and Nellie sing to themselves using the same tune, although they cannot hear the other character sing. This again, tells us that they are right for each other: they are fated to get together. But in *Sweeney Todd* the use of the same tune seems to signal that Mrs. Lovett is trying to *tell* Todd that they are right for each other. Mrs. Lovett, like a good liar, picks up other people's songs and sings them back to them, telling them what they want to hear. She also does this with Tobias in 'Not While I'm Around' but there the problem doesn't arise as we have seen Tobias sing it to her. Yet sometimes a theatrical truth has to take precedence over a logical one and the show would lose a lot of its dramatic intensity if the music didn't thematically cohere.

In 'The Worst Pies in London' Mrs. Lovett sings of one of her pies that it is 'All greasy and gritty,/It looks like it's molting,/And tastes like – /Well, pity/A woman alone' (Sondheim, 2010: 339). The word 'pity' is heard as a joke rhyme when we expect to hear the word 'shitty'. This sudden substitution of a clean word for the expected dirty one is, of course, a standard device of comic songs but it also implies that, for Mrs. Lovett, the concept of pity is a joke. In their last confrontation Lucy warns Todd of Mrs. Lovett: 'She with no pity... in her heart'. (Wheeler, 1979: 526.) After Mrs. Lovett torments Todd with the story of Lucy, she says 'Oh, you poor thing! You poor thing!' (Wheeler, 1979: 395) echoing the refrain of 'Poor thing' that she sang while describing Lucy's rape by the Judge. She later uses the phrase 'Poor thing is penniless' (Sondheim, 2010: 364) of her unseen rival, Mrs. Mooney, in a piece of barely-disguised gloating that Mrs. Mooney's cat-pie shop has lost business. And, in Hugh Wheeler's book, she says 'poor thing' of Tobias (Wheeler, 1979: 514), pretending that he runs away from home, thus explaining why they have to lock him in the cellar. Mrs. Lovett learns to express pity because it was expected of women in that society to be gentle and kind, and yet any society based on ruthless competition does not encourage pity. Mrs. Lovett's two-faced personality is brought about by the contradictions in a capitalist society: a society that also exhorted, through the church and public morality, a kindness and charity that was not practised by many of the wealthy or the institutions of power. Mrs. Lovett is not simply a victim of society, and must ultimately face up to what she has done, yet her villainy is a reflection of the society that she lives in.

As McLaughlin says: 'In many ways Mrs. Lovett represents capitalism in the play'. (McLaughlin, 2016: 123.) Her very first words, which she utters when she spots Todd are 'A customer!' (Wheeler, 1979: 388). This is a change from Bond's play where she asks Todd 'Are you a ghost?' (Bond, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Samuel French, 1973: 3), an image Sondheim uses later in the lyric of the song. Capitalism functions by reducing people to economic units in ceaseless competition with each other. In this brutal environment that thrives on anxiety and desire, the psychological consequences for many people are fear, loneliness and madness. The way of dealing with these debilitating states of mind is for people to create a consoling fantasy away from the world. Even Mrs. Lovett is not immune to this. Brutal as she is, McLaughlin does her an injustice when he says: 'This is not to say that Mrs. Lovett does not love Sweeney in her way, but it is a love that is subordinated to attaining security, wealth, and status'. (McLaughlin, 2016: 123.) But she is prepared to sacrifice profit for him. After all, she hasn't sold his razors. 'Cracked in the head, wasn't I? Times as bad as they are, I could have got five, maybe ten quid for 'em, any day.' (Wheeler, 1979: 395.) At this moment Mrs. Lovett cannot tell Todd that she loves him: instead she sings, in counterpoint to Todd: 'If you only knew, Mr. Todd - ' (Sondheim, 2010: 340). This line itself has two meanings: if only he knew how she felt about him, but also if only he knew the lie that she has told him in leading him to believe that Lucy is dead.

But Mrs. Lovett, like Todd, like the Judge, like Turpin, like Anthony, has a dream that she keeps inside her, untouched by the world's rude commerce. Keeping Todd's razors symbolize her hope that he would return one day. And now he sings a love

song, not to her, but to the razors. This song, 'My Friends', is another Sondheim duet where someone isn't listening. (In fact Todd also doesn't listen to Mrs. Lovett in 'Wait or 'By The Sea'.) He expected to be reunited with his family, but was only reunited with his razors, whom he addresses as if they were his family. 'I've come home/To find you waiting' (Sondheim 2010: 340) he sings. But Mrs. Lovett's gesture of saving the razors is what brings on the disaster. For later, during the contest, Pirelli doesn't recognise Todd, but does recognise his razors. Todd, we can assume, has changed a lot after fifteen years transportation, but the razors have stayed the same. They are the one untarnished thing in Todd's life. It is this recognition of his razors that leads Pirelli to attempt to blackmail Todd, by threatening to tell Beadle Bamford of his real identity. This attempt at blackmail leads to Todd killing Pirelli and then to Mrs. Lovett's idea of making Pirelli's corpse into a pie. Her dream kills them both.

In 'My Friends' we find Sondheim using a technique that he will use again, especially in *Assassins*, that of getting a well-known tune and twisting it to indicate the twisted state of mind of the person singing it. He said: 'I always found the *Dies Irae* moving and scary at the same time, [...] One song, 'My Friends,' was influenced by it ... it was the inversion of the opening of the *Dies Irae*.' (Zadan, 1994: 248). The twelfth-century setting of a poem about the Day of Wrath or Judgement Day is used as part of the Mass of the Dead of the Roman Catholic Church. The poem depicts God taking vengeance on wrong-doers, and part of the poem is a plea for mercy from God when He comes in judgement. Like God, Sweeney will have vengeance on the powerful who have abused their power, but Sweeney never forgives, and Mrs. Lovett has no pity in her heart. Later on Todd sings 'Oh, my God...'

(Sondheim, 2010: 374) when he realises he has killed Lucy. Todd, like Turpin, has played God. Pirelli also sings the name of God, but that is part of his patter. 'Da talent give to me/By God!' (Sondheim, 2010: 348.) *Sweeney Todd* shows a world where the function of God has been usurped by men. The opening ballad asks the rhetorical question: 'And what if none of their souls were saved?/They went to their maker impeccably shaved' (Sondheim, 2010: 333). Todd 'served a dark and a hungry god' (Sondheim, 2010: 375) a pagan deity that lives on human flesh, not mercy. (And 'served' has a double meaning, to obey a higher power but also to serve a customer, especially with food. Even Sweeney's God is a customer.) The other major use of the word God in the show is in the song 'God, That's Good!' There it becomes the cry of greedy customers eating their fellow men. Communion has become cannibalism, where instead of officiating a priest might find himself on the menu. The madmen who escape from Fogg's asylum believe, in 'City on Fire', that the world will soon be coming to an end anyway. God will be coming back in judgement.

It seems that, in nineteenth-century London, belief in God is a sign of naivete, or at least of innocence. Anthony says that:

ANTHONY: It would have been a poor Christian indeed who'd have spotted you
pitching and tossing on that raft and not given the alarm.

TODD: There's many a Christian would have done just that and not lost a wink's
sleep for it, either.

(Wheeler, 1979: 384.)

Todd is no doubt thinking of the Judge. The other naïve character, Tobias, says 'You're a Christian indeed, sir!', (Wheeler, 1979: 434) to Todd, and to Mrs. Lovett 'it seems like the Good Lord sent you for me' to which she replies: 'It's just my warm heart, dear. Room enough there for all God's creatures.' (Wheeler, 1979: 506.) This belief, held by Tobias and Anthony, in the essential goodness of men is, the show seems to suggest, naïve. One must be wary.

At the end of 'My Friends' Sweeney shouts 'My right arm is complete again!' (Sondheim, 2010: 340). Sweeney does not sing the line triumphantly, as one might expect, instead he speaks it without musical accompaniment. One must attend to pick up these clues that Todd's joy is not genuine, but delusional. It is the chorus that then sings: 'Lift your razor high, Sweeney!/Hear it singing, "Yes!"/Sink it in the rosy skin/Of righteousness.' (Sondheim, 2010: 340.)

The audience may find itself urging Todd on with his crimes. After all, Turpin is as much of a villain as Todd: (it is significant that he has the same last name as a famous criminal). After the chorus has sung: 'See your razor gleam, Sweeney./Feel how well it fits/As it floats/Across the throats/Of hypocrites...' (Sondheim, 2010: 350) we see the Judge condemning a young boy to hang. Todd's chair is like the chair the Judge sits in, an ornate throne of death. It is appropriate then, that it should be the place where the Judge is finally killed.

But the Judge, as he reveals in his song 'Johanna', wishes he didn't lust after his adopted daughter.³⁰ This, perversely enough, is the only moment in the play where Turpin is other than a complete villain: he is, at least to start with, tormented with guilt. He sings 'I treasured you in innocence' (Sondheim, 2010: 349). The line is ambiguous: is the Judge referring to Johanna's innocence, or is he protesting his own? Although he whips himself, as if in penitence, he sings the line: 'You tempt me with your innocence' (Sondheim, 2010: 349) which shows the typical abuser's mentality of blaming the victim: as if his perverted desires are the result of deliberate provocation. His agonised cry of 'God' began as a supplication, but, as with other words in the show, it is corrupted: becoming a guilty orgasmic cry. This cry would have been the moment where many composers would have ended the song, but Sondheim goes on. The orgasm is the point where Turpin abandons God, so to speak, and instead starts to pray to Johanna. As such, the cry is a moment of disillusion that the character lives through, but instead of maturing, Judge Turpin loses the last remnants of his conscience. The song began as a prayer to God to deliver him from his tormenting lust, but it ends by the Judge deciding to marry Johanna, entrapping her for ever. He sings that she will: 'tend me in my solitude' (Sondheim, 2010: 349). The fear that many Sondheim characters have, of being alone in the world, is one that the Judge shares. Like Sweeney, Turpin has brought his loneliness on himself with his lack of compassion. The Judge is utterly isolated, only able to spy on his desires: even had he succeeded in marrying Joanna he would not have broken through his solitude. The Judge recognises that theirs will not be a true marriage, he will always be alone. This is a necessary outcome of his inability to connect.

30 As La Bruyere once wrote: 'Men are less ashamed of their crimes than of their failings and of what touches their vanity.' (La Bruyere, trans 1970, *Characters*, Ch 4: 74.)

'You'll/Deliver me' (Sondheim, 2010: 349) he sings at the end of the song, meaning Johanna rather than God, but Johanna will not deliver him from his own evil: instead he means her to be the victim of it. In 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird' Johanna had regretted that 'I cannot fly' (Sondheim, 2010: 341) while the Judge fears that this is exactly what will happen: 'You want to fly away' (Sondheim, 2010: 349). When the Judge decides that she will 'keep away from windows' (Sondheim, 2010: 349) he is thinking that he will keep her out of sight of Anthony, who has seen her at her window, but he might also be thinking that he will keep her away from windows so he won't be tempted to spy on her as the light behind her window 'penetrates your gown'. (Sondheim, 2010: 349.) But this means that she will be kept in the dark. The three characters all focus on the window: to Anthony it is a place of hope where he can see his beloved, to Johanna it is a sign of her imprisonment that contains her and gives her a tantalising glimpse of the outside world, while for Turpin it is a focus of his jealousy and also his voyeurism.

Johanna sings 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird', which is filled with bird imagery. Sondheim has joked about Oscar Hammerstein's obsession with birds (see Sondheim, 2010: 36-37) so it seems appropriate that Sondheim's bird is in a cage, and had been blinded and may be screaming rather than learning to pray. The bird is blinded by the seller to make it sing better: and when Anthony buys it for her it is taken off him and crushed to death by the Beadle. Later Mrs. Lovett buys a caged bird of her own when her restaurant takes off. And Judge Turpin is characterised as a 'pious vulture of the law' (Sondheim, 2010: 338).

Todd and Turpin confront each other for the first time at the barber shop. Todd, rejoicing that his enemy is delivered into his hands, begins to whistle (perhaps a sly dig at critics who say that Sondheim's music can't be whistled?) Then the killer and his designated victim sing a duet: 'Pretty Women'. At the line 'Pretty as her mother?' (Sondheim, 2010: 354) we hear the orchestra play a musical reminder of the opening line of 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd'. Once again the music warns the audience of what may happen. Todd, and the audience, wait. We savour the moment with Todd as he duets with his oblivious intended victim. Todd and Turpin think of the things that pretty women might do: 'Dancing' suggests Todd, (Sondheim, 2010: 354) thinking no doubt of the dancing at Judge Turpin's party. Todd also imagines women: 'Sitting in the window' and Turpin adds 'Silhouetted', (Sondheim, 2010: 354) which, as Judith Schlesinger points out, ('Psychology, Evil, and *Sweeney Todd* or 'Don't I Know You, Mister?' ed. Gordon J, 1997: 129) is the way the voyeuristic Judge sees women: against a window. This, of course, reduces them to two dimensions. As the tension mounts on the refrain 'Pretty women'... (Sondheim, 2010: 354) Anthony infuriatingly runs in and spoils everything.

Cheated of his prey, Todd, in 'Epiphany', does what Turpin did earlier and adopts the place of God (epiphany means to see God). Todd decides that everyone deserves to die: 'Even you, Mrs. Lovett,/ Even I'. (Sondheim, 2010: 355.) And indeed his last victim is to be Mrs. Lovett and the last character to die in the show is Todd himself. This is another of Sondheim's nervous breakdowns in song. In many operas there are 'mad scenes', Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* includes one of the most

famous examples. They gave opera stars a chance to display their coloratura technique, but when Sondheim writes a mad scene he makes the music veer wildly between two states of mind, as it does both during the 'Epiphany' and during the Beggar Woman's cries. The music is itself unstable and does not turn madness into a display of skill. As Banfield says: 'In opera, traditionally, the music commands an exclusive viewpoint on the drama, [...] it cannot be resisted or resist itself (which is a way of saying that it is not self-aware and is why it can so rarely cope with wit and irony)' (Banfield 1993: 6.) But in Sondheim's work the music can be resisted, the drama can overwhelm it and it can break down.

The music accurately represents the characters' psychological states. Unlike, say, *The Phantom of the Opera*, where we are invited to view the Phantom's obsession as an unironic expression of undying love, Sondheim's music tells us what is actually happening in Todd's mind. It doesn't project him as he would like to see himself, the way 'The Music of the Night' projects the Phantom's image of himself as a seductive great lover. Sondheim makes the music reflect Sweeney's madness.

The Epiphany has a Pirandellian effect: as in 'Rose's Turn' the audience becomes the mad illusion of the main character. 'Not one man, no,/Nor ten men,/Nor a hundred/Can assuage me - ' (Sondheim, 2010: 355). In his hallucination he talks to the audience: 'Who, sir? You, sir?/No one's in the chair - /Come on, come on,/Sweeney's waiting!' (Sondheim, 2010: 355 - precisely how much this is directed to the audience depends on how the performer plays it). The world is full of potential victims (and, as we will hear in the show's final number, potential Sweeneys as well).

At the climax of the song he sings: 'And I'm full of joy!' (Sondheim, 2010: 355) but, once again, we can hear that the music doesn't back him up. Instead of a triumphant final chord, there is a major chord, then a minor chord, then a major chord, then a minor chord, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty. Sondheim uses music as audible subtext: he dramatises what the character *isn't* singing. He is dropping a hint to the audience not to take Todd's words at face value, not to be naive.

At this point where Todd declares his desire to slit everybody's throats, where many writers would have ended the first act, the show triumphantly changes tone. While Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney are discussing how to get rid of Pirelli's corpse Sweeney suggests burying him.

MRS. LOVETT: Well, of course, we could do that. I don't suppose there's any relatives going to come poking around looking for him. But...

Then there is a chord of music: the aural equivalent of a light bulb appearing above the character's head in a strip cartoon.

MRS. LOVETT: You know me. Sometimes ideas just pop into me head and I keep thinking...

(Wheeler, 1979: 457.)

Mrs. Lovett, though, is genteel, and sidles around the issue. 'Such a nice plump frame/Wot's-his-name/ Has.../ Had.../Has...!' (Sondheim, 2010: 356). In this double

change of tense, Sondheim brilliantly isolates the process of dehumanisation. Mrs. Lovett has already forgotten Pirelli's name (which was a false one anyway) but when she changes from 'has' to 'had' she is changing the tense to the past, to acknowledge that the person she is speaking about is dead. But then when she changes back to 'has' she is in effect saying 'Who cares what he was? All that matters is the meat on him.' In those three words Pirelli's soul has flown away and all that is left is an unhallowed supply of pie-filling.

But Sondheim expresses this vision, not in a dramatic aria, but in a jolly music-hall-style ditty.³¹ If everybody deserves to be killed and baked in a pie then there is, the characters suppose, no need to be downhearted about it. The blackly comic song, loaded with gleefully bad puns, is where Sweeney learns to laugh. Though even now his obsession is never far away: 'I'll come again when you/Have judge on the menu...' (Sondheim, 2010: 361); he is more light-hearted than before, and waltzes Mrs. Lovett round the room. That their situation has been partially created by their class position is made clear in the lines:

TODD: How gratifying for once to know -

BOTH: (*Indicate the room upstairs*) That those above will serve those down
below!

(Sondheim, 2010: 360).

31 There is a song, 'Sweeney Todd, the Barber' written by veteran music-hall songwriters R.P. Weston and Bert Lee, (perhaps today best known for writing 'With Her 'Ead Tucked Underneath Her Arm'). 'Sweeney Todd, the Barber' was first sung by Stanley Holloway in the film *Play Up the Band* (Ealing Studios, dir. Harry Hughes, 1935). In one verse the song links cannibalism with unwittingly destroying family members: 'And many's the poor young orphan lad/Had the first square meal he'd ever had/A hot meat pie made out of his dad/From Sweeney Todd the Barber.'

To serve no longer means to give service: it now means becoming a serving, becoming dinner. Todd and Mrs. Lovett are animated by class revenge, but not to establish justice: they don't care if their victims are guilty or innocent.

TODD: We'll not discriminate great from small.

No, we'll serve anyone -

Meaning anyone -

BOTH: And to anyone

At all!

(Sondheim, 2010: 361.)

The weak will still be victimised, but so will the strong. Todd and Mrs. Lovett have a perverted democratic view in their slaughter. They see themselves as divorced from their society: like the Judge they feel no responsibility for the world around them and this lack of concern is what isolates them.

In Act Two we hear the bell motif that introduced the London setting in Act One, but in Act Two it is gradually drowned out by a chuff-chuff-chuff machine-like rhythm, once again reminding us of the increasing automation of society. The bells of London have been drowned out and in this act the bell we hear most is the bell attached to the shop door of Mrs. Lovett's pie-shop, which signals the approach of a customer, and then becomes his death knell. It is the only bell that sounds for Sweeney's victims. In the song 'God, That's Good!' the chorus of customers, with their incessant desire for food, (the song climaxes with a mad frenzy of greed) could

be seen as representing a baby with its incessant noisy demands to be fed and Mrs. Lovett and Todd might be its parents condemned to economic servitude to ensure that it is. When Toby kills Todd at the end he is reciting a nursery rhyme and cuts Todd's throat on the line: 'And put him in the oven for baby and me!' (Sondheim, 2010: 375.)

The bell motif can be heard again after 'God, That's Good', and leads into Todd's version of 'Johanna': a plangent song of loss sung by a man who is slitting the throats of strangers as he sings. This is shocking enough, but what is more subtly shocking is that Todd is beginning to lose his love of Johanna. He admits that he lives in a fantasy world with her, where 'You stay, Johanna -/The way I've dreamed you are'. (Sondheim, 2010: 366-367.) He is more at home with dreams than reality. The truly shocking thing is that he admits: 'I think I miss you less and less/As every day goes by' (Sondheim, 2010: 367). Time, as it does so often, erodes what is valuable (see 'Good Thing Going' in *Merrily We Roll Along*). Perhaps Todd is losing his humanity because of the murders that he commits so casually. We see him spare one potential victim as the man has brought his daughter with him. This isn't due to any filial tenderness on Todd's part but because Mrs. Lovett has recommended that he only kill people without family, as no relatives will come looking for them. But as the man and his daughter are in the shop Todd sings 'We'd be the way we were' (Sondheim: 2010, 367) thinking of when Johanna was a child. And Todd finally sings 'We learn, Johanna,/To say/ Goodbye...' (Sondheim, 2010: 367). Perhaps his vengeance is allowing him to say goodbye, to forget. But at the same time Anthony is heard reprising his version of 'Johanna': with the line 'I'll steal you.' Clearly Anthony hasn't learned to say goodbye. This fantasy world of Todd's is contrasted with the world

outside: in Sondheim's work the characters can never withdraw from the world to live in a fantasy, and, if they try to, they damage themselves psychologically.

As Todd sings his song of loss Lucy is outside the shop. She shrieks 'Mischief! Mischief!' (Sondheim, 2010: 366). She is thinking of Mrs. Lovett, both as a sexual threat, (Mrs. Lovett has stolen her husband) and also as a threat of pure evil: Lucy has some half-formed suspicions of what Mrs. Lovett is really up to.

Mrs. Lovett may be evil, but she understands the importance of appearances. In her song 'By the Sea' she dreams of a nice place on the South Coast: the epitome of respectability: 'In a house wot we'd almost own' (Sondheim, 2010: 367). Here is an example of Mrs. Lovett's mock-genteel way of speaking. Similar to 'If Mama Was Married' in *Gypsy* and 'Our Little World' in *Into the Woods*, 'By the Sea' is a fantasy of what will never be. (And even Mrs. Lovett recognises that they would never have the money to finish the payments.) Nellie Lovett is a true bourgeois in the Flaubertian sense: grasping, small-minded and brutal, but obsessed with a desire for 'refinement'. There is also something sinister in the fact that Mrs. Lovett doesn't mention Tobias in her fantasy. Perhaps, subconsciously, she already recognises that one day, like a puppy bought at Christmas, he will become inconvenient and will have to be got rid of.

Sondheim may be parodying all the 'little cottage' songs when Mrs. Lovett sings: 'In our cozy retreat,/Kept all neat and tidy,/We'll have chums over every Friday'. This is not the paradise of a song like 'My Blue Heaven' ('Just Molly and me/And baby

makes three', Walter Donaldson and George A. Whiting 1927): she suggests they could 'Have a nice sunny suite/For the guest to rest in - /Now and then, you could do the guest in -' (Sondheim, 2010: 368.)

And maybe Todd's original family was not ideal. 'How seldom it is one meets a fellow spirit!' Judge Turpin says just before he is murdered. 'With fellow tastes - in women, at least' replies Todd. (Wheeler, 1979: 528). Todd uses the plural, and Turpin has desired both Lucy and Johanna. This gives a darker meaning to the line in Todd's version of 'Johanna' that his daughter may 'look too much like her' (Sondheim, 2010: 367). Not that Todd is likely to add incest to his other crimes, but he is perhaps guilty of it in his mind. And he plans to bring Johanna home and kill Anthony, which he doesn't need to do if his only concern is to rescue her from the Judge. It seems that Todd will imprison her too. Todd's temporary family: himself, Mrs. Lovett and Tobias, does bear some resemblance to Jonas Fogg's asylum. In the asylum, if the patients are good they are rewarded with a sweetie. Mrs. Lovett does the same thing when she wants to keep Tobias quiet about Pirelli's disappearance. 'Here, have a nice bon-bon.' (Wheeler, 1979: 508). But this action is her downfall: she keeps the bon-bon in her purse and as she gets it out Tobias recognises the purse as the one that belonged to Signor Pirelli. Mrs. Lovett dies, one might say, because she doesn't properly appreciate Tobias, who is not as dumb as she thinks.

Mrs. Lovett may have at least some dregs of conscience about killing Tobias. When she realises that he suspects Todd and must be disposed of she offers him a scarf she has been knitting for him (and it is surely his throat that is most in need of

protection) and says 'And it's so becoming on you'. (Wheeler, 1979: 510.)

Ominously, in the original production, the scarf is red. On the album of the revival with Michael Cerveris and Patti LuPone, LuPone as Mrs. Lovett breaks down on these words.

However horrific a family Todd and Mrs. Lovett may make, it is the only one Tobias has ever known. He movingly declares his love for her with his song 'Not While I'm Around.' It is a child's lullaby to his parent, a reassurance that nothing bad will happen. But reassurance, that is to say a song about how there is nothing to worry about, is, in Sondheim's world, *never* to be trusted. Tobias is not lying to Mrs. Lovett, but he does not understand the situation that he is in: he is out of his depth. He sings the very Hammersteinian lyric: 'Being close and being clever/Ain't like being true.' (Sondheim, 2010: 369.) One can imagine Aunt Eller or Nettie uttering such a sentiment: in a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical they would be articulating a wise truth that the main character might or might not listen to. But Tobias is an innocent, in terrible danger that he only partially comprehends. 'Demons'll charm you' (Sondheim, 2010: 369) he sings, not realising that one is charming him at exactly that moment. Innocence, simple trust, is not a sufficient response to the world: Lucy had been trapped by the judge because: 'She wasn't no match for such craft, you see' (Sondheim, 2010: 340). Johanna cannot keep her innocence: she has to kill Fogg in order to escape his asylum. Justifiable though her action is, some of the charm surrounding her is broken by the brutal world she lives in. She finds that she can no longer be naïve. Tobias finds the same thing: by the end of the show, both these innocents have killed somebody.

Tobias is still mentally a child and sees the danger as a monster or an ogre, but recognises that it might be 'just a man'. (Wheeler, 1979: 507.) Sweeney casts a monstrous shadow, but is revealed to be just a man.³² Mrs. Lovett tries to keep Toby quiet, using his tune to placate him. (In a similar way Gussie Carnegie will seduce Franklin Shepard into writing a show for her by taking the song he is singing, 'Growing Up', and singing it back to him.) Both Tobias and Lucy are blinded by love, in thrall to their illusions. Tobias loves Mrs. Lovett, and so thinks all the evil comes from Todd, while Lucy, who loves Todd, thinks that it is Mrs. Lovett who is corrupting him.

We have heard the London of church bells being replaced by the London of engine noises, so when Beadle Bamford later sings the folk song about the bells in the Tower of Bray, it is as if the bells that represented home to Anthony have already become a memory. The bells have been replaced by engines, and are now just a conventional piece of nostalgia. The Beadle has sentimentality but this never makes him question his evil life. Mrs. Lovett asks the Beadle to continue singing in order to delay him from looking into the cellar and she joins in the song, not out of love for music, but in order to drown out Tobias's screams. This is another duet where a third person being excluded, who is the dramatic focus. We listen, not just to the song, but to the silence underneath it as it were, feeling unease when we remember who is being excluded: although Tobias can be heard joining in from the cellar. While

32 I have worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language and during one lesson I played this song to a student. Although the student had never heard of the show, when I played him the song he assumed, without being told, that the two characters were singing to a silent third.

Todd is disposing of the Beadle Mrs. Lovett plays another verse of one of the 'Parlor Songs' to drown out the sound of Bamford's murder.

For a show with so much disguise in it it is appropriate that it culminates in a double recognition scene, where the lies come to an end. Todd gets to shave Turpin again, and this time he finishes the business that was interrupted in Act One. Todd reveals his identity at that moment as it is necessary for Judge Turpin to realise why he is being killed. After he has killed the Judge Todd lovingly puts his razors back in their case singing a lullaby to them: 'Sleep now the untroubled/Sleep of the angels...' (Sondheim, 2010: 374). If Sweeney has declared himself a god, his angels are his razors.

And it is now that it becomes clear that a line that the chorus has sung has taken a new and sinister twist, as so many lines have done in this show. We hear again the chorus, like taunting demons, sing: 'Lift your razor high, Sweeney!/Hear it singing, "Yes!"/Sink it in the rosy skin/ Of righteousness!' (Sondheim, 2010: 374). The first time this was sung it referred to the Judge. Then, when Sweeney gets his second chance to have his revenge we hear the verse again. But now the 'righteousness' no longer refers to the self-righteousness of the Judge. It refers to the genuine righteousness of the wronged Lucy. The chorus now seem to be taunting Sweeney: the same voices that encouraged the deed now mock him that he has done it.

He only recognises her when she is dead: which is perhaps because her face, no longer tormented by madness, has relaxed. But also Todd is unable to form

relationships with real people. We had seen before how Todd had twisted other people's phrases such as 'Wonder' and 'No place like London', giving them darker meanings than had originally been intended by Anthony. Now, when it is too late, he reverses the process. In Act One, in the song 'My Friends', he had sung 'I've come home' (Sondheim, 2010: 340) to his razors. Now, he sings the same phrase to Lucy, who has been killed by one of those razors. He sings a phrase he had previously sung in anger, but now he sings it as a eulogy. Instead of making the phrase darker, he invests it with human feeling. This shows that Sweeney is capable of taking responsibility for what he has done: that he is not merely a grotesque, but has a tragic dimension.

'You lied to me' (Wheeler, 1979: 531) he says to Mrs. Lovett: uttering her death sentence. Mrs. Lovett starts to sing a reprise of 'Poor Thing' nervously jabbering, explaining that she never lied which, strictly speaking, she didn't. She never actually said that Lucy was dead, but she certainly intended Todd to believe it. But Mrs. Lovett, 'refained' as always, doesn't like to say unpleasant things. In 'Poor Thing' she never says that Lucy was raped, but lets Todd infer it, and, at the beginning of 'A Little Priest', she cannot actually say 'Let's kill and cook these people', but keeps dropping hints until Todd gets it: 'If you get it - [...] Good, you got it.' (Sondheim, 2010: 356). This shows that she is mock-genteel, and a good manipulator, as it makes the other person think that they thought of the idea themselves.

Todd said near the beginning of the show that he was 'Naïve'. (Sondheim, 2010: 338.) Then he is referring to the person that he was before the Judge had him

transported. He repeats that line now, realising that, even as he became a killer, he had been blind to what was going on around him. He starts the show disillusioned with humanity and then finds, through the course of the show, that he had more illusions still to lose. Now he sings the word 'naive' again: it is set apart from the rest of the phrase, and sung on a low note that rises to a high keening. It is full of regret. He sees too late that his ideal was there in the rags and the mad talk of an abandoned beggar woman. Too late he sees, in an opposite of disillusion, the beauty behind the ugliness.

Mrs. Lovett admits that she has lied and sings right out that she loves him, and the word 'love' is on a high note such as we have never heard from Mrs. Lovett before. For a moment she has abandoned her viciousness and self-preservation, and becomes, although still a criminal, almost heroic. And with this operatic register, Todd and Mrs. Lovett are transformed from being grotesques into being figures of tragic status. This transfiguration is unironic, and blocks a merely satirical reading of the show. Todd and Mrs. Lovett are not playing at being heroic characters. Instead they have heroic passions which cannot be contained. But they are not lovers from a romantic opera singing to each other about their love which transcends death: instead Todd declares his genuine love to his dead Lucy. Then, abandoning the operatic register, he lies to Mrs. Lovett. He reassures her that there is nothing to fear (always an ominous sign in Sondheim), and the tune is a reprise of the bouncy 'A Little Priest', which Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett had sung while planning who their victims were to be. But now Mrs. Lovett is to be the victim: Todd pushes her into the oven. Then Todd's own nemesis arrives in the form of Tobias.

As Todd's throat is cut we hear the factory whistle for the last time. This makes Todd seem to be screaming, and yet he is not. It wouldn't be appropriate for Todd to scream, the only victim we hear scream (in Harold Prince's original production) is the Judge. It is appropriate that, as the worst villain in the piece, Turpin should be the most craven when he dies. And Turpin doesn't just scream, he screams Barker's true name and recognises why he must die. If Todd screamed as he died he would have been merely another victim. He doesn't cry out because death does not come as a surprise to him. As Sondheim said:

Todd is a tragic hero in the classic sense that Oedipus is. He dies in the end because of a certain kind of fatal knowledge: he realizes what he has been doing. I find it terribly satisfying – much more so than any kind of accidental death, which often occurs in flimsy forms of melodrama.

(Zadan, 1994: 245.)

At the end the chorus recap the story and then shift to the present tense and sings: 'No one can help, nothing can hide you -/Isn't that Sweeney there beside you?' (Sondheim, 2010: 375). Then, as does Todd himself in 'Epiphany' they point into the audience saying 'There! There! There!'. They do not spot, as Sweeney did in his 'Epiphany', potential victims, but rather potential Sweeneys. Then Todd and Mrs. Lovett rise from the dead as it were and join in the song. Why, when they are so very definitely dead, do they come back? Perhaps because they have become mythological figures, to be sung about in a popular ballad. And because, as the closing song says, their type is still around today: 'Perhaps today you gave a nod/To Sweeney Todd'. (Sondheim, 2010: 375.) And not such an uncommon type either:

TODD To seek revenge may lead to hell,

MRS. LOVETT But everyone does it, if seldom as well

(Sondheim, 2010: 375.)

Mrs. Lovett, loyal to the last, still admires him, but the stage directions specify that they go their separate ways: there is no togetherness for them, even in death.

The show, then, can be taken as a criticism and a celebration of the romantic imagination. The show's creators overturn one of the central tropes of the romantic ideal: lovers united in death: Sweeney is not reunited with either of the women who have loved him, Lucy or Mrs. Lovett, and he ends up as isolated as he began. In Sondheim's work with Lapine we will see characters who are able to integrate their dreams with reality (the two Georges, the Baker, Cinderella, Fosca), but here they cannot. One cannot be brutal in everyday life and yet keep one dream apart untainted: if one has a dream one must live it fully. In Sondheim's next show the main character does not live out his dream, and is destroyed by his complaisance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG (1981/1985)

Joe Fields, an author of *Wonderful Town*, warned, "Don't get so successful you begin to equate yourself with success."

(Harold Prince, 2017: 68.)

If you want to look for themes in my shows I often write about the difficulties of maintaining idealism.

(Sondheim in conversation with Donald Macleod as part of the *Composer of the Week* series. Broadcast on BBC Radio 3: 23 March, 2010.)

In *Merrily We Roll Along* we perhaps come the closest in any Sondheim show to seeing the breakdown of all values and how important it is to hold on to these values when faced with chaos. The main characters are three friends: Frank, Charley and Mary, who all dream of becoming artists and changing the world. Only Charley manages to do this: Frank becomes a sell-out and Mary becomes an alcoholic. Frank's tragedy is he does not live up to the ideals that he and Charley had when they were young and Mary's tragedy is that she can see Frank for what he is but can never take her own advice and let go of her illusions. She knows Frank is a sell-out but she cannot move on.

If Sweeney is so obsessed by his dream that he doesn't notice the world around him then Franklin Shepard has the opposite trouble: he surrenders his dream to get worldly success. Sweeney's disillusionment gives him a tragic status but Frank's

tragedy is that he is incapable of the great emotions, he is a victim of his own triviality. He is, like Benjamin Stone in *Follies*, Tom in *The Last of Sheila* and Addison Mizner in *Road Show*, an embodiment of empty success.

The fear of selling out, of finding that success is really the easy path, is embedded in American culture. In one of the most famous depictions of this fear, Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (first published 1956), James Tyrone regrets having sacrificed his talent as a Shakespearean actor for easy success in a crowd-pleasing play. Tyrone does this because he is afraid of the poorhouse: Frank, on the other hand, is simply in love with success and the feeling of belonging that it brings. *Merrily We Roll Along* unambiguously endorses the youthful dreams that the characters had and presents Frank's abandonment of those dreams as self-destructive. Frank cannot go back to his dreams even when he realises how empty his success is. His tragedy is not that he is disillusioned but that he does nothing about it.

'Cameron Mackintosh [...] once said to me that I've spent my life trying to fix the second act of *Allegro*.' (Sondheim, 2010: 165.) *Allegro* was the 1947 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical that the seventeen-year-old Sondheim worked on as a gofer. It tells the story of Joseph Taylor Jr., a small-town doctor who eventually finds that his time is being taken up by being a figurehead rather than by practising medicine. Finally Taylor refuses a prestigious appointment on a hospital board and goes back to small-town medicine. *Merrily We Roll Along* tells a similar story but the vision of Sondheim and book-writer George Furth is darker. As Sondheim says: 'The only, and crucial, difference is that Hammerstein redeems his hero, whereas Kaufman,

Hart, Furth and Sondheim leave him sinking into the hell he has created.' (Sondheim, 2010: 421.)

Merrily We Roll Along is based on Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's 1934 play of the same name, and both play and musical are told backwards: the first scene shows the protagonist as a successful but unhappy middle-aged man and then the story goes back in time to his idealistic youth when he still had dreams. In the first scene of the musical (of the revised 1985 version, which is the one now licensed for performance) Frank is having a party to celebrate the release of his new movie:

Darkness Before Dawn. The title of the film hints at the structure of the show. The show begins in metaphorical darkness, when Frank hosts a disastrous party in 1976, and it ends at dawn in 1957, where the young Frank, Charley and Mary sing 'Our Time', a song that dramatises their excited dreams of what they will do in the future.

For Hammerstein dreams, in the sense of vast idealistic ambitions, were almost entirely a good thing: 'You got to have a dream;/If you don' have a dream,/How you gonna have a dream come true?' (Hammerstein, 1949: 126); 'Be brave, young lovers, and follow your star' (Hammerstein, 1951: 32); 'Climb every mountain,/ Ford every stream,/ Follow every rainbow/Till you find your dream' (Hammerstein, 1960: 98). In Hammerstein's work the villains almost invariably have materialistic instincts: Jud Fry (brutal sexuality), Jigger Cranin (greed), or Jenny Taylor (greed and desire for social position). Jud's desire for Laurey does not have any tenderness or romance: it is a manifestation of his hatred for Curly. 'And I'm better'n that Smart Aleck cowhand/

Who thinks he is better'n me!' (Hammerstein 1943: 71.) Jigger, Jud and Jenny do not express any wonder at being alive.

The idea of the dream also recurs in Sondheim's work, using the word dream in the sense of an ideal that transfigures ordinary life. But in Sondheim's work these dreams sometimes have bad consequences. 'I had a dream' sings Rose in *Gypsy* (Sondheim, 2010: 66) although the dream will drive her mad. In *Assassins* the chorus of murderers sing that 'Everybody's got the right/To their dreams...' (Sondheim, 2011: 143.) This line is followed by them all firing their guns into the air. Their dreams have become murderous. But in *Merrily We Roll Along* the dream that transcends ordinary life is the dream that Frank Shepard and Charley Kringas both have of writing great shows and this dream is presented entirely positively, in the aspirational tradition of the Broadway musical. As Sondheim said in a workshop session, seen in the television documentary *Six by Sondheim*, the show is about 'three idealists, whose idealism is one of the things that binds them'. In the first song the chorus sing of 'Dreams that will explode,/Waking up the countryside' (Sondheim, 2010: 383) which presents dreams as having potential to change the world, which is what Frank, Mary and Charley believe. It is, however, an ambiguous image – the dreams may also explode in the sense of self-destructing. The young characters' dreams are a total good, and to let them be destroyed is to go wrong.

This is a Hammersteinian view of the world, except Hammerstein would never present a main character who loses his soul and never regains it. Hammerstein's characters are flawed but none of the major male characters (Billy Bigelow, Lt. Cable,

Joseph Taylor, Gaylord Ravenal) ultimately lose their chance of redemption, which is always offered by a woman (Julie Jordan, Liat, Emily, Magnolia). Mary might have offered the same chance to Frank, but instead he watches unhappily as she destroys herself with drink. Mary is like Emily, the good scout in *Allegro* who finally turns out to be the right girl for Joseph Taylor. But Mary doesn't get her man.

This musical, like the later *Road Show*, examines what has happened to the American Dream. As mentioned in the chapter on *Gypsy*, Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the expanding of the American frontier by the pioneers was the defining experience of American democracy. The original 1981 version of this show opened with the song 'The Hills of Tomorrow' which draws on this tradition.

STUDENTS Behold the hills of tomorrow!

Behold the limitless sky!

(Sondheim, 2010: 421.)

The American dream, however, is always open to corruption: the dream of achievement can become confused with a dream of success, measured in material terms. This corruption, where we see characters turning a sacred duty into a scramble for riches, will be found again in *Road Show*.

In 'That Frank' the opening song of the 1985 version, Frank's guests all suck up to him, saying 'He's the kind of a man could be President', (Sondheim, 2010: 387) which, as Sondheim points out, was part of the show's criticism of 'the Reagan era,

one built on expedience disguised as affability'. (Sondheim, 2010: 387.)

Expedience, going with whatever happens and making sure that one looks after oneself, is the opposite of having a dream to stay true to. As Sondheim said:

It happens in certain eras in the country's history, and that's why Kaufman and Hart chose to deal with their postwar era, because that's when this kind of syndrome is most prevalent. It's also true of the Eisenhower years, and subsequently.

(Quoted in Banfield, 1993: 314)

When Frank, Charley and Beth, the woman Frank will marry and then later discard for Gussie, put on a revue they perform a number about the Kennedys: 'Bobby and Jackie and Jack'. The number is satirical but affectionate and ends on the couplet:

TRIO The decade is starting anew,
 (*Crossing fingers*)
 And maybe the country is, too.

(Sondheim, 2010: 410.)

At one point in the song, referring to the 1960 election, Charley sings: 'And Nixon didn't win' (Sondheim, 2010: 409) at which point, in the accompaniment, there is a little trill like an Irish jig. It is a celebratory moment, subtly drawing on the Kennedys' Irish ancestry. The audience are aware, of course, that Nixon will win the election in 1968, which will lead to Watergate and a national loss of confidence.

At Frank's party Mary is disgusted with the guests Frank has invited, and she drunkenly shouts at them: 'You are all junk.'³³ In *Road Show* Addison Mizner, another artist who betrays his talent, dies surrounded by physical junk: discarded pieces of furniture. Here Frank, so to speak, is surrounded by living junk, another embodiment of the forces of despair and entropy that figure in Sondheim's work. Frank at first pretends that he hasn't abandoned his dreams, and sings: 'It's our time/ Coming through,/All our dreams/Coming true.' (Sondheim, 2010: 386.) But the musical accompaniment is thin, because Frank is telling a lie, and later he admits to Mary that he would like to go back to how it was. This sentiment is echoed by both Charley, in his song 'Franklin Shepard, Inc.' 'I want it back' (taken from the Original Broadway Cast Recording) and Mary in 'Old Friends'.

MARY Nothing's the way that it was.

I want it the way that it was.

Help me stop remembering then.

(Sondheim, 2010: 390.)

When she asks Charley to help her stop remembering, it is not that she wants to forget. She wants to stop living in the past, stop being tormented by the feeling that everything was better in the old days. Mary realises that nostalgia can be a curse.

MARY Trouble is, Charley,

That's what everyone does:

Blames the way it is

³³ The book for the show is not currently available.

On the way it was.

On the way it never ever was...

(Sondheim, 2010: 390.)

In other words 'everyone' creates a golden image of the past that they then cannot live up to. For all her surface cynicism Mary assumes that, like her, everybody has a secret dream of how their life might have been. Like many cynics Mary is really a thwarted romantic. Maybe it is this nostalgia that inadvertently destroys her, because she cannot integrate this dream into her everyday life.

In the first number of the 1985 version of the show the chorus sing: 'How did you get to be here?/What was the moment?' (Sondheim, 2010: 384.) But there is no one clear moment where Frank sells out, instead it is a constant process: he admits in the first scene that 'I've made only one mistake in my life. But I made it over and over and over. That was saying 'yes' when I meant 'no''. (Quoted in McLaughlin, 2016: 140.) We see this process of saying yes when he should say no in the scene that Sondheim and Furth rewrote for the 1985 version, where Frank is torn between going to meet Mary and Charley or spending the night with Gussie. He sings 'Growing Up.' Like 'The Road You Didn't Take' or 'A Bowler Hat', the song is sung by a character who is trying not to take responsibility for the fact that he has sold out. Ben pretends the choices he made didn't matter, and Kayama loses his personality because he recognises no other duty but expediency. Unlike them, Frank claims that he still has dreams.

Up till now Frank has been seen only as part of a group, and this is the first

scene where he is alone on stage. One might expect that, once the social mask is off, we would see the person as they really are. What is shocking is that Frank is lying in this song. He can't even be honest to himself in the one song that he sings when he is alone. And when he sings the line 'Don't you see we can have it all' (Sondheim, 2010: 395) we hear Frank express the reason why he keeps making the mistake of saying yes. Frank always makes the wrong decision because he won't accept that you can't have it all. He thinks you can have unlimited success and keep your talent unscathed; he thinks he can have an affair with Gussie while still being married to Beth: he does not acknowledge the need to choose, the need to define himself by what he chooses. In *Follies*, in 'The Road You Didn't Take', Ben denies that choices matter and pretends that it's all the same in the end. Here Frank evades making a choice by pretending that choosing is not necessary, that one can have everything. Frank imagines that there are no roads he cannot take.

But as Frank abandons his friends, he also abandons his dreams.

FRANK Like old dreams -
Some old dreams -
Like old friends.

(Sondheim, 2010: 395.)

When Frank claims that he is 'Seeing things as they are' (Sondheim, 2010: 395) the word 'are' is slightly out of key, another musical clue that Frank is not being honest with himself. Frank pretends that he is not abandoning his dreams, he is 'readjusting'

them, but the music becomes agitated when he sings about Charley and this gives away Frank's unease at what he is doing. At this point Gussie, the musical comedy star with whom he is having an affair, re-enters his apartment and tells him that she is leaving her husband. Then she uses his song to seduce him. It is almost as if the song summons Gussie, and she ruins him again. She recognises that one has to make choices in life.

GUSSIE Growing up
 Means admitting
 The things you want the most.
 Can't pursue
 Every possible line.

(Sondheim, 2010: 395.)

She understands, as Frank does not, that choices must be made. However, although what she says is true, she is not trying to make him face facts: rather she wants him to live with her and abandon his wife. But she pretends that Frank is making the choice for himself.

GUSSIE Ignoring all
 Other voices,
 Including mine...
 You're divine...

(Sondheim, 2010: 395.)

Her body, however, tells a different story: she is seducing Frank to make sure he marries her. Once again we cannot trust the song we hear: we must compare it with what we see.

In Act Two, we hear the song again. In Act One, where Frank sings the song, the scene is set in 1968. In Act Two we hear it in a scene set in 1962. Gussie has invited Frank to a cocktail party, and persuades him to write a formula Broadway show for her. She does this by singing 'Growing Up'. So it is only now in Act Two that we realise that when, in Act One, the older Frank had sung the song to himself, he was actually singing Gussie's tune. It is a musical clue that Frank is making his choice in bad faith. The opening trill that Frank plays on the piano when he sings 'Growing Up' by himself, is also the opening trill of 'Franklin Shepard, Inc.', Charley's scathing account of how Frank has betrayed his dreams. Charley sings that song in a scene set in 1973. Charley's use of the opening of 'Growing Up' shows that he realises what Gussie has done to Frank. Gussie is a manipulator and gets her own way for a while, but ultimately, as Mrs. Lovett and Sally find out, no relationship can last based on manipulation. Frank, in pursuit of youth and admiration, falls in love with Meg, the leading lady in his film *Darkness Before Dawn*, and Gussie, sidelined as Beth was before her, takes revenge by hurling iodine into Meg's eyes.

This isn't the only example of Gussie's corrupting influence. At the opening of Act Two Gussie sings a song that, at first, seems to be a heartfelt song about her love for Frank: but the song turns out to be the opening number in her show 'Musical

Husbands'. (The song is in fact called 'Gussie's Opening Number'.) Only later on (in the show) do we discover where she first heard the song – Frank and Charley had sung it at her cocktail party: the party where Frank, in effect, auditions for her. When Frank and Charley sing it it is a tender ballad about love dying. But when Gussie sings it she sells it as a number, with lots of energy and pizzazz but no heart. The song includes the line 'It started out like a song' (Sondheim, 2010: 400). It had started out like a song when Frank sang it at her party, but it has degenerated from being a song into being a number.

As the music can die so can the feelings that inspire it. In other Sondheim shows the possibility of feelings dying had been explored: even Sweeney, corrupted by his lust for killing, finds that 'I think I miss you less and less/As every day goes by' (Sondheim, 2010: 367). Ben in *Follies* finds that 'The yearnings fade, the longings die' (Sondheim, 2010: 211). Charlotte in *A Little Night Music* feels that every day is a little death. Frank sings:

FRANK And while it's going along,
 You take for granted some love
 Will wear away.

(Sondheim, 2010: 403.)

Most of the characters are aware of the potential death of feeling. In the opening number Group I of the chorus sings: 'Time goes by/And hopes go dry,/But you still can try/For your dream'. (Sondheim, 2010: 383.) Gussie sings when seducing Frank

in his apartment: 'Things can slip away for good' (Sondheim, 2010: 395). Entropy wins out in 'Good Thing Going' where the music itself dies away at the end: 'We had a good thing going,/Going,/Gone'. (Sondheim, 2010: 408). This line is ironic: it does not only refer to feelings dying, it also plays on the phrase used by an auctioneer when a lot has been sold: it is as if Frank has been knocked down to the highest bidder. We see this process of love wearing away when Frank and Charley perform this song at Gussie's party. The first time they perform it there is a hush at the end, and then gushing applause and praise. Unwisely, Frank takes the audience's request for a reprise seriously. Charley warns him not to sing the song again but Frank says 'Later, Charley' and they sing. But the love of the audience wears away and they start talking over Frank and Charley's singing. Frank said 'Later, Charley', but in this show there is no later, the story can only go backwards. We know that he will never listen to Charley's advice.

With the death of feeling there is also a loss of identity which is referred to several times in the show. When Charley appears on TV he says: 'I have no idea who I am'. And after he breaks down and sings 'Franklin Shepard, Inc.' Frank refuses to acknowledge Charley's existence any more. Mary too, in the song 'Like It Was', feels this loss of identity: 'I don't know who we are anymore,/And I'm starting not to care'. (Sondheim, 2010: 390). They recognise that: 'Old friends/Do tend to become old habit - '(Sondheim, 2010: 394). Friendship and dreams are two of the main defences against the entropy that threatens to destroy the characters.

At the end of Act One, when Frank is going through his divorce from Beth, Mary cuts through the false reassurance being given by Frank's hangers-on in the song 'Now You Know' and sings: 'It's called letting go your illusions,/And don't confuse them with dreams.' (Sondheim, 2010: 397.) Being disillusioned is sometimes a *necessary* process, whereby one can sort one's illusions from the real dreams, though this is not a process that Frank is ultimately capable of going through; he can't tell the difference between his real dream of being a composer and the illusion that being a successful producer is just as important. But Mary and Charley are not always able to give the right advice either. In this scene they both encourage Frank to go on a cruise with Joe Josephson, the producer husband of Gussie, so that Frank can get over his divorce. It is on this cruise that Frank is seduced by a life of luxury. A true friend might be expected to always give good advice in a show: indeed Charley's advice has always been right up till now, almost as if Sondheim and Furth use Charley's opinion to signal to the audience what the right decision is. Charley has been the voice of impossible idealism. for instance when he says, in the song 'Old Friends', 'Well, what's the/Point of demands you *can* meet?' (Sondheim, 2010: 394). Only impossible dreams are worth pursuing, otherwise all is compromise and sell-out. But even Charley makes mistakes: he goes along with Frank's decision to do a show for Gussie, and here he unwittingly pushes Frank into the kind of life that will destroy him. This might seem a disenchanting view of friendship, but it is more an acceptance of human fallibility, and it underlines the point that one doesn't have friends simply because they give good advice. As Mary says

MARY Good friends like and advise,

Whereas old friends love and forgive.

(Sondheim, 2010: 394.)

Mary sings this song to calm the arguing Frank and Charley and manages to bring them back together temporarily. But at this point in the show we know that, after Charley's blistering attack on Frank on television, the break will become permanent. Frank cannot forgive. He cannot forgive because public image is Frank's main concern: the fact that Charley, and later Mary, both embarrass him *in public* is what seals their doom. Frank has been corrupted but he has not become evil, he has become simply trivial. He has been hollowed out. Even Ben, the hollow success in *Follies*, is driven to the comparative dignity of a breakdown: the stabbing remorse that he expresses in 'Live, Laugh, Love,' shows he has a heart capable of feeling. Ben has some kind of a breakthrough which Frank does not. Frank needs to project an image of success and so becomes an image of success.³⁴ Frank may think too much about money, as Charley complains in 'Franklin Shepard, Inc.' but even more than money, Frank sells out because he needs to feel successful, that he has arrived. Neither he nor Ben Stone nor Addison Mizner were born rich and it is part of Sondheim and Furth's subtle criticism of American life that Frank sells out, not for a life of luxury, but because he needs to belong. To be poor is to be on the outside in American life, to be excluded. Being thought successful is a way of being taken seriously. What Sondheim said about *Allegro* is also true of this show: 'It wasn't about money; it was about losing sight of your goal.' (Secrest, 1998: 54.) 'Musical Husbands', the show

³⁴ The name Charley is not suggestive of ethnicity but Kringas sounds at least European. The character Mary Flynn has an Irish name and is probably of Catholic descent. She says of her drinking: 'It began when I tasted communion wine -' (Sondheim, 2010: 387). The show seems to be hinting that the successful clean-cut WASP image is often phoney, and that belonging to an ethnic group that has another identity is perhaps a counterbalance to that.

Charley and Frank write for Gussie, isn't bad because it's a hit: it's bad because it's a formula show. Its creators don't need to write it and it would have been the first of many formula shows. When Frank is a film producer he produces what he admits is a formula movie but he tells Mary to wait for the next one. 'I gave up waiting,' says Mary. Frank lies to himself that the next picture will be something that matters, while all he ever really does is produce formula work: work that simply conforms to a pattern that can be endlessly replicated.

In 'Not a Day Goes By' we get the angry divorce before the blissful marriage. In Act One Beth complains that not a day goes by without the pain of losing Frank getting worse – in Act Two the song is their wedding song and they sing of how not a day goes by without their love growing stronger. When we hear this tender ballad in Act Two therefore, it has an unspoken sub-text. We remember that we have already heard it in Act One, with different lyrics, as a bitter lament. Beth's lament that 'I'll die day after day/After day after day' (Sondheim, 2010: 397) echoes Charley's accusation to Frank that they won't write one show for Gussie but 'another and another and another' just as Frank makes the same mistake over and over. This ceaseless futile activity is even reflected in the joke in Act One where Meg, Frank's new star and mistress, says to Mary that she admired her book: 'I read it over and over.' 'Didn't you get it the first time?' Mary retorts.³⁵

In this show Sondheim and Furth criticise a tendency deep in the American consciousness, that goes with the idea that everything is there for the conquering, as we have seen with the song 'The Hills of Tomorrow'. It is not that America is more

³⁵ This line is taken from the original Kaufman and Hart play (Kaufman and Hart, Modern Library, 1934: 125.)

greedy or materialistic than any other capitalist country, but there is a strain of American populism that equates success with talent. A hit is good and a flop is bad. There is no undeserved success nor undeserved failure. We see this mentality reflected in the song 'It's a Hit!' This song is sung by Frank, Charley, Mary and Joe Josephson, the producer husband of Gussie. Their show 'Musical Husbands' is getting a rapturous reception and they are all celebrating. We get a key to Frank's character when he and the others sing 'It's the theater and we're really in it,/Not just on the edge!' (Sondheim, 2010: 401.) Frank is not so much greedy for money and status: he shows some interest in the trappings of wealth but he is far more interested in being 'really in it' - that is to say being taken seriously. Even Charley is seduced for a while, but then he is the one to sound an alarm: 'Doesn't that mean we sell out?' (Sondheim, 2010: 401). For Charley, as Frank sang earlier: 'Everything's a "copout"'. (Sondheim, 2010: 395.) If Frank is, in one sense, the Mammon-worshipper, then Charley is a descendent, so to speak, of the Puritans, who view worldly success with suspicion, if not outright hostility.

In the last scene new friends Charley and Frank meet Mary on a rooftop and watch Sputnik going by overhead, and declare that it is a miracle (another man-made miracle in Sondheim's work) and sing 'Our Time'. 'Our Time', is one of the most poignant songs in Sondheim's canon, and is about one of the emotions that he communicates best: expectancy.

FRANK Feel how it quivers,
 On the brink...

CHARLEY What?

FRANK Everything!

(Sondheim, 2010: 419.)

We have already heard the phrase 'On the brink' in the song 'Franklin Shepard, Inc.' but there the phrase was 'Every day you're on the brink' (Sondheim, 2010: 392) and it referred to being on the brink of selling out. This is another example of a Sondheim song that works both 'straight', that is to say as an unironic affirmation of the hopes of youth, *and*, because of where it comes in the story, as an ironic commentary on that hopeful attitude. The audience knows that of the three people singing so hopefully, only Charley will fulfil his dreams. The song itself is not ironic, but its placing in the story is.

If Sondheim was the cynic that his detractors make out it could have been revealed that Frank had been kidding himself all along about his past dreams and that Frank, Charley and Mary's rooftop scene was not the magical moment that Frank remembers. But the scene is unambiguously presented with the idealistic glow that Frank has remembered: his memory has not distorted it. It is only as we see this last scene that we can compare it with the opening scene, and see that they echo each other: the innocence of the last scene showing the corruption of the first. In the first song 'That Frank' the company of hangers-on sing:

COMPANY It's our time

Coming through,

All our dreams

Coming true.

(Sondheim, 2010: 386.)

In the last scene Frank and Charley sing

BOTH Our time, breathe it in:

 Worlds to change and worlds to win.

(Sondheim, 2010: 419.)

Also in the first scene the drunken Mary had said:

MARY These are the movers,

 These are the shapers,

 These are the people

 That give you vapors...

(Sondheim, 2010: 386.)

This is quite a comedown for the company of hopeful beginners who sing in the last scene:

COMPANY We're the movers and we're the shapers.

 We're the names in tomorrow's papers.

(Sondheim, 2010: 419.)

Even the opening line of the show: 'Yesterday is done' (Sondheim, 2010: 383) is echoed at the end in the more hopeful 'Some day just began...' (Sondheim, 2010: 419.) (Significantly it is only Charley who sings that line.) This scene is the only scene where Frank speaks of changing the world – a dream that the show believes is possible just as, in *The Frogs*, it was seen as possible that a poet could change the world.

Twice in the show: in 1968 at Frank's apartment and in 1962 at her house, Gussie says fate brought her to Frank. But this is part of her act. She pretends their meeting is inevitable in order to undermine his resistance. Sondheim does not believe that there is such a thing as fate. But, as a counter-balance to this, Sondheim does believe in the importance of the dream: the talent or vision that one is born with. 'Dreams don't die,/So keep an eye on your dream-' (Sondheim, 2010: 383) sing Group One of the chorus: dreams don't die – they are fulfilled or they remain to torment one.

This show seems to be one of the bleakest shows in Sondheim's canon: Frank doesn't reach even the tentative self-knowledge of the four main characters in *Follies*, who go on with life, or the self-knowledge of Sweeney, who sees, at least in the case of Lucy, the horror of what he has done. Instead Frank is trapped in a worthless life because he was too weak to say no. The reason that the show doesn't play as depressing is because the show's structure enacts what Frank should do – it returns to first principles. It goes back, as Frank cannot, to where it all began. Not that Frank

needs to physically go back to the past, but he needs to mentally go back and recapture the dreams that he had then.

Frank can't find his way back to Hammerstein-style goodness, but Sondheim himself does that in his work with James Lapine (see Sondheim, 2011: 6). These works celebrate art (*Sunday in the Park with George*), family (*Into the Woods*) and romantic love (*Passion*), all the things that Frank has betrayed.

CHAPTER NINE

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE (1984)

The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.

William Faulkner *The Paris Review* (Issue 12, Spring 1956. Collected in *The Paris Review Interviews* vol. 2: 54.)

It's that sense of being related to history [...] and to events that are far outside of your own importance, and far beyond you. It's the same feeling you get when you're a city boy and suddenly you get out in the country and look up at the stars and realise there's a universe and you're part of it. It's that cosmic feeling, again, that city boys get when they're out in nature, in fields and mountains. It's that sense of relating to things outside and larger than yourself, and of looking back on the past, what the past means. That covers a lot of territory.

(Sondheim discussing the *Pacific Overtures* song 'Someone in a Tree' with Samuel G. Freedman: 'The Words and Music of Stephen Sondheim' *New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 1984.)

As we have seen, many of Sondheim's characters live in a dream of one sort or another: Rose has her dreams of stardom, Sally has her dreams of Ben and Sweeney has his dreams of revenge. These dreams are cocoons in that they prevent the character from really living with the people round them. These dreams are always destroyed – Rose realises that she will never be a star; Sally decides that there is no Ben; Sweeney discovers that Mrs. Lovett has lied to him. This is disillusionment, but in each case it was necessary. Their dreams were unrealistic.

George³⁶ Seurat is in a different situation. He can enter his dream-world at will,

36 Seurat's real name was Georges but Sondheim and Lapine anglicised it. Although the characters in Act I all call him George, in this essay he shall sometimes be referred to as Seurat to avoid confusion with the younger George in Act II.

indeed he has to, in order to paint. His dream is not simply a fantasy - he has something to give the world and only by abstracting himself from the world can he do it - but we shall see that this ability to switch off outside distractions comes at a price. It costs Seurat his relationship with Dot.

Sunday in the Park with George is Sondheim's first collaboration with James Lapine. In 1982 he went to see a play by Lapine called *Twelve Dreams* about a young girl who foresees her death in dreams. Sondheim was impressed by the play and wanted to collaborate with Lapine but felt he may not have been interested and so did not get in touch. Later Lapine approached Sondheim via a producer and asked him if he would like to collaborate on a musical version of Nathanael West's 1934 novel *Cool Million*. They met up and discussed the project, but Sondheim felt that the novel, a short and satirical attack on the success ethos in America, was too similar to *Candide*, which had already been made into a musical by Leonard Bernstein. However they wanted to collaborate and discussed ideas until Lapine mentioned Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon of the Isle of La Grande Jatte* and they realised that it could be the basis of a musical. It was Lapine's suggestion that they focus on the painter as the central character. (See Sondheim, 2011, 3-4.)

If *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and *A Little Night Music* have happy endings that is because the expectation of a happy ending is built in to the genres: farce and romantic comedy. In the shows with Lapine the characters find themselves able to connect with other characters and form a community, a very Hammersteinian theme. Sondheim has written:

I realize that by having to express the straightforward, unembarrassed goodness of James's characters I discovered the Hammerstein in myself - and I was the better for it.

(Sondheim, 2011: 6).

Seurat shows Jules, a painter friend of his, the uncompleted canvas of *Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, but Jules does not understand it. When George is alone he reflects: 'He does not like you. He does not understand or appreciate you. He can only see you as everyone else does. Afraid to take you apart and put you back together again for himself.' (Lapine, 1984: 630). This act of taking apart and putting the painting back together is one that Sondheim and Lapine perform throughout *Sunday in the Park with George*. In Act I we see the picture being painted over a series of Sundays by Seurat, and then, in Act II, we see it taken apart and used by his descendant as part of his Chromolume presentation. Finally it is the inspiring example of Seurat's painting that enables the younger George to press on to find a style of his own.

Sunday is structured in a fragmented way, where scenes suggest stories rather than complete them (for instance we never see Dot and George split up). In this the structure is reminiscent of the work of European film directors such as Antonioni or Alain Resnais. Resnais may be the more important figure here: Sondheim has spoken highly of Resnais's work (see Swayne, 2007, 187), and wrote the score for his 1974 movie *Stavisky*. In films such as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Pathé Films, 1959), *Last Year in Marienbad* (Cocinor, 1961), *Muriel* (Anatole Dauman, 1963) and *The War is Over* (Europa Films, Sofracima, 1966) Resnais fragment the character's stories. As Swayne writes: 'prior to Resnais, not many films had sought to make the fracture of

time and space an organising principle'. (Swayne, 2007, 184.) Compared to Resnais' films, Sondheim and Lapine's show is comparatively straightforward: the scenes in *Sunday* are not as short and the characters, unlike those in Resnais' first two features, *Hiroshima*, *Mon Amour* and *Last Year in Marienbad*, have names and individuated characters. Perhaps the presence of music itself imposes a less fragmented structure than can be found in film.

Also, the show focuses, as Resnais' films do not, on the creation of community, and this imposes coherence on the show. The fragmentation of the form may express the difficulty that the characters have in communicating with each other, but ultimately the effort to communicate is shown to be worth it. Sondheim expressed this dialectic between radical technique and traditional aesthetics when he said:

That's something I believe. All good art has that [concern with form], whether it's contemporary or not. I think *Sunday in the Park*, though it might strike you or others as radical, is meticulously formed – as formed as the picture. [...] In philosophy of art, generally, I'm a conservative. My beliefs are conservative, but my work is not.

(Quoted in Gordon, J, 1990: 300.)

Sunday in the Park with George is Sondheim's most extended meditation on the theme of beauty. For Sondheim, beauty is often tied up with the idea of loss, which is a kind of disillusionment. In this show however, beauty lasts: albeit at the cost, to George, of losing the woman he loves. This is the first show of Sondheim's where the idea of beauty unambiguously wins out over the forces of decay and the entropy of passing time. From seeming chaos - scraps of overheard talk and embittered personal relationships - a harmonious work of art is born.

GEORGE The challenge: Bring order to the whole.

[...]

Through design.

[...]

Composition.

Balance.

Light.

And harmony.

(Sondheim, 2011: 7.)

The orchestra comes in on the word 'harmony', effectively making real what George is dreaming of. Order and harmony are, to George, the main components of beauty. Not only can George capture beauty, he can, unlike Todd or Sally, communicate it to others.

In fact Seurat is a little bit similar to Sweeney, who was, according to Mrs. Lovett: 'A proper artist with a knife' (Sondheim, 2010: 339). Both Sweeney and George live most vividly in their imaginations. But, if to Sweeney Mrs. Lovett is simply a sexual and economic convenience, George, on the other hand, loves Dot, but is not able to communicate with her, preferring to look. As he sings in 'We Do Not Belong Together':

GEORGE Why do you insist

You must hear the words,

When you know I cannot give you words?

Not the ones you need.

(Sondheim, 2011: 31.)

But, as Joanne Gordon points out:

When, for example, he protests that he cannot speak the words she longs to hear, the word *need* lies on a tender high note that conveys the magnitude of his feelings.

(Gordon J, 1990: 283.)

He loves her and yet, as we hear in the song 'Finishing the Hat', he needs to be able to stand back from the beloved. He is in two states of mind. As Dot says, it is: 'As if he sees you and he doesn't all at once'. (Sondheim, 2011: 16.) His artistic vocation both brings them together and finally forces them apart.

As the play begins George is seen on a bare stage. He has a pencil and a blank sheet of paper. As he starts to draw, trees and grass appear around him. He creates his own world. As he rubs out a tree from his sketchpad we see a tree disappear from the set. Not long after an old lady comes in and asks: 'Where is that tree?' (Lapine, 1984: 577). The effect is comic and disconcerting: are we in a park or inside George's head? He seems to have powers to revise the world.

We see a similar blending of art and life in the first scene when the Old Lady looks off at the water, and says that there are boys bathing. We hear the sound of boys shouting and a large picture frame slides onto the stage. It is a tableau of 'Bathers at Asnières', an earlier painting of Seurat's. Art and life blend: the off-stage boys at La Grand Jatte become the boys in the painting. We realise that the painting of 'Bathers

at Asnières' is being looked at disdainfully by Jules and his wife Yvonne. They sing 'No Life', their criticism of the painting. They are people who revel in the perceived failure of another artist. Yvonne says 'The dog' (Lapine, 1984: 587) scathingly and then she and Jules laugh. (Later she claims to George 'I loved the dog' [Lapine: 1984: 589.]) She is duplicitous, praising George to his face, and ridiculing him behind his back, although it may be that she ridicules George because she is trying desperately to please Jules. In 'Bathers at Asnières' a smoking factory chimney can be seen in the background,³⁷ which had excited Jules and Yvonne's disapproval, presumably because of its realism. 'It might be in some dreary/ Socialistic peri-/Odical' (Sondheim, 2011: 12) sneers Yvonne. Jules says 'Good' as if to a promising pupil. Jules and Yvonne, one might say, see all the parts and none of the whole. They see the painting, but they don't see George's intention behind it.

The sense of mystery about George is increased by the fact that he doesn't sing the opening number: it is Dot, his lover and model, who sings. Dot is posing for him and her opening song is a stream-of-consciousness monologue: at this stage she is easily distracted as we hear her complain about her discomfort standing in her heavy big-bustled dress, her jealous thoughts about George, and her admiration for his talent. She finds it hard to concentrate. 'Concentrate... Concentrate...' (Sondheim, 2011: 7) she says and then the heavy dress that she was wearing magically opens up while she escapes and dances around in her chemise. Thus she is able, briefly, to make herself do what George can do every day, concentrate and revise the world. But George does not notice.

³⁷ This is reminiscent of Nicolaes Maes' picture in the Louvre of 'Children Bathing' (also attributed to Jacob Van Loo) where a dark cloud overhead emphasises the fleeting nature of pleasure.

As has been shown, one of Sondheim's attributes as a songwriter is that he keeps his characters in the world. If we compare the opening of *Sunday* with, for example, the opening of *Oklahoma!* we can see this more clearly. Both shows start with characters standing in bright sunlight, but when Curly sings 'Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" Hammerstein doesn't have him stop to mop his brow or take off his hat and fan himself (an actor might do this, but it is not written into the lyrics). But Sondheim has Dot refer to the fact that she is sweating in her heavy dress, and we hear also that she is constantly distracted by her jealousy, and her attack of cramp. Dot's discomfort isn't simply forgotten. She has to learn to concentrate.

Dot asks George why he is always in the shade while she is in the sun. Her complaint is also an indication of the characters' contrasting natures: George reserved and mysterious and Dot open and warm. Dot sings 'Artists are bizarre. Fixed. Cold' (Sondheim, 2011: 7) hitting a surprising low note on the word 'bizarre'. She also surprisingly adds: 'I like that in a man. Fixed. Cold.' (Sondheim, 2011: 7) presumably because he can concentrate. (Yvonne, on the other hand, dismisses George's work with 'So drab, so cold' [Sondheim, 2011: 12.]) Dot asks George why he has been painting the monkey cage in a zoo. She suspects he may have another woman, perhaps because she can't quite conceive of a man focusing that much on his work. He replies: 'The monkeys, Dot. Not the cage.' (Lapine, 1984: 578.) He can see the life behind the restrictions, the person inside the cage, or the dress. At least, he does sometimes.

George is painting Dot in profile, the way we will ultimately see her in the painting, and it is perhaps appropriate that he only sees one side of her. Dot loves the thought of being made immortal: 'Something nice with swans/That's durable/Forever'. (Sondheim, 2011: 8.) 'Nice' is a word that is several degrees less strong than 'Beautiful' (which is heard later) and Olaf Jubin says that this shows that Dot's idea about what constitutes a work of art 'is rather commonplace if not downright bourgeois'. ("It Takes Two": The Doubling of Actors and Roles in *Sunday in the Park with George* eds Gordon, R. and Jubin, O., 2014: 190.) Maybe it is, but she also appreciates George's work. Her next lines are: 'All it has to be is good. [...] And George, you're good'. (Sondheim, 2011: 8.) If her ideas are conventional they are nevertheless genuine and she introduces a central concept of the show when she uses the word 'Forever'. Dot has the traditional view of art as being fixed, outside of time: an idea that the show will ultimately endorse. Dot is the first character to use the word 'Forever', and, the next time we hear it, George uses it about Dot ('Forever with that mirror', [Lapine, 1984: 597]) and then George and Dot duet on it in 'Color and Light' on the line 'I could look at him/her forever.' (Sondheim, 2011: 16.) This is both the strength and the weakness of their relationship: they are endlessly fascinated with each other and yet cannot connect (another word that will recur throughout the show). It is significant that when they duet they sing the lines, not to each other, but to themselves. The next time we hear the word 'Forever' it is in the song 'Sunday' and it is sung by the chorus:

ALL As we pass

Through arrangements of shadows

Toward the verticals of trees

Forever...

(Sondheim, 2011: 32.)

Sondheim, careful as ever with the placement of words that reappear and develop like musical themes, has made the word 'Forever' go from Dot, to George singing about Dot, to Dot and George singing together but not to each other, and from them to everyone in the painting. It has gone from being an idea to an achievement. In the opening number of Act II, 'It's Hot Up Here' it is a complaint: the characters have begun to realise how long forever is with each other for company. And yet at the end of the show there is a reprise of 'Sunday', where George is given the text-book from which Dot had learned to read: '... how George looks... he can look forever...' (Lapine, 1984: 707). The chorus reprise 'Sunday' with a triumphant high note on the word 'Forever'. 'It all leads to the word 'Forever' [...] When I wrote that word I cried, because I thought: 'That's what it's about'. (Sondheim interviewed in *Six by Sondheim*, HBO, 2013.) This is the first Sondheim show where beauty (i.e. order, design and harmony) lasts forever.

We see George create beauty from chaos at the end of Act One. The characters are all screaming and fighting in the park when there is an arpeggiated chord and they all freeze. George's mother cries 'Remember, George' and George says the words: 'Order. [...] Design. [...] Tension. [...] Balance. [...] Harmony.' (Lapine, 1984: 645.) It is only by remembering his artistic credo that George manages to create order from chaos and it is his mother who reminds him of it with her cry of 'Remember,

George.' It is the family which reaches back into the past and inspires the artist and ensures that he is never really alone.

This show is the warmest affirmation of the family that Sondheim had yet written. *West Side Story* has a sort of family with the Jets: 'You got brothers around,/ You're a family man' (Sondheim, 2010: 31) although this family is ultimately destructive; *Gypsy* shows a family that is ultimately destroyed by the out-of-control ambition of the mother; *Sweeney Todd* had an adoptive family in Todd, Mrs. Lovett and Tobias which, though it was scarcely ideal, was the only family that Tobias knew and, for a while at least, seemed to be a haven from a cruel world. But in *Sunday* there is no irony in the presentation of the family: it is unequivocally seen in a positive light, and it is not destroyed.

In contrast to the idea of 'Forever', the critical community in both acts are mostly concerned with ephemeral reputation-making and fashion. In Act I, in 'No Life', Jules sings: 'These things get hung - [...] And then they're gone' (Sondheim, 2011: 12) and in Act Two a museum curator in 'Putting It Together' declares: 'And tomorrow is already passé' (Sondheim, 2011: 37). The show's experiments with chronology are perhaps an attempt to break down chronological time in an experience analogous to that of looking at a work of art. Art shows us a realm where temporal values are unimportant.

With the song 'Color and Light' we see George and Dot at home. George is working on *La Grande Jatte*. This scene is reminiscent of the 'Twin Soliloquies' in

South Pacific: in fact the relationship between George and Dot is a little like that between Emile de Becque and Nellie Forbush. The women in both shows are uneducated and overawed by men of superior culture but, for Hammerstein, Nellie's good-natured *naivete* is sufficient in itself to attract Emile. For Sondheim *naivete* is never enough. Dot wants to learn. Her learning to read shows her determination to transcend her origins. George sees her look in the mirror and sings that she is 'Seeing all the parts and none of the whole'. (Sondheim, 2011: 16). She sees all the parts of her body critically:

DOT If my legs were longer...
 If my bust was smaller...
 If my hands were graceful...
 If my waist was thinner...

(Sondheim, 2011: 15.)

At this point she sees with the eyes of a critic, while George sees her with the eyes of an artist and a lover and sees that she is already a work of art.

But to see beauty one cannot merely look: one has to concentrate. In Act One, while Dot is making up at her dressing table in a pose that recalls Seurat's painting 'Young Woman Powdering Herself', she sings: 'If I could concentrate- ', and then abruptly changes the subject singing 'I'd be in the Follies!'. (Sondheim, 2011: 15.) She, like so many Sondheim characters, violently swerves between two contrasting emotions: here they are love and annoyance. But her thoughts, however easily

distracted, keep coming back to George. And, conversely, she is affecting his power to concentrate. 'Dot Dot waiting' he sings, (Sondheim, 2011: 16) the dots on his canvas becoming in his mind the increasingly impatient Dot. We can assume he has noticed her as he later paints 'Young Woman Powdering Herself' – she inspires his art even as he ignores her needs.

George sings a long passionate note on the word 'Sunday', suggesting how he sees it all and is desperate to put it all on paper. 'There's only color and light' (Sondheim, 2011: 15) and these are all the tools he has to recreate this vision that he has in the park. And when, in 'Color and Light' George sings 'it's hot in here' (Sondheim, 2011: 16) echoing Dot's earlier 'it's hot out here' (Sondheim, 2011: 7) it is as if he has brought the weather with him into the studio: he is able to enter into a completely different place using his imagination: that he succeeds in doing this is shown in Act Two when the characters in the painting all sing 'It's Hot Up Here'. Just by changing a preposition twice Sondheim is able to trace the weather from being a fact, to something in the process of being recreated in paint, and finally to a permanent work of art. In the lines 'It's getting hot [...] It's getting orange...' (Sondheim, 2011: 16) we hear George in the process of turning sensual information about the world into pictorial terms. He is surrounded by his art: even the beer bottle he drinks from during 'Color and Light' is reminiscent of the beer bottle seen in 'Bathers at Asnières'. But then George's business is making connections.

If family is a source of strength it is contrasted with the wider community, which is riven with tension. We can see that class politics is an important thread in the

show: in fact Jules' chief objection to George's work seems to be class-based. He says 'Drawing my servants? Certainly, George, you could find more colourful subjects.' (Lapine, 1984: 614.) Art, in Jules' view, is a vocation for the wealthy elite. The working class seem to agree with this idea: the lower-class people that George sketches seem sceptical about being drawn. Franz, Jules' servant, says of his master: 'Monsieur would never think to draw us! We are only people he looks down upon'. (Lapine, 1984: 613.) Franz compares the arduous life of a servant with that of an artist and concludes: 'Work is what you do for others,/Liebchen,/Art is what you do for yourself'. (Sondheim, 2011: 21). The society that he lives in does not understand George, they find him bizarre but, unlike Dot, they do not find his oddness attractive. One of the things that Sondheim and Lapine noticed about the painting was that none of the figures are looking at each other. The characters that we see on *La Grande Jatte* are divided almost entirely into pairs: the two shop-girls, the two soldiers, an old lady and her nurse, Jules and Yvonne, Franz and Frieda and the boatman and his dog, and all the relationships are based on manipulation and rivalry. The old lady, revealed to be George's mother, bullies the nurse who answers with mock patience; the two shop girls are rivals for the soldiers; Yvonne tries unsuccessfully to impress Jules with her sophistication; and the Boatman despises everyone. Even the dog, Spot, (as with Dot, the name reminds us of George's method of painting) finds a canine version of the class society when he meets a pampered but bored lap-dog, Fifi. (Yvonne had objected to the dog in 'Bathers at Asnières' and in this painting Seurat is putting in two.) If we see how divided the society is we also see how George has worked a minor miracle in creating a harmonious whole.

George himself is an outsider in this society and it is the other outsider, the one-eyed Boatman, the only character without a human companion, who challenges him directly. He and George duet on the phrase: 'We're the loonies' and the Boatman sings by himself: "Cause we tell them the truth!" (Sondheim, 2011: 22). The Boatman is being sarcastic: earlier on he had hurled abuse at George and said 'You don't know...'. (Lapine, 1984: 604.) This shows that George does not have complete control over the people in the park, they are not his puppets. George is frightened by the Boatman's violence. But, in Act II, the Boatman recognises his achievement: in 'It's Hot Up Here' he refers to George as a 'genius' (Sondheim, 2011: 36) and a little later he says: 'Most of all, they hated him because they knew he would always be around'. (Lapine, 1984: 667.)

Like George, Dot too must choose between family and art. In her song 'Everybody Loves Louis' she chooses family: her baby must have a name and so she marries the man who will commit to her: Louis the baker. As she had said in the first scene (Lapine, 1984: 579) Dot now says again 'Hello, George', (Sondheim, 2011: 22). She is trying to get his attention once more, only this time she is not really saying hello but goodbye. Dot later says 'Hello, George' in 'It's Hot Up Here', (Sondheim, 2011: 36) providing another link with tradition. In Act Two, however, it has a different meaning, as 'Hello, George' in that song means that she is acknowledging him as an artist. But in 'Everybody Loves Louis' Dot sings that she needs 'someone' and then she corrects herself: 'Louis'. (Sondheim, 2011: 22.) When she sings of George she is lyrical, but when she describes Louis's amiable personality the music is bouncy and jolly. As with 'In Buddy's Eyes' from *Follies*, the song is sung ostensibly

to praise the man that she has chosen but is really sung to hurt the man that she has lost.

Dot has Louis and George has his painting. In the song 'Finishing the Hat' he describes the experience of creating a work of art. There is a word that is repeated four times in the song and each time the word is used, we see it, as it were, from a different angle. The word is 'window',³⁸ and it expresses George's increasing absorption in his work: each time it is sung on a high note which draws our attention to it. The first time we hear it George sings about: 'How you watch the rest of the world/From a window/While you finish the hat'. (Sondheim, 2011: 27.) Here George is working but is aware of the outside world. Then he sings: 'What you feel when voices that come/Through the window/Go/Until they distance and die,/Until there's nothing but sky'. (Sondheim, 2011: 27.) Now the outside world is fading and there is only him and his work. He has gone through the window into the world of his painting. It is like the enchanted mirror in *Through the Looking-Glass*. Then he is 'Reaching through the world of the hat/Like a window,/Back to this one from that' (Sondheim, 2011: 27): in other words he is making the return journey from that other world back into this one, through the window. Then he acknowledges the price he must pay for this: 'Stepping back to look at a face/Leaves a little space in the way like a window,/But to see -/ It's the only way to see'. (Sondheim, 2011: 27.) The price of stepping back and observing means that you are not always actively present. You need a woman: 'To return you to the night' (Sondheim, 2011: 27). She returns George to present reality from the imagined day on the canvas. The moment of *ex nihilo*

38 Sondheim has said that one of his favourite words is 'window': 'It's one of the great words of the language. The sound of it is so terrific – it's romantic, and it's sad.' (Horowitz p.167.)

creation is caught in the last lines: 'Look, I made a hat/Where there never was a hat' (Sondheim, 2011: 27). George has found a way to deal with disillusionment by creating a lasting art work.

As he says to Dot in 'We Do Not Belong Together', 'I am what I do', (Sondheim, 2011: 31). This statement would sound ridiculous coming from the mouths of Robert, Ben, Phyllis, Buddy or Sally, and downright sinister from Sweeney, but it is true, however, when it comes from George. He is able to define himself by his work: one of the two things that his descendent Marie said we leave behind when we die. By painting George is obeying a vision that he was born with and has trained for all his life. He must stay true to this vision even though this ultimately costs him his relationship with Dot. We see this in 'We Do Not Belong Together', where Dot articulates the paradox that the absorption in his work that attracted her to him also makes their relationship impossible. 'What made it so right together/Is what made it all wrong'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.)

As we have seen, in Sondheim's previous shows the idea of beauty has always been associated with fragility and the possibility of its destruction. In this show the song called 'Beautiful' is also about beauty and the sense of its passing. George's mother is '*with a failing memory, lamenting the passing of time*'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.) Earlier on she had complained about the noisy boys bathing and now she remembers how George used to swim on Sunday mornings when he was a boy. Only George reminds her that he cannot swim and was afraid of the water. She revises the world although she cannot make it what she wants it to be.

As with 'Color and Light', the song is closer to being two soliloquies than a duet. George's mother (referred to in the script as Old Lady) regrets the loss of the trees (picking up the earlier joke of the tree going missing as George rubs it out on his canvas) that are being cut down to make way for the Eiffel Tower. The world is disappearing 'As we look' to which George replies by echoing her last word but turning it into an imperative: 'Look!'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.) That is the remedy, to hold it all in before it goes. George insists that: 'All things are beautiful'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.) This is only true because an artist can, as George says, 'revise the world'. George looks at the tower and imagines it as 'A perfect tree'. A real artist does not need a beautiful subject: it is the love and skill that they bring to it, their ability to envisage it, that matters. As George puts it:

GEORGE Pretty isn't beautiful, Mother,
 Pretty is what changes.
 What the eye arranges
 Is what is beautiful.

(Sondheim, 2011: 31.)

Pretty isn't beautiful just as, in Sondheim's next show, '(n)ice is different than good'. (Sondheim, 2011: 69.) Pretty is what changes but beauty is what doesn't. As we have seen in previous shows, 'Pretty' is a suspect word. 'Pretty Lady' in *Pacific Overtures* is a song sung by three sailors pestering a woman, 'Pretty Women' in *Sweeney Todd* is a duet initiated by a murderer to beguile his victim (who is himself a

pervert and a voyeur). 'Pretty is what changes' is ambiguous: it could mean 'Pretty is what fades and dies' or it could mean that people's idea of pretty changes with fashion but beauty is permanent.

This scene between George and his mother echoes the scene in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Allegro* where the ghost of Joseph Taylor's mother comes to recall him to his true vocation. But in *Sunday* mother and son do not perfectly understand each other. Yet it is after this meeting that George finally finishes his painting: creating order out of chaos. 'You make it beautiful' (Sondheim, 2011: 31) his mother says at the end, understanding something of his skill.

The fact that Seurat is able to fix the moment contrasts with the scene in George Furth's libretto for *Merrily We Roll Along* where Frank closes his eyes for a moment at Gussie's party and explains that when he wants to remember a moment he pretends he's taking a picture. Robert in *Company* (also with a libretto by Furth) has the same habit. Frank and Robert's attempts to fix the moment are idle dreams, but George can do it.

This song sets up both 'Children and Art' and 'Lesson #8' in Act Two. 'Children and Art' is sung by Marie and is similar to 'Beautiful' in that it is sung by an older woman and is about passing time. But Seurat's mother sees everything vanishing and is uneasy whereas Marie concentrates on what we leave behind. Marie is more accepting of the inevitability of change and focuses on the good that we can do. The

uncertainty brought on by time passing is felt by the younger George: in 'Lesson #8', he too is upset that everything has changed and he realises he too may fade away.

At the beginning of the first act Seurat stated his artistic ideal: 'The challenge: Bring order to the whole'. (Sondheim, 2011: 7). At the end of the act he behaves like a magician: the characters in the park are all screaming, driven to a frenzy by their own or other people's infidelities, while George sketches obliviously through the row. The scene threatens to descend into chaos and violence, to the complete breakdown of meaning that is a threat in nearly all Sondheim shows. Then George waves his hand and the chaotic mob suddenly stand together and sing 'Sunday' as George arranges them. (Though there may be a hint of revenge in the way he orders Louis to the back.) Then a picture frame descends in front of them: unifying them in art as they are not in life. 'Sunday' is one of the few choral songs in Sondheim where everyone sings the same words: they unite because George has united them. They see the world the way George sees it. They don't just sing of the beauty of life but specifically of painting.

The painting is a realm where George can arrest time, just as the Loveland sequence in *Follies* shows us a moment when 'Time stops'. (Sondheim, 2010: 229.) And, also as with the Loveland sequence, art intervenes just when the human story has become unbearable: in the park the characters are all arguing and their lives are falling apart, then suddenly they are somewhere else. They are in George's painting. In *Follies* the sudden change to the Loveland sequence doesn't have an originator: it just happens. In *Sunday* we see the spell being cast and who casts it.

In the song that opens the second act, 'It's Hot Up Here', we find that the figures in the painting are as small-minded as ever: the people in the sun resent those in the shade and everyone is full of petty complaints. With the line: 'You're stuck up here/In this gavotte' (Sondheim, 2011: 36) Sondheim finds a musical equivalent of the stiffness and formality of the figures in the painting. They are dancing a gavotte with backs held straight. Dot's reaction is ambivalent: in Act I she expressed her desire to be remembered and then in 'It's Hot Up Here' she complains that: 'I do not wish to be remembered/Like this, George' (Sondheim, 2011: 36) as she does not like the people she is with, but then she thanks him for putting her in the shade (as he had not done in the show's opening number) and for the hat, although it was George's insistence on finishing the hat rather than taking Dot to the Follies that had caused their break-up.

After 'It's Hot Up Here' the characters leave the painting one by one and speak directly to the audience. We learn that George started the painting on Ascension Day 1884. Ascension Day is the day that Christ was assumed into heaven and this fact gives an added poignancy to George's mother's remark that George was 'always off and running' (Lapine, 1984: 666) somewhere she couldn't follow. That the artist has a quasi-religious status has already been suggested by Dot's line that George has 'A mission to see'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.)

There was a similar leap of one hundred years at the end of *Pacific Overtures*, with the final song 'Next'. That song brought the story up to contemporary times. Although *Pacific Overtures* was not blind to the cruelties and injustices of imperial

Japan, the song 'Next' shows modern Japan to be in a state of chaos: the modern age is seen as something of a disaster. In *Sunday* the jump forward to the present day is not fatal because the characters can hold onto the past.

As friendship is in *Merrily We Roll Along* (except there the friendships don't last) so here family is a bulwark against decay, against things being forgotten. It ensures stability and warmth. When, in Act II, the younger George says of his grandmother Marie: 'She is something, isn't she?' in a slightly condescending way, Elaine, George's ex-wife, replies: 'Yes, she is...' (Lapine, 1984: 694) seriously, as if to remind him that Marie is more than a 'character'. The idea of family is linked with tradition: artistic tradition also transcends time, and provides something to cling to in an uncertain world. As Marie says:

MARIE: You know, Miss Daniels, there are only two worthwhile things to leave behind when you depart this world: children and art.

(Lapine, 1984: 693.)

Of the female characters, only Blair Daniels, the art critic in Act II, is possessed of 'book learning', and she is a formidable presence. At the launch party of his art installation George raises cardboard cut-outs of himself that symbolise how he is putting on an act for everyone, and she is the one that he cannot raise a cut-out for. She is not easily fooled. It is Blair who asks to meet Marie saying that she 'added a certain humanity to the proceedings' (Lapine, 1984: 687). But when Blair identifies a shape in the painting as a bassinet, Marie corrects her and says that it is Louis's waffle

stove, i.e: the stove belonging to her adoptive grandfather. Blair has enough artistic sensibility to know that the younger George is in an artistic dead end: the intellectual approach has its place - it can identify problems - but it is tradition and family, as represented by Dot and Marie, that enable the younger George to get beyond his artistic rut to something of his own. In some shows, such as *Show Boat*, the later generation rectifies the mistakes made by the earlier one. *Sunday in the Park with George* reverses this pattern: it is the younger George who finds his problems solved by his ancestors. This shows that tradition is a force for good.

The cast all double and Sondheim and Lapine made a virtue of what might have been economic necessity by making the roles reflect each other. After all the show is about continuity throughout time, about tradition as a bulwark against ever-changing life. The two Georges are played by the same actor, naturally enough, and the same actress plays the older George's mother and Blair Daniels. Both remind the George that they know of his artistic vocation. And Dot doubles as Marie, emphasising the importance of family. Another show might have doubled the characters of Dot and Elaine, and have the marriage, which did not take place in Act I, take place in Act II. But Sondheim and Lapine sidestep the marriage trope and instead make family the central concern, perhaps because family reaches back into the past, from Marie back to Dot, and from the younger George back to George Seurat. This is why the doubling of the cast is so appropriate. It is as if they are all playing their descendants.

As McLaughlin points out (2016: 164) Seurat died when he was 31 and, in Act II, George is 32. George is, as it were, being given the chance to live the life that

Seurat didn't have. But the fictional George is in the opposite position to his ancestor. Seurat was not getting his work exhibited while the younger George is the darling of the moment. The party is celebrating George's latest installation, 'Chromolume #7', a laser light show based around the life and work of Seurat. But the show is interrupted when a surge from the electric organ causes an explosion. One of George's collaborators runs on shouting: 'There's no juice!'. (Lapine, 1984: 671.) This phrase could be used to sum up George's creative impotence. He depends on machinery and this might be an ironic reflection of how Broadway shows were themselves becoming more and more obsessed with expensive computer-controlled staging and losing their heart.

George says in his presentation, Seurat 'lived in an age when science was gaining influence over Romantic principles'. (Lapine, 1984: 668.) Seurat, by his mathematical use of colour, tries to reconcile art and scientific principles. His descendent attempts a similar reconciliation by utilising laser technology to create his Chromolumines but the fact that his Chromolume breaks down shows that he has not managed to do this. 'What you need's a link with your tradition,' (Sondheim, 2011: 39) sings George, who is more correct than he knows. He is using the tradition but in the wrong way. He is blocking out his own creativity, merely reshuffling Seurat. He doesn't use the picture to help him see what he can do. The contemporary art scene that we see in Act II is decadent, as it was in Act I, but the younger George is right in the centre of it: not maintaining his distance as his ancestor did. This decadence is fixed by the words that museum trustee Harriet Pawling uses when she says: 'What matters is the means, not the ends'. (Sondheim, 2011: 37.) This is the precise

opposite of the phrase 'Content dictates form' which is part of Sondheim's artistic credo.

McLaughlin says: 'Rather, in *Sunday in the Park with George*, art, even great art, is produced and received within a tangle of social practices and relations. Art is a part of the dirty, political world.' (McLaughlin, 2016: 154.) This is true but the fact that art is part of the dirty political world is the problem that the show wrestles with. As is the case with so many dramatic works, in *Sunday* the inner life is seen as the real one: the public life, lived in public spaces, is seen as very often false and trivial, as something that must be escaped.

Instead of the show rejecting transcendence, it looks at the problem of the artist *maintaining* his vision unsullied in the dirty political world. Seurat and George use opposite tactics to deal with this problem: Seurat takes the traditional route of isolating himself from the world, while, in Act II, it is George who tells his fellow artist Alex that: 'It's all politics'. (Lapine, 1984: 686.) The show unequivocally endorses Seurat's choice, because his painting is the one that's good, and Seurat's example finally rescues the younger George.

In the party that follows his presentation we see George wheedling, trying to get influential friends and backers. His entrance at the party is heralded by a trumpet fanfare, an ironic reminder of the trumpeter that we see in Seurat's painting. George has begun to despise himself and the falsity of his position is shown by the device of his placing cardboard cut-outs of himself in each group at the party. Once again the

private experience is privileged over the public. The public persona is false and the private doubts and moments of self-loathing are genuine. The word 'Connection', so important in the first act and that signified getting through to the world, is here corrupted to making connections, i.e. cultivating useful people who may give a commission. When he says: 'It's time to get to work...' (Sondheim, 2011: 37) he doesn't mean painting. As it does for Frank Shepard, 'working' means working the room. In the DVD of the original production we can see that Mandy Patinkin as George twitches his head in a way reminiscent of a dog: instead of imagining what it is like to be a dog, as George Seurat had done in Act I, he himself has become the cringing cur. His life is one long audition.

Marie echoes Jules' verdict on Seurat: 'All mind, no heart' (Sondheim, 2011: 12) when she suggests to George Two 'A little less thinking,/A little more feeling -' (Sondheim, 2011: 49). Only Jules was wrong and Marie is right. As with Dot and Seurat, so it is with George and Marie: the woman is the instinctual one and the man the cerebral one. This is a very traditional Hammersteinian view of male-female relationships, but one that celebrates female strength. It is Marie's song 'Children and Art', that reminds George of his mission. George, echoing Seurat's words after meeting his mother, says 'Connect, George. Connect...' (Lapine, 1984: 697). It may be ironic that both men say this to themselves rather than to anyone else but it doesn't undermine the genuineness of their desire.

In the next scene the younger George goes to Paris to visit La Grande Jatte. Marie has died. This makes her 'Goodbye, Mama' [Lapine, 1984: 697] in the previous

scene more poignant. The last surviving person in the painting is gone and so that time in history is beyond the reach of living memory. Her death increases George's sense of isolation, and he sings 'Lesson #8', where the lyric echoes the phrases in the child's primer that Dot had used to teach herself to read. The fact that it is Lesson #8 shows that he is moving on from Chromolume #7. The words he reads in the book reach him like light from a long-dead star. He sings in the third person: 'George misses Marie./George misses a lot./George is alone.' (Sondheim, 2011: 49.) This makes George sound alienated. Seurat's mother found that her world was fading while George finds that his personality is fading. This is George's low point: where he feels the world unravelling. He fears, as many of Sondheim's characters do, ultimate disconnection from other people, and purposelessness.

By reading the primer he seemingly conjures up Dot, who enters in the violet dress that she is seen wearing in the painting. She asks him if he is working on something new and he says he is not working on anything new (see Lapine, 1984: 702) – an ambiguous answer that could mean that he is not working at all or that he is working but only on something old and tired. Dot's reappearance here serves the same purpose as the reappearance of the Baker's father in *Into The Woods* and that of the ghost of Joseph Taylor's mother in *Allegro*. Each of these figures recalls their child to his purpose in life. (We will see this device being given a dark twist in *Assassins* when the assassins encourage Lee Harvey Oswald to kill Kennedy.) In her song 'Move On' Dot expresses the idea that George must choose and that choosing, taking responsibility for his own life, is more important than getting it right.

DOT I chose, and my world was shaken -
So what?
The choice may have been mistaken,
The choosing was not.
You have to move on.

(Sondheim, 2011: 52.)

Unlike Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along* she knows that one can't have it all, and unlike Ben in *Follies* she accepts that there are roads one cannot take and moves on.

When Dot says: 'I worried too much about tomorrow. I thought the world could be perfect. I was wrong', (Lapine, 1984: 702) this does not sound like the Dot we have seen in Act One. There she is the one who is able to enjoy living from day to day, while it is Seurat who worries. Perhaps this is a more mature Dot, who has had time to reflect on her experiences. He had been worrying about tomorrow, and her visit gives him courage to commit to an uncertain future.

In Act I, in 'We Do Not Belong Together' Dot had said 'I have to move on'. (Sondheim, 2011: 31.) There it was the cry of someone giving up but, in this scene, the idea of 'moving on' is reintroduced with a positive connotation, as if the wounds of the past are being healed. George admires the painting: 'And the life/ Moving on!' (Sondheim, 2011: 52) contradicting the assertion of Jules and Yvonne in Act I that Seurat's work has 'No Life'. Dot tells him 'Concentrate on now -' (Sondheim, 2011: 52) as it is by concentrating on now that one reaches the timeless.

This song is a second chance for the characters. It contradicts Dot's conclusion in Act I that they do not belong together with her triumphant assertion here: 'We've always belonged together!' after which Dot and George duet on the line 'We will always belong together!' (Sondheim, 2011: 52).

Banfield calls this duet: 'the first entirely uncontingent love duet in a Sondheim musical since Fay's and Hapgood's of twenty years before'. (Banfield, 1993: 344.) It is the culmination of a series of four love songs: (where the word love is hardly mentioned) 'Color and Light', 'We Do Not Belong Together', 'Children and Art' and 'Move On'. 'Color and Light' starts with the relationship already in trouble; in 'We Do Not Belong Together' Dot accepts that she has to move on; 'Children and Art' is a declaration of love for the things Seurat left behind; and in 'Move On' Dot turns the advice that she had given to herself, 'I have to move on', into good advice for Seurat's troubled descendant. He has to move on from the artistic desert that he is trapped in. As Banfield puts it, the music soars

beyond anything Sondheim has permitted himself not just earlier in this show but earlier in his output [...] a moment in which Sondheim's music, perhaps for the first time in his career, "heals the characters," as Stephen Oliver says of Mozart's operatic writing.

(Banfield, 1993: 379.)

So when the characters in the painting of La Grande Jatte re-enter and we see the tableau of the painting again, this asserts the victory of art over the transitory nature of life. The word 'Sunday' is underscored with notes like the peal of church bells. Again this underlines a quasi-religious notion of art: the Sundays in the park are sacred because they have become part of a picture that transcends time. And in the show's

closing moments Dot's message is reinforced when we see the *tableau* of Seurat's painting once more reassembled, and then the figures come forward in pairs and bow to George. They thank him just as, in Act I, Seurat had thanked his canvas.³⁹ The private dream has successfully become public property. The figures in the painting also seemingly mistake the younger George for his ancestor, or are perhaps acknowledging his right to go forward and discover things for himself the way that his ancestor did. The younger George has, in his mind, taken his ancestor's painting apart and put it together again for himself and this enables him to find something of his own. Tradition, properly understood, is a liberating force.

The painting comes alive around the younger George: he becomes immersed in it the way an enraptured observer might be totally caught up in a work of art. In Act I George tells Jules how the eye of the spectator will create the colours in the picture. So to speak, the spectator stands back and completes the picture. In Act II the younger George does something similar: he is able to complete the story by seeing it whole and understanding it.

At the end everyone leaves and George is left in solitude. *Sunday* ends with the younger George echoing the words that began the show.

GEORGE: "Design."

[...]

"Tension."

³⁹ Seurat's 'Thank you' to his canvas is not in the printed script by Lapine, but Mandy Patinkin says it in the DVD of the show. (Dir. Terry Hughes, 1985.)

[...]

“Composition.”

[...]

“Balance.”

[...]

“Light.”

[...]

Dot. I cannot read this word.

DOT: “Harmony.”

(Lapine, 1984: 706.)

'They are your words, George' (Lapine, 1984: 705) she tells him. They are the words that Seurat jotted down in the notebook: despite what he said in 'We Do Not Belong Together', that he cannot give her the words she needs, Seurat was finally able to give her the right words after all. By using these words the younger George finds the courage to break through to something of his own. The last words of the show are: 'So many possibilities...' (Lapine, 1984: 708.) This sense of possibility has been encountered in Sondheim's work before: in 'Waiting for the Girls Upstairs' in *Follies* the foursome sing: 'Everything was possible and nothing made sense'. (Sondheim, 2010: 207.) In 'The Hills of Tomorrow' from *Merrily We Roll Along* the chorus sang: 'Behold the limitless sky!'. (Sondheim, 2010: 421.) But in both *Follies* and *Merrily We Roll Along* these hopes are compromised, most of the characters fail to live up to them. In this show these hopes are embraced. The trumpet fanfare is heard again at

the end, playing the Sunday motif. It is not any longer, as it was at George's first entrance in Act II, ironic.

In this show life is seen as being poised always on the edge of chaos, and yet, by effort and determination (which Seurat, Dot, and the younger George all show) a beauty that defies time is created by the creation of a family and by the creation of a painting: by children and art. The show finally comes down firmly on the side of a traditional view of art as something ordered and beautiful that can enrapture the viewer. The show is like Seurat's painting: a traditional artefact made up of fragments. This description also fits the family that we see being created in Sondheim and Lapine's next show, *Into the Woods*.

CHAPTER TEN

INTO THE WOODS (1987)

'Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.'
(September 1, 1939' W.H. Auden.)

If you want to really examine it, since I do like to deal in people's delusions, that is only an inch away from illusions. And illusions are only an inch away from fairy tales. The things we tell ourselves we want and don't want come under the headings of 'tiny little lies' or 'delusions' or 'self-deceptions.' The little fantasies that you experience today, the things that you told yourself that are not true, could all be put under the heading of 'fairy tales.'

(Stephen Sondheim, quoted in *Secret*, 1998: 355.)

Just as *Follies* took the musical comedy revue apart and reassembled it, so *Into The Woods* does the same for the fairy tale, and for the same reason: both genres can build unrealistic expectations of trouble-free lives. Neither show is simply a piece of literary criticism, but rather they both deal with the gap between the dreams created by the genre, and the reality of life. Sondheim once again collaborated with James Lapine and the show adopts the bi-partite structure of *Sunday in the Park with George* in that the first act seems to bring the story to a close. But in *Sunday* the unresolved tensions of Act I are brought to a harmonious resolution in Act II whereas the second act of *Into the Woods* disrupts the seemingly happy ending of the first act. The first act is a story as it might be to a child, the second act dramatises the disillusionment that a child might feel on finding out that the world is not like the stories, and that it

has no guaranteed happy endings. Sondheim explained that Lapine was: 'skeptical about the possibility of “happily ever after” in real life and wary of the danger that fairy tales may give children false expectations'. (Sondheim, 2011: 58.) While children aren't in danger of believing that stories about dragons or witches are literally true, what is dangerous is that they might believe the underlying pattern: the implicit promise that everything will always turn out all right – that, in the words of Jiminy Cricket in 'When You Wish Upon a Star' (by Leigh Harline and Ned Washington) from *Pinocchio* (Walt Disney, dir. Ben Sharpsteen and Hamilton Luske: 1940): 'Fate steps in and sees you through'.

The opening number of the show incorporates a lot of ditties: incomplete snatches of song that draw on collective memories of such songs as 'We're Off to See the Wizard' from *The Wizard of Oz* (MGM, dir. Victor Fleming, 1939) or 'Heigh-Ho' from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Walt Disney, dir. David Hand: 1937). Sondheim and Lapine enter the world of these much-loved children's classics with a wary but affectionate eye. The ditties that Sondheim wrote for the opening number are incomplete because the characters are incomplete. They are, at the moment, emotionally stunted. They are defined mostly by their wishes: Cinderella desires to go to the ball; Jack and his mother wish not to be so poor; Little Red Riding Hood wants lots of pies and cakes from the Baker; and the Baker and his wife wish for a child. The concept of the wish is similar to that of the dream that we have seen in other shows: it is the most important thing in a character's life. In fact it is 'More than life' (Sondheim, 2011: 59) for Cinderella. When she visits her mother's grave she says 'I wish', only for her mother's ghost to interrupt: 'Do you know what you wish?/ Are

you certain what you wish/Is what you want?' (Sondheim, 2011: 65). This is a key theme in the show. The characters all have wishes but they learn to grow beyond them. If one compares Cinderella to the Snow White of the Disney film we can see that both of them are trapped in a hostile environment and deal with it by wishing for a prince to rescue them. Snow White has her wishing song 'I'm Wishing' and, at the end of the film she gets her wish: the Prince. Her wish is never questioned: she wants it and, after escaping death, she gets it. In *Into the Woods*, in keeping with Sondheim's interest in passing through disillusionment to a mature perspective, all of the characters' wishes are questioned. The surviving characters mostly get beyond their first wish (for Princes, wealth or pies), and grow through their disillusionment.

For instance, at the end of Act One, Cinderella marries one of the Princes. (The fact that there are two princes makes them more comical; instead of being unique figures they are shown to be cut to a pattern.) But the Prince is a fantasy figure who is himself trapped in fantasy. Both he and the other Prince dream only of what they cannot have. The song 'Agony' wittily shows this as the Princes admit to being: 'Always in thrall most/To anything almost,/Or something asleep' (Sondheim, 2011: 89). They are in love with the unattainable - the very fact that Rapunzel is trapped in a tower or Sleeping Beauty is held in an unbreakable glass coffin is what attracts them: they never have to face the disappointment of turning their dreams to prosaic reality. This is why the Princes get a laugh with the exchange:

RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE She has skin white as snow -

CINDERELLA'S PRINCE Did you learn her name?

RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE No,

There's a dwarf standing guard.

(Sondheim, 2011: 89.)

It is so clearly an excuse for Rapunzel's Prince not to get what he wants. Their song 'Agony' is one of the few in Sondheim's canon that is reprised. Sondheim doesn't often write reprises because he feels that if a character sings the same tune twice then they haven't moved on.⁴⁰ This song is reprised for precisely that reason, the Princes will never mature.

'I was raised to be charming, not sincere' (Lapine, 1987: 127) says Cinderella's Prince in a rare moment of honesty. And once he has finished charming somebody he can only move on and charm someone else. In fact he is rather like *Show Boat's* Gaylord Ravenal, who prefers the ideal to the fact, to dream from afar than to be near: whose theme song is 'Only Make Believe'. *Show Boat* was critical of Ravenal's foolish pride, but Hammerstein allowed him a happy ending where he is reunited with Magnolia. When Ravenal, whose abandoning of his family has brought misery to Magnolia and Kim, sings to Magnolia: 'You taught me to see/One truth forever true' (Hammerstein: 1927: 54) one can only wonder at his capacity for self-deception. *Into the Woods* is more accurate in its treatment of such a self-indulgent narcissist. At first Cinderella tries to guess what the Prince wants and be his fantasy. Unlike *Follies*, where Sally has her Prince Charming figure in Ben and never gets him, Cinderella does attain her dream figure but finds, disillusioningly, that he is not what she really

40 'A lot of people think they're holding the score together just by doing reprises of themes, but they're not developing anything.' Sondheim interviewed by Malcolm Jones in *Newsweek*, 21 November 2011. Accessed from *Newsweek* web-site, 16/06/2019.

wants after all and moves on. Disillusionment with the Prince is inevitable: being far away from him is what gave him charm.

In Act One, in the song 'On the Steps of the Palace', Cinderella explains why she left her shoe behind at the ball.

CINDERELLA Then from out of the blue,
And without any guide,
You know what your decision is,
Which is not to decide.

(Sondheim, 2011: 79.)

She leaves her shoe behind to see if the Prince will find her, thus putting the onus on him. This plot twist was Lapine's idea as he and Sondheim realised that Cinderella's reluctance to marry a prince and live in a palace rather than stay a drudge to a pair of abusive step-sisters made no sense. Instead, Cinderella has realised that she has attracted the prince under false pretences and, as she doesn't want to have a marriage based on a lie, she leaves him the shoe as a clue and lets him discover who she really is if he wants to. That the Prince is untrustworthy is underlined, in the original production, by the fact that the actor who played him, Robert Westenberg, doubles as the slaving Wolf who chases Red Riding Hood. This similarity is further underlined by the fact that both the Wolf (in 'Hello, Little Girl') and the Prince (in 'Any Moment', although that passage was later cut) rhyme 'Boring' with 'Ignoring'. The Prince then, underneath his costume, is pure predatory sexuality.

It is only in Act Two, as Cinderella goes out into the woods again - this time in her old clothes, not in the gown of a princess - that she learns to act for herself and then later as part of a group. She orders the magic birds that were left to her by her mother to peck out the eyes of the vengeful giant. Like Johanna in *Sweeney Todd* the price she pays for becoming a free agent is to lose some of her innocence, to become, however justifiably, blood guilty.

In fact Cinderella goes through the same process of disillusionment and accommodation with reality as Petra does in her song 'The Miller's Son' from *A Little Night Music*. Petra dreams first of marrying the miller's son, then, climbing the social scale, dreams of marrying a businessman, until ultimately she reaches the Prince of Wales. Just as Cinderella dreams of giving a ball at the palace so Petra dreams that: 'We'll have dancing' (Sondheim, 2010: 279). But Petra, after her flight of fancy, comes back down to earth, anti-climactically, but without bitterness, on the line: 'And I shall marry the miller's son' (Sondheim, 2010: 280). Cinderella has taken the show to grow through her fantasy of marrying a prince but she too can face the future without bitterness. The Prince says that: 'I shall always love the maiden who ran away' (Lapine, 1987: 128). He has already turned her into another unattainable dream: not his wife but 'a maiden'. 'And I the faraway Prince' (Lapine, 1987: 128) she responds, admitting that part of her feels the same way that he does. The last words of the show are Cinderella saying once again: 'I wish' (Sondheim, 2011:105).

The Prince is not only desirable to Cinderella, he is also attractive to the Baker's Wife. 'Is he charming?/They say that he's charming' (Sondheim, 2011:70) she asks Cinderella, alluding to the name Prince Charming although the Prince is never directly called that. In Act One she eagerly asks

WIFE Is he sensitive,

 Clever,

 Well-mannered,

 Considerate,

 Passionate,

 Charming,

 As kind as he's handsome,

 As wise as he's rich,

 Is he everything you've ever wanted?

(Sondheim, 2011: 70.)

This is almost word for word Cinderella's Prince's description of himself in 'Agony'. Again, this is a deviation from the Hammersteinian model. In *Into the Woods* the fact that the Baker's Wife and the Prince share the same song doesn't show that they are right for each other, it shows that they both share the same fantasy: him. In the song 'It Takes Two' the Baker's Wife sings to her husband 'You're passionate, charming, considerate, clever - ' (Sondheim, 2011: 75). What she had said about the Prince is now transferred to the Baker. We think that the Baker's Wife has matured, and has transferred her immature dreams about the Prince to her husband, but later, in Act

Two, we see her have a fling with the Prince, and we realise that part of her had been thinking about the Prince all along.

Adultery is not part of any traditional fairy story, but the Baker's Wife's infidelity takes place in Act Two, where the Narrator has been killed and all kinds of previously inadmissible elements have entered the woods. As the Baker's Wife says

WIFE This is ridiculous,

What am I doing here?

I'm in the wrong story.

(Sondheim, 2011: 91.)

The Prince is an experienced seducer, as we can deduce from his polished technique. 'Right and wrong don't matter in the woods,/Only feelings' (Sondheim, 2011: 91). We can't trust the song, it is being used by a seducer. When they have had their fling the Prince goes smoothly into his last goodbye, saying that: 'This was just a moment in the woods,/Our moment,/Shimmering and lovely and sad' (Sondheim, 2011: 91). He seems to think that life is made up of such moments: that nothing connects, there is no larger story. The Prince, as it were, still lives in Act One, where actions have no consequences.

In her song The Baker's Wife is torn between savouring her fling with the Prince and displacing her guilt by telling herself it's time to leave: the tempo varies between dreamy and agitated. 'Wake up! stop dreaming' (Sondheim, 2011: 92) she

sings, realising, as Cinderella will, that the Prince is a dream. And yet the dream still seduces her:

WIFE There's the answer, if you're clever:
 Have a child for warmth
 And a baker for bread,
 And a prince for whatever -

In justifying herself she has reduced her husband to a provider of bread but she immediately rejects this.

WIFE Never!
 It's these woods.

(Sondheim, 2011: 92.)

Cinderella's Prince had pretended that her decision will have no consequences:

CINDERELLA'S PRINCE Best to take the moment present
 As a present for the moment.

(Sondheim, 2011: 91.)

The Baker's Wife finally dismisses this idea.

WIFE Oh, if life were made of moments,

Even now and then a bad one -!
But if life were only moments,
Then you'd never know you had one.

(Sondheim, 2011:92.)

By introducing adultery into the story one might say that Sondheim and Lapine are reflecting the trauma many children might have on finding that their parents are getting divorced: something that was a rare occurrence when the stories were first written. By doing this the show's creators acknowledge the fragmentation of society while finally affirming the worth of family. Despite her claim that the moment with the Prince has made her appreciate her husband more (one wonders how the Baker would have reacted to that) The Baker's Wife ultimately rejects living for the moment and decides 'it's time to leave the woods!' (Sondheim, 2011:92).

Even in Act One The Baker's Wife had shown a capacity to twist the truth to suit her wishes. After she lies to Jack, claiming that the beans she gave him are magic (which they in fact are, but she doesn't know that), she claims to her husband, in the song 'Maybe They're Magic' that 'If the end is right,/It justifies/The beans!' (Sondheim, 2011: 67). As Sondheim says: 'What interested James was the little dishonesties that enabled the characters to reach their happy endings' (Sondheim, 2011: 58). The Baker's Wife cheats Jack out of his cow; The Baker steals Red Riding Hood's cape though he brings it back immediately; and Jack is a thief (as indeed he is in the original story). This is in itself a kind of disillusionment: that equivocation and deceit aren't just the property of the villains but of the heroes too. The show

dramatises the clash between pragmatism and idealism. The Witch begins the show as a kind of idealist: she has one powerful wish, to regain her former beauty, and one person she loves, her daughter Rapunzel. In Act Two she becomes purely pragmatic: when the Giant's widow demands that Jack be surrendered to her the Witch agrees to deliver him. This is not the standard wickedness of a fairy tale villain but rather the *realpolitik* of somebody who believes that survival of the highest number is the greatest good, even if that means conniving at murder. The Witch's position is anti-idealist. She is ruthless, though her reasons are at least understandable. But her position is one that the show ultimately rejects as the characters finally learn to act together.

The Witch may be anti-idealist but, as villains often do, she articulates awkward and embarrassing truths that the other characters would prefer left unsaid. If they let Jack live then many other people will die. The Witch decides that Jack must die instead. The other characters won't connive at this and so the Witch rejects them:

WITCH You're so nice.
 You're not good,
 You're not bad,
 You're just nice.

(Sondheim, 2011: 98.)

As the Witch sees, niceness isn't enough. Raymond Knapp suggests that: “nice” may well be a code word for Christian values, especially as it is set against both “good”

and “right,” the latter a code word for justice' (Knapp, 2006: 161). Knapp goes on to say that: 'It is significant, then, that the first of the two “lessons” laid out in the final two songs (in “No One Is Alone”) makes no reference to religion, whether through prayer or the earthly authority of the church' (Knapp, 2006: 161). Yet the 'niceness' surely refers to the requirement of heroines to be always clean, cheerful and good-spirited. Religion is hardly referenced in *Snow White* or *The Wizard of Oz* either: Snow White is briefly seen saying her prayers, and Dorothy's Aunt Emmy refers to herself as a 'Christian woman' which is the reason why she can't call Almira Gulch the names that she'd like to. And, in this context, 'right' seems hardly to accord with justice unless one thinks that the Giant's Widow has a right to kill Jack. Although Jack had killed the Giant, it was in self-defence - the Giant had been about to kill him: 'Someone bigger than her comes along the hall/To swallow you for lunch' (Sondheim, 2011: 71). The Witch is not arguing for justice, only for a pragmatic solution: 'If that's the aim,/Give me the blame - /Just give me the boy' (Sondheim, 2011: 98). The Witch at no point suggests that Jack deserves to be killed, or shows any interest in moral issues: she simply wants the Giant's Widow to stop. Niceness, on the other hand, means not getting your hands bloodied. The Witch will do without that sense of moral superiority: 'I'm not good,/I'm not nice,/ I'm just right' (Sondheim, 2011: 98).

It is part of the show's confrontation with disillusionment that the characters come to realise that they cannot simply be nice: in Act Two they learn to make choices that have consequences, deadly consequences as far as the Giant's widow is concerned. In this Sondheim and Lapine are revising the world-view of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *The Wizard of Oz*. In both of these classic children's films

the heroine is allowed to keep her innocence. In *Snow White* the evil queen tries to dislodge a rock onto the dwarfs who are advancing to get her, only for the rock to be struck by lightning, making the queen fall to her death. This can be read as an intervention by God or the evil deed of the Queen rebounding on her: either way it sidesteps the awkward question of what the dwarfs would have done if they had caught her. (They cannot hand her over to the authorities as she is the Queen.) And, whereas in L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (Chicago, New York: George M. Hill Company, 1900) Dorothy and her friends are sent to kill the Witch, in the film the Wizard asks them to get the Witch's broomstick. The Tin Man points out that they would have to kill the Witch to do that but the Wizard insists. In both book and film Dorothy doesn't mean to kill the Witch: she throws a bucket of water over her and the Witch disintegrates. And in the film Dorothy is doubly absolved from blood guilt, as Oz is only a dream (which it is not in the novel). Why, if water is fatal to her, did the Witch have a bucket of it so conveniently to hand? To say that the story is a dream doesn't answer the question, as all the other characters in the dream have acted consistently: it still reads as a convenient get-out for Dorothy. As Knapp puts it about *Snow White*:

The substitution in the Disney film of divine retribution [...] follows another American trope (in popular fiction, at least), in which punishment and killing, and the vindictiveness they express, are regarded as inappropriate activities for the innocent of soul, so that evil is almost always punished less directly, ideally as a direct result and reflection of its own dastardliness.

(Knapp, 2006: 129.)

We have already seen the perils of niceness: when we first see Cinderella with the Ugly Sisters she tries to tolerate their bullying by telling herself:

CINDERELLA Never mind, Cinderella,

Kind Cinderella -

[...]

Nice good nice kind good nice -

(Sondheim, 2011: 62.)

Cinderella is pulling the hair of one of her stepsisters as she sings this, showing that there is something struggling beneath the niceness. Cinderella feels the pressure (especially felt by girls; boys are allowed to misbehave more) demanded by society that they be unfailingly nice, even when they are not treated well. Niceness is similar to the naivete we met in *Sweeney Todd*, and it can positively endanger you. As Red Riding Hood sings after her encounter with the slaving pervert Wolf: 'he seemed so nice' but now she realises that: 'Nice is different than good' (Sondheim, 2011: 69). When Cinderella tells the Baker's Wife that the Prince is 'a very nice prince' (Sondheim, 2011: 69) we are alerted to the fact that he is like the Wolf.

Little Red Riding Hood sings after being rescued from the belly of the Wolf:

LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

Isn't it nice to know a lot!

And a little bit not...

(Sondheim, 2011: 69.)

She recognises that an increase in knowledge also means lost innocence. The fact that she uses the word 'Nice' here warns us that she doesn't really know as much as she thinks. The Wolf persuades her to try different paths in the woods, bringing in a recurring Sondheim motif of a path or road equalling a choice in life. ('The Road You Didn't Take' from *Follies* is a key example.) It is also a motif found in many fairy tales. But he is clearly the wrong choice: his slaving over Red Riding Hood is sexually charged (this was underlined in the original production by the fact that the prosthetic wolf costume worn by the actor had very noticeable genitals). Not that Little Red Riding Hood *is* sexually abused when she is eaten by the Wolf, but eating is an image of the way that a child might displace their sexual anxieties in their dreams. That the Wolf was a metaphor for a sexual predator was already an idea familiar from popular culture: Oscar Hammerstein alludes to it in 'There Is Nothing Like a Dame' from *South Pacific*: 'We feel hungry as the wolf felt/When he met Red Riding Hood-' (Hammerstein, 1949: 35). In *South Pacific* it is simply a comparison used by one of a group of sexually frustrated but non-threatening sailors: but Sondheim and Lapine make the metaphor a reality.

Jack also develops: when we first see him his principal attachment is to his cow - he is so simple that he thinks the cow is male. When he has to sell it to the Baker and his wife he sings a goodbye that is both poignant and funny. But later, after he has returned from the beanstalk, he sings 'Giants in the Sky' where he explains that, in the Giant's kingdom, he has felt things that he never felt before. This is partly to do with dawning sexual awareness:

JACK And she gives you food
 And she gives you rest,
 And she draws you close
 To her giant breast,
 And you know things now that you never knew before,
 Not till the sky.

(Sondheim, 2011: 71.)

But it is more than that: Jack is another of Sondheim's characters who expresses the thrill of discovering a whole new world that shimmers with possibilities. As Sondheim put it: 'James's wife, Sarah, suggested that these songs would be more interesting if they dealt with what the adventures *meant* to the adventurers, rather than simply being narrative descriptions' (Sondheim, 2011: 69). Both Jack and Red Riding Hood come to realise that, in order for wishes to come true, they have to be acted on, which means making choices. But as the Narrator reminds us: 'these were not people familiar with making choices - ' (Lapine, 1987: 101). The characters often try to duck their responsibility; as Jack puts it in 'Giants in the Sky' 'you wish that you could live in between,' (Sondheim, 2011: 72) between home and the comforts of the familiar and 'the world you never thought to explore' (Sondheim, 2011: 72). But this idea of living in between can also be seen positively. When she leaves the Prince, Cinderella says that she wishes to live somewhere 'in-between' (Lapine, 1987: 128) but in her case this isn't an avoidance of making decisions, it is the opposite: now Cinderella wants to live somewhere away from the slavery of her past or the fantasy of the Prince's palace, to be somewhere where she will live her own life.

Fairy tales have always had morals but this show calls them into question: in the 'First Midnight' sequence the characters take turns to sing a number of different morals and then they start to drown each other out and soon all is confusion. But in the show's finale they sing different morals that show a deeper knowledge of the world; for instance in the 'First Midnight' sequence Jack's Mother sings: "Slotted spoons don't hold much soup..." (Sondheim, 2011: 70), meaning that Jack isn't very bright. At the end she sings: "The slotted spoon *can* catch the potato..." (Lapine, 1987: 133). This doesn't contradict the first statement but shows that she now realises that there are qualities in Jack that she hadn't appreciated. The show, by changing the maxims the characters use, is telling us that reliance on pat little maxims is not enough. As the Baker puts it in 'It Takes Two':

BAKER It takes care,
It takes patience and fear and despair
To change.
Though you swear
To change,
Who can tell if you do?
It takes two.

(Sondheim, 2011: 75.)

The Baker's Wife tells him that 'You've changed' and he has. Realising that 'It takes two' is a move away from selfishness, a move towards the goal of community that the

second act will endorse. As the Baker says it takes 'patience and fear and despair' to change, an unusual list: the Baker acknowledges despair as a force for good in that, presumably, it forces him to do something. 'Though you swear/To change' makes it sound as if he has tried to change before and failed, but here in the woods he can, because he can acknowledge his wife as a partner.

At the end of Act One the characters all seem to have got what they want. Sondheim and Lapine bring back some of the violence of the Grimm stories: we see one of Cinderella's Ugly Sisters cut off her toes and the other one cut off her heels to try and fit their feet into the slipper. This detail is in the Grimm story but typically edited out in modern versions, such as the Rodgers and Hammerstein *Cinderella* (1957, revised 1965 and 1997). The Ugly Sisters are then blinded by the birds that Cinderella's Mother had left her. This scenes can be quite a shock for those brought up on the sanitised versions. None of the other characters are worried about these brutal mutilations and instead are celebrating that they will be happy 'Ever After.'

By including these unpalatable elements of the original stories Sondheim and Lapine are perhaps kicking against an American tendency, in its children's literature at any rate, to censor the brutal aspects of life. As L. Frank Baum writes in his introduction to *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*:

Yet the old-time fairy tale, having served for generations, may now be classified as 'historical' in the children's library; for the time has come for a series of newer 'wonder tales' in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale. Modern education includes morality; therefore, the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder-tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incident.

(Introduction, unnumbered page, Oxford University Press edition, 2015.)

But in Act One of *Into the Woods* the brutal events only happen to the nasty characters, and are not shocking. In Act Two bad things happen to good people.

The concept of a happy ending implies stasis. Act Two shows that this is impossible. As Lapine has said:

When you are young, you envision happiness in such an idealized way. As you get older you realize happiness involves a lot of problems. To me, that's not an unhappy kind of ending – it's just a more informed sense of happy, a happiness that's been earned.

(Quoted in Gordon. J, 1992: 309.)

Near the start of Act Two a giant's foot comes through the sky and brings death to the enchanted forest. (Perhaps provoked by the *hubris* of the characters who declare that they have never been so happy.) The foot belongs to the widow of the giant whom Jack had killed in Act One. Actions have unforeseen consequences. Just as the characters are arguing about what they should do about the Giant they notice the Narrator for the first time. They fight over whether they should pretend he's Jack and offer him to the Giant, and, just as they seem to agree to let him go, the Witch grabs him and pushes him towards the Giant who picks him up and fatally drops him. The killing of the Narrator could be symbolic of the moment when the growing child begins to realise that the stories are not always to be trusted. The characters notice the Narrator just after he has said to the audience: 'It is interesting to examine the moral issue at question here. The finality of stories such as these dictates -' (Lapine, 1987: 102). In other words the Narrator is killed when he stops being a Narrator and starts

to be a critic. From this one might deduce that Sondheim and Lapine don't want the audience to distance themselves too much from the events on stage.

Bruno Bettelheim's book *The Uses of Enchantment* is often supposed to have inspired Sondheim and Lapine though in fact both men were hostile to Bettelheim's utilitarian readings of the stories. Lapine has said: 'Ultimately, we defined our narrator as a kind of intellectual, a Bettelheim figure; I wanted to get rid of Bettelheim!' (Mankin, 1988: 55 quoted in Banfield, 1993: 383). The Narrator wants to stand back emotionally from the stories and see them merely as folklore. It is perhaps significant that he is 'The Narrator', is a word associated with documentary, rather than 'The Storyteller' which is associated with magic. *Into the Woods* shows that the questions that the stories ask about right and wrong are still real questions that have to be answered. Sondheim shared Lapine's dissatisfaction with Bettelheim: 'Bettelheim's insistent point was that children would find fairy tales useful in part because the protagonists' tribulations always resulted in triumph, the happily ever after' (Sondheim, 2011, 58). *Into the Woods*, however, is about how to deal with life when one doesn't triumph.

The Narrator doubles as The Mysterious Man who turns out to be the Baker's long-lost father. In Act One he speaks in rhymed riddles that hint at his identity and then he emerges at the end of the act and helps the Witch perform the magic spell that restores her beauty. In other words, he doesn't just tell the story: he breaks into it to ensure that all is resolved happily. The fact that he is suddenly revealed as the Baker's father, enabling the Witch to end her curse on the Baker, and then seemingly dies

within a few minutes, is a satirical comment on the kind of story that sacrifices credibility to bring in a *deus ex machina* to ensure a neat happy ending.

But Sondheim's belief, as has been referenced before, is that 'Our lives aren't scripted'. The lives of the characters from familiar fairy tales such as Jack and Cinderella feel scripted because most audiences are familiar with the stories. But as Tony and Maria start to break away, so to speak, from the pattern of doom that *Romeo and Juliet* imposes on *West Side Story* (Tony dies but Maria doesn't), so, in the second act of *Into the Woods* the characters go beyond the familiar stories into new territory and start to grow. The Narrator is dead and there is no-one guiding the story. After her fling, the Baker's Wife falls victim to the Giant and dies. This part of the story could be seen as an overly-severe punishment of her infidelity; but there is no hint that, even though she has betrayed the Baker, she *deserves* to die. In traditional fairy tales death is a punishment for the wicked but in the second act of this show the deaths are arbitrary: people die because they happen to be standing in the wrong place. As part of his seduction technique the Prince had said: 'Any moment we could be crushed' (Sondheim, 2011: 91). When bad things can happen at any moment, he argues, one lives for the moment. Randomness has entered the woods. But the Baker's Wife and the surviving characters decide that randomness is not the same as meaninglessness.

In fact the Baker's Wife seems curiously reminiscent of Marion Crane in *Psycho* (Paramount, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960). In the Hitchcock film we see Marion (Janet Leigh) run off with \$40,000 that belongs to a client of her employer. The viewer

follows how she stops at the Bates Motel, befriends the lonely and seemingly-mother-dominated owner, and then decides to return to her home town and give the money back – only to be randomly, and without explanation (for her), stabbed to death in the shower. Hitchcock had done what few, if any, mainstream movies had done before – kill an audience identification figure before their story arc had come to an end. Both Marion Crane and the Baker's Wife have repented of their sins (the Baker's Wife only ambiguously) and are about to go back to their former life, when, without warning, they die. Just as Hitchcock shocked audiences by bringing randomness into the world of the thriller, so Sondheim and Lapine bring it into the world of the musical, taking away its reassuring quality.

In this show, more than any other Sondheim show, we are guided through this process of which disillusionment is a part. I have broken down the closing scenes into five successive stages of disillusionment and return. 1. Blame, 2. Renunciation and despair, 3. Renunciation that changes its mind, 4. New-found maturity and 5. Community. Blame is the theme of 'Your Fault', which shows the characters at their lowest ebb, as they start to accuse each other and pointlessly argue. They all finally blame the Witch for growing the beans in the first place: a blatantly ridiculous attempt to pass the buck which the Witch soon silences. The Witch then sings 'Last Midnight', a song of renunciation and despair. As far as she is concerned they are all about to die and she washes her hands of them. She throws the magic beans on the ground, for which they all scramble, and she mocks them for wanting the beans so much. She curses them:

WITCH I'm leaving you my last curse:

I'm leaving you alone.

(Sondheim, 2011: 98.)

This is the curse that the characters have been afraid of throughout the show. In 'Giants in the Sky' Jack admits to being: 'really scared being all alone' (Sondheim, 2011: 71). The Witch sees them all 'Separate and alone,/ Everybody down on all fours' (Sondheim, 2011: 98) as they scabble for her magic beans. The Witch does not see the possibility of them ever being a meaningful community: only a group of individuals, all out for themselves. The Witch can't move on: now her daughter is dead she feels she has no reason to try. In Act One the Witch had sung 'Stay with Me' to Rapunzel, to encourage her to stay at home. In Act Two this song, with new words, becomes 'Lament', a song sung after Rapunzel's death, and which faces the uncomfortable fact that: 'Children can only grow/From something you love/To something you lose...' (Sondheim, 2011: 91). This line chokes her and she sings no more. At the end of 'Last Midnight' her song dissolves into a scream. The Witch renounces the group and renounces singing altogether. She asks her mother to curse her once more: she reverses the glamorous transformation of Act One. Beauty, as so often in Sondheim's work, does not last. The Witch becomes once more her old malevolent ugly self.⁴¹

41 In *Sense of Occasion* Harold Prince recollects the opening of *Damn Yankees* in 1956. 'When the show opened in New York, on opening night in fact, the plot called for Gwen [Verdon], who'd been playing a beautiful witch, to be turned into an ugly hag at the curtain. The reviews for the show were good, but it came as something of a shock to us that the audience resented our turning the girl they'd fallen in love with into an old crone.' (Prince, 2017: 21.) The end of *Damn Yankees* was altered, but it is interesting to speculate that a director might now show the transformation from beauty to ugliness (usually it is the other way round) that was not accepted in 1956. Some day Hal Prince will come.

WITCH Give me claws and a hunch,
 Just away from this bunch [...]

(Sondheim, 2011: 98.)

Here we see the breakdown of all values, for the Witch at least. She succumbs to the nihilistic idea that there is no meaning and no community.⁴²

The fairy tale world of the woods is not stable. If curses are reversible so are good things. Take The Witch's transformation. It is unusual that it is the Witch who is transformed, not Cinderella. Cinderella gets a new dress, but her transformation from skivvy to guest at a royal ball is not made much of. This is because the transformation is not what she really needs, as she will discover when she is married to the vainglorious prince. Instead it is the Witch's transformation from Witch to beautiful woman that is emphasised. This is not entirely unprecedented: it is reminiscent of the Witch's transformation in Disney's *Snow White*, where the Queen transforms herself into a gnarled old woman to give Snow White the poisoned apple. But, in *Into the Woods*, we start with the Witch as the traditional warty crone and it is her desire to become the beautiful woman she once was that starts the plot in motion. It is unusual, to say the least, to have a leading lady covered in latex warts for the first act of a show and when she becomes beautiful she finds that she has lost her power to cast spells as she is now a woman not a witch. She had to make a choice and, at the end of Act One she regrets the choice that she has made:

⁴² In a cabaret performance of a selection of Sondheim songs presented at the Jermyn Street Theatre in July 2010, *Classic Moments- Hidden Treasures*, devised and directed by Tim McArthur, the song was performed as a stand-alone number by Valerie Cutko as the last song of a woman about to commit suicide.

WITCH I was perfect.
 I had everything but beauty.
 I had power, [...]
 Then I went into the woods
 To get my wish
 And now I'm ordinary.

(Sondheim, 2011: 83.)

But this change is reversible, and in Act Two the Witch turns back into her former self.

Like Prospero, The Witch uses magic on a disparate number of people for revenge; but unlike the magician of *The Tempest* she grants no forgiveness (when the Witch later finds that she can't cast a spell over Rapunzel any more she breaks her magic staff out of petulance, not renunciation). In this enchanted kingdom the characters cannot look to a magician to save them: they have to rely on themselves. The Witch has kept Rapunzel locked in a tower for fourteen years and when, later, Rapunzel angrily confronts her the Witch's comic yet heartfelt response is: 'I was just trying to be a good mother' (Lapine, 1987: 95). This line usually gets a laugh, but the world is a dangerous place, and the Witch was right to be afraid.

Cinderella, Jack and Red Riding Hood all accept that their initial wishes were wrong: Jack shouldn't have stolen, Red shouldn't have strayed from the path,

Cinderella should never have wished to go to the ball. The Baker has not yet reached this point. Unlike those of the other characters, his original wish was not selfish: he wanted to have a child. However, after the Witch has abandoned them, he runs out on the group who need him to stay. As the Baker wanders in the woods his father, referred to in the script as Mysterious Man, reappears. The Baker blames his father for starting the whole chain of events. The Mysterious Man helps him, not, this time, by giving him the objects he needs, as he had done in the first act, but by making the Baker confront what he is doing. The Mysterious Man admits that he himself ran away and asks the Baker if he isn't doing the same. The Baker avoids the question by starting to sing 'No More'.

The Baker wants to shrug off responsibility: he feels that he has suffered enough. The Baker goes on to add: 'No more feelings./Time to shut the door' (Sondheim, 2011: 100). This is another song where a character attempts to betray his principles, but, unlike Kayama or Franklin Shepard, the Baker is not abandoning them for the sake of worldly advantage but because he doesn't want to suffer any more. That he wants to close the door is a sign of his negative state of mind. Opening doors has recurred in more than one Sondheim show as a sign of hope: in *Company* Joanne says 'Oh, I just heard a door open that's been stuck a long time', (Furth, 1996: 111) when she realises that Robert is starting to mature, and there is the number 'Opening Doors' in *Merrily We Roll Along* where the three main characters sing of their opportunities. Conversely closing doors is a sign of negativity: at the end of *Sweeney Todd* the unrepentant Sweeney slams a door on the audience; and in the song 'What Can You Lose?' (from the film *Dick Tracy*, Touchstone Pictures, dir. Warren Beatty, 1990) the singer

envisages being rejected by the love object: 'So she closes the door'. (Sondheim, 2011: 348).

The Mysterious Man sees that his son is about to make the same mistake he made many years before. So he tempts his son to go ahead and run away. But he does not really want the Baker to do this, rather his father is making the Baker realise what would happen if he did run away.

MYSTERIOUS MAN Trouble is, son,

The farther you run,

The more you feel undefined

For what you have left undone

And, more, what you've left behind.

(Sondheim, 2011: 100.)

In other words, we are defined by our choices, not to choose is not to be. Then the Mysterious Man admits his culpability: 'We disappoint,/We leave a mess,/We die but we don't...' (Sondheim, 2011: 100). The Baker tries to understand what he is like as a son. 'We disappoint/In turn I guess./Forget, though, we won't' (Sondheim, 2011: 100). Then the Baker and his father duet on the line: 'Like father, like son.' (Sondheim, 2011: 100). His father has forced a realisation on him: the Baker understands that if he runs away he will be just like the father he blames for his problems.

No sooner has the Mysterious Man done this than he runs off again. Maybe he realises that the Baker has to go back and fight the giant without him. The Baker, this time alone on the stage, again sings the phrase 'No more' but this time he sings 'No more giants'. He still doesn't want to fight the giant: 'Can't we just pursue our lives/ With our children and our wives?' (Sondheim, 2011: 100) but he accepts that he must go back to the group.

BAKER All the children...
 All the giants...
 (*After a moment's thought.*)
 No more.

(Sondheim, 2011: 100.)

'No more' has now totally changed its meaning: it is not an evasion of responsibility but an acceptance of it. It has gone from negative to positive. It is not a plea for life to stop, but a way of expressing his determination to stop the giant whatever it takes. When he returns to the group he says 'Give me my son' (Lapine, 1987: 125) and cradles the baby in his arms.

When the Baker tells the Mysterious Man that he thought he was dead the Mysterious Man replies: 'Not completely. Are we ever?' (Lapine, 1987: 123). By this he means that as long as people are remembered they are not really dead. This is a similar sentiment to that expressed by the 1st Heavenly Friend in *Carousel*: 'As long as there is one person on earth who remembers you - it isn't over,' (Hammerstein 1945: 139) and it also echoes a later scene in *Carousel*, where Billy, who has committed

suicide, sees from the afterlife his daughter growing up without a father. The Starkeeper says: 'Somethin' like what happened to you when you was a kid, ain't it?' (Hammerstein, 1945: 150). It is also reminiscent of the song 'Come Home' in *Allegro* where the ghost of the hero's mother returns in Act Two to call her son back to where he can practice his true vocation of medicine. *Into the Woods* is perhaps Sondheim's most Rodgers and Hammerstein-like show: the only one that is prepared to give explicit morals.

The Baker rejoins Cinderella, Red Riding Hood and Jack, and the four of them work together to kill the Giant. This again dramatises the clash between pragmatism and idealism that has run through the show. Pragmatism might be seen to be an anti-idealist position: a disillusioned rejection of ideals in favour of a policy of 'the ends justify the means' (or indeed the beans). And yet, in the final confrontation with the Giant's Widow, idealism and pragmatism blend, as they often do in life. The Baker has rejected self-preservation and so he is forced to act, like the rest of them, never sure if he is doing the right thing.

The problem of justice, and that of pragmatism versus idealism, is articulated when Red Riding Hood says: 'But the giant's a person. Aren't we to show forgiveness?' (Lapine, 1987: 128). Cinderella and the Baker both sing of the importance of forgiveness and moving on, accepting the 'Terrible mistakes' (Sondheim, 2011: 102) of parents.

BAKER, CINDERELLA People make mistakes,

Holding to their own,
Thinking they're alone.

(Sondheim, 2011: 101.)

They understand the mistake that the Witch made in thinking that everyone was 'Separate and alone'.

The formation of the family unit is a central trope in Sondheim's work. It can be seen in *West Side Story* ('You got brothers around,/You're a family man' from 'The Jet Song'), 'Together, Wherever We Go' from *Gypsy*, 'Not While I'm Around' from *Sweeney Todd*, 'Children and Art' from *Sunday in the Park with George*, 'Our Little Home' from *Into the Woods* and 'Family' in *Assassins*. It is in fact family (often an improvised family such as an acting troupe or a group of neighbours and friends) that help Sondheim's characters face the disillusion that often overtakes them.

This is another Hammersteinian moment, similar to that in *Carousel* where Nettie comforts Julie after Billy's death. 'You'll Never Walk Alone' has become one of the anthems of consolation and endurance. 'No One Is Alone' concentrates on how one must make decisions for oneself: 'You decide, but you are not alone' (Sondheim, 2011: 101). (A phrase that echoes W.H. Auden's lines from the original version of 'September 1, 1939' 'no one exists alone' in the stanza that ends 'We must love one another or die'.) The song seems to espouse moral relativism- good or bad are decided on by each person for themselves. Yet in the end the show does not embrace this position: we ultimately have a responsibility for each other. *How* we should best act we have to decide alone but one cannot decide that there is no right or wrong, that

there is only expedience - that is the mistake that the Witch made. Cinderella and the Baker sing separately and then together and then Red Riding Hood and Jack join in, becoming a community in song. In *Anyone Can Whistle* Fay had figured that no hero was going to come riding to save her: 'And when you want things done,/ You have to do them yourself alone!' (Sondheim, 2010: 134). Here, they learn to do it together.

Just as Arthur Laurents removed the fate motif from *West Side Story* and Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler, in *A Little Night Music*, removed the magic spell from *Smiles of a Summer Night*, so Sondheim and Lapine take most of the magic spells out of the fairy tales. It is significant that among the few spells in the story are the Witch's mother's curse of ugliness on the Witch and the Witch's curse of childlessness on the Baker. They are not only curses, they are reversible. In other words what might seem to be a malevolent fate is no excuse for inaction. Just as Oedipus never rails against an unjust fate so the characters never use the fact that they have a malign spell cast on them as an excuse. It is significant that the Witch pretends that she has no choice when she does something wrong: 'You give me no choice!' (Lapine, 1987: 73) she says when she attempts to curse Rapunzel, somehow pretending that her petulant attempt to spoil her daughter's happiness is inevitable. Instead the surviving characters learn that they have a choice.

How much the characters have learned can be shown when we compare their intentions at the beginning with their intentions at the end. At the end of the first scene in Act One they had sung:

ALL To see-
 To sell-
 To get-
 To bring-
 To make-
 To lift -
 To go to the Festival!

(Sondheim, 2011: 64.)

In the final song they sing:

ALL To mind,
 To heed,
 To find,
 To think,
 To teach,
 To join,
 To go to the Festival!

(Sondheim, 2011: 105.)

They are no longer just out for what they can get. So we see the enactment of the final stage of disillusionment and the return from it: the formation of Community. Although the characters had all been on stage at the same time at the beginning of Act One they had been divided into five separate units: the Baker and his Wife, Red Riding Hood, Jack and his Mother, Cinderella and her family and the Witch. Now they are together.

What Knapp writes of *The Wizard of Oz* applies here.

But in acting, one must nevertheless be more righteous than self-serving – which explains the odd collective of mutually needful personages in the film, individually lacking something essential, who together, by acting on each other's behalf, constitute a functioning whole.

(Knapp, 2006: 140-141.)

As Lapine said:

If you read Bettelheim, or even the Jungians, they say that the issues presented in fairy tales are about individual or collective psychic development. It seems to me that the real world is about being part of a whole.

(Mankin, 1988: 55 quoted in Banfield, 1993: 384.)

The show's final number is 'Children Will Listen', where the characters, both living and dead, join together in song. Previously, in 'Lament', the Witch had sung that 'Children won't listen' (Sondheim, 2011: 91) as a bitter lament for Rapunzel, who had disobeyed her, and been crushed by the Giant. Now she sings that they will listen; not necessarily when you tell them what to do, but they will listen when you tell them stories. They also may listen when you don't want them to. As the Witch adds: 'Careful the tale you tell./ *That* is the spell' (Sondheim, 2011:103). In *Look, I Made a Hat* it is specified that the Witch sings this directly to the audience. In this show, the morals are mostly for the parents.

Family is central to this show. Even the Witch, as most witches do not, has a child. If this is an acknowledgement that some mothers can be witches, i.e. bad mothers, yet making the Witch a mother humanises her – she is a possessive and over-

protective parent it's true, but not entirely a bad one. Her own witch-hood is the result of a curse laid upon her by her own mother, which underlines the point of parents leaving legacies that their children have to deal with. In *Gypsy* Rose realises, in 'Rose's Turn' that it was her desertion by her own mother that has made her try to live through Louise. In *Gypsy* the parent becomes the child, in *Into the Woods* the characters become like their parents. But this is not inevitable, unlike his errant father, the Baker does not run away.

If this fragmentation of family is, at first sight, disillusioning, it can be made into a good thing: if families are broken they can also be remade, and no-one need be left out. Cinderella learns to 'Honor their mistakes' (Sondheim, 2011: 101), an echo of the Biblical injunction to 'Honour thy father and thy mother' (Exodus: ch.20, v.12, Deuteronomy: ch.5 v.16) and break the destructive patterns of the past. The damage that the Baker might do if he doesn't break the pattern of running away is hinted at by The Witch, just before she gives it all up. 'You're all liars and thieves,/ Like his father,/ Like his son will be, too -/ Oh, why bother?' (Sondheim, 2011: 98). The sins of the fathers will, she thinks, be visited on the sons as they will not learn from the father's mistakes.

In S.F. Stoddart's essay 'Happily... Ever, Never' he writes of *Into the Woods* that: 'As act 2 [sic] continues, the audience senses the chaos and confusion of these now "perfect" lives, which serve to deconstruct the harmony found in the "bourgeois" materiality of their initial goals.' (Ed. Goodhart, 2000: 215.) And yet it is a traditional idea of family that the show ends up celebrating: it celebrates the idea of family even as it acknowledges that it is fragile and often made up of the remains of

other broken families. Both the Witch and Jack's mother are single parents and, by the end of the show, Jack's Mother and Red Riding Hood's Granny are dead, the Witch has lost Rapunzel, and the Baker has become a father but has lost his wife. Yet in the finale the dead characters reappear, and the Baker's Wife sings: "No one leaves for good" (Sondheim, 2011: 102). *Into The Woods* asserts, along with *Carousel* that, even though people die, we remember them and they still help us to live.

We see the Baker trying to calm his infant son by telling him the story of what has happened. Like the Narrator he is both storyteller and father but he doesn't pretend, as the Narrator did, to be outside the story while simultaneously entering it in disguise. Instead he starts to tell the tale hesitantly, feeling unsure of himself. But it is by telling stories that man preserves his creativity and the truth as he sees it.

Learning to take responsibility for oneself is of course what the stories had been about. In *The Wizard of Oz* the Scarecrow wants a brain, the Tin Man wants a heart and the Cowardly Lion wants courage. Throughout the film they develop these attributes: it is the Scarecrow who gets the idea to bring the chandelier down on the monkey people, the supposedly heartless Tin Man often cries and even the Cowardly Lion joins in the attack on the castle. In a way the Wizard, although a fraud, is not a fraud, as he has after all given them what they want. They find that what they wanted was really inside them all along, just as Dorothy realises that happiness is to be found at home. Similarly the characters in *Into the Woods* find that they have the ability to defeat the giant. This goes deeper than an American insistence on self-reliance: it is an important realisation for any person. This is how Glinda explains her not telling

Dorothy at the beginning that she could click her heels together and go home: because Dorothy wouldn't have believed her, and had to learn it for herself. There is a similar moment in *Pinocchio* when Pinocchio, having escaped from Pleasure Island, comes home to find that Geppetto has been swallowed by a whale. After having been told to always follow Jiminy Cricket, his conscience: it is Pinocchio who decides to rescue Geppetto, and Jiminy Cricket is, at first, a coward who wants him to reconsider. In other words Pinocchio doesn't need to be told to rescue Geppetto, he understands that he must, independently of society's expectation of him.

It is significant that *Into the Woods* has no easily identifiable star role. In the original production top billing went to Bernadette Peters as the Witch, but the Witch is not on-stage for the formation of community and their triumph over the Giant, although she does return for the final ensemble number. Second-billed was Joanna Gleason as the Baker's Wife, who would be a natural audience identification figure, being written as a modern woman who has somehow been born in this fairy-tale kingdom. But the Baker's Wife is killed before the final scene. This would not happen to a star, one could not have written Ethel Merman or Mary Martin out before the climax of the show. But to not have a clearly-defined star part is one of the points of the show: the community gradually takes shape in front of the audience, where no one personality dominates. Small roles can play significant parts: for instance Jack's mother is killed by the Prince's Steward. The Steward doesn't mean to, he only wants to stop her from antagonising the giant, but he hits her with his staff, fatally wounding her. It would have been quite easy for Jack's mother to be killed by the Giant, or maybe by the Witch, and one can imagine a different director asking Sondheim and

Lapine to make that change: objecting that no-one knows or cares who the Steward is. But it is part of the randomness within the show that a small part can have such a catastrophic effect.

Hammerstein too wrote about the formation of community. In *Oklahoma!* the community is formed in the party scene with 'The Farmer and the Cowman', where Aunt Eller stops the box social from degenerating into a brawl by usurping traditionally male behaviour (she fires a gun in the air); in *Show Boat* it is the women who show themselves to be community-minded, (and an inter-racial community) in the song 'Can't Help Lovin' That Man'; in *Carousel* Nettie cares for the women and forms a community for which there is no male equivalent. In *Into the Woods* there is a similar criticism of male dominant behaviour: when the Baker's Wife follows the Baker into the woods he orders her home: 'You are not to come and that is final', (Lapine, 1987: 18) and only later does he acknowledge that he needs her, in the song 'It Takes Two'. Although, considering the fact that the Baker's Wife is later killed, perhaps the Baker wasn't completely unjustified in wanting her to go home.

The blithe confidence of the opening of the show has gone:

RED RIDING HOOD The way is clear,
The light is good,
I have no fear,
Nor no one should.

(Sondheim, 2011: 61.)

Here the characters are confident: they don't think that there is anything to worry about. By the end this mood has changed. The Baker's wife, who has returned from the dead, tells her husband, who is cradling their baby:

WIFE Hold him to the light now,
 Let him see the glow.
 Things will be all right now.
 Tell him what you know...

(Sondheim, 2011: 102.)

The light that the characters had taken for granted at the beginning, is at the end still there. The characters now know that there is darkness too, but find strength in passing on what they have learned.

A similar movement can be traced in:

ALL No need to be afraid there -
BAKER, CINDERELLA (*Fearfully*)
 There's something in the glade there...

(Sondheim, 2011: 64.)

At the end of the show the light is the same but the characters have changed and see it differently:

BAKER, CINDERELLA, JACK, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD (*Softly*)

The light is getting dimmer...

BAKER I think I see a glimmer -

(Sondheim: 2011: 105.)

At the beginning of the show they take the light for granted and then are afraid by something in the shadows. At the end they see that the light is dying and yet spot a glimmer. They have lost their blithe confidence based on ignorance and learned to hope.

The first and last words of the show are 'I wish'. Cinderella says them both times, thus admitting that one goes on wishing and that in life there is no happy ending where everything is resolved. Instead you realise that you have to keep going back into the woods, keep facing new challenges: 'But everything you learn there/Will help when you return there' (Sondheim, 2011: 103). *Into the Woods*, like *Follies*, is about the impossibility, not of happiness, but of happy ever after.

The show accepts that our lives aren't scripted: that there is no guarantee that we will get what we want, but it also endorses the idea that life does have meaning. Life is not just made up of moments, but rather there is a larger story that the characters belong to, that of learning to help each other. The Narrator dies but storytelling goes on: families suffer bereavement, and yet they get reformed so that the survivors are

not left alone. As with *Sunday*, the form of the piece is fragmented, but the message of the piece is traditional.

Sondheim's experience with Lapine in a way mirrors that of the characters in *Into the Woods*, they move through cynicism and despair and reconnect with hope, as did Sondheim, who had felt 'in a morass of despair after the joyful public slaughter of *Merrily We Roll Along*' (Sondheim, 2011, XXIII).

Just what happens if we tell the wrong stories is dealt with in Sondheim's next show *Assassins*.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ASSASSINS (1990)

Someone Tell the Story.

Assassins marked the second collaboration between Sondheim and John Weidman. In their first, *Pacific Overtures*, they had been critical of American expansionism and its effect on another culture. Here they examine the effect that that culture, the deep-seated sense in American life that anything is possible and that one only has to reach out and take it, has on people who live in America itself. It deals with a kind of national disillusionment. It is notable that, while in the shows written with Lapine characters are able to overcome the restrictions placed on them and fulfil their dreams (albeit at a price), in the shows written with Weidman characters are not able to escape: Manjiro must surrender his topknot, and Wilson and Addison Mizner end up on the road to eternity, which is going nowhere. And in *Assassins*, none of the assassins gain any wisdom or comes to understand that what they have done is wrong. In the Weidman shows characters ultimately do not take responsibility for their actions or become integrated in a wider story. It is the fact that they can't join a wider story, a story of success and acceptance, that is what frustrates them.

Assassins deals, as does *Gypsy*, with the disillusionment of being excluded from the American Dream. The expression of the American Dream can be found in a great deal of American popular music, with its frequent messages of can-do optimism and self-reliance: and this musical, along with *Follies*, is Sondheim's most concentrated examination of the effect of that kind of song on the singer. In *Follies* and *Assassins* we see the clearest expression of Sondheim's concern that music will feed dreams that

can't be fulfilled. One is invited both to enjoy, and also to stand back from, the songs that are being sung. If, as the Balladeer reminds us, 'the country's built on dreams' (Sondheim, 2011: 136), these dreams are shown to be potentially dangerous, precisely because they can create disillusionment and bitterness.

Gypsy reveals disillusionment with the myths about becoming a star; *Follies* takes on the myth of marriage as a happy ending; *Into the Woods* examines the myths underlying fairy tales, and *Assassins* takes on America's myths about itself - how it is a land of opportunity, where anyone can make it. As Weidman put it: 'There are cherished national myths which we like to repeat and which create expectations in people which, more often than not, remain unsatisfied'. ('Knockin' 'em dead in the aisles: Interview with Sarah Hemming. *The Independent*, 28 October, 1992.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-musicals-knockin-em-dead-in-the-aisles-author-of-assassins-john-weidman-talks-to-sarah-1560013.html>)

Assassins shows these myths being used as excuses for violence.

The show is, in a way, a compressed musical history of America: Stephen Foster influenced 'The Ballad of Booth', 'The Ballad of Guiteau' draws on ragtime and the cakewalk, 'How I Saved Roosevelt' is inspired by Sousa's marches, the 'Gun Song' is in the style of the barber shop quartet, the pop ballad is the model for 'Unworthy of Your Love' and the uplifting Broadway musical number becomes 'Everybody's Got the Right'.

The score, however, is not simply a compendium of pastiche: Sondheim uses these songs to alert us to the fact that something is wrong. As Scott Miller says of the opening of the show: 'From the moment we hear "Hail to the Chief" in $\frac{3}{4}$ time – the

wrong meter – we know things are amiss'. (Scott Miller, *From Assassins to West Side Story*. Heinemann, 1996: 9). This may seem to be a satirical device but in fact it goes deeper than that. This twisting of familiar tunes is a psychologically accurate representation of the twisted minds of the assassins: it is a way of showing, through non-naturalistic means, how they have misunderstood and misinterpreted the myths of their country. For instance in 'The Ballad of Czolgosz', about Leon Czolgosz's assassination of President McKinley, Sondheim's music incorporates the hymn 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'. It is a hymn especially associated with McKinley's assassination. James McKinley, in *Assassination in America*, described how, on his deathbed: 'McKinley... mumbled the last verse of 'Nearer, My God, To Thee,' and died about 2:15 A.M. on September 14...' (Quoted in Swayne, 2005: 134.) Swayne goes on to point out that:

The greatest melodic concordance between “The Ballad of Czolgosz” and the hymn occurs at the mention of the president's name in the ballad and at the words “nearer my God” in the hymn.

(Swayne, 2005: 134-135.)

In other words God and the presidency are ideas that are inextricably tangled in the minds of the killers. In 'The Ballad of Guiteau' Charles Guiteau sings: 'Glory hallelujah!' (Sondheim, 2011: 131) which echoes the triumphal: 'Glory, glory Hallelujah' of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic'. But Guiteau's 'Glory hallelujah' is toneless: Sondheim specifies in *Conversation Piece*, a video interview that he and John Weidman recorded for Music Theatre International, that the two Glory hallelujahs should be sung the same way - robotically. The toneless delivery undercuts the joyous message and makes us aware that Guiteau is not as joyful as he

makes out. Guiteau perverts one of the central patriotic songs in the American canon but finally, as we will see, he cannot make himself believe what he is singing.

The ironic echo of 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic', one of the most famous of American patriotic songs and indelibly associated with the Union cause, is made even stronger in the verse, where Guiteau sings: 'He is your lightning,/You His sword'. (Sondheim, 2011: 131.) This clearly echoes Julia Ward Howe's line from the Battle Hymn: 'He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword' but later on Guiteau gives away his true agenda when he sings: 'You are the lightning/And you're news!' (Sondheim, 2011: 131). Guiteau claims to serve God but really serves only his image of himself.

Not only does Sondheim refer to 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' in 'The Ballad of Guiteau', he also references a traditional song 'Charles Guiteau' (see McLaughlin, 2016: 193). The opening line of the traditional song is: 'Come all you Christian people' and, in Sondheim's song, the Balladeer's first line is: 'Come all ye Christians' (Sondheim, 2011: 131). Also, in the traditional song Guiteau expresses repentance: 'When I'm dead and buried/Oh Lord remember me' which becomes, in Sondheim's version, the egotistical 'I shall be remembered!' (Sondheim, 2011: 134).

In *Conversation Piece* Sondheim said that he wrote the show's opening song 'Everybody's Got the Right' as a response to 'that kind of bromide that persists in a good deal of optimistic mid-century musical comedy music and has another meaning here'. These distorted quotations, we might say, function like the Follies songs in

Follies: they remind the audience of former glories and make us see how far things have decayed.

And there are people who would lie to us in song, such as the Proprietor of the shooting gallery, whom we see in 'Everybody's Got the Right'. One by one, as the assassins come on, he addresses them: he knows just what they want and how to appeal to them. He is a dishonest showman, pandering to people's worst desires. In this number we can hear him corrupt some of the most potent ideas of the American myth. He even gives a deadly meaning to 'Hail to the Chief' when he suggests to Giuseppe Zangara that he can 'give some/Hail-a to da chief'. (Sondheim, 2011: 114.) When the other assassins have all gathered (apart from Oswald, who is not seen until near the end) then the Proprietor introduces them to John Wilkes Booth with the words: 'There's our/Pioneer' (Sondheim, 2011: 115). The Proprietor even perverts the ideal of the pioneer spirit - the idea that anything can be achieved by determination - by making Booth, the first successful assassin, a pioneer: which in a sense he is. Booth was the first man to become famous by killing a president and this gives the other assassins the idea that it is possible to gain lasting fame in this way. The Proprietor also calls Booth 'chief' (Sondheim, 2011: 115) as in 'Hail to the Chief' so Booth also usurps, as it were, the title of President. The Proprietor seductively promises an easy ride to glory.

PROPRIETOR Some guys

Think they can't be winners.

(Smiles, shakes his head)

First prize

Often goes to rank beginners.

(Sondheim, 2011: 114.)

The words are an echo of The Bible's 'the race is not to the swift' (Ecclesiastes, ch.9 v.11), where King Solomon expresses regret that life is not always just, and things do not always go as one might expect them. But The Proprietor slyly turns this into a promise. You won't have to work at it, he says, and you will still get the prize. This sets up the theme of winning prizes that is developed later in the song when Zangara says: 'I want prize. You gimme prize!' (Weidman, 1990: 9). Later, in the song 'Another National Anthem', there is an angry refrain of 'Where's my prize?' (Sondheim, 2011: 135).

The dream of untroubled future happiness can be heard in many popular songs: e.g. 'Blue Skies' (Irving Berlin, 1926), 'On the Sunny Side of the Street' (Jimmy McHugh, Dorothy Fields, 1930), 'It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow' (Irving Berlin, 1940), '(Open Up the Door) Let In the Good Times In' (Mitchell Torok, Ramona Redd, 1966). The assassins have absorbed these promises but have not realised that the songs are about acknowledging present unhappiness and hoping for the future. The Assassins feel that opportunities are the same as rights. 'Rich man, poor man, black or white,/ Pick your apple, take a bite' (Sondheim, 2011, 115) sing the assassins in unison, not seeing the irony that their image of opportunity is reminiscent of Satan tempting Adam and Eve. They have listened to the voice of Satan sugar-coated in a musical theatre number.

It is just after the assassination of Lincoln that the Balladeer first appears. In *Conversation Piece* Sondheim said that the Balladeer represents: 'the received wisdom of what happened in American history'. The Balladeer's message is that America has a social system that works and that: 'Every now and then a madman's/ Bound to come along' but that this 'Doesn't change the song...' (Sondheim, 2011: 119). But when the Balladeer sings the word 'song' (on the Original Broadway Cast album) the note is quavery, possibly indicating that his confidence is a pose. His only concern is to smooth over the alarm caused by the assassins. The Balladeer has four songs: 'The Ballad of Booth', 'The Ballad of Czolgosz', 'The Ballad of Guiteau', and 'Another National Anthem'. In each of the three ballads his attitude to the assassin is slightly different. In 'The Ballad of Booth' he is adversarial; in 'The Ballad of Czolgosz' he is ironical towards Czolgosz; and in 'The Ballad of Guiteau' he is encouraging to Guiteau.

In 'The Ballad of Booth' Booth is tragic and dignified while the Balladeer is hostile, even taunting:

BALLADEER You'd merely had
 A slew of bad
 Reviews -

BOOTH I said shut up!

(Sondheim, 2011: 119.)

The word 'Reviews' is sung on a taunting note, like a playground cry of 'nyeh-nyeh', (see Knapp, 2005: 168) as the Balladeer is mocking Booth. The Balladeer suggests that Booth had only become a killer because he was failing as an actor and was jealous of his more successful brother Edwin. Edwin Booth's greatest success was as Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, a part that John Wilkes Booth acts out in real life by killing Lincoln while shouting 'Sic Semper Tyrannis!' ['So die all tyrants']. (Weidman, 1990: 14.) The song is sung in the barn where the wounded Booth is hiding after the assassination. *'Booth tosses the diary to the Balladeer, who glances at it without opening it, as if he knows the contents'* (Sondheim, 2011: 119). But it is after Booth passes over the diary, with the plea that the Balladeer tell people what really happened, that the Balladeer starts to sing Booth's version of events. Instead of saying 'Shut up!' Booth now interjects with 'Tell them, boy!' (Sondheim, 2011: 119). Booth is struggling with a powerful disillusion and his tragic dignity, indicated by his stately bearing and his baritone voice, is such that an audience might be won over by him, until Sondheim jolts us with a glimpse of Booth's true character:

BOOTH How the union can never recover
 From that vulgar,
 High and mighty
 Nigger lover [...]

(Sondheim, 2011: 120.)

Then we hear Booth saying 'Never' four times in a broken voice: the Shakespearean actor echoing King Lear's five 'never's when he grieves for Cordelia. At the end of his

song Booth shoots himself. This is a change from the historical facts - Booth was actually shot by a Union soldier - but his suicide is in keeping with his despair and his self-dramatisation.

Once Booth is dead, however, the Balladeer no longer takes his side but instead sings bathetically that: 'Johnny Booth was a headstrong fellow' (Sondheim, 2011: 120). The Balladeer, no longer hypnotised by Booth, tries to trivialise the assassination. But the Balladeer's attempt at hiding his anger fails, and he finally lets his real emotions show when he sings 'Damn you, Booth!' (Sondheim, 2011: 120) echoing Booth's earlier line: 'Damn my soul if you must' (Sondheim, 2011: 120) and Booth's cry of 'Damn you, Lincoln' which the Balladeer had sung along with. Sondheim subtly criticises the way that popular history attempts to smooth over the pain of tragic events.

The show does not stick to strict historical chronology: after the assassination of Lincoln we see a scene in a bar: '*It could be on 14th Street in 1900, or on Columbus Avenue in 1991*'. (Weidman, 1990: 24.) This placing of the characters outside of time points up the fact that the problem of political violence has always been present in America. Scene 4 deals with Giuseppe Zangara and his attempt to kill Roosevelt in 1933, Scene 5 shows Czolgosz's meeting with the anarchist Emma Goldman which happens some time before his assassination of McKinley in 1901, and Scene 6 has the first meeting between Squeaky Fromme and Sara Jane Moore some time before their bungled attempts to kill President Ford in the 1970s. In this way Weidman's book manages to bring the heartfelt and the absurd side by side: to balance the painful and

the ridiculous. This chronology also enables the show to have a horrific climax with the Kennedy assassination, rather than end on Hinckley's attempt to assassinate Ronald Reagan.

We can see the Balladeer try to cover the truth with platitudes in the 'The Ballad of Czolgosz'. In a bright up-tempo song the Balladeer tells of how Czolgosz went to the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo. We have already heard Czolgosz sing in his section of the 'Gun Song' where he expresses a controlled anger about the exploitation of the poor. In 'The Ballad of Czolgosz', on the other hand, The Balladeer seems to be presenting Czolgosz as a typical get-up-and-go American hero. The Balladeer sings the line: 'Some men have everything and some have none,' three times - the first time it is followed by 'So rise and shine' (Sondheim, 2011: 129). This makes Czolgosz sound like the hero of a story by Horatio Alger, writer of many popular novels about boys who work their way up from a poor background to wealth by toil and tenacity. The second time we hear: 'Some men have everything and some have none' the phrase is being used by President McKinley to the audience of the Pan-American Exposition. Here the line is followed by the complacent: 'But that's just fine' (Sondheim, 2011: 130), illustrating McKinley's indifference. The third time we hear the phrase the Balladeer reports Czolgosz's thoughts that: 'That's by design', i.e: that poverty is what the wealthy want, and the poor are poor because of the rich. The song continues with the Balladeer utilising the platitudes of the can-do American spirit: 'You've been given the freedom/To work your way/To the head of the line'. (Sondheim, 2011: 130.) But this line is in ironic contrast with what we see: Czolgosz has worked his way to the head of the line of people waiting to meet the president and then shoots him. The

Balladeer tries to turn Czolgosz's act of political violence into an American success story. We cannot simply trust what we hear being sung, we must compare what we hear with what we see happen on stage.

The Balladeer wilfully misrepresents Czolgosz but, in 'The Ballad of Guiteau', he and Guiteau seem to work together as a team, duetting in agreement. Guiteau has none of Booth's misguided tragic dignity, instead he is ludicrously optimistic and lacking in seriousness, as is shown by his use of the cakewalk when ascending the scaffold. Once again the Balladeer comes up with a can-do cliché: 'You can be sad/ Or you can be President' but as the song progresses this hope of attaining high office becomes more distant. Guiteau sings, now using the subjunctive: 'You could be pardoned,/You could be President' (Sondheim, 2011: 131), but he is starting to crack up, and finally the Balladeer contradicts him with the more realistic: 'What if you never/Got to be President?' (Sondheim, 2011: 134). Guiteau himself comes across as a typical populist entertainer-cum-motivational-speaker.

GUITEAU Look on the bright side,
Not on the black side.
Get off your backside,
Shine those shoes!

(Sondheim, 2011: 131.)

Guiteau is eager to be made into a mythological figure. We hear him sing, unaccompanied, the lyric: 'I am going to the Lordy,/I am so glad'. (Sondheim, 2011: 131.) The words are Guiteau's own, a poem written for children on the morning of his

execution, and Sondheim set them to music. Guiteau cakewalks up to the scaffold, goofily optimistic in the face of death. And then his song starts to falter. As the noose gets nearer, he is not so certain. He dries up on the line: 'Sit on the right side [...] Of the...' and is unable to say the word 'Lord'. (Sondheim, 2011: 134.) He may be starting to doubt the existence of God, or he may fear that God will turn his wrath on him for murdering President Garfield. Again, we are jolted out of accepting the assassin's story at face value. Guiteau's pretence that his murder of Garfield was a righteous slaying is undercut in a kind of musical Freudian slip. As the Balladeer sings: 'Charlie Guiteau/Had a crowd at the scaffold -' we hear Guiteau repeat the phrase 'I am so glad...' (Sondheim, 2011: 134). He has inadvertently revealed what his real motive is: publicity. Earlier in the show, in the 'Gun Song', Guiteau says that assassination is the way to: 'Remove a scoundrel,/Unite a party,/ Preserve the union' (Sondheim, 2011: 127), ideas that he seems to be parroting from Booth, the chief corrupter. But unlike Booth, who says truthfully that Lincoln threw political enemies into prison without trial, Guiteau is unable to back up his accusations with facts: Garfield was no threat to the union, nor does Guiteau unite a party. Booth has shown the way to be famous and Guiteau is simply following him. Earlier Booth had said sardonically: 'Say I did it for the fame', (Sondheim, 2011: 120) which is an untrue allegation that the Balladeer hurled at him. But in Guiteau's case it is true.

The Balladeer starts his part of 'The Ballad of Guiteau' as if issuing a warning to the listeners: 'Come all ye Christians,/And learn from a sinner' (Sondheim, 2011: 131). Guiteau, it seems, is to be held up as an example of how a man can go wrong. But Guiteau, far from repenting his sin, delights in it. If we are to learn from a sinner

it is not from one who has repented, or even one who flings defiance of his fate in our faces, but one who gloats that he will be famous. Instead of fighting the Balladeer, as Booth does, Guiteau joins with him in a song about how everything is possible in America. Already in this show we have heard Guiteau propose a toast:

GUITEAU To the Presidency of the United States. An office which by its mere existence reassures us that the possibilities of life are limitless. An office the mere idea of which reproaches us when we fall short of being all that we can be.

(Weidman, 1990: 26.)

Guiteau is poisoned by the sense of possibilities but also by his own self-obsession; this toast turns out to be a well-rehearsed piece of advertising patter to get the other assassins' attention, so that Guiteau can sell them his book.

In one sense the assassins are all disillusioned. They are embittered by the failure of their dreams: whether it be to have their stomach cured, to become ambassador to France, or to marry Jodie Foster. Yet, in another way, they are not disillusioned, in that none of them abandons their dream. As the Balladeer says of Charles Guiteau: 'Charlie had dreams/That he wouldn't let go' (Sondheim, 2011: 131). For these misfits do not want to be misfits, they passionately want to belong. Killing a president is their way of being part of a greater story. Lynette Fromme imagines that Charles Manson will save the world; Guiteau thinks that he has saved his country; Hinckley thinks that he can save Jodie Foster, and also that she can save him. It is

notable that they want to be saviours not revolutionaries, though their plan is to inflict violence, rather than undergo it. None of them belong to a movement or have any kind of a plan. They are isolated figures with dreams they cannot fulfil and cannot let go.

This theme is dealt with most explicitly in the monologue that Weidman gives to Sam Byck. Byck records a rambling message to Leonard Bernstein, where he sings what he thinks is the lyric to 'Tonight' from *West Side Story*. But he gets it wrong. He sings 'Tonight, tonight, I'll meet my love tonight...' (Weidman, 1990: 54), instead of the song's actual lyric: 'Tonight, tonight,/It all began tonight' (Sondheim, 2010: 40). Byck wants certainties, and so he mis-remembers Sondheim's lyric to make it more definite. But this dream is troubling him: 'Where is she, Lenny? Gimme a hint.' (Weidman, 1990: 54.) He is looking for the right girl, the one ordained by fate. And, as ever in Sondheim's work, there isn't one. Byck thinks that if he kills Nixon then Bernstein will be able to write more love songs and the love songs will come true.

Like Guiteau, Lynette Fromme and John Hinckley have dreams that they won't let go, but, unlike the case of Guiteau, these dreams make them feel small and worthless by comparison. Hinckley sings, imagining that he is singing to Jodie Foster: 'Tell me how I can earn your love' (Sondheim, 2011: 130). He dreams that she will set him free, while Fromme, perhaps more confident, portrays herself as a liberator and imagines that she will set the convicted murderer Charles Manson free. But they both sing 'Baby, I'd die for you', (Sondheim, 2011: 130) again a common enough sentiment in popular songs, and also in opera, though one that Sondheim has

never subscribed to. It is, when one considers it, an alarming sentiment.⁴³ By putting these words into the mouths of assassins Sondheim poses the question: 'Why do people sing these things?' We simply can't accept it as a romantic convention: Sondheim puts these conventional sentiments into the mouths of people we don't imagine as having feelings, people who are deemed to be monsters. The song does not make the characters more sympathetic but instead makes us question the ideology on offer in other shows.

To save a country or a world, to be willing to die to do it, is a kind of patriotic idealism that is the response of the powerless: having no power they imagine being able to correct everything. In Byck's second monologue he rants at President Nixon: 'We need to believe, to trust like little kids, that someone wants what's best for us, that someone's looking out for us.' (Weidman, 1990: 77.) His childhood innocence does not give him hope, however: in 'Another National Anthem' he says 'You know why I did it? Because there isn't any Santa Claus!' (Sondheim, 2011: 136). Byck explicitly links his memories of his parents' hatred of each other with the arguments between the Republicans and the Democrats. And, in his rants to Nixon, Byck never mentions any of what might be thought of as the major political issues of the 1970s: civil rights, Vietnam, racial prejudice – instead he mentions events like the Howard Johnson restaurant chain being bought by a Saudi prince, and a grandmother living in a packing crate and says: 'Who can understand this crap?' (Weidman, 1990: 77.) Unable to understand and feeling powerless, he makes a giant illogical leap and says: 'We do what we have to do. We kill the President.' (Weidman, 1990: 77.)

⁴³ And one that may have serious repercussions: see the persistent urban legends of people over the years committing suicide to Rezső Seress's song 'Gloomy Sunday'.

In the 'Gun Song', a barber-shop-style quartet, Guiteau, Czolgosz and Booth sing of how easy it is to change the world by firing a gun. They join in on Booth's waltz tune; the Mephistopheles of the play has hypnotised them all. As Knapp says:

As they all sing Booth's waltz tune together, a capella (that is, without accompaniment), the image becomes a nightmare version of the American ideal, of separate individuals united in common cause.

(Knapp, 2005: 170.)

He goes on to say that: 'Not surprisingly, the "Gun Song" has been widely understood as an indictment of the gun lobby and the National Rifle Association' (Knapp, 2005: 170). But this is too easy. That identifies the problem as 'out there' with an acceptable villain whom the audience can pass the problem on to. But the song does not put the blame on anyone. Instead Guiteau, who waltzes with his gun (a little reminiscent of Todd singing a love song to his razor), sings 'First of all, when you've a gun -' then points it at the audience. The music stops. He ranges his gun over the audience, then sings: 'Everybody pays attention!' (Sondheim, 2011: 127). We recognise Guiteau's weakness for needing a gun, but we still have to listen to him.

There is an audible subtext to the song 'Unworthy of Your Love'. John Hinckley begins the song with a guitar introduction which has a wrong note. This is a musical clue, another way which Sondheim makes us listen again and not merely take the song as a direct expression of feelings. Hinckley's lyric is naïve and the tune is beguiling, reminiscent of a 1970s pop ballad by The Carpenters. The song is gentle, if one doesn't remember who is singing it. Hinckley, after all, is trying to fool himself: he sings as if Jodie Foster is in love with him and he is not worthy of her love. But she is not in love with him, as he acknowledges later in 'Another National Anthem'

where he screams: 'Because she wouldn't take my phone calls...' (Sondheim, 2011: 135). Lynette Fromme takes over the song and sings it to Charles Manson more confidently and with far more brutal imagery. 'Take my blood and my body/For your love' (Sondheim, 2011: 130) she sings, perverting the idea of communion, because she regards Manson as the Son of God. To sing to a lover one is parted from is a common occurrence in musicals, but Hinckley and Fromme sing to people who care nothing for them. This is a disillusioned version of the love duet: the love is not merely tragic, it is bizarre and incapable of fulfilment. It is not just a dream, it is a fantasy.

The dream of 'changing the world', presented positively in *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Road Show* as an idea that *shouldn't* be let go of, is, for these characters, a dangerous idea: they *can't* let go of their desire to change the world, but they have no idea how to do this. They do not have the gifts of Frank or Charley or Addison Mizner, and so their ideals become only destructive.

In 'Another National Anthem' the characters finally rise up against the Balladeer, just as, in *Into the Woods*, the characters rise up against the Narrator. The Narrator diminishes the characters' stories by making them mere quaint folklore, while the Balladeer trivialises their stories by making them part of a populist triumphal myth. The assassins are fed up with hearing promises of how everything is possible. The sense of frustration that they express is an echo of that of Rose in *Gypsy*, who, in 'Rose's Turn', sings: 'Well, someone tell me, when is it my turn?' (Sondheim, 2010: 75). Sondheim says in *Conversation Piece* that in 'Another

National Anthem': 'the optimism of the Balladeer is set off against the deep disillusion, anger and frustration of the assassins'.

The song begins with the assassins giving their justifications for their actions. They range from wrong-headed but understandable, such as Czolgosz's: 'I did it because it is wrong for one man to have so much service when other men have none...' (Sondheim, 2011: 134) - to the blatantly ridiculous, such as Sara Jane Moore's: 'I did it so *I'd* know where I was coming from...' (Sondheim, 2011: 135). Interspersed with these justifications Sam Byck sings variations on the phrase 'Where's my prize?' (Sondheim, 2011: 135). Byck's phrase creates a mounting sense of urgency, as first Guiteau, and then the other assassins take up the theme, obsessively repeating the word 'Prize'. Sondheim, it might be said, indicts the American dream itself: the idea that one can rise from log cabin to president, that one can be anything, and that, if you are not, it is your own fault. The first part of the song ends with a screaming chorus of assassins singing 'I want my prize!' except now for Byck who screams '*Nobody would listen!*' (Sondheim, 2011: 135). The assassins have found a kind of unity in discontent and grievance. Then the music changes tempo to a smooth mellifluous tune as the Balladeer comes in to brush all their worries aside. He tells them that what they did was futile and they should have gone on believing that good luck was just around the corner.

BALLADEER And it didn't make them listen

And they never said, "We're sorry" -

This leads to Byck's angry acknowledgement:

BYCK Yeah, it's never gonna happen,

 Is it?

(Sondheim, 2011: 135.)

The Balladeer, in his role as purveyor of folk wisdom, comes out with a series of bromides:

BALLADEER Goes to show:

 When you lose,

 What you do is try again.

(Sondheim, 2011: 135.)

His examples of success are ludicrous.

BALLADEER I just heard

 On the news

 Where the mailman won the lottery.

(Sondheim, 2011: 135.)

Winning a lottery is due to chance and so contradicts what the Balladeer has said about working for it.

The expulsion of the Balladeer from the stage by the assassins is the dramatic

summation of a theme that has been building up throughout the show: the characters trying to silence somebody who represents the official narrative. Twice Booth tells the Balladeer to 'Shut up' (Sondheim, 2011: 119); Zangara interrupts the crowd who are congratulating themselves on having saved Roosevelt and tells them about his life; Samuel Byck, in one of his rants at Nixon, screams: '*Shut up, Dick! I'm talking now, all right?! I'm talking and you're listening!*' (Weidman, 1990: 77). The final rebellion against the Balladeer is the culmination of their rebellion against a society that doesn't want to listen.

The assassins sing of their frustration and Byck, who had sung '*Nobody would listen!*' now stands at the front and sings quietly 'Listen...' (Sondheim, 2011: 136). It is as if the assassins are pleading directly to us to take heed of their story. And this is what Sondheim and Weidman make us do: listen to these characters - not to applaud what they did but to feel the sense of loneliness, exclusion and failure that drove them to it. It is in a sense a disillusioning experience to focus on the people who are left out of society, but it is one that Sondheim has done before in different ways: Madam Rose is the figure in the shadows while her daughter becomes a star, Todd is an outsider in his own society, the quartet in *Follies*, although on the face of it not too unsuccessful, all feel as if they have missed their chance. *Assassins*, though, takes this sense of exclusion further. The assassins have no society: we do not see their family or friends (except Sara Jane Moore's son Billy, on whom she pulls a gun). The only community they have is with each other, and their song is a sourly triumphal march.

Gypsy and *Follies* showed Rose and Sally at least capable of gaining some understanding that their dreams are futile; Sweeney is capable of understanding what he has done; George can reconnect with his tradition, and the fairy tale survivors can band together to make a community. But nobody in *Assassins* understands the enormity of what they have done and nobody learns: they are trapped perpetually in a hell of their own making. The Balladeer tries to accommodate their dissatisfaction when he says, referring to America: 'That it's a place/Where you can make the lies come true' (Sondheim, 2011: 136). In effect, he admits that he is lying but says it is up to them to make the lies come true.

In 'Another National Anthem' the assassins express 'angry disillusion' said Sondheim in his *Conversation Piece* interview. He goes on to add that the song should have 'no jauntiness [...] it becomes a kind of an angry joy instead of an open joy'. The characters force the Balladeer off stage and claim the space for themselves. They realise that there are millions of angry, frustrated, ignored people in America. Once they have claimed the stage they not so much ignore as twist the Balladeer's You-can-do-it message. They sing 'You've got to keep on trying.../Every day -/Until you get a prize...' (Sondheim, 2011: 137), a phrase that the Balladeer himself might have sung. But they are twisting the Balladeer's message, that anyone can get a prize, to the darker message that anyone can kill a president.

This scene leads into the scene where we see Lee Harvey Oswald for the first time, at the book depository. The assassins, having now banded together, appear to him. Booth, the most articulate, is their spokesman, and persuades Oswald to go

through with the assassination. Booth refers to *Death of a Salesman* and this becomes, in Booth's mouth, yet another part of the American myth that can be corrupted. He quotes the line that Linda, Willy's wife, says of her husband, that 'Attention must be paid' (*Death of a Salesman*, Act One) to such a man. But attention, close critical attention, must be paid to Booth's words. Booth tells Oswald that Loman dies in despair, thinking that his life has been a failure. But this isn't true: in the play Willy commits suicide while attempting to disguise it as an accident so that the family can collect the insurance money and his son Biff can go on and be a success in a way that Willy has never been. Willy is deluded in this hope but not despairing. Booth makes Loman's death seem more forlorn in order to tempt Oswald. The other assassins join in, promising Oswald that he will always be remembered. 'We're your family...' (Sondheim, 2011: 138) they sing, offering another example in Sondheim's work of a family made up of broken individuals who band together. But this does not create a new community, as it did in *Into the Woods*; instead the family act as demons, tempting Oswald into an atrocity.

'You think you can't connect. Connect to us' (Weidman, 1990: 100) Sara Jane Moore tells Oswald, speaking for all the assassins. The scene where they all emerge and visit Oswald is itself a dark version of the scene in *Sunday in the Park with George* where the figures in Seurat's painting appear to George and remind him of his artistic heritage. Oswald is the assassins' culmination because his assassination shocked the world.⁴⁴ Sondheim and Weidman considered making the rejected Balladeer turn into Oswald, which would have underlined the point that all these can-

⁴⁴ The show alludes to 'the grassy knoll' (Weidman, 1990: 97) but otherwise avoids discussing the conspiracy theories surrounding Kennedy's assassination.

do platitudes can create loners and murderers who want to fit in to the American dream. This idea was dropped however, maybe because Oswald needs to be a credible character, not merely the embodiment of an abstraction.⁴⁵

For a cast of characters who are desperate for publicity it is appropriate that there are three songs that feature the public as characters. The first, 'How I Saved Roosevelt' satirizes publicity hunters, the second, 'The Ballad of Czolgosz', which is sung by the Balladeer but features spoken asides by the public, satirises the growing cult of personality and trivia about the president. In the third of these songs, however, 'Something Just Broke' the crowd is not treated satirically. The song deals with the reactions of different people to the Kennedy assassination: they act as a Greek chorus, horrified by what has happened.

When the show originally was staged in New York, in a short run at the Playwrights Horizons, Sondheim had not completed this song, and, as the original production did not transfer to another venue he didn't include it in the show until the London production directed by Sam Mendes.

'Something Just Broke' was always part and parcel of the show, because I wanted a moment where the national grief after a President gets killed to be musicalised, so it wouldn't all just be from the assassins' point of view, but from the nation's point of view, because I remember the grief I felt on Kennedy's assassination [...]

('Another Conversation with Sondheim'. In conversation with Edward Seckerson in *Sondheim: The Magazine*, October 2006: 12.)

⁴⁵ It has, however, been used in subsequent productions, such as the 2004 Roundabout Theatre Company revival on Broadway, directed by Joe Mantello and starring Neil Patrick Harris as The Balladeer/Oswald.

The Housewife in the group speaks of the killing as: 'Just an awful moment...' (Sondheim, 2011: 142), echoing the Balladeer's earlier remark, in 'Another National Anthem', that: 'you made a little moment' (Sondheim, 2011: 135). But, unlike the Balladeer, the crowd are not complacent: the housewife talks of the event: 'Bringing us all together' (Sondheim, 2011: 141). They become for a moment, a community, in a way the assassins never do.

The show, with its pervasive irony and its similarity to the epic theatre, could at first glance, be seen as Brechtian, although Sondheim rejects this interpretation.

One of my objections to Brecht is that it's always politics to the forefront and the characters to the rear, and what I hope we have done with *Assassins* is to put the characters to the forefront and the political and social statements all around.

(Secrest, 1998: 362-363.)

The difference between Sondheim and Brecht's approach is explicated by Scott Miller when discussing how the actresses should play Sara Jane Moore and Lynette Fromme: 'They should never comment on their characters through their performance' (Miller, 1996: 16). There is a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* in the incongruity of hearing a barber shop quartet praising the virtues of political assassination, or a tender love-ballad sung by two psychotics: but the show doesn't stand back from the characters, inviting us, as Brecht might have done, to coolly and keenly assess them. The whole point of the show is that there is *no* clear point from which to judge them.

For the assassins there is no let-out. The music is often ironically at odds with the anger the characters feel. We hear a type of music - a march, a line-dance, an

admonitory folk-song, a tender ballad - that are not usually sung with anger, and we see the characters trying to use these forms to express their violent emotions. Unlike in *Sunday* or *Into the Woods*, the characters are not healed by the music. It is almost as if they are trapped in it. They cannot use the music to help themselves comprehend the situation that they are in. If the characters reject the Balladeer and his platitudes, their rejection doesn't make them any wiser: they do not come to a new understanding. Instead, at the end, we hear a reprise of a song we heard at the beginning, 'Everybody's Got the Right', that could have come from a frothy Golden Age musical comedy. 'Everybody's got the right/To be different -' sings Moore (Sondheim, 2011: 142) although a slight pause before the word 'different' indicates that the word is a euphemism.

The Broadway show has produced a lot of uplifting ballads about life being full of possibilities: e.g. 'A Lot of Livin' to Do' from *Bye Bye Birdie*, 'Put On Your Sunday Clothes' from *Hello, Dolly!*, 'Tomorrow' from *Annie*, 'Corner of the Sky' in *Pippin*. In 'Everybody's Got the Right' the characters take the possibilities held out by the songs as promises: it's not just that they *might* be happy, they have a *right* to be. Sondheim does not belittle these songs: 'even here he exalts whatever he pastiches' (Banfield, 1993: 57). With this song we can have our cake and eat it: enjoy the song and yet realise that singing is often a cover for pain rather than an expression of it. It encourages us to think about what we are enjoying. In this song Sondheim is utilising a technique he had used in *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Follies*: using musical comedy language to make points. He returned to this technique in *Road Show* but nowhere else does he use it with such harsh intent.

The song's last line: 'Everybody's got the right [beat] To their dreams...'
(Sondheim, 2011: 143), followed by a gunshot and a doom-laden musical phrase, sums up a great deal of what the show is about. The gun-shots are what happens when some people try to make their dreams a reality. 'Everybody's got the right/To be happy' (Sondheim, 2011: 114) is the insidious phrase we hear in this song that we first heard at the beginning of the show used by the Proprietor of the shooting gallery. The original phrase, in the United States' Declaration of Independence, is that amongst mankind's 'unalienable rights' are 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness'. The assassins have dropped the 'pursuit' and somehow believe that they are entitled to happiness itself, and become selfishly turned in on themselves. As John Weidman has said:

Why do these dreadful events happen *here*, with such horrifying frequency, and in such an appallingly similar fashion? *Assassins* suggests it is because we live in a country whose most cherished national myths, at least as currently propagated, encourage us to believe that in America our dreams not only *can* come true, but *should* come true, and that if they don't someone or something is to blame.

(Weidman, quoted by Bishop, Weidman, 1990, x-xi.)

Time does not move forward in this show – in *Follies* it cannot be stopped, whereas in *Sunday* the artist can stop time, although at a cost to his personal relationships. Here the assassins are trapped in resentment, in permanent disillusion that never becomes maturity. They are unable to let the dreams go but can't make them real.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PASSION (1994)

In *Passion*, with a book by James Lapine, Sondheim returns to the theme of the manipulator attempting to control the people around them. In *Follies*, Sally fails to manipulate Ben, himself a political fixer who is appalled at the hollowness of his own life; in *Sweeney Todd* Mrs. Lovett tries to manipulate Todd, to her own undoing; Gussie manipulates Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along* only to find herself usurped by another manipulator. What is unique in *Passion* is that the manipulator, Fosca, is entirely successful, and that the hero knows that he is being manipulated and yet still loves her.

The show is based on the film *Passione d'amore* (Ettore Scola, Massfilm:1981) and on the 1869 novel, *Fosca*, on which the film is based, that was written by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti. *Passion* begins with an orgasmic cry. The cry is uttered by Clara, mistress to a soldier, Giorgio, in nineteenth-century Italy. After her cry the first song is a love duet between them.

CLARA That we ever should have met

 Is a miracle -

GIORGIO No, inevitable -

(Sondheim, 2011: 148.)

Clara seems to use the word 'miracle' meaning 'unlikely' rather than 'sacred' and Giorgio disagrees, insisting that their love is fated. But then he tells Clara that he has

been transferred to a remote outpost. When Giorgio moves to his new posting he meets Fosca, the cousin of his colonel. She is ugly and ill and given to screaming fits. Like Sally in *Follies*, Fosca admits to reading in order to escape from life.

FOSCA (*Fiercely*)

I read to live,
To get away from life!

(*Calmer*)

No, Captain, I have no illusions.
I recognise the limits of my dreams.
I know how painful dreams can be
Unless you know
They're merely dreams.

(Sondheim, 2011, 152.)

Fosca claims to have no illusions but then she falls in love with Giorgio and emotionally blackmails him into writing her love letters, playing on his pity. She is attracted to Giorgio because of his sensitivity which is a contrast to the callous behaviour of the other soldiers in the camp. And yet, at first, Giorgio is not the romantic figure Fosca takes him for. He might seem to be a man of feeling, in that he believes in 'a superior kind of love' (Lapine, 1994: 32): the love that he imagines he has for Clara. But for Giorgio and Clara their love is a love that 'shuts away the world' (Sondheim, 2011: 158). It takes place in 'Our little room' (Sondheim, 2011: 152). This should alert us that their love is not all that it seems. For Sondheim and his collaborators the dream of the secure refuge from the world can never come true.

True happiness, and this is *always* true in Sondheim's work, lets the world *in*; it doesn't shut it out. Sondheim seems to be reacting against the tendency in popular song to picture love as an idyll that is removed from the world. Lorenz Hart does this in many of his songs ('There's a Small Hotel',⁴⁶ 'Mountain Greenery',⁴⁷ 'The Blue Room'⁴⁸ etc). In those songs the world never touches the love the lovers sing about. But when Fosca falls in love this brings her round from her self-obsession and *out* of her room. She sings to Giorgio, in her final song, 'Things I feared,/Like the world itself,/I now love dearly' (Sondheim, 2011: 176). As always in the shows written with James Lapine, characters who are willing to can find a sense of belonging in the wider world.

Giorgio may think he is a romantic at the beginning of the show - he uses the word 'beautiful' to describe Clara - but this relationship is in fact a limited liability for both partners. It is when he falls for Fosca that Giorgio truly learns to love without restraint, without carefully weighing up the pros and cons.

GIORGIO No one has ever known me
As clearly as you.
No one has ever shown me
What love could be like until now:

46 From *On Your Toes*, 1936.

47 From *The Garrick Gaieties*, 1926.

48 From *The Girl Friend*, 1926.

Not pretty or safe or easy,
But more than I ever knew.
Love within reason – that isn't love.
And I've learned that from you...

(Sondheim, 2010: 175.)

This is similar, thematically, to *Company*. In *Company* Robert moves from a desire for limited liability love, expressed in 'Marry Me a Little', to a heartfelt wish for total commitment, that will inevitably entail pain, in 'Being Alive'. The difference is that Giorgio has somebody to sing his song to. Although the love affair in *Passion* ends tragically, the affair itself is presented as a good thing. Fosca dies (although the doctor had explained that she was not likely to live long in any case) and Giorgio has a complete breakdown. But neither character express any regret for their love. Both of them are able to leave their shuttered rooms, their respective fantasy worlds – Fosca's world of escapist books and Giorgio's affair with Clara.

It could be argued that the show is ironic – that Fosca is a destructive force and that Giorgio is her victim - but the rhapsodic music overrides this possibility. As in the scene at the end of *Sweeney Todd* where Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett sing in an operatic register, the music aims to *block* an ironic reading: the emotional response stimulated by the music overwhelms the sense of irony and affirms Giorgio's sense of liberation. During previews of the show Sondheim and Lapine were disturbed by the hostility of audiences to Fosca: there were sniggers and derisive laughter, especially one night when, during the scene where Fosca faints on the mountainside, somebody

from the audience cried: 'Why don't you just leave her there?' which drew a round of applause. Sondheim writes:

I suspect that what bothered them most was how extreme her behaviour was, the lengths she went to, her shamelessness – all the things that for James and me ennobled her.

(Sondheim, 2011: 171.)

In order to further block an ironic reading, Sondheim and Lapine

[...] spent the preview weeks flagging and removing the little discomfiting moments which would cause pre-giggle frissons in the house, and by the time we opened there was no unwanted laughter whatsoever.

(Sondheim, 2011: 147.)

In effect, Fosca breaks into Giorgio's world and takes him over. Earlier we had seen Fosca excluded while Giorgio and Clara sing, via their letters, of their love. In other Sondheim shows we have seen a singer serenading someone they love while another person, who is excluded from the song, looks on. *Passion* is the only show where the excluded one actually comes to be the beloved. Again, an ironic reading would be that Giorgio had been tricked by Fosca, but this is obviously not the case. Giorgio knows full well how manipulative Fosca is and falls in love with her with his eyes open. It is also Giorgio's free choice to fight a duel with the Colonel - who thinks that Giorgio had cynically taken advantage of Fosca - rather than humiliate her by revealing how she has thrown herself at him. Giorgio and Fosca are not self-deceiving dupes. They are rather lovers in a hostile world that will not understand their love, a world that is as cruel in its way as the slums of New York in *West Side Story*.

Fosca had had a dream lover before: a fraudulent count from Austria. She had married him and he then stole her money and deserted her. This shows that Fosca can be misled by her dreams. But, in Giorgio's case, her dreams become reality. He becomes the fantasy figure that she desires. In fact she says that 'Beauty is power', (Sondheim, 2011: 167), talking of the beauty of Count Ludovic. This is an unusual statement for a character in a Sondheim show because beauty in his shows is usually is under threat. Beauty is something that can be destroyed: turned into filth (*Sweeney Todd*) or simply lost with time (*Follies*). If *Sunday* shows the triumph of beauty through art, *Passion* is the first show to depict the triumph of beauty in life.

On the audio commentary of the DVD Sondheim explained how he got the idea for the musical while watching the Scola film.

I realised the story was going to be about how he falls in love with her, not vice-versa, and I was so deeply moved I started to cry.⁴⁹

In this show beauty does triumph, although at a cost, yet it is a cost that neither Fosca nor Giorgio ultimately regret paying. Sondheim found that the show came into focus when he saw Jamie Lloyd's 2010 revival at The Donmar Warehouse in London, because David Thaxton, who played Giorgio

conveyed an innocent vulnerability not just through acting but by virtue of who he was. Unlike all the other Giorgios I'd seen, he didn't seem a fully grown man: he was clearly someone who was on the brink of change, and that was crucial to the story.

(Sondheim, 2011: 156.)

Sondheim and Lapine show the change of Giorgio to maturity, which they define as being able to feel passion, which is to say to love without protecting oneself. The

⁴⁹ Sondheim in discussion with James Lapine, Marin Mazzie, Donna Murphy, Jere Shea and Ira Weitzman.

change which Robert recognised in *Company* that needed to take place, has in this show become a reality – Giorgio has indeed found someone to hurt him too deep. This is why Sondheim and Lapine were so careful to eliminate irony – precisely because irony is often a form of defence against emotion. They favour innocence – that is to say an openness to life, a readiness to be transformed and to accept emotional hurt.

Innocence is not the same as naivete: as Sondheim reminds us (Sondheim, 2011: 156) Giorgio is hardly naïve, being in the midst of a love affair with a married woman. But this affair will end, because Giorgio finally admits to himself that he needs more, and it is Fosca who teaches him this. It is a breakthrough for Giorgio, even if Fosca achieved it by blatant emotional blackmail; this blackmail is made acceptable in that she is the one who is willing to sacrifice all for love. She sings to Giorgio:

FOSCA Loving you

Is why I do

The things I do.

Loving you

Is not in my

Control.

But loving you,
I have a goal
For what's left of my life...

I will live,
And I would die
For you.

(Sondheim, 2011: 172.)

Like Cinderella in *Into the Woods*, who wants something 'More than life' (Sondheim, 2011: 59), Fosca wants a love that transcends death. The idea of dying for the beloved, which had been treated as madness in 'Unworthy of Your Love' in *Assassins*, is here treated as a noble sentiment. Unlike those of Lynette Fromme or John Hinckley, Fosca's dreams come true.

At the beginning of the show Giorgio believed that his affair with Clara was a great love affair, but he realises that he was mistaken. When he asks Clara to leave her husband and son for him she refuses. This is hardly unreasonable of her, but the way her character slips so easily from the story shows that she was not as important to Giorgio as he had thought. He is hardly disillusioned with her: their little world of stolen afternoons is exposed as a fantasy but there are no recriminations - she simply drops out of the show as Giorgio finds that he is falling in love with Fosca. When he finds true love he is able to reach emotional maturity. In this show, for the first time

in *Sondheim's oeuvre*, a character faces the concept of 'Tomorrow' without fear. As she says to Giorgio, in a letter that he reads after her death:

FOSCA And though I want to live,
 I now can leave
 With what I never knew:
 I'm someone to be loved.

(Sondheim, 2011: 176.)

Fosca, too, has moved on from the bitterness of saying that she would die for Giorgio: she has now reached maturity, and wants to live, but also is not afraid to die.

Previously in *Sondheim's work* the future has been full of uncertainty. 'You're Gonna Love Tomorrow' from *Follies* satirizes the unrealistic hopes for a perfect future that the young Ben and Phyllis have; 'The Hills of Tomorrow' in the original version of *Merrily We Roll Along* is about hopes that, during the course of the show, are corrupted; the cry of the Balladeer in *Assassins* is 'Tomorrow you'll get your reward!' which is an empty promise (Sondheim, 2011: 131). Giorgio learns not to worry about tomorrow and sings, in his last letter to Clara, berating her for her caution: 'Love doesn't give a damn about tomorrow,/And neither do I!' (Sondheim, 2011: 174). It might be objected that Giorgio can afford to say that, having no children, whereas Clara has a young son she doesn't want to lose.

But 'Tomorrow' is soon a time of real threat for Giorgio, when he is challenged to a duel by the Colonel. Giorgio explains to the Doctor that he needs to see Fosca before the duel the next day.

GIORGIO And if I should die tomorrow,
 Or live and be forced to go,
 No one has truly loved her
 Like me,
 And I want her to know.

(Sondheim, 2011: 175.)

Later, when Giorgio reads a letter from the now-dead Fosca she sings:

FOSCA And should you die tomorrow,
 Another thing I see:

GIORGIO Your love will live in me...

FOSCA Your love will live in me...

(Sondheim, 2011: 176.)

At the end of *Passion* the lovers duet – Fosca is dead but her figure appears before Giorgio while he reads her letters. Giorgio is recovering from a breakdown, and she is an apparition inside his head. Their final lines, 'Your love will live in me' (Sondheim, 2011, 177) again could be read ironically. They are not sung triumphantly, reaching a climax, as 'Move On' had done in *Sunday*, but rather they

fade out. This melancholy ending might be surprising to an audience who are expecting a passionate affirmation of Giorgio and Fosca's love, but Lapine and Sondheim eliminate the irony of the Scola film. In the film the final scene is of a broken Giorgio telling his tale to a hunchbacked dwarf who laughs at what he takes to be the absurdity of it.

This show is unique in Sondheim's canon in casting off irony, and in fact is hostile to it. In the audio commentary to the DVD of the show Sondheim said: 'We live in an era where people will not take emotions larger than life'. *Passion*, then, is the reclaiming of large emotions, untrammelled by irony. The process of going through disillusion and coming back to a commitment to life is not as important to this show as it is to other shows: Fosca is already disillusioned when we first see her, and Giorgio is never really disillusioned, even when he ends the affair with Clara neither he nor Clara suffer a great deal. Sondheim and Lapine have removed the irony from their original sources and made the moral a traditional Rodgers and Hammerstein one about an emotionally closed-off man who learns to love, such as those found in *Carousel*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROAD SHOW (2008)

With *Road Show* Sondheim teamed up once again with book-writer John Weidman to tell the story of the real-life Mizner brothers, Addison and Wilson. Sondheim's three shows with Weidman, *Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins* and *Road Show*, are all about the failure of national ideals. In *Assassins* the problem is that the characters cannot let go of dreams that have become delusions, but in *Pacific Overtures* and *Road Show* the enemy is expedience (a theme also central to *Merrily We Roll Along*). In *Road Show* the idea that America is the land of opportunity becomes corrupted to mean that one must take any opportunity at all, no matter how dishonest it may be. Unlike the characters in *Assassins* Addison has a gift and he has a chance to fulfil his dreams, a chance that he surrenders in favour of worldly success.

Once again we see a controlling figure who cannot really control events at all: here it is the charming con-man Wilson. He attempts to manipulate the people round him, including his brother Addison. Addison is another figure like Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along* or Ben in *Follies*: a sell-out who abandons his talent for the sake of success. Sondheim described the show as being about '[t]he symbiotic relationship between the two visionaries, one a snake-oil entrepreneur, the other a creative dreamer' (Sondheim, 2011: 185). It is notable that Sondheim refers to both brothers as 'visionaries', not just Addison. For Wilson is a visionary of a kind: he does believe that America is a land of opportunity, he just doesn't think that it matters if you tell the truth or not.

The title *Road Show* is reminiscent of the series of *Road To...* movies that starred Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. The films are light-hearted parodies of other movies and Hope and Crosby usually play two conmen who get into trouble. Wilson Mizner's problem, so to speak, is that he is a conman who believes one can live the way Hope and Crosby act in the movies: that charm, lightness of touch and superficial good nature are all that one needs to get through life. Wilson's life collapses as he cannot maintain his pose of carefree insouciance.

Sondheim has said that he and Weidman had been interested in using a vaudeville style for the show because of vaudeville's 'constant threat of immediate chaos' (Sondheim, 2011: 244).⁵⁰ Even though the show, in its final incarnation, lost a lot of its vaudeville trappings, this threat of chaos is ever present. The show opens with Addison in bed: *He is surrounded by an eclectic pyramid of trunks, old furniture and packing crates.* (Weidman, 2009: 9.) He dies surrounded by junk: a visual embodiment of the threat of entropy. A chorus sings that Addison's life had been a 'waste'. Then Wilson appears and shoos the chorus away. But, at the end of the show, Addison agrees with the crowd.

ADDISON: I had a talent, Willie. I threw it away.

WILSON (*climbing into bed with him.*): Nah... Well, yeah.

(Weidman, 2009: 97.)

⁵⁰ The show has another connection with vaudeville in that the Marx Brothers show *The Cocoanuts* (1925, filmed 1929), with a score by Irving Berlin and a script by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind, was set during the Florida land boom.

They didn't make history, instead they made, as their father tells them, 'a mess'.

(Weidman, 2009: 98.)

Papa Mizner tells his sons to live up to the ideals that the country was founded on. In his song 'It's in Your Hands Now', he asks his sons to 'Go forth and make your papa proud -!' (Sondheim, 2011: 220). Papa is a pioneer and it is the pioneer spirit that the Mizner brothers turn into mere opportunism. As Wilson sings in 'The Game' when he is about to bet the gold mine that he and Addison have dug:

WILSON: Every card you're dealt opens new frontiers -

Let's be pioneers!

(Sondheim, 2011: 221.)

Wilson uses the ideals of the Founding Fathers to describe a poker game. We hear similar lines later in 'Addison's City', when Wilson persuades Addison to build a city in Boca Rotan, so that he can run the publicity for the scheme.

WILSON: This is our chance to open up a new frontier!

And if there ever was a time to pioneer,

The time is now!

(Sondheim, 2011: 265.)

But they don't conquer new territory: they create a land boom and make people lose their money.

As we have seen, Sondheim referred to both brothers as 'visionaries'. Addison's gift is to be an architect, but Wilson's vision is rather different. He is a hustler. In his song 'The Game' Wilson speaks of the pleasures of being an expert bluffer: 'Beating ace high with a pair of twos' (Sondheim, 2011: 222). This is a thrill, because the cards don't win, *he* does. Compared to this thrill 'the world seems pretty tame' (Sondheim, 2011: 222). He is a twisted kind of visionary because 'the world' in the sense of material things, is less important to him than his vision. The money doesn't matter that much to him: 'That's nice, but it's just icing on the cake' (Sondheim, 2011: 222). The vision that Wilson has is that of knowing that he's the only one who is smart. 'The Game' is reminiscent of 'Live, Laugh, Love' in *Follies*: both songs are sung by people who think they can control the world by charm, by pretending that nothing is important. And both of these pretences fail: Ben's more spectacularly when he breaks down in the middle of singing and yells 'Phyllis!', (Goldman, 2001: 85) but Wilson's song fails as well when he sings it as a reprise. The reprise comes when Wilson visits Addison in Florida and explains how he 'Got a bad break and wound up broke' (Sondheim, 2011: 288). Wilson's song grinds to a halt on the words 'Only please - !' (Sondheim, 2011: 288). Both times the pretence breaks down and instead the singer makes a naked plea for sympathy.

Wilson denies that anything in life is irreversible. In the opening to the reprise of 'The Game' Wilson sings: 'One day up, the next day down,/That's the way it goes' (Sondheim, 2011: 288). This is reminiscent of Carlotta's line in 'I'm Still Here': 'Top billing Monday,/Tuesday you're touring in stock' (Sondheim, 2010: 221). Both characters accept that fame is transient, but Wilson treats it as a game while Carlotta is

more honest about how it is a grim struggle for survival. Wilson is incapable of taking anything seriously. When he is trying to persuade Addison to build a city Addison says that he is no longer interested in it.

ADDISON: You make choices and you live with them.

WILSON: Nuts! This is the Land of Opportunities! [...] You didn't like who you were, so you made yourself over into someone else.

(Weidman, 2009: 80.)

The usual phrase is 'Land of opportunity' but Wilson can't resist making it into a plural, as to him opportunities are infinite. All that really matters is the game, and his ability to win it, to outwit the other guy. Beyond that there's nothing. McLaughlin writes that

Road Show suggests that postmodernism as an alternative to the totalized narratives of the American mythos may not be as exhausted as it appears. In its insistence on multifarious narratives putting multiple worldviews in dialogue, it still offers the possibility for surprise and a way out of a closed system.

(McLaughlin, 2016: 227.)

But, if anything, the show is a critique of the post-modern outlook: Wilson's narratives never last, instead his grand schemes always fail. His friends have a wonderful year with him, and then he deserts them to obscurity, penury and prison.

Wilson's sales pitch for Boca Raton plays on the image of American life as a journey down a road.

WILSON: What is life? I say it is a journey. A road down which we travel, ever seeking, never satisfied. An endless quest for something different, something better. Onward we go, restlessly reinventing ourselves. Searching for something that already lies before us. For in America, the journey *is* the destination! Or it has been, until now. Until tonight. Because the road which I have just described to you will take us someplace so spectacular that finally we can cease our searching, stop our wandering and be content. Where does it lead? To journey's end. Behold, my friends, Boca Raton!

(Weidman, 2009: 91.)

Boca Raton, of course is not journey's end, and Wilson doesn't believe that it is. It's just another sell. The road to eternity that the dead Wilson and Addison see before them at the end of the show is surely not 'a way out of a closed system'. The road goes nowhere. Wilson, of course, doesn't understand this. His final line in the show, as he looks out at the road to eternity, is

WILSON: The greatest opportunity of all. Sooner or later we're bound to get it right.

(Weidman, 2009: 99.)

The irony is that Wilson is dead when he says this.

Wilson's lack of self-pity is endearing, but he is incapable of learning. He *has* to keep reinventing himself as none of his selves last: his endless succession of roles as

playwright, saloon owner, prize-fight promoter and real-estate salesman all end in failure and disgrace. He even tries to be Prince Charming and awaken his mother with a kiss, only to find that she is dead. He has no special powers. The only person he is loyal to, and the only one he is left with at the end, is Addison. Addison had a dream of being an architect, and Wilson helped to destroy it. In the song 'Get Out of My Life' Addison sings: 'I thought we could go from scheme to dream'. (This line is not in Sondheim, but is sung on the Original Broadway Cast album.) But, in this show, scheme and dream are opposites, and cannot exist side by side.

And Addison is not the helpless victim that he might like to believe. When he and his partner Hollis Bessemer are in Palm Beach Hollis tries to get some money out of his wealthy aunt, Mrs Stotesbury, to help found an artists' community. But she isn't interested until Addison, on the spur of the moment, designs a house for her. This shows that Addison has his brother's gift of improvisation. Addison corrupts Hollis' dream of creating a colony of artists just as Wilson corrupts Addison's dream of building a city. Instead of building a city, Addison builds ostentatious houses for the wealthy. Mrs Stotesbury likes Addison's designs and soon he is taken up by the fashionable rich who, as is also the case in *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Merrily We Roll Along*, are a destructive force, with no interest in art. It is important that Addison sells out to them before Wilson arrives on the scene: this shows that his failure to live up to his dream is at least partly his own responsibility. Garrett Eisler wrote of the song 'You' that it is 'a love song between both Hollis and Addison and between Addison and his new clients, simultaneously'. ("Nothing More Than Just A Game": The American Dream Goes Bust In *Road Show*' ed. Gordon, R. and Jubin, O.

2014: 176). He also points out that Addison sings 'You, where have you been all my life?' to Hollis, and then it is sung to him by his rich patrons. A love song becomes flattery. During this song, while Addison is busily lining up influential clients, he has a vision of Papa.

PAPA: My boy, you have a *gift!* Don't let...

ADDISON: Papa? Get lost.

(Weidman, 2009: 69.)

It is easy, then, for Wilson to persuade Addison and Hollis to let him take over the publicity for Boca Raton. He does this to the tune of 'It's in Your Hands Now', using the song to get his own way. And, like Gussie in *Merrily We Roll Along* and Cinderella's Prince, Wilson knows how to corrupt people by pretending that the person he is corrupting is making the choice himself. 'Forget about what I want, what do *you* want?' (Weidman, 2009: 79.) He tells Addison that he could 'change the world' (Weidman, 2009: 81), but this dream, as it is for Frank in *Merrily We Roll Along*, is not to be.

Public speech, as so often in Sondheim's work, is suspect. We can see this with Sondheim's use of the word 'Parade'. References to parades can be found in three shows, and in each show the idea is suspect or compromised. In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* the vain and brutal Miles Gloriosus sings 'I am a parade!'. (Sondheim, 2010: 103.) In *Anyone Can Whistle* the villainous Cora Hoover Hooper sings 'A Parade in Town' where she reveals her need for approval. And in

Road Show Wilson sings that Boca Rotan will be: 'Not so much a city - a parade!'. (Sondheim, 2011: 263.) In Sondheim's work parades are suspect, it would seem, part of a sell. This mistrustful attitude to public discourse shows a disillusioned attitude to public life in America. For Sondheim the parade is a metaphor of how America itself is in danger of turning into a giant sell. Wilson is like Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, but Wilson never gets his foot caught in the door.

Addison embodies the conflict between material well-being and artistic fulfilment. Earlier in the show, in the song 'Addison's Trip', Addison goes around the world looking for something that he can do, and makes several farcical attempts to start up in business, only to be frustrated each time. And each time all he gets are more objects that he collects, that at one point he refers to angrily as 'a ton of other assorted junk!' (This line is not found in Sondheim, but is in Weidman, 2009: 41.) Then he gets the idea of making a house to put all these objects in. His gift is to be an architect, and it is this gift for design that transforms random objects into a harmonious whole. When Addison loses his gift they become merely objects again, part of the old furniture that surrounds him as he dies.

Holding on to one's dream, one's gift, is the only way to combat the disillusionment that threatens to destroy the characters, and America itself, at every turn. It is the only way of forging a meaningful connection. Without that everything is entropy and death. When they meet in the afterlife Wilson asks:

WILSON: By the way, what'd *you* die of?

ADDISON: I got lonely.

(Weidman, 2009: 97.)

Addison has succumbed to the thing that so many Sondheim characters have dreaded: ultimate disconnection. Addison is lonely, and ashamed of wasting his gifts: the two feelings, as in *Merrily We Roll Along*, are inter-related. If one is true to one's gift one does not feel estranged from oneself.

It provides a warning, in a way that Hammerstein would surely have approved of, of the necessity of holding on to one's dream.

CONCLUSION

Sondheim's work is based on a paradox, and that paradox makes it so rich and intriguing. His shows confront the possibility of the breakdown of all values: that one's life may be a failure (*Gypsy*, *Follies*), that theatres may be destroyed (*Follies*), cultures wiped away (*Pacific Overtures*), artistic gifts betrayed (*Merrily We Roll Along*, *Road Show*), and one may end up killing what one loves (*Sweeney Todd*), living 'separate and alone' (The Witch in *Into the Woods*) and die surrounded by junk (Addison in *Road Show*). In *Follies* and *Into the Woods* the genres themselves, musical revue and fairy tale, collapse and reform themselves under the pressure of this entropic movement. Chaos and collapse are ever-present threats.

Yet, and this is the paradox, counterbalancing his seeming pessimism Sondheim maintains an idealistic viewpoint in his shows, in the aspirational Rodgers and Hammerstein tradition. There may not be a pre-destined plan for the lives of the characters: but many of them (George Seurat, Manjiro, Franklin Shepard, Charley Kringas, Sweeney Todd, Addison Mizner, the Baker, Cinderella) have dreams: that is to say a sense of purpose, whether it is to create art, marry a prince or have a family. These dreams are not always lived up to: they can be abandoned for wealth and the need to feel successful (Ben Stone, Franklin Shepard, Addison Mizner), or they can prove to be illusory (Cinderella, Rose), or indeed be the delusions of people not altogether sane (all of the assassins).

Disillusion is what happens when a character's dreams meet a hostile reality. The characters have different ways of dealing with this disillusion. Some lie and

manipulate in song in order to hold on to their dream: Rose, Mrs. Lovett, the Shogun's Mother, Franklin Shepard – but these lies never finally succeed. The more mature characters take responsibility for themselves. In *Company* Bobby will commit himself to finding his right partner while accepting that there is no pre-destined partner waiting for him, and will risk hurt and disappointment. In *Follies* the characters come to accept that one must endure even if they have seen all their dreams disappear. In *Sweeney Todd* Sweeney accepts some of the responsibility for what he has done and dies at the hands of Toby without complaint. In these shows the victory over disillusionment, the maturity that the characters reach, is little more than a patient endurance.

In the shows written with John Weidman the characters are trapped by their own delusions, unable to take responsibility for their lives (the assassins, Wilson Mizner) or they sell out in order to fit in (Kayama in *Pacific Overtures*, Wilson Mizner.) The shows with Lapine are based on values that positively counteract despair. In *Sunday in the Park with George* the failure of personal relationships and the damage wrought by time are defeated by George being able to create a masterpiece that transcends time. Also family and tradition rescue the younger George from the chaotic and valueless modern-day art scene. *Into the Woods* showed the reality of chaos and sudden violent death, but it also showed the formation of community and the family unit as a counterbalance to this. *Passion* affirms the beauty of self-sacrificing love. Beauty, which is constantly under threat in the earlier shows (*Follies*, *Sweeney Todd*) is, in the shows with Lapine, something that can be achieved, through art or emotional abandonment.

For both Sondheim and Hammerstein, the idea of the dream is paramount: to abandon one's dream is to lose one's soul. We see that one cannot keep a dream away from the world: it will only die, the way Lucy is killed by Todd, or the way Sally finally realises that: 'there is no Ben' (Goldman, 2001: 86). The mature characters: George Seurat, Charley Kringas or the Baker (who dreams of having a child), all accept that dreams lead to responsibilities. This enables them to attain maturity. Because, in Sondheim's world, true happiness involves letting the world *in*, not shutting it out: the dream is integrated with reality.

As we have seen, Sondheim has reconstructed the Hammersteinian musical. By his placing of seductive tunes in startling and incongruous dramatic settings (Todd's version of 'Johanna', 'Unworthy of Your Love') and by giving his songs troubling dramatic subtexts ('In Buddy's Eyes', 'Growing Up') one is invited both to enjoy, and also to stand back from, the songs that are being sung. He often writes songs where the singer cannot be trusted.

Sondheim, as a romantic, desires to create beauty, but he is also concerned that beauty does not deceive the audience. That is why he has characters lie in song, so that the audience does not simply listen to beguiling melodies, but is made aware of the character who is singing and their underlying motives. As Cinderella says: 'you have to be wary' (Sondheim, 2011: 79). Sondheim is aware of the dangers of romanticism, of letting a dream blind you, the way Rose, Sally, Sweeney and the assassins are blinded. This is why in Sondheim's world disillusion is sometimes

necessary. In *Into the Woods* Cinderella has to learn that her original dream of marrying a prince was false. She had to be disillusioned in order to gain a greater understanding.

It is this ambivalence: the ability to see the enchantment and the disenchantment of life side by side, to see the value of the aspirational tradition of Broadway while recognising that the world that saw the birth of the Golden Age musical has crumbled away; to see that the world is both beautiful and yet can lead to hurt and disappointment and that nevertheless one cannot give up on it, that has made his work so rich, dramatically effective, layered with meaning and endlessly satisfying.

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Sarah Whitfield. *Studies in Musical Theatre*. January 2012, Volume 5, Issue 3.
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Desert Island Discs transmitted Saturday August 16, 1980.

Interviewer Roy Plomley. BBC Radio 4.

Desert Island Discs transmitted Sunday December 31, 2000.

Interviewer Sue Lawley. BBC Radio 4.

The Musical Episode 3 'Breaking the Mould' transmitted 20 September, 2010.

BBC Radio 2.

Composer of the Week. Series of interviews with Donald Macleod,

transmitted 21-25 March 2010. BBC Radio 3.

PRODUCTIONS SEEN AND HEARD

All productions are in London, unless otherwise stated. *Classic Moments: Hidden Treasures, Putting it Together, Side by Side by Sondheim* and *Something's Coming* are revues based on Sondheim's work.

ANYONE CAN WHISTLE

Jermyn Street Theatre. dir. Tom Littler. 10 March - 17 April 2010.

ASSASSINS

Bridgwater Arts Centre. dir. Brian Buttle. 24-27 February 2010.

Union Theatre. dir. Michael Strassen. 30 June - 24 July 2010.

Pleasance Theatre. dir. Ray Rackham. 21 March – 8 April 2012.

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. Jamie Lloyd. Menier Chocolate Factory.
21 November 2014-7 March 2015.

Chelsea Theatre. dir. T J Lloyd. 2 - 6 August 2016.

CLASSIC MOMENTS: HIDDEN TREASURES

Jermyn Street Theatre. dir. Tim McArthur. July 6 -24, 2010.

COMPANY

Donmar Warehouse. dir. Sam Mendes. 1 December 1995 – March 2 1996.

Transferred Albery Theatre March 7 – June 29 1996.

Rose and Crown, Walthamstow. dir. Tim McArthur. April 14-25 2009.

Pleasance Theatre. dir. Ray Rackham. 8 December 2010.

Southwark Playhouse. dir. Joe Fredericks. 2 February -12 March 2011

DO I HEAR A WALTZ?

The Wigmore Hall. Concert version as part of season 'Richard Rodgers on Broadway Act III'. 8 March 2014.

FOLLIES

Pleasance Theatre. dir. Ray Rackham. May 31- June 11, 2011.

Royal National Theatre. dir. Dominic Cooke. August 22 2017 – January 3 2018.

THE FROGS

Mumford Theatre, Cambridge. dir. Neil Ward. 17-18 January 2014.

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

Royal National Theatre. dir. Edward Hall. July 9- November 2 2004.

Queen's Theatre, Hornchurch. dir. Bob Carlton. September 24 – October 16 2010.

GYPSY

Queen Mother Theatre, Hitchin. dir. Jim Snell. 18-22 October 2011

Curve Theatre, Leicester. dir. Paul Kerryson. March 10 – April 15 2012

Chichester Theatre. dir. Jonathan Kent. 6 October 8 November 2014.

Transferred Savoy Theatre 30 March – November 28 2015.

INTO THE WOODS

Upstairs At The Gatehouse. dir. Racky Plews.

December 20 2008- February 1 2009.

The Landor Theatre. dir. Robert McWhir.

September 17 – 17 November 2009.

Regents Park Open Air Theatre. dir. Timothy Sheader.

August 6 – 11 September 2010.

Hampton Hill Playhouse. dir. Debs McDowell. 22-26 May 2012.

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. Ben Steinfeld/Noah Brody.

July 1-September 17 2016.

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

Royal National Theatre. dir. Sean Mathias. September 26, 1995 – August 31 1996.

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. Trevor Nunn. November 22 2008-March 8 2009.

Catford Broadway. dir. Sheila Arden. January 16-20 2013.

MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG

Bridewell Theatre. dir. Roger Harwood. May 28-June 10 2006.

Watermill Theatre, Newbury. dir. John Doyle. 16 January – 8 March 2008.

Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts. dir. Stuart Pedler. 2-11 October 2008.

Queens Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue. (Concert version.) dir. Rob Ashford.

31 October 2010.

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. Maria Friedman.

16 November 2012- 9 March 2013.

Transferred Harold Pinter Theatre. April 23-27 July 2013.

PASSION

Donmar Warehouse. dir. Jamie Lloyd. September 10 - November 27 2010.

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

St James Theatre. dir. Alistair Knights. 15 January – 1 February 2014.

ROAD SHOW

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. John Doyle. June 24 – September 17 2011.

Union Theatre. dir. Phil Willmott. February 3 – March 5 2016.

SATURDAY NIGHT

Jermyn Street Theatre. dir. Tom Littler. February 10 – March 14, 2009.

Waterman's Arts Centre. University of West London (London College of Music)

dir. Graham Hubbard. 29 April- May 2 2015.

SIDE BY SIDE BY SONDHEIM

Brockley Jack Theatre. dir. Elliot Clay. September 9 -26 2015.

SOMETHING'S COMING

Theatro Technis. dir. Randy Smartnick. December 9-11, 2010.

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

Menier Chocolate Factory. dir. Sam Buntrock.

18 November 2005 – 19 February 2006.

Transferred Wyndhams Theatre May 23-September 2 2006.

Théâtre du Châtelet. dir. Lee Blakeley. April 16-25 2013.

SWEENEY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET

BBC Radio 2. dir. Declan Donnellan. Transmitted 30 December 1994.

Watermill Theatre, Newbury. dir. John Doyle. 4 February – 27 March 2004.

Transferred to the Trafalgar Studios July 27-October 9 2004.

Transferred to the Ambassadors Theatre October 13 –

February 2005. Subsequent tour.

Chichester Festival Theatre dir. Jonathan Kent. September 24 -November 5, 2011.

Transferred Adelphi Theatre March 20 – September 22 2012.

Twickenham Theatre dir. Derek Anderson; 10 September – 4 October 2014.

WEST SIDE STORY

Sadlers Wells. dir. Joey McKneely. 22 July – 31 August 2008.

(Subsequently toured.)