Assignment #6

In this interview, Dominic Cavendish describes Stephen Sondheim as “America’s most venerated living composer and lyricist.” Sondheim is now eighty-four years old yet his mind is still creative and sharp as ever. He has won eight Grammy awards, eight Tony awards, and even a Pulitzer Prize for his incredible work.

Sondheim’s goals with his productions are to flood people with emotion, to make the audience laugh, cry, and think. The audience is to examine the underlying issues causing the social unrest. He goes on to state that, “the US Constitution guarantees the pursuit of happiness. It doesn’t guarantee the happiness. That is the difference.”

Citation:
Stephen Sondheim, interview: 'I'm not pretentious, I'm a product of Broadway'

At 84, Stephen Sondheim is musical theatre's most fiercely intelligent voice. Ahead of the revival of his 1991 classic 'Assassins', he talks to Dominic Cavendish

Stephen Sondheim Photo: Rex

By Dominic Cavendish

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Stephen Sondheim, America's most venerated living composer and lyricist, calls me from his Connecticut home on a Sunday. It's lunchtime there but, he explains, "I don't have lunch because food puts me to sleep and then I'll get no work done."

Work? You bet. Though Sondheim is 84, there's creative life in the old dog yet. As the Menier Chocolate Factory in London revives Assassins (1991), his stylistically daring and provocative (because it is not wholly unsympathetic) group-portrait of nine US Presidential assassins and would-be assassins, he's toiling away on what promises to be the 16th major musical for which he
has produced both score and lyrics.

The longevity of his career – its productivity, variety and ingenuity too – is remarkable. If it’s generally accepted that Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II propelled the American musical away from fluffy entertainment into a new era with Show Boat (1927), in which the “play” now became the thing around which the music had to cohere, Sondheim in turn is widely acknowledged as having expanded further the possibilities of the form over the past half-century.

Though he regards such sweeping overviews as a “fool’s game”, there’s no doubting the artistic intent in his work, a reaching after perfection in every note, every word, that makes the competition look as if it’s not trying hard enough. With Sondheim, life isn’t reducible to boy meets girl, or phantom falls for opera starlet. With musicals such as A Little Night Music, Follies and Sweeney Todd he tackles the big questions: who we are, how we cope with the business of being alive. Confusion, angst, regret, ambivalence and the keenest human yearnings are his stock-in-trade.

He has won eight Tony awards (more than any other composer), eight Grammy awards, a Pulitzer Prize too. The world’s most successful producer of musicals Cameron Mackintosh has described him as “possibly the greatest lyricist ever”. In a sense, we’re still only coming to grips with his genius.

Despite all this, he seems curiously downbeat about the cultural impact of his work. “How much effect does the theatre have on life?” he asks. “In the Twenties, theatre had an effect on public thinking. I think today by the time a show gets on [stage] the idea has already passed. Theatre is
now a cottage industry and a cottage entertainment – it doesn’t have much influence.”

Still, he keeps making it. He confirms that he’s now working on an as-yet-untitled show with the American playwright David Ives that will combine the storylines of two classic surrealist films by Luis Buñuel: The Exterminating Angel (1962) and The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972). The latter famously centres on the abortive attempts by a group of friends to go out to dinner. In the former, guests at a swish dinner party find themselves mysteriously trapped in the music room after supper.

“It’s a notion I’ve had for a long time, to take those two films, and blend them together into some kind of musical piece because they have a similar plot,” he explains. “It was prompted by something somebody said, which was that one of the major forms of entertainment these days is eating out. I thought that was a funny and sharp statement – and I think a correct one.”

He hopes the project will see the light of day, but the frequent revivals of his work around the world ensure that Sondheim fans are not going to be deprived of material in the meantime. In the spring, Emma Thompson and Bryn Terfel will bring his Sweeney Todd to the stage of the ENO but, before that, January will see the release of the Hollywood film version of Into the Woods, Sondheim and James Lapine’s dazzlingly inventive interweaving (and deconstruction of) familiar fairy tales. The Disney Studios production bodes well on multiple fronts, even if Sondheim, having seen an early cut, will only venture that he likes what he has seen so far. Its director is Rob Marshall, who won an Oscar for his film adaptation of Chicago, and the stellar cast includes Meryl Streep, Johnny Depp (so memorable as the lead in the big screen incarnation of Sweeney Todd) and James Corden.
Throughout our conversation Sondheim sounds remarkably peppy and still fiercely intelligent. Yet one of the frustrations – and fascinations – of talking to him is his reluctance to tally what he has produced with what he has experienced.

He bats away an inquiry as to why misfits and loners crop up so much in his work, not an unexpected one, given that he spent much of his life romantically unattached, wrestled somewhat with his homosexuality and first found love only in his 60s: “From Oedipus through Hamlet that’s the stuff of drama,” he says. “It has nothing to do with me.”

It would take far more getting to know him, too, to probe his notoriously difficult relationship with his mother. “Foxy”, a fashion designer who became emotionally abusive after her husband, Herbert, a New York dress manufacturer, left the marriage when Sondheim was 10. As Meryle Secrest’s 1998 biography chillingly records, his mother once sent him a letter that bore the words: “The only regret I have in life is giving you birth”. However, when they moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, she introduced him to a hugely influential figure – and almost a surrogate father – Oscar Hammerstein, who lived nearby.

Yet if Sondheim refuses to wear his heart on his sleeve, he’s more than happy to air his thoughts on his art. He considers Assassins his most accomplished musical: “John Weidman [the librettist] and I knew what we wanted to do, and we did it. I judge pieces that way. How many places are there where you’d say, ‘If I only knew how to fix that’? I look at Assassins, and with a few exceptions, it fulfils all my expectations.”
The show brings together some of America’s best-known assassins – Lee Harvey Oswald and John Wilkes Booth – with lesser-known historical figures – Charles Guiteau, Samuel Byck and Sara Jane Moore, played in Jamie Lloyd’s new revival by Andy Nyman, Mike McShane and Catherine Tate. They’re pitched into eerie, at times disconcertingly jaunty dialogue with each other in a fairground shooting booth. Though the piece won acclaim on its UK premiere by Sam Mendes at the Donmar Warehouse in 1992, its chances in New York were scuppered by the upsurge in patriotism during the Gulf War.

“It seemed like the wrong time to question the principles on which America was built,” Sondheim recalls, reasserting its underlying seriousness. “Every time I saw a reference to the show as ‘singing and dancing assassins’ it would just p--- me off, pardon the expression. Sing they do, but when they dance they’re not happy about it.

“Nobody at the end of the show should feel that we have been excusing or sentimentalising these people. We’re examining the system that causes these horrors. The US Constitution guarantees the pursuit of happiness. It doesn’t guarantee the happiness. That’s the difference. These are people who feel they’ve been cheated of their happiness, each one in a different way.”

Talk turns to the future. Does it matter how subsequent generations respond to his work? “If I get bad reviews after I’m dead, do I really care? If I get good reviews after I’m dead, do I care? If you can’t enjoy or complain about them, what’s the point?”

He laughs, then seems to change his mind: “Of course, I’d love the work to be done. And for what will sound like a very mealy-mouthed reason. I want people to enjoy what I write. I’m a product of Broadway no matter how pretentious anybody thinks what I write is. I’m not writing for myself. I’m writing to entertain, to make people laugh and cry and think. I want as big an audience as possible.”

**Assassins is at the Menier Chocolate Factory, London SE1 (020 7378 1713; menierchocolatefactory.com), until March 7**

**Into the Woods is out on January 9 (certificate PG)**

How we moderate

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