

Roundabout Theatre Company

COMPANY

A MUSICAL COMEDY

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**NYNEX Family Series
Study Guide**

COMPANY

text by Deborah Pope
Director of Arts In Education

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by David Olivenbaum

A SELECT LISTING OF SONDHEIM'S CANON

Following is a selected listing of Stephen Sondheim's major work for the American musical stage. This list does not include the work he created in theatres outside New York City, the projects that were started but never completed, or the work he contributed to original films as a composer, lyricist and/or writer. To include every work would require much more space than we have here.

Many of us think that a writer (of plays and/or music) can sit down with an idea, and write a show. Perhaps he does some re-writing, but then the show is done. That is not how it works in real life. This list illustrates only part of the complicated path Sondheim's creations have taken on their way toward public viewing. Some projects took years of discussion and development before opening on Broadway. Many projects became intertwined as they leap-frogged, one in front of the other, until they finally reached completion.

Many of us think of Stephen Sondheim as the creator of modern musicals. Perhaps we think of his latest show *PASSION*, or of *SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE*, or *INTO THE WOODS*. Surprisingly few remember that Sondheim wrote the lyrics for *WEST SIDE STORY* and *GYPSY*. It is fascinating to trace Sondheim's work as it forms a bridge from the older style of musical comedies (produced by teams like Rodgers and Hammerstein or Lerner and Lowe) to musicals we quickly connect to the name Stephen Sondheim.

Sondheim and his work have led the way from the old to the new style of musical

play. Though he learned his craft from the old masters, he has recast the form of the musical comedy. He is a pioneer, an inventor, and an experimentalist, as well as a poet.

1949 - Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and Arthur Laurents their have first meeting to discuss a *Romeo and Juliet (R&J)* musical.

1954 - Bernstein and Laurents revive discussions on *R&J* project.

1955 - *SATURDAY NIGHT* is slated for Broadway, but never produced. Jack Cassidy, Alice Ghostley and Arte Johnson are lined up to star. Stephen Sondheim writes the music and the lyrics. He is 25 years old.

Sondheim meets Leonard Bernstein and is invited to join *R&J* project as Bernstein's co-lyricist.

1957 - *R&J* project becomes *EAST SIDE STORY*, then *GANG WAY* and finally *WEST SIDE STORY*. Bernstein removes his name from the lyrics, giving the young Sondheim full credit for his contribution to the show. The show opens in Washington, D.C. and then in New York to critical raves.

1958 - Sondheim begins work with Burt Shevelove on a modern treatment of a group of plays by the ancient Roman comic playwright Plautus.

Sondheim is invited to write the lyrics for a musical based on the memoirs of Gypsy Rose Lee, to be called *GYPSY*. Arthur Laurents is to write the book, Jule Styne the music, Jerome Robbins is set to choreograph, and Ethel Merman to play the lead.

1959 - May 21, only six months after Sondheim was asked to join the project, *GYPSY* opens to rave reviews on Broadway.

Work continues on the PLAUTUS musical now titled *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM*. Phil Silvers withdraws from the show because he feels the material is "too old". Milton Berle refuses to star for the same reason. Zero Mostel finally accepts the part and heads the cast with Jack Gilford.

1961 - *The New York Times* announces a new Stephen Sondheim/Arthur Laurents musical coming early in 1962. First titled *SIDE SHOW*, then *THE NATIVES ARE RESTLESS*, the musical is finally called *ANYONE CAN WHISTLE*.

1962 - After bombing in New Haven, *FORUM* opens to rave reviews in New York on May 8. Sets and costumes for the original Broadway production of *FORUM* are designed by Tony Walton, the set designer for the Roundabout's current revival of *COMPANY*.

1963 - Rosalind Russell and Natalie Wood star in the movie version of *GYPSY*. The motion picture is not as successful as the show.

1964 - *ANYONE CAN WHISTLE* reaches Broadway with Angela Lansbury, Lee Remick and Harry Guardino. This is the first live musical comedy performance for all three of these performers. Plagued by catastrophes, the production lasts for only nine performances. Columbia Records decides to record the live cast album despite the short run.

1965 - With Richard Rodgers writing the music and Stephen Sondheim the lyrics, Arthur Laurents' play *THE TIME OF THE CUCKOO* comes to Broadway as the

musical *DO I HEAR A WALTZ?* This is the first and last time Sondheim collaborates with Rodgers, the long time partner to Oscar Hammerstein II, Sondheim's friend, teacher and mentor. The show runs for six months.

Stephen Sondheim and James Goldman, a friend and playwright, decide to work on a project together. The first draft of the libretto and five songs for *THE GIRLS UPSTAIRS* are completed by the end of the year.

1966 - *FORUM* is adapted to the screen with Phil Silvers, Zero Mostel, and Jack Gilford leading the cast.

1969 - Stuart Ostrow options to produce *THE GIRLS UPSTAIRS* for a Broadway run, rehearsals to begin by the end of 1969.

George Furth, Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince have their first meeting to develop the concept for *COMPANY*, a completely new type of musical, one about marriage. Anthony Perkins is slated to star.

Harold Prince agrees to take over the option to produce *THE GIRLS UPSTAIRS* on Broadway after *COMPANY* is up and running.

1970 - April 26, 1970, *COMPANY* opens on Broadway starring Dean Jones (who replaced Anthony Perkins before rehearsals began), Barbara Barrie, Elaine Stritch and Donna McKechnie. Although the critics are sharply divided in their reviews, the show becomes a hit in New York and in London.

Prince begins work on *THE GIRLS UPSTAIRS*, as promised, immediately after *COMPANY* opens.

1971 - April 4, **FOLLIES**, the new title of **THE GIRLS UPSTAIRS**, opens on Broadway, starring Alexis Smith, John McMartin, Yvonne DeCarlo and Gene Nelson. Harold Prince and Michael Bennett co-direct. The show runs for one year to critically mixed reviews. **FOLLIES** is, to this day, considered a daring and groundbreaking show, testing the limits of the musical comedy form.

Sondheim and Prince search for a story on which to base a truly romantic musical comedy. Sondheim thinks of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film, **SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT**. After a screening, Prince calls Bergman for the rights to adapt the story into a musical play for the stage. Bergman agrees.

1972 - **FORUM** is revived successfully on Broadway with Larry Blyden, Nancy Walker and Phil Silvers. Stephen Sondheim writes a new closing number for Nancy Walker. (This revival wins two Tonys!)

1973 - February 25, **A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC**, the Sondheim/Prince adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's **SMILES OF A SUMMER NIGHT**, (with a book by Hugh Wheeler), opens and becomes a tremendous hit on Broadway. Winning five Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Music and Lyrics, the show stars Len Cariou, Glynnis Johns and Hermione Gingold. Perhaps its most famous song is **SEND IN THE CLOWNS**.

Sondheim sees a new version of **SWEENEY TODD, THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET**, a classic English story adapted by playwright Christopher Bond. Pursuing the rights to the story, Sondheim joins with producers Richard Barr and Charles Woodward who are planning to bring the play to New York. They decide to wait for Sondheim to complete his other

commitments before moving ahead on this project.

1974 - **GYPSY** is revived on Broadway, directed by Arthur Laurents and starring Angela Lansbury. It is a hit all over again.

Talks begin on the musical that will become **PACIFIC OVERTURES**. The idea for the show is brought to Harold Prince by a young playwright (law student), John Weidman who has written a rough draft of a play about the opening of Japan to western trade by the American Admiral Matthew Perry.

1976 - January 11, **PACIFIC OVERTURES** opens on Broadway. Although critical reviews are again sharply divided, there is agreement that the show is daring, innovative and imaginative. **PACIFIC OVERTURES** runs for six months.

August 27, The New York Times announces that **SWEENEY TODD** will open in New York in the summer or fall of 1977.

Harold Prince begins shooting the movie version of **A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC**, book again by Hugh Wheeler, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Hermione Gingold, Diana Rigg and Len Cariou. Sondheim's music and lyrics travel to the screen with additional songs created just for the film version.

1979 - March 1, **SWEENEY TODD** opens on Broadway to general acclaim. Angela Lansbury and Len Cariou are given rave reviews and the production wins eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Score.

1980 - Harold Prince approaches Sondheim to write music and lyrics for **MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG**, a play written in the 1930's by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart.

1981 - November 16, **MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG** opens on Broadway to terrible reviews. The play closes quickly but RCA records the original cast album because Sondheim's work is too important not to document.

1982 - Stephen Sondheim meets playwright James Lapine. They begin to look for a project to work on together. These meetings will ultimately result in **SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE**.

1983 - July 6, **SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE** opens Off-Broadway at Playwright's Horizons for a planned 25 performance run.

1984 - May 2, **SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE** opens on Broadway. Despite mixed reviews, the production is a popular success and enjoys a long run.

October 25, an Off-Broadway revival of **PACIFIC OVERTURES** opens on the Upper West Side of Manhattan at the Promenade Theatre. Once again recognized as an important event in musical theatre, the show runs for under six months.

1985 - **SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE** wins the Pulitzer Prize.

Sondheim and Lapine look for another project to work on to follow **SUNDAY IN THE PARK**. They settle on a group of fairy tales and call the piece, **INTO THE WOODS**.

FOLLIES IN CONCERT is produced as a tribute to Sondheim. The concert, performed for two nights at Lincoln Center, stars Carol Burnett Lee Remick, Barbara Cook, George Hearn, Mandy Patinkin, Betty Comden, Adolph Green, Andre Gregory, Elaine Stritch and Phyllis Newman, to name a few.

The La Jolla Playhouse in California stages an are-worked version of **MERRILY WE ROLL ALONG** that is praised by the critics.

1987 - November 5, **INTO THE WOODS** opens on Broadway after previewing in San Diego at the Old Globe Playhouse. The reviews are very strong as is the popular response. The show does very well at the box office and wins three Tony Awards.

1989 - **SWEENEY TODD** is revived by the York Theatre Company and the production is moved to Circle in the Square Uptown, opening on Sept. 14.

1994 - **PASSION**, music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, opens on Broadway on May 9. Based on Attore Scola's 1982 movie **PASSION DEL AMORE**, Sondheim's play receives mixed notices but popular approval.

1995 - The Roundabout Theatre revives **COMPANY** on Broadway for the first time since its original run.

ABOUT COMPANY

Most musical comedies are structured to tell a unified story involving a number of central characters. In the beginning we learn about the characters and what they want. Then something happens to complicate the lives of the characters and they have to figure out how to overcome the obstacles in their path. Finally there is a climax after which the problems are resolved, positively or negatively, and the story concludes.

But there are other ways to structure a musical play. The musical *COMPANY* has proven to be one of those adventures into a different form.

As with many of Sondheim's projects, *COMPANY* evolved as a collaboration among a group of artists. First playwright George Furth approached Sondheim with a collection of short plays that he had written and wanted to present as a unit. Sondheim brought the plays to Harold Prince and asked for his opinion of the idea. Prince read the plays and suggested that Sondheim and Furth select from the group the plays that dealt with the subject of marriage.

They decided to do a musical about how difficult marriage is in the modern world of New York City. But there were too many aspects to this subject for the play to have only one story.

The team of Furth, Prince and Sondheim had more thinking to do before the play *COMPANY* appeared as we now know it today. Since the play was to focus on subject (modern marriage) rather than character they had to structure the play so that this central theme held together. The play would deal with a group of friends, consisting of several married couples and a few singles. Each married relationship and each single in search of a partner would be

exposed to the audience through short scenes and songs. The pivotal device connecting each story to the next would be the single man, Robert, who is everyone's friend but a person unable to make any type of serious commitment of his own.

For many years audiences had come to expect each song in a musical comedy to move the action of the play forward, to be part of the story and not stand outside of the action. Sondheim realized that this approach would not work for this material. He felt strongly that the characters in this play could not sing about themselves. Forcing these characters to sing about themselves would destroy the fabric of each story.

Sondheim's solution was to have the songs comment on the story from outside the action. Characters could sing about the situations other characters found themselves in and thus provide information while the action of the play stopped. Once again Sondheim solved a problem by flying in the face of traditional musical comedy convention.

Actually Sondheim gave credit to the German playwright Bertolt Brecht for this decision. The story of a Brecht musical play often stops when a song is sung, and characters regularly step outside the action to comment on the plot. But Sondheim felt that the Brechtian use of this technique was often cold and mechanical. In *COMPANY*, it was important to Sondheim to preserve the warmth and artistic fluidity of the whole piece.

By the time the script was near completion George Furth had had to eliminate all but one and one half of his original eleven short plays. The musical had become quite different and exciting. Unlike other musicals it did not have a chorus to support

the principal actors. Instead, the principal actors had to double as chorus members thus eliminating any time the cast might have to rest between scenes or large musical numbers. This made performing in *COMPANY* a particular challenge.

Although the creation of *COMPANY* took place over a relatively short period of time (meetings began in 1969 and the play opened in New York in April of 1970) it was intertwined with Sondheim's work on *FOLLIES*, which opened almost exactly one year later. *COMPANY* was a very personal creation for Sondheim and became so for almost everyone who shared in its creation.

It seems that the current revival of *COMPANY* at the Roundabout is following in the Sondheim tradition by becoming a very personal voyage for all the artists now joining together to bring the play to you in the fall of '95.

THE ROUNDABOUT REVIVAL OF COMPANY

Scott Ellis, the director of the Roundabout production of *COMPANY*, spoke very movingly at the first rehearsal about the continuing relevance of this play. Mr. Ellis researched carefully the attitudes toward marriage held by most people in 1969, the time during which *COMPANY* was created, and he found that surprisingly little has changed over the years. The difficulties of finding and maintaining close personal relationships in a large fast-paced city have remained central to the lives of a large part of our population.

In fact, it seems as if these interpersonal problems have only gotten worse and

become increasingly the subject of talk shows, newspaper columns, novels, psychological studies, as well as plays and movies. As the theme of *COMPANY* remains as relevant today as it was twenty-five years ago, and a growing number of people have become familiar with the issues dealt with in the play, a new production should be an exciting experience.

Mr. Ellis and the cast of the current production have had many talks with Stephen Sondheim about the work and how he sees it moving into the nineties as a musical for our times. Sondheim is excited about the prospect of seeing his work revisited by a fresh, yet sophisticated audience. It is quite possible that the times have caught up with the show and a whole new generation of *COMPANY* fans will be born.

Set designer Tony Walton (who designed sets and costumes for Sondheim's original production of *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM*) and costume designer William Ivey Long have worked closely with Mr. Ellis to bring the look of the Roundabout production of *COMPANY* into the 90's without losing its roots in the 60's.

Mr. Walton has designed a set that is stark and with different levels, all slightly tilted. The aim is to create a stage world that mirrors the inside minds of the characters in the play. For people who have trouble making close relationships it would seem that warmth, coziness, making things level and square would be very difficult. Thus the stage reflects the lack of connection and lack of "rightness" the characters feel inside.

Mr. Long wanted to give the audience a sense of the 60's fashion but in a way that would be compatible with our tastes today. While Mr. Walton's set is largely without

color, Mr. Long's costumes are bright and daring. The characters in this play may have dark and fearful insides, but they choose to hide these fears from view in loud and cheerful colors.

The actors in this production, just as the designers, are facing particular challenges. In addition to the fact that *COMPANY* is an exhausting show to perform, the actors must be able to convey to the audience the hopeful side of relationship problems. After the first production of *COMPANY* Sondheim pointed out, "people were mistaking our saying that relationships are difficult for relationships are impossible. What we clearly said over and over again was two is difficult and one is impossible." In other words, *COMPANY* was meant to highlight the problems in working out the relationships that we need in life, not confirm the notion that it is better to remain single.

In this, the first Broadway revival since its premiere, Mr. Ellis and the entire creative team are focusing on bringing to the stage a new and fresh interpretation of this now classic musical, and one that is truly faithful to Mr. Sondheim's original vision.

A FEW WORDS ON SONDHEIM

Stephen Sondheim was born in New York City on March 22, 1930 and lived his first ten years here. When his parents divorced in 1940 he moved with his mother to Doylestown, a small town in Pennsylvania. It was this move that would determine the course of Sondheim's life, for in this small town he befriended a boy named Jimmy Hammerstein, son of the great musical comedy lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein II.

Oscar Hammerstein became Stephen Sondheim's teacher, mentor and advisor. It was to Hammerstein that Sondheim brought his first musical (written when he was fifteen) for appraisal. Sondheim was so proud; he was certain that Hammerstein would immediately say it was ready for Broadway. Hammerstein did not give Sondheim the praise he expected. But Hammerstein treated Sondheim with great respect by criticizing the work very seriously and very completely. Sondheim still believes that he learned more about musical comedy in that single day of conversation with Oscar Hammerstein than some people learn in a lifetime.

The criticism offered by Hammerstein was part of the encouragement and support offered by this older, experienced and successful man to the younger still growing talented younger man. During the early part of his career Sondheim would come to Hammerstein frequently for advice and Hammerstein proved to be a solid guide helping Sondheim make good career decisions.

Early in his career Sondheim carried on in the tradition of his mentor Oscar Hammerstein. And then Sondheim created a new path and took the musical theatre to new places. Now he is in the position of fostering the young talents that continue to enter the field.

FURTHER THOUGHTS ON COMPANY

by David Olivenbaum

A MUSICAL FOR CITY PEOPLE

When *COMPANY* was first produced, in 1970, it showed its audiences their own lives on stage in a way that musicals had never done. That doesn't mean every previous musical fit the stereotype of silly Broadway fluff. Some--such as *WEST SIDE STORY*, *CAROUSEL* or *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*--were as moving or thought-provoking as any good play. Besides, *COMPANY* isn't "serious" at all. It is funny, sarcastic, and full of the high energy we associate with musicals.

But its nervous rhythms, and its rather nasty tone--especially its very unromantic view of marriage--gave it a modern, New York flavor at a time when many people thought musicals were old-fashioned and out of touch. It wasn't a fantasy, or set in a distant time and place, or a romance raised to operatic heights. Instead, it depicted New Yorkers just like the audience sitting in the theatre--even if the reflection wasn't too flattering.

Of course, these people aren't typical of everybody. For one thing, they all seem to live in expensive high-rises. But Stephen Sondheim and George Furth depict characters who--like anyone--get into arguments, or are jealous of their husband or wife, or say one thing when they mean another. And they try hard to be hip. They're terrified of not being sophisticated or cool enough. In *COMPANY*, this feeling--the pressure to be in on the latest thing, even if you're not really comfortable with it--is seen as part of the insistent pace of New York.

Characters in a musical had never sung this way before. Sondheim conveys the sense of being a little off balance not just in the urgent pulse of his music, but also in his words--which are full of surprising, sometimes unbelievable rhymes. And the characters often express their confused feelings in big, brassy musical numbers--the way someone who's trying to convince you of something can be too wound up, too "on".

That's why some songs in *COMPANY* seem like numbers we might see in another type of musical. But these aren't lighthearted singers and dancers performing them--these are mixed-up people who act out their problems musical comedy style. And that gives the songs an anxious quality, as if the characters are straining to measure up to what they're singing about.

At the time that *COMPANY* was first produced, society seemed to be changing faster than some people could handle. Even a few years earlier, many issues that these characters contend with--smoking pot, or having a lot of sex before marriage, or being afraid to commit themselves to marriage at all--hadn't been talked about openly. Now, marriages were falling apart more than ever before; some women asserted their independence from their husbands for the first time. People sometimes felt liberated, sometimes just confused. That's the background that *COMPANY* is set against, and it's the source of its slightly hysterical tone.

Traditionally, people thought of musical comedy's high energy as the expression of an optimistic, wholesome attitude--a cliché of what "American" is supposed to mean. In *COMPANY* that energy is more the result of a bad case of nerves. In this high-strung world, we can recognize our own.