

## 12 Stephen Sondheim and the Musical of the Outsider

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In a *New York Times Magazine* interview with Frank Rich, Stephen Sondheim (b. 1930) told an anecdote as revealing as it was charming. Reminiscing about the New Haven opening of *Carousel* in 1945, when he was fifteen, the composer/lyricist recalled the emotional impact of the first act's closing moments: 'I remember how everyone goes off to the clambake at the end of Act One and Jigger just follows, and he was the only one walking on stage as the curtain came down. I was sobbing.'<sup>1</sup> In the next paragraph, however, Sondheim displays a more characteristic caginess when considering why *Carousel* is his second favourite score. (*Porgy and Bess* is his favourite.) After suggesting that he might be drawn to *Carousel* 'because it's about a loner [the protagonist Billy Bigelow] who's misunderstood', Sondheim dismisses the thought, calling it 'psychobabble'.<sup>2</sup> Later in the interview, he returns to this somewhat defensive argument, noting that, after all, 'the outsider is basic to a lot of dramatic literature. This country's about conformity. And so nonconformity is a fairly common theme.'<sup>3</sup>

Nonconforming outsiders are indeed inherent in much dramatic literature. American musicals, however, have generally avoided them, and certainly their presence as protagonists in musicals before *Carousel* is rare. Even their existence as important supporting characters is unusual. Notable exceptions exist, of course. They include the mulatto Julie in *Show Boat* (1927), the discovery of whose racial heritage results in her dismissal from the showboat company and her subsequent tragedy, and Jud Fry in *Oklahoma!* (1943), whose angry isolation is voiced in the disturbing number 'Lonely Room'. With the possible exceptions of *Pal Joey* (1940) and the opera-derived *Carmen Jones* (1943), however, musicals before *Carousel* were not about these outsiders. Instead, these were secondary characters whose conflict with society usually resulted in society's triumph. Interestingly, each of these rather atypical works, with the exception of *Pal Joey*, had book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, Sondheim's mentor and close personal friend. Only after *Carousel*, which was also written by Hammerstein, do we find the outsider increasingly cast as the principal figure in a musical, particularly a musical with a score by Stephen Sondheim. Perhaps, as Sondheim acknowledges, this is because the

nonconformity of the outsider is 'obviously something I feel, belonging to a number of minorities'.<sup>4</sup> (Sondheim is Jewish and gay.) Or perhaps such observations really are psychobabble. Either way, Sondheim's body of work for the musical theatre thus far suggests that his early emotional reaction to a work about a disenfranchised member of society, a nonconformist, was an indication of the theme upon which he since has written many variations, each of them in a distinct personal style. He seems always to have been attracted to characters whose actions place them outside mainstream society. Neuroses are plentiful in these musicals, and they are found in characters whose complexities often recall the loner who troubled and moved the young Sondheim.

Sondheim's first Broadway shows were *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959), for which he provided the lyrics to Leonard Bernstein's and Jule Styne's scores, respectively, and even they are concerned with outsiders and/or the disenfranchised. Already Sondheim's lyrics create sharply drawn characters who express, among other feelings, a frustration with, or even contempt for, mainstream society. *West Side Story*, for example, concerns several layers of social ostracism: a white gang (the Jets) aggressively treats a Puerto Rican gang (the Sharks) as outsiders from American society, and the Sharks deeply resent and violently challenge that status; both gangs are disenfranchised from society in general (in the clever lyrics of the number 'Gee, Officer Krupke!', the Jets chronicle their misfit status); and the lovers Tony and Maria are rejected by both gangs because of their relationship. Sondheim's lyrics for the show create an expressive vernacular that emphasises the strained social relationships between the two gangs. *Gypsy*'s Mama Rose thumbs her nose at 'respectable' bourgeois society: 'they can stay and rot', she sings, 'but not Rose'. Only at the end of the show, when Rose breaks down in 'Rose's Turn', does the audience see the toll that this disenfranchisement has taken. Furthermore, both of these early works also feature a motive common to several of the later works: the outsider's ability, or at least hope, to escape reality through dreams or dreamlike fantasy. *West Side Story* contains a dream ballet in which the two principal characters imagine a life in which none are outsiders; and *Gypsy* is full of Rose's leitmotif 'I had a dream', with which she confronts various crises.

Many of Sondheim's subsequent outsiders also express themselves in or through dreams, or in dreamlike detachments from reality. In *Follies*, for instance, the neurotic and emotionally frazzled characters take turns performing acts in an imaginary and nightmarish vaudeville. Much of the action of *Company* (1970) occurs in a timeless and dreamlike suspension of reality in which Robert, an emotionally detached bachelor, comes to grips with what he really wants from

life. In the second act of *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), the twentieth-century George is consoled and inspired by the dreamlike apparition of Dot, a character from another century (and another act), and in *Assassins* (1991) the characters fervently, if desperately, believe that 'Everybody's got the right to their dreams'.

A consideration of Sondheim's scores as representations of the outsider provides an entrée to discussing some of their general and specific stylistic traits. These traits create what Sondheim scholar Steven Swayne has called Sondheim's 'multiple musical voices', many of which are imitative or referential.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, argues Swayne, Sondheim exploits this 'range of musical voices in pursuit of his singular voice: the voice of character delineation'.<sup>6</sup> While Sondheim's principal purpose, therefore, is the clear depiction of individual characters, his means for achieving it are as diverse as the concepts for the shows in which those characters exist.

The introduction previously of the word 'concepts' in turn demands mention of the term 'concept musical', for it is often applied to Sondheim's work in general and relates specifically to any discussion of his means of creating characters for a given show. Joanne Gordon sums up this term as follows:

Concept, the word coined to describe the form of the Sondheim musical, suggests that all elements of the musical, thematic and presentational, are integrated to suggest a central idea or image . . . Prior to Sondheim, the musical was built around the plot . . . The book structure for Sondheim, on the other hand, means the idea. Music, lyric, dance, dialogue, design, and direction fuse to support a focal thought. A central conceit controls and shapes an entire production, for every aspect of the production is blended and subordinated to a single vision . . . Form and content cannot really be separated, for the one dictates and is dependent on the other.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, Gordon continues, Sondheim 'develops a new lyric, musical, and theatrical language for each work. Sondheim's music and lyrics grow out of the dramatic idea inherent in the show's concept and themselves become part of the drama'.<sup>8</sup>

Two compositional techniques especially facilitate Sondheim's ability to change musical languages without losing his own 'singular voice': the use of motives, or short, recognisable musical ideas that sometimes represent non-musical concepts or characters and that are often used as structural cells for lengthier musical statements; and the use of pastiche, which is the presence of music and/or musical styles from various sources in a single work. While the first of these is observable as early as *Company* and, after *Sweeney Todd* (1979), becomes increasingly important, the second appears as a recognisable trait even earlier and is variously exploited by Sondheim in nearly all his works.

*Company*, then, serves as an early example of one way Sondheim uses motives to define the character of an outsider. Throughout *Company*, Sondheim uses a recurring motive, the 'Robert' or 'Bobby' motive, as a cell, or building block, for much of the score, as Stephen Banfield has demonstrated.<sup>9</sup> (The motive, first sung to the words 'Bobby, Bobby', consists of a descending minor third followed by a descending major second. The initial pitch of each interval is the same.) What Banfield does not mention, however, is the careful utilisation of this motive in relation to Robert and the other characters, and as a musical symbol of Robert's detachment from his married friends. It is heard almost immediately at the show's beginning, and a development of it introduces the opening title song. After this, the motive is used between scenes and before, or as part of, musical numbers involving Robert and his married friends, a group from whom he is an outsider despite the mutual affection between them.

The motive does not introduce songs that involve characters or their observations without Robert, however. This is evident in 'Little Things', a commentary by the acerbic Joanne on another couple's scene as well as on marriage in general, and 'Sorry Grateful', the men's reflective answer to Robert's question, 'Are you ever sorry you got married?' The motive neither introduces nor appears in songs that involve Robert on his own or without the couples, such as 'Someone Is Waiting', or 'Barcelona', his emotionally removed duet with a flight attendant. Although these numbers do not quote the motive, they are frequently built on it, often by inverting it, as Banfield points out. Perhaps the most dramatic use of the motive is in the dance sequence 'Tick Tock', omitted from the revised version of the show. In this number the audience hears taped dialogue of Robert and the flight attendant during sex. At a critical, post-coital moment, she says, 'I love you', and the motive is heard. It signifies what the couples all along have been wanting Robert to hear and experience; it represents their hopes fulfilled, as well as their presence in even his most intimate life. Robert, however, can only respond with 'I . . . I . . .', at which point the orchestra plays a dissonant fragment of the motive that signifies Robert's inability to express what everyone else wants him to express.

The central character's inability to respond reinforces his outsider status in the world of the married and emotionally committed. It is a telling moment, harking back to an earlier moment in the second act when, in the course of a production number, several couples perform a call-and-response tap dance break; when it is Robert's turn, there is a call but no response. Robert's motive, therefore, is expressive of the gulf between Robert and the couples, between Robert and thoughts of marriage and between Robert and any kind of emotional commitment.



Plate 17 Production of *Company* in 2001 at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre (formerly Missouri Repertory Theatre). Left to right: Kathy Barnett, Tia Speros, Cheryl Martin, Paul Niebanck, Lewis Cleale (as Robert, the 'other' who is unable to make a connection with his friends). Photograph courtesy of Kansas City Repertory Theatre

On his own Robert can only recall the motive by transforming it into something else. Woven into the show's texture, the motive and its transformations, along with the accompanying lyrics, create a web that is present in some form throughout the show, and that defines Robert as a singular figure on the outside of a world of couples. This kind of motivic development is later greatly utilised by Sondheim, especially in *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* (1988).

Sondheim's use of pastiche appears even earlier, as previously noted. In *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), his second produced show as both composer and lyricist,<sup>10</sup> Sondheim made use of what he calls 'traditional musical comedy language to make points. All the numbers Angie (Angela Lansbury, one of the show's co-stars) sang in the show were pastiche – her opening number, for instance, was a Hugh Martin–Kay Thompson pastiche. The character always sang in musical comedy terms because she was a lady who dealt in attitudes instead of emotions.'<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, Sondheim has also said of this show that, 'Essentially the show is about, on one level, non-conformity and conformity in contemporary society.'<sup>12</sup> Although the show ran for only nine performances, the score is original and often memorable, and it explores subjects like sanity,

depression and twentieth-century fears with a decidedly musical theatre vocabulary.

Sondheim also uses the vocabulary of the musical theatre in *Follies* (1971). Because *Follies*, in the words of director/producer Harold Prince, 'deals with the loss of innocence in the United States, using the Ziegfeld Follies . . . as its metaphor',<sup>13</sup> musical pastiche is a natural choice for realising that metaphor. Here, however, Sondheim gives resonance to characters who, unhappy with the present, look back to a past best recalled by its music and by their memory of having sung it. (The characters are former showgirls and their husbands, and the title refers to their former employment as well as to their personal delusions.) As Joanne Gordon observes, 'The work is a voyage into the collective unconscious of America's theatrical imagination. Nostalgia is not merely the mood, it is the subject matter.'<sup>14</sup> To this end, Sondheim writes musical numbers that recall the past eras referred to in the script and for which the characters express nostalgia, as well as numbers that are 'book' songs sung by the characters in the unhappy present. Because the script calls for the representation of the characters in their past youthful days as well as their present middle age, Sondheim sometimes combines the two styles of writing and creates a surreal blend of past and present.

The pastiche numbers, however, are most effective in the last section of the show, a kind of musical revue–nervous breakdown in which each of the four principal characters expresses his or her individual neurosis. Sally, a former chorus girl who is now unhappily married to a travelling salesman and living a nondescript suburban life in the American Southwest, expresses her long-standing love for Ben, a friend's husband whom she has quietly loved for years, in a Gershwin-like torch song. The rather mousy and decidedly unglamorous Sally stands alone in a circular spot, clad in a clinging silver gown evocative of Jean Harlow, and passionately sings 'Losing My Mind', one of Sondheim's most powerfully emotional love songs. Her husband Buddy, on the other hand, sings a patter song about loving one woman (Sally) but finding affection only in the arms of another. The upbeat and funny vaudeville quality of the song, a baggy pants routine, barely masks Buddy's desperate frustration with a lifetime of watching his wife love another man. Phyllis, Sally's former best friend and the wife of the man Sally loves, has a production number that speaks of her schizophrenia: 'The Story of Lucy and Jessie' depicts Phyllis as a young woman, warm and loving but fearful of life, and as a middle-aged woman, classy but emotionally dead. The irony is that each wants to be the other. This number recalls both Cole Porter and Kurt Weill, especially 'The Saga of Jenny' from *Lady in the Dark*.

The final number in this follies of the mind is for Ben, Phyllis's husband and the man loved by Sally. This is a top hat and tails number that also recalls Gershwin or, perhaps, the syncopated dance tunes of Irving Berlin. As Ben swaggers to the song, cane in hand and backed by the ensemble, he quite literally falls apart, forgetting his lyrics and losing control until the nightmare takes over and the revue literally explodes in a cacophony of musical fragments and shadowy images. Sondheim's choice of material to parody in this final section of the show is what makes the numbers so effectively devastating, and it is his most powerful and successful use of pastiche up to that point. His portraits of the neurotic and troubled characters are almost painful to watch, and they are created with great sympathy for the individuals who yearn for a time that was not nearly as happy, or tuneful, as they like to remember.

The complex web of relationships that forms *A Little Night Music* (1973) is one of outsiders. Of all the characters, Henrik most exemplifies this state. He goes from being a misfit at the seminary to being a misfit at home to being a misfit at Mme Armfeldt's estate. Indeed, before gathering with others at the estate for a weekend, Henrik notes that 'the devil's companions know not whom they serve, / It might be instructive to observe'. Henrik eventually does more than observe, however. Before the end of the weekend, and after contemplating suicide, he runs off with his father's young bride, who also realises her emotional and chronological distance from her husband and the others. The flight of Henrik and Anne propels the plot to its conclusion, in which the various characters rediscover their relationships and their places inside – or outside, as the case may be – the society around them. Desirée, the principal female character, compares the group of adults to clowns in 'Send in the Clowns', Sondheim's most famous song. After a statement of the song's titular command, Desirée changes her mind. 'Don't bother', she reconsiders, 'they're here.'

One of the most original creations for the musical theatre *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979) is filled with outsiders, colourful characters who are all dispossessed persons, outsiders in nineteenth-century London. Sweeney Todd, alias Benjamin Barker, a half-mad barber bent on revenge, comes to London to murder Judge Turpin; when the intended victim escapes Todd's blade, Todd swears to kill all who visit his barber's chair until he cuts Turpin's throat.

In 'Epiphany' Todd's inner need for revenge is awakened to some of the angriest and most disturbing music ever written for the musical theatre. In the subsequent duet 'A Little Priest', Todd and the resourceful Mrs Lovett, who loves him, devise a plan to solve both of their problems – Todd getting rid of his murdered bodies and Mrs Lovett finding a source of meat

for her pies. The cannibalistic fantasy, with its grotesque lyrics that describe how members of various professions would taste, appears as a light-hearted waltz. The counterpoint between the lyrics and the music accentuates the macabre nature of the duet.

The idea of using the waltz idiom to accompany dark and menacing lyrics was of course nothing new. Sondheim himself had used it throughout *A Little Night Music*, but in *Sweeney Todd* the style took on an even more demonic character. This would become manifest in two numbers in *Assassins*, as we shall see: the opening sequence, where 'Hail to the Chief' is transformed into a waltz, and 'Gun Song', where the carefree waltz is the musical identifier in a number that celebrates the weapon of assassination.

In the fairy-tale-based *Into the Woods* (1987), Sondheim once again has nontraditional characters as the central figures in his musical. Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Jack (of beanstalk fame), Rapunzel and even Snow White appear in this musical about outsiders, all of whom have their own personal issues, working together to solve bigger problems. Encased in a larger tale of a baker and his barren wife who is under the spell of a witch, the stories of the familiar fairy tales are enhanced through their dramatic and musical treatment. Rapunzel's Prince and his brother, Cinderella's Prince, sing the waltz duet 'Agony', and the instructive ballads 'No One Is Alone' and 'Children Will Listen' have enjoyed lives of their own outside theatrical contexts. 'No One Is Alone' is a benevolent anthem to outsiders – people are never completely disconnected from others in their thoughts and actions.

Before turning our attention to *Assassins*, a veritable treasure chest of otherness that will occupy the rest of this chapter, we must acknowledge two other shows with scores by Sondheim that further demonstrate varied conditions of outsiders: *Passion* (1994) and *Bounce* (2003). The former concerns the life-altering and transformative love of a sick and physically unattractive woman – an outsider in every sense, from her physical to her emotional isolation from society – while the latter considers the troubled relationship of two entrepreneurial brothers who find it impossible to sustain themselves within the confines of society. The scores for these two shows inhabit different stylistic worlds, *Passion* rising to operatic heights through some of Sondheim's most exquisite music and *Bounce* recalling a more traditional Broadway style not unlike the earlier *Merrily We Roll Along*. Despite their being wildly different, each of these shows nonetheless provided Sondheim with additional sets of characters whose status as outsiders he could musically confirm.

It is in *Assassins*, however, that Sondheim is at his best portraying the neurotic outsider. Nowhere in Sondheim's work is this character type



created with more explicit sympathy, humour or irony. *Assassins* is a troubling work that perplexed and even angered some critics and still has the power to disturb American audiences.<sup>15</sup> In this piece all the characters are would-be or successful assassins of American presidents. They are also unhappy loners and, from society's perspective, losers. In *Assassins*, furthermore, Sondheim and the playwright John Weidman suggest that, with the exception of John Wilkes Booth, none of these singular figures acts out of any specific political motivation. Instead, their acts are explosive expressions of their hopeless and powerless positions in a system that seems, to them, to have been designed for the well-being of someone else. Individually and as a group, these men and women feel cheated and deprived of a happiness they view as their right. They express these feelings in one of Sondheim's most accomplished scores. How he gives voice to these outsiders, and how his technique for doing this is unique in this work, is fascinating.

Weidman and Sondheim, who had earlier collaborated on *Pacific Overtures* (1976), created *Assassins* after the model of a vaudeville-like revue, a choice that contributed in several ways to the successful presentation of the disenfranchised titular characters. It encouraged Sondheim to exploit pastiche in new and sophisticated ways. Previously, as noted, the composer/lyricist used familiar and traditional musical theatre song styles to underscore aspects of situations and characters. In *Assassins*, however, the reach of Sondheim's stylistic net is much wider. The sources for his pastiche include pre-existent and often familiar pieces of music from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1980s. He also parodies familiar popular song styles from nineteenth-century parlour songs to 1980s pop love songs, as well as popular dance styles such as cakewalks, Sousa marches and hoe-downs. Non-musical sources include historical poems, lyrics, interviews and quotations. In addition, historical characters are interwoven throughout various eras to create relationships that would have been chronologically impossible. Such an extended use of historical materials, musical and textual, is unprecedented in Sondheim's work. He exploits these sources to probe the troubled psyches of deeply disturbed, and disturbing, outsiders.

By taking the familiar vocabulary of American music and using it to give voice to the disenfranchised and the desperate, moreover, Sondheim uses pastiche to particularly ironic effect. Comfortable and sometimes comforting styles of American popular music are used to depict an underside of American society, a depiction that in turn causes discomfort. Sondheim recasts or de-familiarises the comfortable styles by using them for characters who make us squirm but whose disenfranchisement, we begin to see by the show's end, is just as American as the 'comfortable'

musical space it inhabits. When Sondheim uses popular song styles in ways that subvert the connotations they have carried for a century or more, he is taking a drastic stylistic step, one that cannot but disturb and unsettle American audiences. Sondheim thus creates a network of textual references to give individual numbers, and even the entire score, meanings they might otherwise lack. The whole work is a carefully spun web of various references that maintains cohesion in part through the manipulation of these references and the viewer's assumed knowledge of them. This combination of references, demonstrated shortly, is adroit and powerful.

The vaudeville model for *Assassins* allows each character to have his or her appropriate turn, or specialty number, each following the other in no particular order and each in a different musical style. Giuseppe Zangara sings his Sousa-inspired number strapped in an electric chair, looking as if he might at any moment make a Houdini-like escape; Charles Guiteau sings and dances a jaunty cakewalk up and down the hangman's scaffold; and Samuel Byck dictates monologues into his tape recorder as if performing stand-up comedy. This combination of seemingly unrelated styles and personalities is, of course, characteristic of American vaudeville, which was derived from, and often satirised, established genres of entertainment. The unrelated styles also allow the distinctness of each character from the others, as well as from society in general. The individual messages from the fringe are similar, but they are spoken with different musical vocabularies.

The choice of the vaudeville model no doubt also suggested the nonlinear structure for *Assassins*. Like *Follies* and, especially, *Company*, the show moves smoothly but non-chronologically through time. Sometimes its dejected historical characters meet in locations nonspecific to any one time period: a saloon in downtown New York City, for instance, that looks the same today as it did in 1900. Other times, however, the setting is almost painfully specific: the penultimate scene takes place in the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, just before the assassination of President John Kennedy. Sondheim also creates extended musical scenes through collections of numbers related by dramatic content and musical styles. 'How I Saved Roosevelt' is a collection of closely related but meaningfully contrasted dances. 'Gun Song' is a collection of waltzes, each of which deals with a different aspect of handguns and features a character from a different era. These waltzes are stylistically diverse, but they are connected by a refrain and preceded, as well as followed, by a sombre ballad, also a waltz. 'The Ballad of Guiteau' mixes hymn, parlour song and cakewalk. Stephen Banfield has called these sequences 'suites'.<sup>16</sup>

The focus of one of these suites ('How I Saved Roosevelt') is Giuseppe Zangara, an Italian immigrant who, in February 1933, attempted to kill President-elect Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Miami. He failed, but he managed to wound several others, including the mayor of Chicago, Tony Cermak, who subsequently died from his wounds. After Cermak's death, Zangara's life sentence was changed to death by execution in the electric chair. Zangara's only political agenda was his simple if fervent anti-capitalism: he was neither an anarchist, a socialist nor even a communist. He bore no grudge towards any individual figure, including Roosevelt.

While 'How I Saved Roosevelt' creates a vivid portrait of Zangara, it also contrasts him with a group of patriotic Bystanders, as Sondheim calls them, all of whom claimed to have thwarted the assassination attempt. These individuals each received and enjoyed much attention in the press and became momentary celebrities for their claims of having saved FDR. The contrast of Zangara's passionate anti-capitalism with the all-American absorption with self-promotion and celebrity in the press creates the bipolar perspective of the musical scene. When we add to this the fact that before Roosevelt's appearance, a band gave a concert at Bayfront Park's new bandshell,<sup>17</sup> we have the makings of a musical number, and it is from here that Sondheim works his magic.

Through an onstage radio, we hear the activities at Bayfront Park: a performance of Sousa's march 'El Capitan', an announcer's description of the festive scene and then of the unsuccessful assassination. The announcer summarises the ensuing events, ending with, 'We take you now to a group of eyewitnesses who will tell us what they saw.' The lights come up on five Bystanders and, as the band resumes 'El Capitan', they begin singing.

Sondheim's choice of 'El Capitan' is interesting. One of Sousa's best-known marches, it, too, is a pastiche of unrelated musical numbers from Sousa's most successful operetta, also titled *El Capitan*. This lighthearted work is also concerned with political insurrection and turmoil. After opening his number with a direct quote of the march's four-bar introduction in 6/8 time, and thus emphasising the diegetic aspect of the march being played in Bayfront Park, Sondheim builds a melody related to Sousa's, albeit more of a recognisable reminiscence than a direct quote. In the third strain of the march Sondheim changes the character through a shift to sustained quartal harmony (i.e. harmony based on fourths). This serves as Zangara's introduction into the number, and the lights come up on him confined in the electric chair. In the middle of this section, after the minor mode unambiguously appears, Zangara's music is transformed into a tarantella.

Whereas the character of the Sousa march indicates the patriotic American middle class and its capitalist system, the tarantella is, in this context, distinctly ‘other’ and foreign. Its heritage as a folk dance reflects Zangara’s poor Italian background and provides a clear contrast to the Sousa march’s more bourgeois origins. Since both are in 6/8 time, transition from one to the other is relatively simple.

After Zangara’s interlude, the strains of ‘El Capitan’ return, and the Bystanders begin again. After they sing the same musical material as in the opening section of the number, Sondheim takes another surprise turn and introduces ‘The Washington Post’, another Sousa march that operates on more than one level. The first, of course, is that the ‘The Washington Post’ represents the establishment press to whom the Bystanders are so eagerly and self-importantly telling their stories. The other level is that of yet another dance style. After its composition by Sousa in 1899, ‘The Washington Post’ was chosen by a group of dance instructors as suitable for a new and fashionable dance called the two-step, which in many places is still referred to as ‘The Washington Post’. This dance, then, implies another contrast in social class.

When the music yet again returns to ‘El Capitan’, a Bystander refers to Zangara as ‘Some left wing foreigner’. Zangara, however, refutes the term ‘left wing’ with a chilling section best described as a miniature mad scene. Here the orchestra plays dissonant snippets of the march melodies in counterpoint to Zangara’s increasingly higher, and increasingly intense, vocal line. After asserting ‘Zangara no foreign tool, / Zangara American! / American nothing!’ Zangara begins asking about the photographers. He sings, ‘And why there no photographers? / For Zangara no photographers! / Only capitalists get photographers!’ Odd though it is, this ranting is based on fact: in its report of Zangara’s execution in March 1933, *Newsweek* reported that Zangara said, ‘No camera man here? No one here to take picture? Lousy capitalists! No pictures! Capitalists! All capitalists! Lousy bunch! Crooks.’<sup>18</sup>

What Sondheim does with this outburst is particularly ingenious. Zangara’s diatribe about photographers equates him with the Bystanders, who are smitten with the press and excited by their importance to it. To point out this new, if fleeting, relationship between Zangara and the Bystanders, Sondheim again quotes the second strain of ‘El Capitan’ and has Zangara sing a counter-melody while the Bystanders sing the original melody. Zangara’s identifying tarantella, then, transforms into an integral section of the march. After Zangara asks, ‘And why there no photographers? / . . . / Only capitalists get photographers’, he comments ‘No right! / No fair / Nowhere!’ as the Bystanders sing, ‘I’m on the front page – is that bizarre? / And all of those pictures, like a star!’ The implication is that, for

at least this one moment in his life, Zangara envies the capitalist middle class more than perhaps he ever dreamed possible, even as he distinguishes himself from them. Because of Zangara's presence on stage with the Bystanders, the original lyrics for this phrase in Sousa's operetta are almost eerie: 'Gaze on his misanthropic stare. / Notice his penetrating glare.' As both Zangara and the Bystanders reach the end of the number, Zangara sings, 'Pull switch!' and a hum of electricity accompanies the number's final cadence.

Sondheim again references and/or quotes other texts, musical and non-musical, in his portrayal of Charles Guiteau in 'The Ballad of Guiteau'. On the surface an affable lunatic who shot James Garfield to preserve the country and promote the sales of his book, the singular Guiteau is given a pathetic and angry underside. This is done in part through recalling writings by the character as well as subsequent folk songs about him. (Indeed, the body of extant folk songs about political assassination in fact suggests that *Assassins* is the latest in a long line of works in popular genres about this aspect of the American character.)

On the day of his execution, Charles Guiteau wrote a poem that begins, 'I am going to the Lordy; / I am so glad. / I am going to the Lordy / I am so glad. / I am going to the Lordy, / Glory Hallelujah! Glory Hallelujah! / I am going to the Lordy.'<sup>19</sup> This poem intrigued Sondheim, who first encountered it in the short play by Charles Gilbert that inspired *Assassins*, and he opens Guiteau's number with its first lines. They are sung hymn-like and unaccompanied, and Sondheim continues to use the line 'I am going to the Lordy' as a recurring refrain between the number's sections. The contrast of Guiteau's fervent yet hymn-like poem with the musical styles that follow it suggests Guiteau's mental imbalance, a trait the audience has already seen. He is glib, frequently charming and completely insane.

Sondheim first contrasts Guiteau's mad hymn with a parlour song in 3/4 time sung by the narrating Balladeer. The opening lines also recall the opening exhortation of the folk song mentioned earlier, which is, 'Come all ye Christian people, wherever you may be, / Likewise pay attention to these few lines from me.' Sondheim distils this to 'Come all ye Christians, and learn from a sinner'.

Musically, Sondheim constructs a useful structure for all this textual reference. As noted earlier, the opening is an unaccompanied hymn sung by, and with lyrics by, Guiteau himself. Because the lights come up to reveal him at the foot of a scaffold, his reference to 'going to the Lordy' is amusing. The music, however, is a straightforward and almost austere hymn, sixteen bars of increasingly wider intervals. The initial hymn section segues into the Balladeer's triple-time parlour song. The parlour song leads into a sixteen-bar cakewalk refrain for Guiteau, by the end of which he has

danced himself one step closer to the hangman's waiting noose. The upbeat character and tempo of the dance are reflected in Sondheim's optimistic lyrics for Guiteau. Each refrain begins 'Look on the bright side' and continues with appropriately optimistic homilies that, along with the cheerfulness of the cakewalk, provide ironic contrast to the ominous scaffold on which they are delivered. The first two statements of the refrain are upbeat, but the third is slower, more resolute and accompanied by strong chords played on the beat, and ends abruptly after only four bars. At this point, Sondheim returns to the hymn. Now, however, it is played as a resolute and forceful dance: a *danse macabre*. At the end of the forceful hymn section, the Balladeer begins his refrain, this time in the previous fast tempo, and he and Guiteau sing an extended ending. As the refrain and the number are finally allowed to conclude, Guiteau is blindfolded and, as the lights black out and the final chord is played, the Hangman pulls the lever that releases the trap door under Guiteau.

The implications of the cakewalk, of course, are fascinating. The dance was originally a dance of outsiders, created by plantation slaves as a means of ridiculing their white owners. It was theatrical from its conception, with its prancing, high steps, its forward and backward bowing and its practice of dressing up in costume to impersonate others. Later, when the cakewalk was included in minstrelsy, it included acknowledgement of the audience. The cakewalk was eventually accepted by all of society, and it became quite popular with American and European dancers, white as well as black. Guiteau's self-consciously theatrical performance of the number recalls the cakewalk of minstrelsy and its winks and bows to the audience, and the absurdity of its urgent cheerfulness, under the circumstances of its performance, suggests Guiteau's insanity. The changing reception of the cakewalk, furthermore, suggests Guiteau's desperate desire for the respectability he thought fame and success would bring. Interestingly, the nature of the cakewalk, in its origins and later as a popular dance, was competitive. The slave who best impersonated the masters was rewarded with a prize – a cake – and later dancers also competed for prizes and acclaim. In *Assassins*, the disenfranchised seek a prize withheld by society, and their increasingly angry demand for that prize culminates in the powerful musical number 'Another National Anthem'. Guiteau's cakewalk simply and subtly drives home the idea that he, like each of the characters, is waiting for a prize, but not necessarily the noose and trap door.

The skill demonstrated in the creation of these two musical numbers suggests why Stephen Sondheim is among the most accomplished and influential composer-lyricists of the American musical theatre. His mastery of the styles that inform the score for *Assassins* is nothing less than

stunning, and each musical number displays a virtuosity similar to that found in 'How I Saved Roosevelt' and 'The Ballad of Guiteau'. Even the musical interludes refer to music other than that in *Assassins* and at one point are self-referential: Samuel Byck's first monologue, a humorous if unsettling message to Leonard Bernstein dictated into a tape recorder, ends with Byck singing Sondheim's lyrics to 'America' from *West Side Story*. Sondheim then parodies Bernstein's music for 'America' to close the scene. First quoting the number and then paraphrasing it, Sondheim uses his own work as a historical source. The moment is as chilling and ironic as it is amusing. Later, before the scene in the Texas School Book Depository, Sondheim uses actual recorded music – The Blue Ridge Boys singing 'Heartache Serenade' – to give the scene an especially eerie sense of reality that is made surreal when John Wilkes Booth appears before Lee Harvey Oswald.

Drawing on the body of American popular culture to give voice to the characters as well as to make critical commentary about them, Sondheim leaves the audience with the act of assassination as a collective cultural memory that uncomfortably lingers. The bitter observations of 'Gun Song', for instance, have the capability to haunt the viewer long after the final curtain. The communal desperation of 'Another National Anthem' fades into the quieter desperation of Lee Harvey Oswald, whose violent act, still vivid in the minds of many in the audience, is the climax of the show. There is no song for Oswald because his feelings have already been anticipated and expressed: he is the culmination of all the assassins and all the songs that have gone before him. Of course, he too is the victim of assassination, an act that provokes the final chorus of 'Everybody's got the right to be happy'.

This one score, perhaps the most indigenously 'American' of all Sondheim's output given its sources, displays a master at a high point of his career. *Assassins* is representative of Sondheim's work in its use of pastiche, its experiment with form and its representation of outsiders looking at a society that, for whatever various reasons, excludes them.

In all his work, Sondheim's musical languages are varied yet identifiably his own; perhaps they are more like different accents of the same language than altogether different languages. His harmonic vocabulary is vast and he alters it somewhat with each project; but the end result is always recognisably his.<sup>20</sup> His musical treatment, as well as the vocabulary of the lyrics in his own scores (Sondheim has criticised some of his earlier lyrics as inappropriate),<sup>21</sup> displays an unerring sense of character as well as theatricality, and no false note or word appears in any of his mature work.<sup>22</sup> Returning to his scores again and again, the listener is continually

informed, surprised and entertained by them. In *Assassins* Sondheim's musical pastiche is a tool for revealing aspects of the American national psyche, including the American proclivity for assassinating elected leaders. The initial and nervous critical reception of *Assassins* in the United States perhaps suggests that Sondheim reveals too much too clearly. Each of his works operates in similar, although outwardly different, ways.

The sensitivity that caused the fifteen-year-old Stephen Sondheim to cry at the first-act curtain of *Carousel* is still present in his maturity. *Sweeney Todd*, *Into the Woods*, *Assassins* and *Passion* are each as heart-breaking as they are disturbing and amusing. In *Assassins* Sondheim's outsiders find a national anthem for all the 'others' as well as for themselves in a musical score of inordinate richness. In musical after musical Sondheim offers a moving reminder about those people who 'can't get in to the ball park', and he offers this reminder in a most American way: through the voice of America's own songs.

## Notes

1. Frank Rich, 'Conversations with Stephen Sondheim', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 March 2000, p. 41.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 60.
4. Ibid.
5. Steven Robert Swayne, 'Hearing Sondheim's Voices', PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1999, p. 27.
6. Ibid.
7. Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim* (Carbondale, IL, 1990), p. 7.
8. Ibid.
9. Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1993), p. 152.
10. Sondheim's first show as both composer and lyricist to open on Broadway was *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962). An earlier effort, *Saturday Night*, was slated for a production in late 1955 or early 1956, but the death of the producer Lemuel Ayers resulted in the cancellation of the production. *Saturday Night* finally received a New York production in February 2000.
11. Craig Zadan, *Sondheim and Co.*, 2nd edn (New York, 1989), p. 82.
12. Ibid., p. 88.
13. Harold Prince, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-Six Years in the Theatre* (New York, 1974), p. 158.
14. Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy*, p. 78.
15. The discussion of *Assassins* is drawn from two papers by the author. The first, 'Sondheim, Sousa, and the Electric Chair', was presented at the 1997 national conference of the Sonneck Society for American Music. The second, 'Propelling the Plotless Musical: The Sondheim Solution', was presented at the 2000 national conference of the Society for American Music. Similar observations and analyses, at the time unknown to the author, were made concurrently by Steven R. Swayne in his 1999 doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley.
16. Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, p. 56.



17. The large acoustical 'shell' placed behind ensembles such as bands, orchestras or choruses when they perform outdoors.
18. 'Transition', *Newsweek*, 1 (25 March 1933), p. 19.
19. Patrick Donovan, *The Assassins* (New York, 1955), p. 60.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
21. See Sondheim's comments on harmony in Swayne, 'Hearing Sondheim's Voices', pp. 345–46.
22. Sondheim has often recounted the story of Sheldon Harnick's criticism of the lyrics to 'I Feel Pretty' from *West Side Story*. The inner rhymes, such as 'It's alarming how charming I feel', were too sophisticated for Maria, Harnick informed Sondheim. When Sondheim simplified them, however, they were rejected, and so 'there it is to this day embarrassing me every time it's sung' (Zadan, *Sondheim and Co.*, p. 22).