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*Washington University in St. Louis*

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS

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Sociocultural and Collaborative Antagonism in the Harold Prince-Stephen Sondheim Musicals  
(1970-1979)

by

Ashley M. Pribyl

A dissertation presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2019  
St. Louis, Missouri

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# Acknowledgments

A dissertation, much like a musical, is a collaborative effort, and one that requires many types of support, input, suggestions, discussions, and investments. First, this dissertation – and my entire degree – would not have been possible without my adviser, Todd Decker, who has been a true *Doktorvater* to me in every sense of the word. I never felt alone on this journey, as he continually provided enthusiastic support, incisive criticism, and probing questions for my thoughts and writings, as well as opportunities to improve myself as a teacher and scholar.

The other members of my committee, Christopher Stark, Patrick Burke, Paige McGinley, and Steven Swayne, also provided help, support, and feedback on this dissertation. Particular thanks go to Paige McGinley, whose course on Music and Performance planted the seeds to view Sondheim's musicals as performative works. She also provided guidance throughout this dissertation, specifically in the areas of performance studies and theatre history, as my project turned from one about Sondheim to one about Sondheim and Prince. Also thanks to Steve Swayne for giving me his time and also providing me with a wonderful foundation on which to build my studies.

Financial support was provided by the Department of Music, the American Culture Studies Department, and the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis. This project relied heavily on archival research. Doug Reside at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts has been an invaluable colleague, taking time to help me explore the deepest, darkest corners of the Billy Rose Theatre Division. Thank you to the other staff at the NYPLPA,



as well as Mark Horowitz and the staff at the Library of Congress, the Beinecke Library, and the Harry Ransom Center.

Other faculty at Washington University in St. Louis have contributed to this dissertation, through their courses, feedback, and/or moral support and mentorship, including Denise Gill, Peter Benson, Alex Stefaniak, Dolores Pesce, William Paul, Linda Nicholson, Iver Bernstein, Clarissa Hayward, Kim Daniels, Jeffrey McCune, Julie Singer, Luis Salas, Samuel Shearer, and Rebecca Wanzo. Faculty and staff outside of Washington University that have also provided indelible support include Jeffrey Magee, Sonia Seeman, Susan Jackson, Michael Tusa, Charles Carson, Byron Almen, Edward Pearsall, Suzanne Cusick, David Hunter, and Raymond Knapp. My *Pacific Overtures* chapter began in my seminar with Laurie B. Green at the University of Texas. Special thanks to my mentor, Andrew Dell'Antonio, who advised my Master's Thesis on *Sweeney Todd* and spurred my burgeoning interest in musicology as an undergraduate.

I am blessed to have had excellent colleagues with whom to discuss both the content and labor practices of a dissertation and who have been mentors, friends, and confidants throughout this process. It would be impossible to name them all, but I would like to give special thanks to my student mentors (some of whom are faculty now), Ashley Macrander, Jane Mathieu, Heather Buffington Anderson, Jennifer Chu, Christi Jay Wells, Liza Dister, and Kelsey Klotz. Thanks also goes to my supportive colleagues, including Daniel Viggers, Joseph Jakubowski, Darren LaCour, Elena Arredondo, Lillian Pinto de Sá, Kathryn Kinney, Daniel Weaver, Caleb Boyd, Karen Olson, James McMaster, Margaret Rowley, Jenna Harmon, Vanessa Tonelli, Daniel Deshon Hodges, Justin Wright, Nathan Lamp, Ashley Wilson, Donny Gerke, Ling Kang, Rose

Miyatsu, Toshi Miyatsu, Constantine Karathanasis, and all the members of the Negative Capability Basketball Team. Thanks especially to Felipe Guz Tinoco and Rachel Jones, our semi-permanent house guests.

Of course, family (chosen and given) provides that special kind of support that one cannot get anywhere else. Erin Griffith, you always answer the phone. Jacob Garcia, thanks for providing spiritual and emotional support. To my work spouses, Daniel Fister and Milena Schaller, thank you for putting up with me, taking care of me, and being the rocks on which the foundation of this dissertation was laid. I seriously could not have done this without either of you. To my friends, especially Sarah Williams, Richard Deja, Bethany McLemore, Joe and Jeremy, and all the boys, I could always count on you for anything and everything. Jeffrey Pribyl, thank you for providing deep and abiding mentorship as I navigated the difficult process of getting a PhD. My sister, Megan Pribyl, believed in me, even and especially when I did not. My mom is the reason that I love musicals, taking me to see *Side by Side by Sondheim* when I was three years old. My father taught me to never give up, especially when things are difficult. They have truly shown me what unconditional love looks like in their unflagging emotional, mental, physical, and financial support throughout these many, many years. Finally, thanks to L.N. Chesterfield – this would have been much lonelier without you.

Ashley M. Pribyl

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*August 2019*

To my parents, Charles and Theresa Pribyl.  
With their support, everything is possible.

# Abstract

Sociocultural and Collaborative Antagonism in the Harold Prince-Stephen Sondheim Musicals  
(1970-1979)

by

Ashley M. Pribyl

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

Washington University in St. Louis, 2019

Todd Decker, Chair

“I can get an idea for a musical...from getting politically roiled up about one or another thing.”

- Director/producer Harold Prince

“I couldn’t have been less interested in politics.”

- Composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim

Despite the above seemingly incompatible quotes, Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim somehow ended up forming one of Broadway’s most enduring collaborative legacies. Prince, who strived to challenge his audience’s political complacency, often clashed with Sondheim, whose primary consideration was individual characterization and narrative arc. Prince also chose other collaborators who were more interested in creating politically challenging works, contrary to Sondheim’s focus. When collaborating, Prince and Sondheim independently followed their own paths and intuitions, a mode of creation that I call *antagonistic collaboration*. Focusing on four musicals – *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), and *Sweeney Todd* (1979) – I show how Prince and Sondheim’s antagonistic collaboration yielded politically and culturally complex works.

My project builds on and challenges prior scholarship by insisting that the Broadway musical is a collaborative art informed by its historical and sociological contexts. Scholars from several disciplines have examined the texts that Sondheim created, but the nature of these analyses has tended to use an *auteur* model that ignores the embodied performance and the specific historical contexts for which these shows were created. My project provides a necessary intervention by investigating the interplay between the creative, collaborative process of each musical production and the larger socio-political context of 1970s New York.

Each chapter offers a case study in antagonistic collaboration between Sondheim and another artist in the context of the cultural politics of the time. Chapter 1 explores Sondheim and Prince at work making *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim's music and lyrics zoomed in to Sweeney's inner desire for revenge, as Prince's staging and Eugene Lee's set-design zoomed out to frame Sweeney as a victim of class oppression. Chapter 2 explores how Sondheim's entirely aesthetic interest in Japan while writing *Pacific Overtures* worked independently from Prince and bookwriter John Weidman's goal of critiquing American imperialism and pushing for Asian American representation on stage. Chapter 3 illustrates how Prince and co-director Michael Bennett turned *Follies* from a murder mystery into a show that intimately embodied discourses around sexism and aging, especially as related to the female body. Finally, Chapter 4 moves to the final collaborator, the audience, arguing that generational differences within the gay community led young people to read the main character of *Company* as gay against Sondheim's and Prince's authorial intent. Focusing only on Sondheim's contributions to these important expressions of American culture misses the ways that Sondheim's necessary collaborators explicitly put these shows in dialogue with the tumultuous politics of the 1970s, working against Sondheim's attempts to avoid doing so.

Highlighting the collaborative process and expanding the definition of who counts as collaborators allows for previously marginalized voices to become central to understanding the original context and enduring content of these works. The status of the musical as a collaborative performance done at a specific time and place, rather than a definitive text set down on paper, affords a flexibility of meaning. A range of creative figures involved in a production have their own agency to shape meaning. Historians of the musical must take this distributed, often antagonistic agency into account when attempting to understand the past.

# Introduction

“I can get an idea for a musical...from getting politically roiled up about one or another thing.”

- Director/producer Harold Prince

“I couldn’t have been less interested in politics.”

- Composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim<sup>1</sup>

Though a self-described “fierce liberal,” composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim has worked hard to distance himself and his musicals from blatant political interpretations.<sup>2</sup> As Steve Swayne points out in *How Sondheim Found His Sound*,

[Sondheim’s] art avoids being overtly political. Neither the Vietnam War nor the civil rights movement nor feminism nor issues surrounding gays...seemed to inform Sondheim’s stories at all. While some take great pains to find these things in Sondheim, Sondheim took great pains to play down these very things.<sup>3</sup>

Sondheim himself might not have been interested in mixing politics and art, but the topics of his shows do lend themselves to political interpretations when put in the context of their original moment. Whether a musical about American intervention in Japan at the end of the Vietnam War or a show about a single man dealing with heteronormative expectations after Stonewall, those who do take even modest “pains” to find political messages in the works of Sondheim are easily rewarded.

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<sup>1</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1998), 281.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 157.

How then are those who stage, perform, study, or consume these works to understand the political undertones of Sondheim's shows and the apolitical nature of Sondheim's expressed intent? The first step is realizing that musicals are never the creation of one person; as a collaborative art form, the final show is always a combination of intentions brought by many collaborators. Directors, book writers, and choreographers, as well as performers, music directors, lighting and costume designers, and even audience members and critics, together create meaning in and out of a show. Therefore, privileging Sondheim's intent or contributions leads to the loss of meanings brought forth by other, equally important, collaborators.

The question of authorial intent may seem irrelevant in the wake of Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author," but in Sondheim studies it remains an influential interpretive framework.<sup>4</sup> Here, I use intent to understand the collaborative process between creators rather than to make any authoritative claims concerning meaning and interpretation. Furthermore, it seems telling that Barthes uses the word "author" in the singular – privileging the literary and the singular creator. If we consider the audience as a collaborator, as this dissertation does, what does it mean to say that the author is dead? Rather, I relegate what has traditionally been considered "the author" to "one author" or "one collaborator" with reader/watcher/consumer and time and place of both creation and consumption as always also co-authors. This approach serves collaborative art forms most of all by allowing for a multiplicity of intents that then are

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<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). Intent provides a salient backbone for many studies on Sondheim and Prince. For example, Joanne Gordon's book *Art Isn't Easy* relies significantly on quotes and interviews for her interpretations of Sondheim's shows. Both Carol Ilson's and Foster Hirsch's books on Harold Prince also rely heavily on interviews for their histories. Finally, both Sondheim and Prince have entire books dedicated to their own thoughts (Mark Horowitz's *Sondheim on Music*, Sondheim's *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*, Prince's two autobiographies, *Sense of Occasion* and *Contradictions*), as well as numerous interviews within the last fifty years. This extensive collection of memories, thoughts, and authorial interpretations continues to provide a valuable resource for scholars looking to understand Prince's and Sondheim's artistic processes. My project here is to understand the discourse around differing intents, as well as how and why intent and interpretation often clash with one another.



combined and either taken up, rejected, or transformed by the final collaborator: the audience. Instead of erasing intent as a possible place of meaning, this framework considers how a variety of intents, in this case, intents that are in conflict with one another, makes impossible one authoritative interpretation, precisely Barthes's argument.

Sondheim never intended his shows to be political, but one collaborator in particular was driven to make his contributions socially and politically relevant: director/producer Harold Prince. As the epigraph to this introduction suggests, Prince made a career out of creating politically antagonistic musicals – shows that went beyond the marriage trope and forced audiences to think beyond the generic conventions of popular theatre to challenge preexisting norms in society and culture. Prince's output as a director in productions like *Evita* (1979), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1992), and the revivals of *Candide* (1974) and *Show Boat* (1994) consistently and deliberately foregrounded political critique. Sondheim himself discussed Prince's artistic leanings, "Hal Prince always likes to relate the work he does firmly and strongly to the society from which the material springs. That is why most of his shows are what I would call political shows."<sup>5</sup> Sondheim was acutely aware of Prince's interest in the political, and yet, chose to work with him for over a decade. As this dissertation will show, their differing intentions generally resulted in productive conflict and highly complex shows, a result that Sondheim seems to have valued.

Though the Prince shows listed above occurred after he began his partnership with Sondheim, Prince had already established himself as a political director by 1970, when he first worked as a director with Sondheim on *Company*, through his previous work on *Cabaret* (1966).

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Sondheim, "Larger than Life: Reflections on Melodrama and Sweeney Todd" in *Melodrama*, Daniel Gerould, ed. (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), 11.

A show about the decadence of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Nazi Germany, Prince envisioned the story as applicable to current times. He even directed the cast to research the two together: “When I was directing *Cabaret* in 1966 I had the entire company delve into newspapers about the surge of Fascism in the South to substantiate my claim that it *can* happen here.”<sup>6</sup> Prince focused on photographs of white Southerners defying the edicts of the Supreme Court by using force to keep black students from integrating public schools, as well as police ignoring the first amendment and attacking Civil Rights protestors with dogs and water hoses. Even though the show took place in a historical time period and a distant country, Prince directed the show towards political relevance in the here and now. Further, his work with stage designer Boris Aronson emphasized the complicity of the cabaret’s audience and *Cabaret*’s audience in the rise of fascist agendas by using a giant mirror on the set that reflected the audience and literally put the audience’s bodies into the material world of the show, bringing forth the audience’s role as a collaborator. Prince did not just desire political content – he desired to challenge the audience and call upon them to think about the political content and their own role in perpetuating violence and injustice in society. Prince’s past and continued interest in politics influenced the way collaborators and audiences interpreted his works with Sondheim by creating an expectation for the political and socially challenging.

Prince’s continued interest in socio-cultural context worked against, with, and through Sondheim’s focus on characterization and craft. Derived from his studies with Oscar Hammerstein II, Sondheim has continually been interested in traditional ideas of theatrical integration, while simultaneously looking to challenge the artistic norms of the field. He writes,

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<sup>6</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 37.

“In Hammerstein’s shows, for all their revolutionary impact, the characters are not much more than collections of characteristics...Refining his innovations was left to my generation.”<sup>7</sup>

Sondheim views the work of Hammerstein in particular, but also Rodgers and Kern, as moving the musical from a frivolous art to a serious one through integration of song, lyric, plot, character, dance, and all visual elements. His goal continues to be writing musicals that present characters deeply and realistically (within the artifice of a genre that allows for song and dance), and using craft to create music and lyrics that reflect everyday speech with clever rhymes and accurate accentuation. Content and context outside of the world of show holds little interest for Sondheim.

Though Prince used the term “creative abrasion” to describe his collaborative relationship with Sondheim, I employ the phrase *antagonistic collaboration* to specifically refer to their ideological differences.<sup>8</sup> The word *antagonistic* here refers to collaborators whose visions for a show are in opposition to one another, not necessarily to collaborators who find themselves in personal conflict or who have negative attitudes towards one another. In fact, Sondheim and Prince worked very well together, each bringing their own attitudes and preferences to the creative process, resulting in nuanced and emotionally resonant works.

Antagonism in this dissertation, as is evident in the title, does not just refer to collaboration, but also to politics. All art is political, even in and through its appearing not to be, but the name of Prince portends a specific kind of political, one intended to challenge the viewers’ understanding of the status quo. Prince intends to test and even antagonize his audience, forcing them to look at their complicity, such as the mirror in *Cabaret*, the value, or lack thereof,

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), xix.

<sup>8</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 71

of older women and their own aging bodies, such as in *Follies*, or their blindness to political corruption, as in *Evita* (1978). Furthermore, Prince tends to focus on domestic rather than foreign politics – though this does not mean that his shows are limited to the United States – as well as the politics of the social, rather than for example, military and economic policy.<sup>9</sup> This form of antagonism can find itself at odds with audience expectations of the musical as an escapist fantasy. Coupled with Sondheim’s interest in pushing and expanding the structure, plot, and content of the musical, the Sondheim-Prince shows often conflicted with the two’s other desire: to create popular and financially successful shows in the commercial theatre.

Prince and Sondheim alike recognize their collaborative antagonism. They discussed their collaboration extensively in a 1979 interview in *Dramatists Quarterly*. In this insightful text, both artists refer to having a “secret metaphor” for each show they worked on. Sondheim admitted, “I suspect that Hal and I have different metaphors for all the shows we do...we’d probably sum up each with a different sentence, and yet we were writing the same show.”<sup>10</sup> The use of different metaphors opens their shows to multiple meanings and interpretations.<sup>11</sup> Even as Prince’s metaphors were often imbued with sociopolitical meaning, neither Prince nor Sondheim was interested in creating a type of political musical that lacked nuance or rich characterization. Sondheim claims, “I was most concerned that we not soap-box. [Prince] was too, because we both like didactic theater but don’t like soap-boxing.”<sup>12</sup> This parsing between the didactic and the

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that military and economic policy do not overlap with domestic and social policy, and as I will show in my discussions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Pacific Overtures*, Prince is aware of the overlap between these areas of political relevance. Another important point is that domestic and social policy are much more easily highlighted and rewarded on the Broadway stage – it is difficult to imagine (though not impossible!) a musical focusing on the politics of the housing crisis or the intricacies of the Vietnam War.

<sup>10</sup> “On Collaboration Between Authors and Directors,” *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1979): 14.

<sup>11</sup> This hermeneutic flexibility continually affords the makers of revivals the ability to construct a culturally relevant show.

<sup>12</sup> “On Collaboration Between Authors and Directors,” *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (1979): 14.

soap-box allows for musicals that both he and Prince loved (*South Pacific* [1949]) or they had both worked on (*West Side Story* [1957]), as they simultaneously disavowed works whose aesthetics and narrative focus entirely on the political, such as those by Brecht and his various collaborators or *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* (1971). By combining Sondheim's insistence on characters first with Prince's need for political meaning, their collaborations often ended with shows that could be loved for their emotional experience and still feel artistically challenging and culturally relevant.

In the most recent book on Sondheim, Robert L. McLaughlin divides Sondheim scholarship into three categories: biographical, musicological, and literary.<sup>13</sup> While overly schematic - for example Stephen Banfield's work uses both musicological and literary studies methodologies and Steve Swayne's monograph looks in tandem at musical style in relationship to biography - these three categories encompass the main threads of Sondheim studies to this point. McLaughlin's categories exclude books for non-academics, such as popular histories by Ethan Mordden and Craig Zadan. These popular books do not provide the level of scholarly inquiry one would require from an academic publication, but they do shed light on important aspects of Sondheim's life and works. In particular, they demonstrate how audiences view Sondheim and his legacy, what fans and practitioners believe one should know about Sondheim, and of course, incorporate gossip inappropriate to scholarly publications. Though these stories

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<sup>13</sup> Robert L. McLaughlin, *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), x-xi. He sorts the current works on Sondheim in the following ways. Biographical: Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*; Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*; Stephen Citron, *Sondheim and Lloyd Webber*; Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*. Musicological: Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*; Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound*; Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*. Literary and close-readings: Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy*; Joanne Gordon, ed., *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*; Sandor Goodhart, ed., *Reading Stephen Sondheim*; Gina Masucci MacKenzie, *The Theatre of the Real*; Robert Gordon, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*.

can never be deemed factual, they do provide an important window into the popular imagination around Sondheim and his works.

McLaughlin's categories reveal a methodological lacuna in Sondheim studies. Missing from his list is cultural and historical theory and analysis. McLaughlin attempts to fill in the gap of cultural analysis through postmodernism, an analysis that he claims will "put Sondheim's work in conversation with its cultural moment."<sup>14</sup> Yet, his use of postmodernism does little to connect the shows to the material, political, and social contexts outside the theatre. His use of "cultural moment" in the singular also reveals his reliance on notions of the text-as-work, a view employed by Stephen Banfield in *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, elides the performative fact that musicals are continually recreated through performance within a variety of cultural moments. By ignoring the historical and sociological contexts within which the shows were written and performed, McLaughlin misses the implicit extratextual meanings these shows carried for creators and audiences.

Similarly, books on Harold Prince tend to be primarily biographical, with little analysis around his artistic contributions or influences. This is in part due to the general neglect that musical theatre directors have received in theatre histories – only two scholarly monographs focused entirely on Prince exist: Foster Hirsch's *Harold Prince and the American Musical* and Carol Ilson's *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera*, later updated to *Harold Prince: A Director's Journey*.<sup>15</sup> Most other work about Prince consists of analysis of his work in relationship to other collaborators or interviews with him directly. This is, in part, due to

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<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin, *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*, vii.

<sup>15</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989); Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: A Director's Journey* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000).

scholars' reliance on work-as-text which frames a producer's and/or director's contributions, even one as hands on as Prince, as intangible or lost. Furthermore, general lack of material evidence can erase the work done by collaborators that exists in the space between writing the text and staged performance.<sup>16</sup>

Sondheim scholars have often also underplayed the role of collaboration in his works. In his unironically titled article "Sondheim's Genius," Stephen Banfield argues, "Genius is heartless...My own view of the matter is that if Sondheim has saved his soul it is through *subjecting* his genius, and his music as it actually features in Broadway musicals, to collaboration."<sup>17</sup> Banfield's italicizing of the word "subjecting" reflects his larger argument: that Sondheim's collaborators were continually playing catch-up to his "genius." The problem with this argument, as I will show repeatedly in this dissertation, is that it misses the essential role that collaborators like Prince and John Weidman played in shaping Sondheim's musical and lyrical output. Banfield and I agree that collaboration changed Sondheim's work and perhaps made his shows more accessible, but Banfield disregards the exceptional abilities of Sondheim's collaborators. Furthermore, his argument implicitly values the "artistic" over the "popular," the auteur over the collaborator, the written over the performed, and the value of logic over the value of emotion. Not only are these values antithetical to the Broadway musical, Sondheim's chosen genre, these categories do not exist in opposition to one another – instead, they influence, intermingle with, and inform each other. As demonstrated by the work of feminist and

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<sup>16</sup> This hole has recently been filled somewhat through books such as *The Palgrave Handbook on Musical Theatre Producers*, Laura Macdonald and William A. Everett, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Lawrence Thelen, *The Show Makers: Great Directors of the American Musical Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Though, Thelen's book, like most books on directors, is interviews rather than analysis.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Banfield, "Sondheim's Genius," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, Robert Gordon, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

postcolonial scholars beginning in the 1970s, these hierarchical dichotomies support the epistemological foundations of hegemonic power structures.<sup>18</sup> Though other scholars of Sondheim are less insistent on Sondheim's "genius," their work has often been shaped by these foundational beliefs.<sup>19</sup> This dissertation demonstrates how persistent scholarly interest in the auteur has left out essential contributors and missed the value of theatre's most interesting and unique feature: collaboration among creative artists with different roles and perspectives.

Some scholars have begun to study Sondheim's work as a collaborative process. Most relevant to this dissertation is Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen's 2014 article "The Prince-Sondheim Legacy." She defines three important factors in their collaboration: their intense understanding of the American musical as a genre, their interest in culture outside of the American musical, and their desire "to create musicals that were intelligent, probing, and disturbing, as well as entertaining."<sup>20</sup> This last factor is essential to my argument for antagonistic collaboration: Sondheim and Prince had to have a shared goal for their collaboration to work. They both

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<sup>18</sup> For some examples of this scholarship, see: Darrin M. McMahon, *Divine Fury: A History of Genius* (New York: Perseus Books, 2013); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313; Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Christopher G. Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011); Brian Henderson, "Critique of Cine-Structuralism (Part 1)," *Film Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Autumn, 1973): 25-34; Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas, *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Louise Lamphere and Michelle Rosaldo, *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Radical histories and question of Enlightenment rationalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 14, (1995): 751-759. Carolyn Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?" *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 505-36; Simon Frith, ed., *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> As Sondheim studies began inside the purview of English departments, the earliest studies of these works focus on the text itself, ignoring both the sonic and the performative, as well as focusing on Sondheim as an auteur, such as *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Sandor Goodhart and *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, edited by Joanne Gordon. Furthermore, books like Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* focus solely on the score as the work, rather than performance as the work.

<sup>20</sup> Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen, "The Prince-Sondheim Legacy," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, Robert Gordon, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 97.



wanted to create shows that were both popular and thoughtful, though how these interacted looked differently for each collaborator. Lundskaer-Nielsen goes on to demonstrate how Prince and Sondheim's individual interests and temperaments worked in tandem to produce the shows discussed in this dissertation. I see this dissertation as responding to her article, delving further into her argument about the necessity and importance of the Sondheim-Prince partnership, and creating a theoretical framework informed by archival information through which to understand their collaboration.

Coming to musical theatre studies through an interest in opera, I derive many of my primary methodologies from opera scholarship. Musical theatre only recently entered the field of musicology and has thus far focused primarily on legitimizing discourses. These include traditional methodologies focusing on composer/lyricists as auteur, writing narrative histories, and working on critical editions.<sup>21</sup> Opera scholarship, conversely, has been at the forefront of the so-called New Musicology since the late 1980s and offers a rich and deep well of theories and methodologies from which to draw.

This project is most indebted to Tamara Levitz's book *Modernist Mysteries: Persephone* (2012), from which I first derived the concept of antagonistic collaboration. Though Levitz does not use that phrase in her book, Levitz constructs *Modernist Mysteries* around the four main collaborators of the musical drama *Persephone* (1934), Igor Stravinsky, Andre Gide, Jacques Copeau, and Ida Rubenstein, and their individual, contradictory interpretations of the *Persephone*

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<sup>21</sup> Recent examples of this type of work include Domonic McHugh and Amy Asch, editors, *The Complete Lyrics of Alan Jay Lerner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); MUSA (Music in the United States of America) editions, such as MUSA 29: Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle: *Shuffle Along* (1921), edited by Lyn Schenbeck and Lawrence Schenbeck; MUSA 02: Irving Berlin's Early Songs, edited by Geoffrey Block; MUSA Forthcoming: *Follies*, edited by Jon Alan Conrad; and the Broadway Legacy Series housed at Oxford University Press (previously problematically titled the Yale Broadway Masters Series housed at Yale University Press), edited by Geoffrey Block.

myth. In her final chapter, titled “The Promise of Irreconcilable Difference,” Levitz concludes that the conflicting interpretations of the myth led to a work that simultaneously contained contradictory meanings. The Persephone myth became a metaphor for both perverse sexuality (as established by Andre Gide) and the resurrection of Christ (as established by Stravinsky), and audiences often took up one or more of these interpretations. Levitz concludes that “the multidirectional outcome of *Persephone*, though unintended by its original creators, evokes a sensibility...that resists the teleological narrative of modernism.”<sup>22</sup> The collaborative clash that occurred within this work created a new aesthetic, one at odds with theatrical norms favouring a singular, integrated intent, such as Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For Levitz, this aesthetic contained a moral dimension: to value the contradictory, the circular, the meandering over the accepted norm of linear progress. She continues, “By abandoning the dream of a coherent and unified happy end, and by persisting on the heterogeneity of theatrical means, affects, goals, intentions, and temporal planes, *Persphone*’s collaborators inadvertently participated in creating...a politics of hope.”<sup>23</sup> Like the Prince/Sondheim shows, some of *Persephone*’s creators never intended for the drama to be a political project, yet through their conflict, the final project spoke to and defied modernist aesthetics. The Prince-Sondheim shows reflect her views, including plots that lack a teleological narrative (*Company*, *Follies*, *Merrily We Roll Along*), endings that often feel ambiguous or unfinished (*Company*, *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*), and productions open to a multiplicity of readings (*Company*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures*).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Persephone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 620-621.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 621-622.

<sup>24</sup> The postmodern tendencies of the Prince-Sondheim aesthetic centers Robert L. McLaughlin’s *Stephen Sondheim and the Reinvention of the American Musical*, particularly the way narrative and ambiguity function in the text. He also considers Sondheim’s use of musical pastiche and quotation, though he skips over the way other artists, such as set designer Boris Aronson and lighting designer Tharon Musser, contributed to his postmodern aesthetic.

Furthermore, Levitz's theory opens the door to valuing less integrated musicals, such as pre-1940s musical comedies, jukebox musicals, musical reviews, and even, like *Persephone* itself, total flops, challenging teleological narratives of the musical that claim the "integrated" era as the golden standard on which all other shows must be measured. In Levitz's framework, integration becomes only one possible aesthetic among many, and one whose ontology is rooted in modernist ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Levitz's "heterogeneity of theatrical means, affects, goals, intentions, and temporal planes" grounds this dissertation. However, unlike *Persephone*, the works studied in this dissertation were all at some level popular and/or critical successes, with lives extending beyond their original production.<sup>25</sup> I call the shows discussed here either "Sondheim shows" or "Prince-Sondheim shows," but this shorthand in no way negates the contributions of the other numerous creators who worked on these expansive productions, many of whom are also discussed in these pages. Rather than simplifying, this study responds to Levitz's call to study the contradictory impulses of the theatre, a form that necessarily requires assembling heterogenous means into a homogenous production.

Performance studies and theatre history have also provided an important foundation for this project, as these fields have moved away from a work-as-text point of view towards the work as an embodied project. In particular, Bruce Kirle's book *Unfinished Show Business* proves the necessity for historical grounding of specific productions. Rather than approaching the musical as an art captured in the text, Kirle, insists on reading the musical as a theatrical art,

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<sup>25</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, the least successful of the four, has continued to be more successful in revival, as will be discussed in chapter 2.

existing in a specific production at a specific time.<sup>26</sup> Stacy Wolf's *Changed for Good* extends Kirle's claim by showing how the construction and politics of a specific identity group, in her case women and girls, influence and change the content and interpretation of musicals.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Marvin Carlson's *The Haunted Stage* provided a strong theoretical backbone for understanding the way memory creates meaning, often outside of authorial intent.<sup>28</sup>

Recent musicological scholarship on the Broadway musical has begun to delve into the issues of culture, context, and collaboration. Books in Oxford's *Broadway Legacy Series*, edited by Geoffrey Block, often focus on one show, giving scholars the space to discuss more than just the composer/lyricist and the musical text. Todd Decker's *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* illustrates the importance of specific performers and specific socio-political issues to the creation, revivals, and reception of a musical.<sup>29</sup> Carol Oja's *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* shows how a microhistory of a specific show can demonstrate the importance of performers since forgotten.<sup>30</sup> Her work also emphasizes the collaborative nature of the musical, looking beyond Bernstein to find meaning. Forthcoming publications in the series promise to continue this urgently needed scholarly trend.<sup>31</sup>

Antagonistic collaboration is not limited to the relationship between Prince and Sondheim, and recent scholars' focus on collaboration has revealed other examples. Kara Anne

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Stacy Wolf, *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

<sup>29</sup> Todd Decker, *Show Boat Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Carol J. Oja, *Bernstein Meets Broadway: Collaborative Art in a Time of War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Upcoming publications in the Broadway Legacy Series include *Sweet Mystery: The Musical Works of Rida Johnson Young* by Ellen Peck, "Gypsy" and *the American Dream* by Jeffrey Magee, and *Pal Joey: A History of a Heel* by Julianne Lindberg.

Gardner's recent monograph provides an example of antagonistic collaboration (without naming it as such) between the choreographer Agnes De Mille and Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, particularly in De Mille's choreography for *Oklahoma!* (1943).<sup>32</sup> In the dream ballet, De Mille highlighted Laurie's sexuality and the dark sexual undertones of the show, antithetical to the more wholesome themes for which Rodgers and Hammerstein aimed. Gardner explicates, "De Mille had her own stories to tell, and they often went against the grain of the narratives her collaborators had devised. Those moments of conflict interest me most, because they resulted in more complex final products."<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless as Gardner shows, unlike the collaboration between Prince and Sondheim, De Mille's antagonism with Rodgers and Hammerstein negatively manifested at the personal level as well, leading to a termination of their working relationship after directing *Allegro* (1947).

Most closely related to this dissertation, Elissa Harbert's article on politics and *1776* (1969) illustrates another example of antagonistic collaboration. Harbert lays out the conflict between producer Stuart Ostrow, who wanted to create a popular show that encouraged leftist activism, composer/lyricist Sherman Edwards, who wanted to write an apolitical, historically-accurate show, and book writer Peter Stone, who wanted to bring out the parallels between the past and the present to ensure a better future. Harbert observes, "Each of the three main creative forces behind the production, Edwards, Stone, and Ostrow, had his own political views and mission for *1776*, which ultimately gave it a balanced character."<sup>34</sup> The conflict differed from that between Prince and Sondheim, but like the Prince-Sondheim shows, the conflict opened

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<sup>32</sup> Kara Anne Gardner, *Agnes De Mille: Telling Stories in Broadway Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21-46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. xvii.

<sup>34</sup> Elissa Harbert, "'Ever to the Right?': The Political Life of *1776* in the Nixon Era," *American Music* 35, no. 2 (Summer 2017): 243.

1776 up to a multiplicity of interpretations, allowing both liberals and conservatives to find a supportive message in the show.<sup>35</sup>

The 1970s, when Prince and Sondheim were working together, was a volatile time in the history of the United States, and in New York City in particular. The prosperous, stable lifestyle of the 1950s for white, middle-class Americans was challenged in the 1960s by the Black civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the gay and lesbian movement, as well as by world events, particularly the Vietnam War. Published in 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* began to question the happiness of suburban housewives, leading to the rise of the feminist movement in the early 1970s. In the aftermath of the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., the 1970s also saw the rise of the Black Power movement and the Black Panther party, and radical groups challenging the long-term effectiveness of peaceful protest. Other identity groups began movements inspired by both the Civil Right and Black power movements, including Asian Americans and Native Americans. The beginning of the 1970s saw the beginning of the United States' exit out of Vietnam; Saigon fell in 1975, concluding the most unpopular war in the United States and punctuating the country's humiliating defeat overseas. The economic prosperity of the post-War period became the recession that began in 1973, just as President Richard Nixon resigned from office. It would have been impossible for most Americans to enter a theatre without the influence and memories of at least some of these events.

New Yorkers, the primary audience for Broadway during this period, would have been especially aware of the changes taking place. The recession of the early 1970s combined with losses from tax revenue due to white flight to the suburbs left the city in a fiscal crisis. The city

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<sup>35</sup> Other disciplines have also influenced this paper, such as feminist studies, gay and lesbian history, and Asian American studies. Each chapter will delve more into these literatures.

nearly went bankrupt in 1975 and had more than \$11 billion dollars in debt. New York became the scapegoat for the rising conservative movement. In 1975, President Ford famously proclaimed, “Other cities, other states as well as the federal government are not immune to the insidious disease from which New York is suffering.... If we go on spending more than we have, providing more benefits and services than we can pay for, then a day of reckoning will come to Washington and the whole country just as it has to New York.”<sup>36</sup> The Times Square district itself became a bastion of crime, drugs, and sex work. Many old Broadway and movie theatres turned into “blue” theatres, which showed pornography. Primarily white, middle- and upper-class patrons entered and left a Times Square very different than the one that existed only twenty years earlier – dirty, barren, and run-down. Both the audience and the artists would have been aware of the complex political and economic situation facing the city and the nation during this decade.

Despite the realities of Times Square and the Theatre District, Broadway shows continued to play and succeed at similar rates as in the past. The number of new musicals (including new revivals) produced every year continued to stay steady (around fourteen), and the number of musicals that made back their initial investment (about 1 in 4) held steady as well.<sup>37</sup> The Prince-Sondheim shows did slightly better than average: two in six shows (*Company* and *A Little Night Music*) recouped on Broadway; two others – (*Sweeney Todd* and *Follies*) enjoyed healthy runs of over 500 performances but failed to recoup, mostly due to very high production costs;<sup>38</sup> *Pacific Overtures* (193 performances) was a financial flop, but has since been critically acclaimed for its artistic innovation; *Merrily We Roll Along* flopped spectacularly with only 16

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<sup>36</sup> “The Legacy of the 1970s Fiscal Crisis,” *The Nation*, accessed September 22, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/legacy-1970s-fiscal-crisis/>.

<sup>37</sup> Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Both shows have earned a place in the canon of oft-revived shows since, despite originally being financial “flops.”

performances. Although the songs in the show are often performed outside of the musical, *Merrily* has yet to have a successful run, even with continued, heavy revisions.<sup>39</sup> Not financial blockbusters, the Sondheim-Prince shows do carry a cultural weight and critical cachet that has put them at the center of discussion for the Broadway musical post-Rodgers and Hammerstein.<sup>40</sup>

This dissertation focuses on antagonistic collaboration in four Sondheim/Prince musicals spanning the 1970s – *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), and *Sweeney Todd* (1979).<sup>41</sup> Besides being a director and producer, Prince was often the impetus for his collaborations with Sondheim, such as his suggestion that both *Company* and *Pacific Overtures* be musicals rather than straight plays. He also brought with him other collaborators who had interest in or experience with political musicals. As producer of most of these musicals, Prince ultimately had control over which artists would be involved, from set designer to casting director. As director, he led the musical as a whole, using Sondheim’s lyrics and score as a starting point for both a sonic and visual world. Prince’s interest in a larger meaning outside of the specific stories and individual characters, one that was grounded in current issues and events, pervaded these four works.

Each chapter represents an individual case study, not necessarily reliant on the other chapters to be understood but providing a unique example of antagonistic collaboration. I use a

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Appendix 4.

<sup>40</sup> Here is a typical example of Sondheim’s dominance in musical theatre discourse: The first edition of Geoffrey Block’s detailed history of the Broadway musical published in 1997 includes only one post-*West Side Story* chapter, dedicated solely to Sondheim, even though Sondheim’s shows tended to run only a year or two, while blockbusters like *The Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, and *A Chorus Line* dominated the Broadway scene. The second edition, published in 2009, includes a chapter on Andrew Lloyd Weber and a change in the title “from ‘Show Boat’ to Sondheim” to “from ‘Show Boat’ to Sondheim and Lloyd Weber.” Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from ‘Show Boat’ to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>41</sup> My reasons for limiting the discussion to these four musicals are twofold. First, the practical reason of space. Second, both *A Little Night Music* (1974) and *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) are outliers in reception, with *Night Music* being the most popular and *Merrily* the least. While both could be viewed through a political lens, feminism with the first and neoliberal critique with the second, they fit less well into their political paradigms.



different political lens for each chapter to explore more closely the collaborative process and the way that antagonistic collaboration works and creates meanings, inside and outside of authorial intent. Each political lens is shaped by archival evidence that reveals its relevancy to the show during the musical's original conception, creation, production, and reception. Echoing the structure of Prince and Sondheim's final Broadway collaboration, *Merrily We Roll Along*, the chapters unfold in reverse chronological order beginning with *Sweeney Todd*. Starting with *Sweeney Todd* allows the dissertation to commence with the collaborators' own words, explaining in detail their fully-formed way of working together, a collaboration that over the ten previous years had taken on a coherent shape. Moving backwards in the subsequent three case studies then means moving into murkier waters, where Sondheim and Prince were working out their collaborative process. Furthermore, in moving backwards, the dissertation also expands outwards, away from Prince and Sondheim exclusively to include other and more distant collaborators. This second trajectory further reveals the complicated nature of the Prince and Sondheim collaboration in relationship to other collaborators.

Chapter 1 looks at *Sweeney Todd*, the Sondheim-Prince collaboration and its relationship to the economic crisis in New York City. The only musical production based solely on the urgings of Sondheim, Prince was forced to find his own meaning in a primary source with which he felt little or no connection; he eventually found that meaning in poverty and class conflict, problems plaguing New York City at the time. Prince's detailed account of his conflict with Sondheim and the source material begins the dissertation with a clear example of antagonistic collaboration.

While second-wave feminism, the gay and lesbian movement, and the black power movement are often brought to the fore in histories, the Asian American movement also began in earnest in the late 1960s and achieved success throughout the 1970s in improving the living conditions of both Asian immigrants and Asian Americans throughout the United States. Chapter 2 focuses on *Pacific Overtures* (1976), adds the collaboration of the bookwriter, John Weidman, and the somewhat accidental symbiosis between the show and the Asian American movement. As this was Weidman's first stage production, he worked closely with Prince to transform his play into a book for a musical. Prince brought Sondheim in late to the production, allowing for close analysis of Weidman and Prince's contributions to the show without Sondheim. In many ways, Sondheim served as a musical addition to *Pacific Overtures*, steered and supported by Prince and Weidman, rather than an equal collaborator.

In chapter 3, *Follies* (1971) becomes a mirror for discussions of the aging female form by feminists such as Susan Sontag and Simone de Beauvoir. Focusing on *Follies* as an embodied performance rather than solely a textual work, I analyze how the memories of past performers and performances impact a show centered on the coexistence of past and present. Further, I look at how the performers' physical bodies, emphasized by Michael Bennett's choreography and Boris Aronson's set, and aged voices work with and against Sondheim's semi-pastiche score. By listening and looking more closely at the original performers of *Follies*, I conclude that current casting practices that utilize divas in the lead roles erase the complexity forged in the original through the use of women whose lives more closely resembled that of the characters they played. Current casting also erases the normative female aging body, as championed by Sontag and the original production, from the stage.

Finally, chapter 4 tackles the myth of a gay Bobby in *Company*. Rather than making an either/or judgement around Bobby's sexuality, I interrogate discourse around Bobby's sexuality, uncovering who actually read Bobby as a gay character. Furthermore, this chapter asks what is afforded to audiences reading explicitly against authorial intent, as well as how and why *Company* specifically opens itself up to such antagonistic interpretations. Firmly rooted in the complexities of gay culture during the time of Stonewall, generational difference provides differing interpretations of what it means to be gay, and therefore, what it means for Bobby to be gay. Such differences also appear in performance, as two very different leading men, Dean Jones and Larry Kert, provide the show with their own antagonistic readings.

Theories of collaboration help to expand understandings of how people with varying life experiences and beliefs can reach goals and complete projects together. I present antagonistic collaboration as one of many possible models for successful collaborative production and hope that other scholars interested in musical theatre and other collaborative art forms will theorize different models of collaboration. Furthermore, expanding definitions of collaboration affords the inclusion of marginalized artists and communities, as well as provides of a way of contextualizing artistic works.

# Chapter 1

## *Sweeney Todd* (1979): Harold Prince as Antagonistic Collaborator

Harold Prince initially resisted Sondheim's idea to turn Christopher Bond's play *Sweeney Todd* (1970) into a music on the theme of obsession and revenge. Prince explained,

I told Steve 'I don't get it'... I told him that I had to find a way to do it. It seemed to me to be relentlessly about revenge, and I couldn't, then or now, afford to be interested in revenge. As a director I needed to see metaphor, to find some way of justifying the revenge. When I began to think of Sweeney's revenge as being against the class system that Judge Turpin represents, I began to find a way to get inside the material: if Sweeney is victimized by the class system so is everyone else in the show... All this hifalutin' stuff was acceptable to Steve and to Hugh [Wheeler] and stimulating to our set designer, Eugene Lee, and I told them to go ahead with their own work and to ignore my metaphor.<sup>1</sup>

Prince's opposition to Sondheim's (and *Sweeney's*) laser-focus on the revenge plot necessitated antagonistic collaboration: both men pursued their own interpretation of the show, independently from one another. Though moments of fusion between the two artist's interpretations did occur, each felt that their own goal should be of primary importance and were inspired to explore either the expressions and limits of revenge or the institutional oppression of the lower classes under capitalism. Both goals resonate in Bond's original, yet the play does lean on revenge, hence Prince's initial hesitation. In response to a letter from an interested student during *Sweeney Todd's* original run, Prince wrote, "Steve's primary source...[is] not substantially concerned with things sociological...In order to direct it, I needed some frame of reference other than an

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<sup>1</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 120.

exercise in theatrical style.”<sup>2</sup> As class critique only tangentially existed in the original text, Prince had to rely on extratextual methods, mostly theatrical, to develop his concept for the show. He felt audiences needed a sense of *justified* revenge to feel some sort of sympathy for the deranged protagonist and his accomplice Mrs. Lovett, while still condemning their actions as absolutely immoral.

Prince and Sondheim discussed their collaboration and acknowledged their creative differences in a 1979 interview for *Dramatists Quarterly*. In this interview dating to the period when they were making *Sweeney Todd*, both artists referred to using a “secret metaphor” for each show they worked on together. With *Sweeney*, Sondheim explained, “For me, what the show is really about is obsession. I was using [*Sweeney Todd*] as a metaphor for any kind of obsession.”<sup>3</sup> Each character had his or her own obsession: the titular character focused on revenge. Prince further elaborated, “I suppose people who are collaborating should be after the same thing, but Steve and I were obviously not with respect to *Sweeney Todd*. I think it’s about impotence, and that’s quite a different matter.”<sup>4</sup> Prince located such impotence in the inability of the working class to improve their position in life and in Sweeney’s inability to get justice for the crimes committed against him. Impotence in Prince’s *Sweeney Todd* derived from aristocratic and bourgeois exploitation of the working class.

Prince’s desire to make a Broadway musical about class oppression in the late 1970s firmly rooted *Sweeney* within a city in crisis, at times literally “on fire,” as the Beggar Woman sings. When *Sweeney* was in production and performance, New York City reeled from near

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to Mike Stevens [An English student] from Harold Prince, February 27, 1981, Harold Prince Papers, Box 188, Folder 1, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>3</sup> “On Collaboration Between Authors and Directors,” *Dramatist’s Guild Quarterly*, Volume 2, Issue 6, 1979: 14.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

bankruptcy and severe austerity measures, mostly at the expense of the most vulnerable. *Sweeney Todd*, then, was not just a horror musical, designed to scare audiences, but a politically relevant allegory illustrating the violent results and abject desperation of a class system that worked to benefit the wealthy while exploiting the working class. Designer Eugene Lee worked with Prince to make the show a visual exploration of Marxist critiques. Sondheim, on the other hand, created a sonic world steeped in the generic modes of thrillers and horror films, imitating the sounds of film composer Bernard Herrmann. He wanted to write a musical about the terrifying nature of obsession, and he wanted audiences to be immersed in that world. Both metaphors coexisted throughout the show. Audiences, in turn, could interpret the show through either or both metaphorical lenses. In the case of *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim and Prince's antagonistic collaboration opened up the show to a multiplicity of "correct" readings. Their two metaphors came together in select moments, underlining the connection between Sweeney's desire for revenge and the socio-political corruption that created such a monster.

### **The Sources of *Sweeney Todd***

*Sweeney Todd* was the only Prince and Sondheim collaboration instigated solely by Sondheim. Their other shows were either proposed by the book writers - *Follies* by John Goldman, *Company* by George Furth – or by some combination of Prince and another collaborator. Sondheim was motivated by a 1973 London production of Christopher Bond's play *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.<sup>5</sup> Sondheim anticipated a Grand Guignol experience, a type of French theatre known for horror with over-the-top blood and guts, but he

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 331-332.

found the play to be more of a sophisticated melodrama. Still, he was intrigued enough to want to write a musical version.<sup>6</sup>

Sondheim initially worked with Hugh Wheeler to adapt Bond's play into a musical; Sondheim had tried to write the book himself, but found it too difficult, so he enlisted Wheeler quite early in the process. They made surprisingly few changes and lifted more than a few lines directly from Bond's play. For example, the opening lines of Bond's play greatly resemble the opening lines to the first number of the show after the chorus prologue.<sup>78</sup>

Bond's Play

Anthony: I have sailed the world, beheld its fairest cities, seen the pyramids, the wonders of the east. Yet it is true – there *is* no place like home.

Todd: None.

Anthony: What's the matter?

Todd: You are young. Life has been kind to you, and fortunes smiles on your enterprises.<sup>7</sup>

Sondheim's Lyrics

Anthony: I have sailed the world, beheld its wonders/From the Dardanelles/To the mountains of Peru,/But there's no place like London! I feel home again./I could hear the city bells/Ring whatever I would do./No, there's no place –

Todd: No, there's no place like London.

Anthony: Mr. Todd, sir?

Todd: You are young./Life has been kind to you./You will learn.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 290.

<sup>7</sup> C.G. Bond, *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (London: Samuel French Limited, 1974), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 334.

Using Bond's play for inspiration, Sondheim completed seven songs – “No Place Like London,” “The Barber and His Wife,” “The Worst Pies in London,” “Poor Thing,” “My Friends,” “Green Finch and Linnet Bird,” and “Johanna (Anthony)” – before convincing Prince to direct the show.<sup>9</sup> These numbers tend to follow Bond's play quite closely, with the addition of solo numbers for Anthony and Johanna, expanding their introduction. After Prince's involvement, Sondheim and Wheeler began taking more liberties in consultation with Prince.<sup>10</sup> They added “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” throughout to frame the story and “A Little Priest” to end Act I. The second act deviates quite significantly from Bond's play. Table 1 charts the similarities and differences between Bond's play and Sondheim's lyrics. Those marked “similar” means that Sondheim followed Bond closely, as in the example above. The blanks indicate there is no corresponding moment in Bond's text. Unlike other Prince-Sondheim shows, Sondheim had almost completed the entire show by the time rehearsals started in fall 1978. Bond's play, which contained elements of both Sondheim's and Prince's metaphors, remained the trunk from which the show branched out.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003), 148.

<sup>10</sup> Correspondence from Hugh Wheeler to Harold Prince, July 28, 1977, Harold Prince Papers, Box 188, Folder 1, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.



**Table 1: Comparing Bond's and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*.**

\* indicates written before Prince's involvement.

<b>Christopher Bond Play</b>	<b>Stephen Sondheim Numbers</b>
N/A	<b>Organ Prelude</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd</b>
<b>Similar (Text and plot resemble one another)</b>	<b>No Place Like London*</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>The Barber and His Wife*</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>The Worst Pies in London*</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>The Barber and His Wife/Poor Thing*</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>My Friends*</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd</b>
	<b>Green Finch and Linnet Bird*</b>
	<b>Ah, Miss/Green Finch and Linnet Bird*</b>
	<b>Johanna (Anthony)*</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Pirelli's Miracle Elixir</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>The Contest</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Tooth-Pulling Scene</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Johanna (Judge)</b>

	<b>Wait</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Pirelli's Death</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Kiss Me</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Ladies in their Sensitivities</b>
<b>Combination (some different material)</b>	<b>Kiss Me Quartet</b>
<b>Different (Different text and plot)</b>	<b>Pretty Women</b>
<b>Different</b>	<b>Epiphany</b>
<b>Different, except introduction</b>	<b>A Little Priest</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>God, that's Good!</b>
<b>Different</b>	<b>Johanna (Sweeney)</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>By the Sea</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Wigmaker Sequence</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>The Letter</b>
	<b>Not While I'm Around</b>
<b>Different</b>	<b>Parlor Songs</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd</b>
<b>Similar</b>	<b>Final Sequence</b>
	<b>The Ballad of Sweeney Todd Finale</b>

For his play, Bond used a multiplicity of sometimes contradictory sources to establish and expand on existing versions of the Sweeney Todd myth. The original legend of Sweeney Todd began as a penny dreadful entitled *The String of Pearls: A Romance* in 1846 in *The People's Periodical and Family Library*.<sup>11</sup> Sold for a penny, penny dreadfuls were serials that appeared either as pamphlets or parts of larger periodicals and were known for gratuitous violence and sensationalism. *The String of Pearls* framed Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett as mere thieves, who murdered well-to-do men and women and stole from them, hiding the evidence through Mrs. Lovett's pies. The story has a young couple, Mark and Johanna, but no tragic backstory connects the pair to Sweeney; instead, they inauspiciously cross Sweeney's murderous path through a number of fantastical coincidences, a hallmark of nineteenth-century melodrama. The target audience for the story was boys and young men from working- and middle-class families.<sup>12</sup> Like many melodramas from the period, the thrust of the story was a morality tale, warning against the pitfalls of avarice and greed. Furthermore, the horror tale was deeply entrenched in the fears of urban anonymity in the rapidly growing London. The story became extremely popular, and due to lack of copyright laws, nineteenth-century London saw a proliferation of Sweeney Todd theatrical reproductions, many before the serial was completely published. Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett escaped their original context and turned into an urban legend, with realistic details such as the address of Todd's tonsorial parlor.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately the

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<sup>11</sup> Dick Collins, introduction to *The String of Pearls* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2005), v-vi.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the penny dreadful, see E.S. Turner, *Boys Will Be Boys: The Story of Sweeney Todd, Deadwood Dick, Sexton Blake, Billy Bunter, Dick Barton, et. al.* (London: Michael Joseph LTD, 1948); Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Karl Bell, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2012); John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998). For information specifically on the legend of Sweeney Todd, see Robert L. Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd: The Life and Times of an Urban Legend* (London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, 78-79.

legend of Sweeney Todd terrified nineteenth-century Londoners because it preyed upon their fears of the city as a place where one gets lost and where criminals can conduct business without discovery.<sup>14</sup>

In the introduction to his play, Bond acknowledges using the original story and its surrounding lore as a foundation and then expanding on it using outside sources. He explains, “All the versions of the play [*Sweeney Todd*] have contained the chair and the pies, and so does mine – I would hardly have the temerity to call my play *Sweeney Todd* if it didn’t. However, I’ve cast my net wider than anyone else in ‘borrowing’ from other authors.”<sup>15</sup> He then goes on to list “*The Count of Monte Cristo*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *The Spanish Tragedy*, the family green-grocer, and Shakespeare, as well as Dibdin-Pitt’s original melodrama” as inspirations for his complicated revenge plot.<sup>16</sup> The variety of these sources anticipates both Sondheim’s and Prince’s individual metaphors by way of the Sweeney urban legend.

Sondheim’s theme of revenge appears in most of Bond’s outside sources. Bond clearly derived Sweeney’s backstory from Alexander Dumas’s *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), where the title character is arrested for treason by two wealthy men, one of whom is interested in his fiancée, sentenced to life in prison, escapes, and returns under a new identity years later. Like Sweeney, the Count spends the story obsessed with revenge. Revenge also features in *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *The Spanish Tragedy* - both English revenge plays from the late-Elizabethan/early-Jacobean period. Revenge plays often utilized extreme stage violence, murder, and even cannibalism as part of their plots. One of the most famous of these, *Titus Andronicus*

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<sup>14</sup> Karl Bell, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack*, 9-12; Robert L. Mack, *The Wonderful and Surprising History of Sweeney Todd*, 51-70.

<sup>15</sup> Bond, *Sweeney Todd*, v.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

by William Shakespeare, utilizes human meat pies as the means of revenge. Lucy's rape can also be derived from this Shakespeare play. Other Shakespeare plays that might have influenced Bond include *Hamlet*, also a revenge play, as well as the many lovers doomed by outside forces, such as *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, and of course, *Romeo and Juliet*. One wonders what Bond's family green-grocer contributed, but this wide variety of sources allows for a wide variety of themes to be disentangled.

Still, Prince's metaphor can also be found, if more subtly, in the works cited by Bond. Dumas's Count is the victim of corrupt, wealthy men, even as he himself is a wealthy man. The revenge tragedies, such as *The Spanish Tragedy* and even *Hamlet*, often commented on corruption stemming from social hierarchies of the time.<sup>17</sup> These critiques look different than those in Bond's play, as all the characters are of similar noble and aristocratic birth, but the critique of corruption related to status and money remains present. In fact, Bond and Sondheim portray Sweeney before prison as being of an artisan class, in opposition to the working-class characters of the play like Toby and Mrs. Lovett.

Prince's metaphor can also be found in the generic designation of "melodrama." Though Bond drew on a number of genres for his story, he considered it a "melodrama." In fact, the story, play, and musical of *Sweeney Todd* were all called melodramas by their writers.<sup>18</sup> The genre of melodrama on the nineteenth-century stage often works on multiple levels, at once shallow and deep. Focusing on crime melodramas, to which *The String of Pearls* belongs, English scholar Matthew Buckley explains "[crime melodrama] appeals to popular history, but

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Justice, "Spain, Tragedy, and The Spanish Tragedy". *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25, no. 2, (Spring 1985), 271–288.

<sup>18</sup> Both Bond and Sondheim talk about the show in a special issue of the New York Literacy Forum. See Daniel Gerould, ed., *Melodrama* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980).

the popular history it invokes is now that of modern dislocation, poverty, labor unrest, and especially crime.”<sup>19</sup> Crime melodramas rose to popularity in the 1830s and 1840s, at the height of population growth and economic difficulties in London. They tended to critique the social and economic situation that allowed criminals to thrive, but they generally ended with the villains facing justice, maintaining, at some level, the status quo. When discussing *Sweeney Todd* in particular, Joanne Gordon claims,

Yet most of the successful melodramas contain elements of sociopolitical comment. ... This is not to suggest that the typical melodrama is a profound work of social criticism. Nevertheless, in its glorification of the common man, its emphasis upon the ultimate triumph of justice, and its depiction of gothic horror and murderous greed, *Grand Guignol* served an ultimately useful and moral purpose.<sup>20</sup>

Although scholars have historically viewed melodrama as a genre purely for entertainment, recent scholarship has shown that the themes of the play can delve into more serious, moral issues.<sup>21</sup> Even *The String of Pearls*, the original story of Sweeney Todd, served as a lesson regarding the pitfalls of greed, though it was Sweeney, not the Judge, for whom greed was his downfall.

In Bond’s melodrama, abuse of power and wealth by the upper classes underlay both plot and characters: The Judge abused his power to send Sweeney away, Mrs. Lovett’s extreme poverty led her to make desperate, disgusting decisions, and Sweeney’s inability to access justice for himself and his family created an uncaring monster. The socio-political implications went beyond just the plot, however. At the time he wrote *Sweeney Todd*, Bond was especially

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<sup>19</sup> Matthew Buckley, “Early English Melodrama” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 208.

<sup>21</sup> For more on the relationship between the melodrama and class critique, see Rohan McWilliam, “Melodrama and Class” in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama*, ed. Carolyn Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 163-175.

interested in the British class system and to this end his characters were sharply delineated by their language:

Judge Turpin, the aristocrat of the bunch, spoke in measured cadences, Sweeney and the young lovers in proper and slightly flowery King's English, and the others in either Cockney or working-class argot.<sup>22</sup>

By using language to differentiate class, a common practice among playwrights, Bond made class part of the aural landscape of his play, something that Sondheim attempted to follow in his lyrics.<sup>23</sup> Yet, it was Prince who made class the center of his vision for *Sweeney Todd*, bringing out this small part of Bond's play. Prince saw very little of his sociological critique in Bond's melodrama, but took the kernel found in the language of the play and transformed it into his foundation.

Both Sondheim's metaphor and Prince's appeared in Bond's seemingly simple melodrama. The amalgamation of source material, the connotations of the original story, and Bond's class-specific dialogue all contributed to a text that could be read in a multiplicity of ways. Nevertheless, Prince's reading held special significance for 1979 New York City, many of whose residents were facing extreme economic challenges and imposed austerity due to near bankruptcy.

### **Bankruptcy, Austerity, and the Class Conflict**

Prince's interest in class was perhaps a response to larger issues in New York City. The people of New York City in the late 1970s were reeling from the near-bankruptcy of the city and austerity measures put in place primarily by Wall Street and big banks, rather than by elected

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<sup>22</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 332.

<sup>23</sup> Bond's use of iambic pentameter for upper-class characters directly connects to Shakespeare's similar use of unrhymed verse to indicate the noble characters in his plays.

representatives, as recently examined by Kim Phillips-Fein in *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*.<sup>24</sup> Starting in the late 1960s, New York City faced financial hurdles due to lessening tax revenues related to housing incentives for white, middle-class families, encouraging them to move out of the city, as well a general recession and rising costs for social services. Between 1969 and 1976, the city lost 500,000 jobs as most other cities in the country were seeing a decline in unemployment.<sup>25</sup> City officials were unable to raise taxes without state approval. Banks began to threaten an end to loans to the municipal government of New York City. The real possibility of bankruptcy loomed.

Rather than attempting to raise taxes or receiving help from Washington, whose housing policies at the very least exacerbated New York problems, the city was forced to adopt extreme austerity measures, cutting services, laying off public employees, and betraying union contracts. These decisions were not made by public officials, but instead by the Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB), a state agency run mostly by financial elites with limited representation from labor and elected city officials.<sup>26</sup> According to Phillips-Fein, the EFCB “presented themselves as neutral, apolitical, arbiters of the fiscal reality rather than ideology. Nonetheless, they had a clear idea of how they wanted the city to change. What they sought was not simply budget cuts but a shift in priorities, a move away from the city’s long-standing commitment to social welfare spending.”<sup>27</sup> The financial crisis spurred a shift in New York City from liberalism to neoliberalism, where emphasis on government-run programs would shift to charity and the

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<sup>24</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Roger F. Alcala and David Mermelstein, “Part I: Overviews,” in *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcala and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 152.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.



free market.<sup>28</sup> For marginalized and liberal New Yorkers, the creation of the EFCEB and the enforced austerity the Board put in place expressed the irresponsibility of corrupt government officials and the financial elite, who cut services to the poor to make up for their mistakes. Such government corruption came in for critique in the production, staging, and plot of *Sweeney Todd*.

Differing political sides faulted different entities for New York's fiscal problems. For the Ford administration and other conservative Republicans, New York represented the failures, both moral and economic, of the New Deal and its liberal legacy.<sup>29</sup> For those on the left, policies favoring corporations over individuals caused and worsened the fiscal crisis.<sup>30</sup> In the preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities* (1977), Roger Alcala and David Mermelstein wrote, "Ultimately, the origins of urban fiscal crisis lie in the process of capitalist accumulation, in a system of economic growth dictated by capital's need to seek ever greater profits."<sup>31</sup> Leftists believed that the financial crisis in New York City demonstrated the moral and economic flaws of capitalism, even liberal capitalism, and that a Marxist-socialist way forward would be the best way to solve New York's and the country's financial woes.

### **Meyerhold, Brecht, and *The Threepenny Opera***

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<sup>28</sup> A large body of literature on the premise, implementation, and results of neoliberalism exist. For example, see Roger E. Alcala and David Mermelstein, ed., *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essays on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997); David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Julie Wilson, *Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>29</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> William K. Tabb, *The Long Default: New York City and the Urban Fiscal Crisis* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Roger F. Alcala and David Mermelstein, preface to *The Fiscal Crisis of American Cities: Essay on the Political Economy of Urban America with Special Reference to New York*, ed. Roger E. Alcala and David Mermelstein (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), ix.

*Sweeney Todd* was not the first late 1970s production to resonate with the Left's critique of capitalist corruption in 1970s New York City. In fact, critics frequently compared *Sweeney* to the 1976 revival of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre, directed by Richard Foreman. The revival was produced by Joseph Papp and The New York Shakespeare Festival, now The Public. Brecht and Weill composed *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928 based on John Gay's 1728 ballad opera *The Beggar's Opera*. Gay's opera, a satire critiquing the corruption of the British aristocracy was turned into a Marxian polemic against capitalism and the bourgeoisie by Brecht and Weill. The show flopped in its 1933 Broadway debut, but ran successfully Off-Broadway from 1954 to 1961 in a new version with a translation by Marc Blitzstein. Blitzstein, whose most famous work remains the pro-union musical *The Cradle Will Rock* (1938), had similar goals to that of Brecht and Weill in critiquing capitalism in the United States, so his interest in *Threepenny* was both political and aesthetic.

Producer Joseph Papp was also particularly concerned with the long tradition of theatrical activism in relation to class conflict, and he and Richard Foreman chose to use a new translation of *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht scholars Ralph Manheim and John Willett for their Beaumont revival in 1976. The new translation supposedly reflected a more "accurate" reading of Brecht's libretto, one that included cursing, dirty jokes, and a generally harsher and more offensive style in order to challenge audiences in the way Brecht had intended.<sup>32</sup> New York theatre critics were mixed as to whether or not the production succeeded in both verbal authenticity and Brechtian intent. Nonetheless, whether or not they viewed the show as a

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<sup>32</sup> "Echt Brecht," *The New Yorker*, May 10, 1976.

success, some critics commented on the parallels between the production and the current economic crisis. Joel Schechter of *Theatre* wrote in his extremely negative review,

Even the new translation's assertion that the modern world harbors dangerous corporations, torture, and starvation holds no surprises. If you haven't worried about multinational corporations or dictators before seeing the production, or even if you have, you will not suddenly be alarmed by superficial references to these subjects in song lyrics.<sup>33</sup>

He felt that this new production, even with its new "offensive" translation, paled in comparison to what audiences were actually seeing and experiencing outside the theatre walls. Even the more conservative Clive Barnes of *The New York Times* expressed his desire for an updated version set in New York with a contemporary, vernacular libretto.<sup>34</sup>

Both Prince and Sondheim vehemently disliked overtly didactic theatre, so it is unlikely that either one was consciously influenced by Foreman's production. In the late 1960s, Sondheim had been approached to write a musical based on a Brecht play; the musical, titled *A Prayer by Brecht* was supposed to include Leonard Bernstein as composer, Jerome Robbins as director, and star Zero Mostel. Sondheim had only agreed to the project because of the opportunity to work with Jerome Robbins again but found himself struggling with his disinterest in the material and eventually dropped out.<sup>35</sup> Commenting on his experience, Sondheim said simply, "Brecht and Weill worked in a tradition of *Lehrstück*; my background is Broadway, and the two are very different...Basically, I hate Brecht."<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Prince felt that he was never directly influenced by Brecht, but his love of the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold complexly connects the two directors. Prince told

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<sup>33</sup> Joel Schechter, "On Not Offending the Audience: Brecht at Lincoln Center," *Theater* 8 no. 1 (1976): 77.

<sup>34</sup> Clive Barnes, "Papp's 'Threepenny' echoes original," *New York Times*, May 3 1976.

<sup>35</sup> Lara E. Housez. "Becoming Stephen Sondheim: *Anyone Can Whistle*, *A Prayer by Brecht*, *Company*, and *Sunday in the Park with George*," PhD diss., Eastman School of Music, 2013, 133-142.

<sup>36</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 15.

biographer Foster Hirsch, “I have not remotely been consciously influenced by Brecht. Unlike Brecht, my purpose is not to eliminate emotional response – it isn’t by design that a show of mine is cold...Furthermore, I’ve been bored to death by Brecht-inspired productions.”<sup>37</sup> Prince instead cites a lineage with Meyerhold, to whom he was first exposed on a 1965 trip to Moscow. There, he saw the Taganka Theatre’s production of *Ten Days that Shook the World* directed by Yuri Lyubimov.<sup>38</sup> Lyubimov had met Meyerhold in the 1930s before Meyerhold’s execution in 1940. Lyubimov, however, cited influences outside of Meyerhold, including Brecht, and Meyerhold himself directly influenced Brecht.<sup>39</sup>

Prince’s claim to the lineage of Meyerhold via Lyubimov then also includes Brecht as at least a first cousin in influence. Certain aspects of Meyerhold’s direction, such as a preference for Symbolism over Realism and an interest in biomechanics over method acting can be seen in both Prince’s and Brecht’s work. Furthermore, Prince’s interest in sociopolitical theatre and socialist ideals also align him with Brecht. Yet, unlike Brecht, Prince never found inspiration in the alienation of the audience. Working in a commercial form, Prince was deeply invested in bringing the audience into the world of the play, even as the musical form itself resists any sense of realism.

Whether directly influenced or not, Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* contains several similarities with *Sweeney Todd*, including the setting, Industrial Revolution London, and a plot involving working class violence and aristocratic corruption. Bill Brotherton of the *Daily Evening Item* claimed of *Sweeney*, “There is definitely a Brecht, ‘Threepenny Opera’ feel.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Harold Prince, *Sense of Occasion* (Milwaukee: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2017): 128-130.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Banham, *The Cambridge Guide to Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 656.

<sup>40</sup> Bill Brotherton, “‘Sweeney Todd’ Gives a Close Shave,” *Daily Evening Item*, Lynne, MA, January 12, 1981.

Critics also commented on parallels outside of the text between Foreman's and Prince's productions. For example, both Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* and John Simon of *New York Magazine* specifically mention Foreman's production in their reviews of *Sweeney Todd* in relation to similarities in the set design.<sup>41</sup>

Prince may have been interested in creating a work similar to Foreman's, but Sondheim's aesthetic choices bear little resemblance to those of Weill. Reviewer John Simon agreed that the show was not an imitation Brecht/Weill, but instead, "Critics who cited Weill seem to me mistaken; it is the fiercer Brecht collaborators, Dessau and Eisler, who are overheard here."<sup>42</sup>

Douglas Watt also made the comparison but believed the comparison is only surface. He observes,

The very first reference that comes to mind on seeing Eugene Lee's grandly grubby factory setting with its moving parts and then watching it become populated with Dickensian riffraff in murky light, is 'The Threepenny Opera,' especially in its recent Lincoln Center reincarnation. But the association must be quickly discarded, for not only is 'Sweeney Todd' gloriously un-Brechtian, but the comparison is unfair to Weill and Sondheim both.<sup>43</sup>

Sondheim's melodramatic inclination paired with his lush, operatic score kept the musical from becoming an imitation of Brecht and Weill's work. His score, steeped in his cinematic interests, as discussed below, does anything but alienate the audience and instead draws the listener into a dark world of obsessive revenge.

### **Sondheim's Obsession with Obsession**

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<sup>41</sup> Jack Kroll, "The Blood Runs Cold," *Newsweek*, March 12, 1979; John Simon, "A Little Knife Music," *New York Magazine*, March 19, 1979.

<sup>42</sup> John Simon, "A Little Knife Music," *New York Magazine*, March 19, 1979.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Watt, "Stephen Sondheim," Eugene Lee Papers Box 17, Folder 20, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

By composing a large chunk before inviting collaborators, Sondheim alone chose the general soundscape for the show. Aesthetically, he desired to translate the mood of Hollywood studio-era thriller and horror films, particularly those from the 1940s and 1950s, onto the live musical stage.<sup>44</sup> Steve Swayne in *How Sondheim Found His Sound* closely documents the intersections between Sondheim's intense interest in film music and his musical scores. Swayne explains, "Sondheim *as composer* borrowed concepts from the language of film and translated these concepts in to *the music*."<sup>45</sup> For *Sweeney Todd*, he found inspiration in the works of Bernard Herrmann, a composer best known for his work with Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock. Sondheim said of Herrmann in a 2003 interview, "Horror movies and suspense movies are very much co-created. Bernard Herrmann *is* Alfred Hitchcock; that's why Hitchcock used him all the time. What happens in *Psycho* in the orchestra is just as frightening as what happens on the screen."<sup>46</sup> In *Sweeney*, Sondheim wanted to evoke the sonic world and expectations of a Herrmann thriller.

Specifically, Sondheim was inspired by Herrmann's score for *Hangover Square* (1945).<sup>47</sup> The film's plot concerns a composer whose obsession with the piano concerto he is working on leads him to murder. The connection between obsession and revenge presents a clear link to *Sweeney*. Herrmann's score, which includes a complete single-movement piano concerto, known as *Concerto Macabre*, contains sonic similarities to his later work with Hitchcock, including lush, harmonically complicated chords, leitmotivic development, and soaring melodies over

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<sup>44</sup> As noted, Sondheim uses the terms "horror" and "suspense" to describe the films he emulated, but Steve Swayne goes into detail about how many of the films Sondheim cites are actually found in the genre "film noir," including *Hangover Square*; Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 166-174.

<sup>45</sup> Swayne, *How Sondheim Found His Sound*, 159.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 72.

<sup>47</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Sondheim: A Life*, 295.

repetitive rhythmic ostinatos. Herrmann also utilizes techniques such as brass stingers to punctuate startling moments, high winds to imitate screams, and continuous underscoring of tense sections. Claudia Gorbman dedicates the last chapter of *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* to this Herrmann score. She observes that *Hangover Square* sounds as much inspired by early twentieth century modernists as it does by the Romantics favored by Max Steiner and Erich Korngold. Herrmann uses more modernist techniques to represent the main character's madness. Gorbman writes, "While Herrmann's score might strain some formal and stylistic boundaries, at no point does it violate the basic principles of the Hollywood scoring model. The film uses music for continuity, and for underscoring moods and narrative events; all music is motivated by the narrative."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Sondheim favors modernist harmonies and underscoring for emotional continuity, narrative reasons, and characterization in *Sweeney*.

As an homage to Herrmann, Sondheim used a chord that he deemed "the Herrmann chord" throughout *Sweeney Todd*.<sup>49</sup> This chord, also called the "Hitchcock chord," is simply a major-minor chord.<sup>50</sup> The minor second contained in the chord destabilizes the already ominous minor triad. Sondheim and Herrmann both prefer the minor second in the bass of the chord, further subverting any sense of resolution, the key to horror according to Sondheim. He found in Herrmann's scores that "unresolved chords [keep] going on so that nothing ever reaches a cadence, and so you're constantly upset, because it's all kind of – 'irresolution' is the best I can say. But it promises something else: You're not through yet."<sup>51</sup> As shown by Craig McGill in his article, "Sondheim's Use of the 'Herrmann' Chord in *Sweeney Todd*," Sondheim uses the chord

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<sup>48</sup> Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 153.

<sup>49</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Harpers & Row, 1986), 246.

<sup>50</sup> For more on this chord, See Craig M. McGill, "Sondheim's Use of the Herrmann Chord in 'Sweeney Todd'," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 6, no. 3. (Winter 2012): 291-312.

<sup>51</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 72.

throughout the show to undermine normal points of resolution, such as at the end of phrases or songs, as well as to punctuate moments of intense emotion, similar to Herrmann's use of the chord in *Psycho*.<sup>52</sup> The unresolved chord also signals Sweeney's obsessive qualities: if we're "not through yet," it is because Sweeney's desire has yet to be resolved – the audience, like Sweeney, is left unsated without his revenge.

Unlike Sondheim's previous musicals, *Sweeney Todd* contains a significant amount of underscoring, making it a literal melodrama. Sondheim built the background music using leitmotifs derived primarily from the introductory songs he composed before involving Prince. Sondheim's metaphor of obsession dominates the sonic world of the show. "I'm very much a leitmotif man – I really like the notion that an audience will register certain tunes, or rhythmic ideas, or even harmonies, with given characters. And you can build on that...If you set those things up, it's effective for the audience. That's what dictates the underscoring."<sup>53</sup> Sondheim's use of the term leitmotif connects his goals to those of Richard Wagner, who sought to create a world that the audience will get lost in. Sondheim is firmly on the side of Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as opposed to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, Weill's work with Brecht did not utilize underscoring and musical numbers were sonically separated from dialogue. Leitmotifs were and are also found in studio-era and studio-era-styled Hollywood films, such those by Erich Korngold, Max Steiner, John Williams, and of course, Herrmann.

Sondheim derived the leitmotif associated with Sweeney's obsession from the beginning of the *Dies Irae* chant from the Requiem Mass.

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<sup>52</sup> McGill, "Sondheim's Use of the Herrmann Chord," 292.

<sup>53</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Though Sondheim professed to not like most opera, he did like a few – in particular, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* and Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, both which use leitmotivic development. Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 22-23.



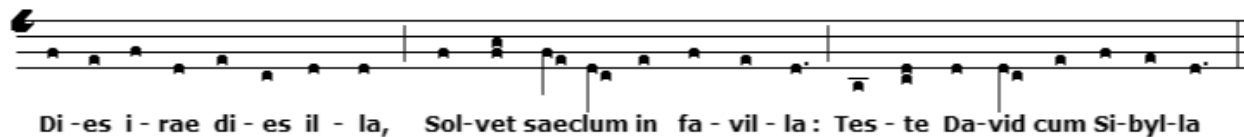


Figure 1.1 The *Dies Irae* Chant. Sondheim utilizes the first phrase throughout *Sweeney Todd*.

The main characteristics of the opening of the chant include 1) a descending lower neighbor figure, 2) a descent by third, and 3) a modal final with a whole step leading to the tonic rather than a half-step. Sondheim introduces the entire motive in the fourth measure of the organ prelude (figure 1.2).<sup>55</sup> This is the only place in the score where the opening of the *Dies Irae* exists in a complete and altered form, but Sondheim discussed with both Mark Horowitz and Craig Zadan the different ways in which he used the *Dies Irae* theme, and that it and the Hermann chord provide the foundation of Sondheim's music for *Sweeney*, as further demonstrated by the insightful analysis of Stephen Banfield.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> "Prelude," *Sweeney Todd* Score, Act I, January 2, 1979, Harold Prince Scores, Box 27, Folder 2, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY. This measure is not included in the published edition of the organ prelude but exists in both the unpublished conductor's score from the original production and in all the recordings of the original production.

<sup>56</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 128-140; Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 246-248; Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 297-300.



Figure 1.2 Original organ prelude (as performed, not published) measures 4-8. The soprano line in measure 4 (here, measure 1) introduces the *Dies Irae* motive.

As “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” begins, the chorus sets up both themes of horror and obsession through continual use of the *Dies Irae* motive in the melody (figure 1.3). Sondheim points out that the opening of “The Ballad” sits up a third harmonically than where the *Dies Irae* normally lies in the chant, changing the harmonic relationship and masking the quotation.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, this short phrase haunts Sweeney throughout the show as the chorus returns again and again with this same melody – including the final moments of the show.

<sup>57</sup> Zadan, Sondheim & Co., 248.



**Figure 1.3** The opening melody of "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd."

Sondheim saturates the score with motive derived from the *Dies Irae* motive, the often obliquely and always hidden. The main motive connected with Sweeney’s obsession is shown in Figure 1.4. Banfield calls this a “flattening out” of the *Dies Irae* motive, but the characteristic lower neighbor begins the motive and it ties back to other moments, such as the accompaniment in “The Ballad” that are more obviously derived from the *Dies Irae*.<sup>58</sup> These two measure obsessively repeat throughout the play when Sweeney becomes fixated on his revenge, such as beginning the number “Epiphany” or after he sings “The Barber and his Wife.” Banfield calls this the “nemesis” motive, though its unyielding, unresolved nature (the last two intervals between the bottom and top lines are a minor second and a tritone) could also designate it the “obsession” motive.<sup>59</sup> To rename this motive aligns it with Sondheim’s conception of the musical, as well as connoting a feeling over an object. “Nemesis” implies the Judge and the Beadle, whereas “obsession” places the motive in Sweeney’s mind – the music obsessively recalls Sweeney’s singular focus, aligning the listener affectively with Sweeney rather than outside as an observer.

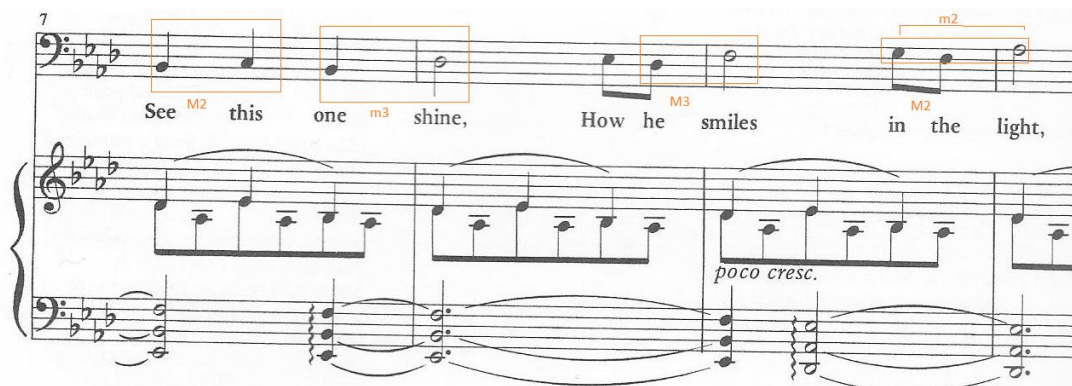
<sup>58</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 296.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 295-297.



**Figure 1.4 The obsession/nemesis motive**

Sondheim did not want the *Dies Irae* motive to be overly distracting and claims that he did not include the motive in its entirety in the show.<sup>60</sup> The most audible example of the *Dies Irae* motif in the songs that Sondheim wrote before Prince came on board is found in “My Friends.” Sondheim explained, “‘My Friends’ was influenced by [the *Dies Irae*]...it was the inversion of the opening.”<sup>61</sup> During this number, Mrs. Lovett presents Sweeney with his razors; Sweeney then sings to his razors “Friends, you will drip rubies,” referencing the bloody results of his future revenge (see figure 1.5). Narratively, this number presents audiences the first glimpse of the extent of Sweeney’s obsession with revenge, as he anthropomorphizes his razors and completely ignores everything else in the room, including Mrs. Lovett.



**Figure 1.5 *Dies Irae* motive inverted for the melody of "My Friends."**

<sup>60</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 248.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

The prominence of the inverted *Dies Irae* as the main melody of this number demonstrates Sondheim's earliest desires to focus on Sweeney's revenge obsession; the use of the motif throughout creates a sonic feeling of obsession, moving forward towards revenge. The sonic world established by Sondheim worked against Prince's Brechtian polemics, creating tension between Prince's contributions (explored below) and Sondheim's. As Stephen Banfield observes,

Perhaps we can sum up by saying that, as melodrama, *Sweeney Todd* permits the vocal music to enter, cease, or undergo transformation proudly yet unconsciously as the vehicle for the dynamic flux of action and language... This results in total audience involvement; there is no place for alienation techniques.<sup>62</sup>

Banfield oversimplifies the score by ignoring Prince's contributions (discussed below), but his general argument is correct. Sondheim's score exists in opposition to the Brechtian works of Weill. In order to scare an audience, as Sondheim desired to do, the score had to pull listeners in and make them forget the outside world.

Sondheim desired a musical thriller, one that would pull the audience in with relentless underscoring and jump scares, engulfing their attention. He also imagined a show concerned with the themes of obsession, revenge, and the inability to move forward, to resolve the tragedies of one's life – all subjects found in the score.

Prince also wanted a musical that would pull audiences in, but one that left them wondering if such tragedies could be avoided and how the abuse of power, particularly capitalist corruption, created a cycle of violence that could not easily be escaped or ended. He used his areas of control: stage design, direction, and diegetic sound to expand – and sometimes even counter – Sondheim's sonic tapestry.

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<sup>62</sup> Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, 292.

## Prince's Socioeconomic Metaphor

Unlike his previous work with Sondheim, Prince did not produce *Sweeney Todd*. He still, however, maintained control over most of the creative choices, including his other collaborators. The show was instead produced by committee, with five producers and three associate producers, more in line with twenty-first century practices. For some time, Prince had been interested in focusing more on directing, leaving many of producing responsibilities for shows such as *Follies* and *On the Twentieth Century* to his associate producer and close friend Ruth Mitchell. The use of multiple producers for *Sweeney Todd* allowed Prince to avoid supervision of the budget and other producing headaches altogether and focus on creating his version of *Sweeney Todd* with Mitchell as his assistant. As a director freed from his role as producer, Prince work to make Sondheim's original conception into a more complex and socially relevant musical.

Prince's vision began with the set. He was inspired by a trip to Dublin, where he visited the infamous Kilmainham Jail. The starkness of Kilmainham, combined with the sun seeping through the dirty skylights, influenced Prince's overall aesthetic approach to both the set and lighting.<sup>63</sup> Jails and prisons provide a means to control urban poverty during periods of austerity, something the city of New York was doing in the 1970s through the war on drugs.<sup>64</sup> Prince brought together Industrial Revolution London and 1970s New York by the shared aesthetic of a prison. But Prince went further and superimposed the Victorian factory on his initial notions of the jail. He explained,

Our way to shared revenge became the incursion of the industrial age on the human spirit. For that scenic designer Eugene Lee designed a factory to house our

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<sup>63</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre*, 120.

<sup>64</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 281.

musical, and our cast – *all* our cast – became victims of the class system. *It wasn't written into the script* [emphasis mine]. We simply told our story inside that factory, dirty window panes blocking out the sun.<sup>65</sup>

To fulfill his vision of a factory, Prince and Lee traveled to Rhode Island and bought the remains of a rundown factory. Although the factory only cost \$7000, shipping it to New York City cost around \$100,000, a huge investment for only part of the set. (The musical's entire cost was around \$1.7 million.<sup>66</sup>) The factory framed a cube-shaped, two-story smaller set in constant motion in the middle of the stage, where most of the action takes place. The cube set appeared small when dwarfed by the large factory frame. Rather than looking to Sondheim's spooky music and lyrics for inspiration, Prince built his own metaphorical understanding of the show through (physical) set design.



**Figure 1.6** The Kilmainham Jail in Ireland, which inspired Prince and Lee's set for *Sweeney Todd*.

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<sup>65</sup> Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 283.

<sup>66</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 120.

*Sweeney Todd* played at the Uris Theatre (now the Gershwin) known for having an especially wide and deep stage compared to other Broadway theatres, made even more epic by Prince's set. Howard Kissel describes this effect:

Almost as if to make the cold, barnlike Uris Theater seem intimate, Eugene Lee's set for 'Sweeney Todd,' the astounding new Harold Prince-Stephen Sondheim musical, is cavernous. Within the awesome set, which abolishes the proscenium and extends the apron, the normally large Uris stage, if we could still discern its outlines, would seem dwarfed. Instead of a conventional picture-book stage, we are fairly assaulted on entering the theater by the ashen interior of some Victorian factory.<sup>67</sup>

By creating an engulfed atmosphere of Industrial Revolution London, Prince immediately signaled to the audience upon entering that the show concerned, at some level, factory life, labor, and class. While no factory exists in the original show outside of the young boy, Toby, mentioning working in a factory and being given gin, the physical framing of the story inside a factory brought Prince's metaphor of capitalist-created impotence through poor working conditions to the fore.

If the factory setting was only vaguely allusive, the show curtain directly addressed the British class system. Unlike traditional curtains, the curtain did not cover all or even most of the stage, but hung in the middle, surrounded by the large factory setting. As the audience entered, grave diggers worked in front of the curtain. The white sheet featured a reproduction of Victorian political cartoonist George Cruikshank's "The British Beehive," (drawn in 1820, published in 1846). The cartoon depicts British society as the inside of a beehive, with each type of worker, from banker to baker, supporting the British parliament and most of all, the monarchy. Robert Patten in his article "George's Hive and the Georgian Hinge" (partially inspired by Prince's use

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<sup>67</sup> Howard Kissel, *Women's Wear Daily*, Friday March 2, 1979.



of the image in *Sweeney Todd*) describes the purpose of “The British Beehive” “as an expression of populous enterprise and the stable class hierarchies of the British bourgeois monarchy.”<sup>68</sup> Cruikshank was a moderate leftist who supported reform rather than revolution and saw universal white male suffrage as the beginning of mob rule in Great Britain. “The British Beehive,” then, represents a utopic stability of class-hierarchies – each person remains in their place, does their specific job, and, theoretically, everyone benefits. But Victorian England was not a utopia for most, especially the working class and poor, who were often subjected to unsafe working conditions with no limit on hours and no minimum wage. *Sweeney Todd* began when the organ prologue ended and the chorus members physically tore down the curtain, in a violent rejection of Cruikshank’s idealized hierarchy.

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<sup>68</sup> Robert L. Patten, “George’s Hive and the Georgian Hinge,” *Victorian Culture and Literature* 14, Spring 1986: 37.

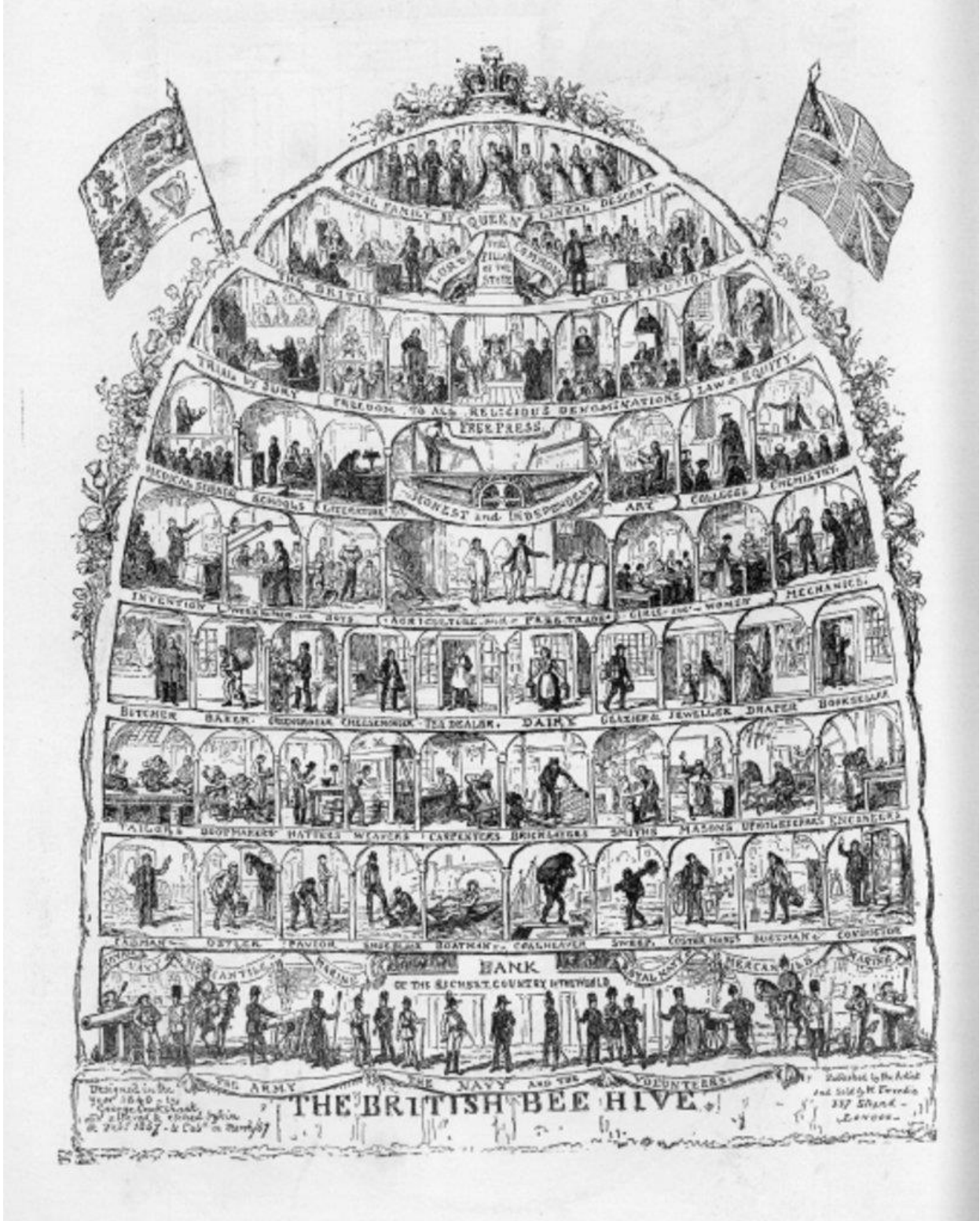


Figure 1.7 George Cruikshank's "The British Beehive," used as the opening curtain.

Prince also used techniques drawn from Brecht (perhaps via Meyerhold/Lyubimov) to call attention to the labor of the stage. Beyond making the stage an actual factory, he used the chorus in costume to move the giant cube around in the middle of the stage, as well as move other props and scenery around. This was a deliberate choice, rather than a simple cost saving measure, as documented in a scathing reply to a demand from Actors' Equity that the actors who move the props be paid more for doing stagehand labor. He complained,

My friend, I'm appalled. What you propose will drastically discourage creative development, experimentation, artistic growth – the form of theatre that I've given my life to. Sounds corny, doesn't it, but I feel passionately that what I'm doing is in the name of artistic conception, not shoving scenery.<sup>69</sup>

While he could have had stagehands move the set around, Prince was willing to fight with Actors' Equity to show the inner workings of his *Sweeney Todd* Factory.

This conflict, however, also highlights the contradictions Prince faced in wanting to critique capitalist economics within a commercial genre. Though he wanted creative freedom, he was also at the mercy of investors who wanted *Sweeney* to turn a profit – resulting here in a conflict between Prince and the labor union. Prince was not a stranger to union conflicts, as he had had many in the past and often threatened to quit directing Broadway musicals over them. Some of the more recent conflicts included one with the musicians' union over theatre minimums for *Candide* (1974) and another with Actors' Equity over hiring actors from outside the United States for *Pacific Overtures* (1976) (see chapter 2). Prince may have created politically left shows, but he was also extremely pragmatic about Broadway as a business. *Sweeney* critiqued corrupt, incompetent leadership, but Prince saw himself as both a fair and competent director and the unions as at times corrupt and incompetent.

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<sup>69</sup> Letter to Don Grody at Actors' Equity from Harold Prince, April 10, 1979, Harold Prince Papers, Box 188, Folder 4, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

Beyond visual elements, Prince contributed the trademark sound of this production: a piercing factory whistle. Prince used the whistle to begin the show after the organ prelude, to signal the beginnings and endings of scenes, and to amplify moments of heightened tension, such as Todd's murder of Pirelli. The shriek of the whistle served a multiplicity of purposes: first, it startled the audience, creating a sense of unease; second, its similarity to a human scream set the sonic stage for the horror show that Sondheim wanted; and third, the factory whistle became an auditory representation of class oppression, moving Prince's conception of the show into the soundscape of the musical.

The whistle was not part of Sondheim's original aural conception of the show. He explains,

What I intended was that the theater should be covered entirely in black...and that on the stage you would see, with his back to the audience, this sort of *Phantom of the Opera* organist playing. And at various points in the story he would pound away with all stops open – something I used to do to scare people at military school...Then Hal Prince had the idea of the steam whistle – which turned out, I think, to be a much better idea. The grating sound of the whistle is much more unnerving and upsetting than just big, loud, sting chords.<sup>70</sup>

The original production maintained Sondheim's organ prelude in lieu of a traditional overture, but Prince's whistle signaled the real tone of the show. The timbral implications of the organ created an eerie, horror-movie atmosphere, lulling the audience. Prince enhanced the atmosphere by having actors, as grave-diggers, go out onto the stage before the whistle, implying that the show had already begun. The sudden shriek of the whistle, used as a jump scare, called the attendees to attention, aided by the act of pulling down the Cruikshank curtain. The continued

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<sup>70</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music* 126.

use of the factory whistle throughout the production added both sonic unity and more jump scares to the show.

The whistle aided Sondheim's *Grand Guignol* while also literally signaling Prince's social critique. Joanne Gordon observes, "The hard shrill of the factory whistle suggest[ed] unambiguously the unremitting oppression of economic power."<sup>71</sup> Power relations, then, framed the show both visually and sonically, never allowing audiences to forget the real cause of Todd's plight. Like the applause at the end of an overture, the real performance began with the factory whistle; the show itself became a factory, one that, as Prince aptly put, makes "a show called *Sweeney Todd*."<sup>72</sup> This Brechtian displacement immediately cued the audience to view what followed on stage as both a story about class-critique and as actual physical and creative labor in and of itself. The tale was not just a story, but a story told by working New Yorkers facing hardship in the time of austerity; the chorus members moving the sets would likely have also suffered from cutbacks to public transportation, financial aid, and other social welfare programs due to their precarious employment. The use of the whistle during Todd's murders related those murders to class oppression, framing them aurally as an ultimate consequence of an economically unjust society. The show never condoned Todd's behavior, as the tragic end reaffirmed – nonetheless, violence as a result of poverty and corruption seemed a logical conclusion to Prince.

Audiences and critics alike commented on the whistle, clearly understanding its use as an agent of social critique. Allen Wallach of *Newsday* wrote, "While *Sweeney Todd* is taking men's lives with his razor, the industrial age is polluting their city and maiming their souls. The scream

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<sup>71</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy*, 211.

<sup>72</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 129.

of horror we hear repeatedly is a factory whistle.”<sup>73</sup> Wallach connected the murders with the violence of the Industrial Revolution and vividly described how the sound of pain and the sound of capitalist oppression are elided by the whistle. Todd may be killing bodies, but corrupt, unfettered capitalism is killing souls. Howard Kissel of *Women’s Wear Daily* noted the double-use of the whistle as both class critique and horror device. He explained,

The sound that interrupts the organ and pierces the expectant air as the show begins is a shrill factory whistle, the hard, pervasive sound of authority, of oppressive economic power. Apart from its metaphoric aptness, the whistle is a shrewd theatrical device, a way of jolting and chilling the audience. The organ and the whistle say much about Prince’s overpowering conception of ‘Sweeney Todd.’ The organ would have been sufficient if the show were merely 19<sup>th</sup>-century melodrama, a straightforward piece of Grand Guignol... When it is used to punctuate moments of horror, the whistle, blaring and abrasive, implies an awareness that it takes quite a lot, nowadays, to shock us.<sup>74</sup>

For Kissel, the whistle, and Prince’s overall vision, brought the show forward to a more modern sensibility. The organ would have been enough to both interest and scare nineteenth-century audiences, but according to Kissel, Prince understood that more was needed to hold the attention of audiences in the age of post-Hitchcock: audiences wanted to be both terrorized and intellectually challenged. The whistle fulfilled both needs.

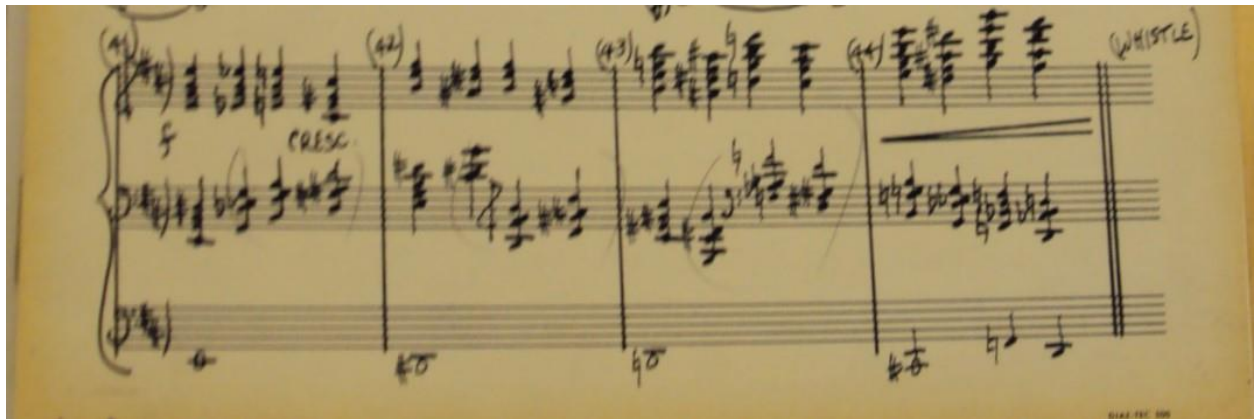
Interestingly, like the visual elements of the original production, the factory whistle is not a required element of revival. Though many productions choose to use it, those favoring Sondheim’s melodramatic thriller, such as John Doyle’s scaled-down 2006 revival, eschew the whistle – in this case for smaller, more intimate horror sounds, such as door slams and footsteps. In the score, the whistle is only indicated in musical notation at the end of the opening “Ballad.” All other uses of the whistle are written into the text as stage directions. The symbol indicating

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<sup>73</sup> Allen Wallach, *Newsday*, Friday March 2, 1979.

<sup>74</sup> Howard Kissel, *Women’s Wear Daily*, Friday March 2, 1979.

its use is a square, clearly an editor's addition and not Sondheim's – an assumption reinforced by the lack of notation in the performance score for the 1979 production (figure 1.7). The whistle then becomes an aural representation of Prince's original production rather than an aspect of Sondheim's "work," making an analysis of only the score an incomplete interpretation of the original production's soundscape. However, as the 2006 revival illustrates, the lack of notation removes the whistle as an integral part of the "work," the notated score controlled by Sondheim. Sondheim's metaphor, then, is the one that lasts in perpetuity, whereas Prince's is more ephemeral (and more contextually tied to 1979 New York City).



The deafening sbrill sound of a factory whistle blasts forth as the workmen pull down the drop. Blackout.

A printed musical score for piano and voice. The score is in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and 4/4 time. It begins at measure 38. The piano part features a series of chords that build in intensity, marked with "accel." and "fff". The vocal part has a few notes, followed by a long rest. A circled "X" symbol is placed above the vocal line. The score concludes with a double bar line. The text above the score describes the sound of a factory whistle and the action of workmen pulling down a drop, leading to a blackout.



**Figure 1.8** The whistle notated inconsistently at the end of the prelude. Top is the 1979 conductor's score, next is the piano vocal score, and below is the orchestral score from MTI.

As the whistle illustrates, Prince and Sondheim did not stay in their respective lanes, the visual and the aural, but bled into one another. Important moments in the play necessitated both metaphors, bringing them together in sometimes complicated and contradictory ways.

### Synthesis in Song

While the notion of antagonistic collaboration requires independence between collaborative parties, their separate ideas necessarily came together at some points during the process. Both Prince and Sondheim prize collaboration as a defining aspect of their work in the theater. Prince's contributions turned what could have been a generic melodrama into something more. Sondheim commented, "[*Sweeney Todd*] could be told in a naturalistic setting...It could be a show about doors and walls and stuffy Victorian furniture. Hal turned it into something more abstract, which affected how I thought about the songs."<sup>75</sup> Prince's vision and sociopolitical metaphor changed Sondheim's numbers from Pirelli's song onward, but the general sonic milieu remained.

<sup>75</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 120



Two numbers in particular, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” and “A Little Priest,” represent a synthesis of Prince and Sondheim. Both of these numbers were completed after Prince joined the project and both lack any correlation with the source material. Both also carry a structural importance, with “The Ballad” beginning and ending the show and marking important moments throughout and “A Little Priest” closing Act I. The lack of source material made room for more creative lyrics on Sondheim’s part, as well as allowing Prince to inflect the show with his own point of view.

The opening of *Sweeney Todd* paralleled Prince’s work on *Evita* (1979), which he directed the year before in London. *Evita*, a show steeped in critique of political elites, opened with Evita in a casket in the center, just as Sweeney is being buried by the grave diggers. Both begin with a chorus, reflecting on what has already happened, though the audience has not been witness to it yet – the shows start and end at the same place. The action occurs in the center of the stage with lots of empty space around the sides. The similarity between these two openings reveals Prince’s stylistic influence on *Sweeney*, as well as the connection in Prince’s mind between the two productions. Though the two differ in tone – *Evita*’s funeral is presented as a somber occasion, *Sweeney*’s as a scary one – their physical similarities highlight the use of the chorus as a framing device. Yet, the chorus of *Sweeney* proves an omniscient one, while the chorus of *Evita* represents the mourning of a nation. It is through the interruption of the character Che, who will continue the narration, that the audience of *Evita* receives a more critical commentary on the action.

By utilizing a chorus to frame the production, *Sweeney Todd* gives audiences a point of orientation that can support both Prince's and Sondheim's vision for the show.<sup>76</sup> The opening number, "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd," was developed by Prince and Sondheim together and frames the entire story as a legend. A member of the chorus begins the show singing, "Attend the Tale of Sweeney Todd" to the *Dies Irae* motive, moving the motive from instrumental accompaniment to sung melody, bringing out the leitmotif and connecting it directly to Sweeney himself. Sondheim described this moment as establishing the story as a "folk ballad" or a "fable," calling to mind the use of framing devices in other nineteenth-century literary legends like Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*.<sup>77</sup> Sondheim also believed that "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" served his interest in raising the show from the lowbrow genre of melodrama and into the realm of tragedy. He compared the story to a Greek tragedy, "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."<sup>78</sup> The chorus, then, serves as a kind of Greek chorus, commenting on the action. In particular, the chorus immediately frames Sweeney as a visual monster – "His skin was pale and his eye was odd" – and yet, more insane than immoral – "Sweeney heard music that nobody heard."<sup>79</sup> The final iteration of "The Ballad," which closes the show, sends the audience off with this terrible image, the foundation of the thriller or horror

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<sup>76</sup> Sondheim has often discussed the importance of the opening number in setting audience expectations. For example, see Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 83.

<sup>77</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 333.

<sup>78</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 245.

<sup>79</sup> This line could imply that the constant underscoring of the show, and particularly the underscoring associated with Sweeney's obsession, exists in Sweeney's head – that the audience is being made privy to Sweeney's inner mind through the underscoring.

genre: “No one can help, nothing can hide you--Isn't that Sweeney there beside you?”

Combined, these separate parts of the ballad create a sense of both a scary legend and something more – a morality tale about revenge and obsession.

However, audience members more interested in Prince’s sociopolitical message could read the chorus in a different way. Reviewer Allen Wallach commented, “A Brechtian ‘Ballad of Sweeney Todd’ runs through the show like a thread of evil.”<sup>80</sup> Wallach’s review reminds us that Brecht himself was also interested in the use of a chorus, not as framing a legend or commenting on the action, but as an alienation technique to keep the audience from attaching emotionally to the story. “The Ballad” is sung by both the chorus and the main characters, taking them out of their role in the story and showing them *as actors*. Even the actor playing Sweeney sings about himself in the third person, “What happens then/well that’s the play/and he wouldn’t want us to give it away.” Though not as alienating as many of Brecht and Weill’s creations, *Sweeney Todd* immediately declares its status as fiction, play and legend. Even with the continuous underscoring, the audience is constantly brought out of the action throughout the show, unlike a Hitchcock film.

The chorus also adds a layer of nuance, explicating Sweeney’s reasons for violence while also condemning his obsession. At times, the chorus encourages his violent behavior: “Swing your razor wide, Sweeney/Hold it to the skies/Freely flows the blood of those who moralize” or “He’d seen how civilized men behaved/He never forgot and he never forgave.” These moments remind the audience that Sweeney wants to kill those who abuse power, those who kill others with their cruel policies or exaggerated sentences. In addition, the chorus condemns Sweeney’s

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<sup>80</sup> Allen Wallach, *Newsday*, Friday March 2, 1979.

single-minded focus on revenge rather than justice and our own tendencies to want vengeance: “Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd! /He served a dark and a hungry god! /To seek revenge may lead to hell/But everyone does it, though seldom as well.” “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” simultaneously serves Prince and Sondheim, allowing audiences to understand the story as both one of revenge and obsession and of class critique.

Negative critics read the final chorus as implying that anyone could become Sweeney Todd, and they did not find this implication convincing.<sup>81</sup> Sondheim and Prince both dismiss these critics. Sondheim argues, “What I said and what the lyric very clearly states is that Sweeney – the spirit of Sweeney – is all around us, which is not the same thing as saying that each person in the auditorium is a multiple murderer.”<sup>82</sup> For Sondheim, the desire for revenge maintains general appeal in the right circumstances. This moral connected to Prince’s metaphor. For economist Alan Greenspan, these circumstances were now in New York City. In 1975, he believed that the violence in New York City was “evidence of a nihilistic mood emerging in contemporary America... [and that] radical violence was linked to a broader skepticism about the virtues of capitalism and the free market, which made such acts seem morally acceptable, even righteous.”<sup>83</sup> *Sweeney Todd*’s message only reinforces Greenspan’s fears around growing discontent in a suffering city. However, when viewed from the perspective of the liberal and leftist New Yorkers, the violence, such as looting during the 1977 blackout, stems from the violence enacted upon the marginalized by capitalist systems. Never morally acceptable,

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<sup>81</sup> For example, see Richard Eder, “Introducing ‘Sweeney Todd,’” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1979.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Sondheim, “Larger than Life: Reflections on Melodrama and Sweeney Todd” in *Melodrama* (New York: New York Literary Forum, 1980), 10.

<sup>83</sup> Phillips-Fein, *Fear City*, 163.

*Sweeney Todd* states that such violence is at least explainable, and perhaps, even an inevitable consequence of top-down exploitation.

Another key section of *Sweeney Todd* artfully intertwines Prince's and Sondheim's metaphors. The Act I finale, "A Little Priest," combines Sondheim's love of virtuoso word play, Sweeney's obsession with revenge, and Prince's critique of capitalism. Bond's play contains only a small moment here to move from murder to cannibalism.<sup>84</sup> While the seeds of what became "A Little Priest" exist in Bond's play, including almost verbatim the spoken introduction to the number, the list song that follows was written entirely by Sondheim after Prince had joined. The lyric relishes occupational satire and cannibalistic puns, providing black humor to release the tension.<sup>85</sup> Sondheim explained, "I got my cue [for 'A Little Priest'] from a stage direction in Bond's play. The song's comic spirit is an expansion of an emotional moment in Bond in which the odd couple giggle at their conspiracy. The comedy grows right out of the tension: you can be tickled *only* if you're tense – Hitchcock made a career out of that."<sup>86</sup> Sondheim's trademark wit and cleverness here serve to lift the mood before the Act I curtain, but the number also still deals with both Sweeney's obsessive tendencies and class critique. Sondheim chooses to weave the class critique throughout the lyrics, including "It's man devouring man, my dear/so who are we to deny it here?" and "How gratifying for once to know/those above will serve those down below." Whether he was inspired by Prince's interpretation or Bond's class-based language is unclear, but either way, Sondheim's lyrics move into Prince's territory. The number also critiques the abuses of the clergy, calling the clergy "too coarse and too mealy" while also pointing out that the vicar and the priest have quite a bit of fat.

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<sup>84</sup> Bond, *Sweeney Todd*, 21-22.

<sup>85</sup> Prince, *Sense of Occasion*, 224.

<sup>86</sup> Hirsch, *Harold Prince*, 127.

Fat as well are the politicians, whom Sweeney calls “oily.” Here, Prince’s and Bond’s underlying theme of class critique becomes textual, but only as folded into Sondheim’s dry, dark wit.

Though Sondheim included Prince’s metaphor in the lyrics here, he did so to release tension, reveal his virtuosic wit, and tie-up the themes of the show – class and revenge – sending the audience out to intermission with the iconic tableau of Mrs. Lovett with her rolling pin and Sweeney with a meat cleaver.

Sweeney first mentions his revenge when he asks Mrs. Lovett “Have you any Beadle?” referring to cannibalizing Beadle Bamford, the Judge’s co-conspirator. Mrs. Lovett deflects his obsession – which she sees as getting in the way of their relationship – through humor, “Next week, so I’m told. Beadle isn’t bad ‘til you smell it and notice how well it’s been greased. Try the priest.” The final line brings the song back to its original theme, distracting Sweeney momentarily. Such a distraction does not hold, however. In the final verse, Sweeney completely interrupts the number, almost yelling due to the marked forte and the high range, “I’ll come again when you have judge on the menu” to the beginning of his obsessive *Dies Irae* leitmotif, with a whole step lower neighbor, bringing the song momentarily into his world of obsession. The descending scale also uses D flat and G flat to give the scale the Dorian feel of the *Dies Irae*. Mrs. Lovett then hands him a meat cleaver, telling him “We have something even better. Executioner.”



Figure 1.9 Sweeney begins his interjection “I’ll come again when you have judge on the menu” with the lower neighbor the *Dies Irae* motive, which then occurs, followed by a descent, and then the neighbor motive again.

The momentary return of the *Dies Irae* theme signals the continuation of Sweeney's revenge, but the use of the waltz as a satirical device also sounds Mrs. Lovett's and Sweeney's desire to mock the upper-classes. The waltz has become a symbol of the European bourgeoisie in the United States, particularly in musical theatre where the form flourishes in Viennese operetta. Even though the musical takes place in England, the audience receiving the show were primarily Americans, so this association would have been stronger than the English association. By having two proletariat characters dance a waltz, they are embodying higher classes and transgressing social norms, retaking power through their murderous plot. Furthermore, the waltz contains a moment of "unnaturalness" as well. Though the music generally follows typical operetta harmonies and an oom-pah rhythm in the accompaniment, the final phrase ends on a discordant harmony (figure 1.10). Rather than ending on a I chord or a cadential 6/4 moving to a I chord, the final harmony stays on a I chord with a major 7 and 9 added, most notably with the 9 in Mrs. Lovett's line. This unresolved chord continues the tension discussed above, keeping the song (and the act) from resolving and reminding audiences that they are laughing at jokes relating to cannibalism – a move that could make audiences uncomfortable.

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who are we to de - ny it in here?

who are we to de - ny it in here?

81

M.L.

T.

**Figure 1.10** The final cadences for "A Little Priest" end with a I 6/4 chord that includes the ninth in the soprano.

By viewing "A Little Priest" through the lens of antagonistic collaboration, the connection between the two metaphors is revealed: Abuse of power breeds desperation, leading vulnerable populations to commit crimes without remorse that might horrify them in other conditions.

Scholars Stoddart and Puccio put it this way in their discussion of the number:

These two discourses, however, ultimately harmonize in a single ideology, mirroring not only the metaphorical cannibalism of the English class system, but



also the literal cannibalism of the revenge plot. Madness and capitalism are shown to be compatible, even congenial bedfellows.<sup>87</sup>

Put succinctly, unbridled capitalism causes mental illness, desperation, and violence. Pulling apart Prince's and Sondheim's separate metaphors and understanding their interaction moves "A Little Priest" from a somewhat frivolous Act I closer to a key moment when the two threads of meaning in the show come together and comment upon one another.

## Conclusion

Prince rooted *Sweeney Todd* firmly in a city in crisis. Even as reviews in New York continually connected the show to capitalism, critics in Boston a year later failed to recognize the Brechtian elements of the show or to buy into Prince's critique. Most Boston reviews found the show unpalatable, grotesque, and overwrought. Most completely missed the class critique of the show, or at least the critique was absent in their reviews, though at least one Boston critic did mention capitalism. Peter Altman of Boston's WRUR argued,

'Sweeney Todd' continually almost implies in a rather suspect way that capitalist society is so brutal that random assassination is justified... 'Sweeney Todd' is a very angry piece much of its time, its vitriol engendered by half-views of the world. Not only does it deny an audience the pleasure of identification with and sympathy for the worthy, it leaves an odd sense of confusion about its purpose and about the irony of its ending.<sup>88</sup>

Altman could not sympathize with Sweeney's situation, nor see him as an inevitable product of an unjust society. Even the show's tragic end, where Sweeney becomes a victim of his own

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<sup>87</sup> Paul M. Puccio and Scott F. Stoddart, "'It Takes Two': A Duet on Duets in *Follies* and *Sweeney Todd*," *Reading Stephen Sondheim*, ed. Sandor Goodhardt (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), 125-126.

<sup>88</sup> Peter Altman, WRUR, Eugene Lee Papers Box 17, Folder 20, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

violence, elicits an unfeeling response from the Bostonian. Boston critics' general rejection of the show probably stems from multiple sources, such as changes to the set and staging because the original set was too big to tour, as well as changes in cast – particularly the substitution of George Hearn for Len Cariou in the leading role – but changing political tides are likely one of them, too.

By the time the show opened in Boston, Ronald Reagan had been elected president, and popular tides were turning towards the neoliberal experiment started in New York City. Support for the Reagan administration and neoliberal policies began to spread across the country. The critique of capitalism was beginning to fade and a backlash against the more socialist policies of urban liberals emerged, blaming unions and welfare programs for spending deficits and looking towards the free market as a way of escaping the recession of the 1970s. In this new environment, Prince's *Sweeney Todd* perhaps felt outdated and obscure. Support for neoliberal policies generally increased across the mainstream political spectrum until the recession of 2008. The successful 2006 revival by John Doyle discarded most of Prince's extratextual contributions, from the large set to the factory whistle. Instead, the show took place in an insane asylum, focusing intensely on the psychological underpinnings prized by Sondheim. However, Prince's metaphor still grounds the story, as class critique proves necessary to sympathize with Sweeney's character. Furthermore, songs like "A Little Priest" still contain Prince's influence. As critiques of capitalism gain in popularity once more, one wonders if a version of *Sweeney Todd* more heavily focused on Prince's metaphor would be welcomed on Broadway or in a less commercial venue.

## Chapter 2

### *Pacific Overtures* (1976): Bookwriter as Antagonistic Collaborator

Two years after *Pacific Overtures* (1976) premiered on Broadway, Edward Said published his landmark study *Orientalism*, which discussed the ways that the “Orient” in the mind of the West was a product of the Western colonialist imagination. Said’s book questioned the ability of Westerners to ever create representations of East Asia that had any sort of authentic validity outside of their own ethnocentric point of view. Although Said never mentions musical theatre explicitly, he pays considerable attention to the way such performed cultural artefacts participate in the creation of the “Orient.”<sup>1</sup> Though Harold Prince, bookwriter John Weidman, and Stephen Sondheim each invested time and energy in trying to ground *Pacific Overtures* in notions of authenticity—however vaguely and differently defined by these collaborators—Said’s book by implication called into question the entire conceit of their project. Considering *Pacific Overtures* as a contemporary of *Orientalism* requires a re-centering of the discussion around Weidman’s, Prince’s, and Sondheim’s *conception* of the East and its perceived relations to the West rather than any actual Japanese history and art.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Both Stephen Banfield and Paul Filmer briefly discuss Said’s *Orientalism* in relation to *Pacific Overtures*, but both end up concluding that the show somehow can still be read as a mixture of East and West rather than an orientalist version of the East with some Japanese trimmings. Furthermore, both credit Sondheim over Weidman and Prince for making a more “progressive” Eastern musical, something that I significantly question in this chapter. See Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 249-258; Paul Filmer, “Narratives of Tragedy and Progress in *Pacific Overtures*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, Robert Gordon, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 405.

Reading *Pacific Overtures* through *Orientalism* puts the how and why of Prince, Weidman, and Sondheim's sought-after authenticity into specific frames that reflect the antagonistic collaboration of this musical. For Prince and Weidman, a musical presented from the point-of-view of an Asian culture invaded by the United States marked a political statement. A show about Commodore Matthew Perry's 1852 expedition to Japan was and remains Prince's most political collaboration with Sondheim. In his article "The Sung and the Said," English scholar Thomas Adler calls the work "the first Broadway musical directly spawned by our involvement in Vietnam."<sup>3</sup> Though Adler overlooks a few other shows, including *Hair* (1968) and *The Lieutenant* (1975), *Pacific Overtures*, a show about 19<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese-American relations, necessitates an engagement with the role of the United States in East Asia. Prince and Weidman also thought that using techniques and symbols from the Japanese theatrical tradition of kabuki would open the eyes of audiences to the Japanese/Asian culture and point-of-view. The use of kabuki included the early decision by Prince and Weidman to cast only Asian-American men. This decision extended their critique to representation, particularly the existence of only stereotyped roles for actors of Asian descent on Broadway and the common practice of yellowface casting.

Sondheim, for his part, was characteristically uninterested in the political content of the show.<sup>4</sup> Instead, his dedication to theatrical integration (as discussed in Chapter 1) led him to attempt to write music and lyrics that were both historically accurate and drew on traditional Japanese music. Whereas the show's topic and book were inherently political, Sondheim's efforts towards aesthetic and historical authenticity worked to temper the polemical qualities of

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas P. Adler, "The Sung and the Said," in *Reading Stephen Sondheim: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Sandor Goodhart (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000), 40.

<sup>4</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf: Distributed by Random House, 1998), 281.

Weidman and Prince's work. Sondheim also had a very different idea of what authenticity meant than did Weidman and Prince: his contributions leaned towards surface Japanese and orientalist elements the Broadway audience would have heard as "authentic" rather than delving deeply into actual Japanese musical traditions. Working within my paradigm of antagonistic collaboration, though the three men differed in their working definitions of accurate representation, they shared a goal of accurately representing Japanese culture through the Broadway medium: Prince and Weidman did so for sociopolitical purposes and Sondheim for narrative and aesthetic ones.

The show they made together articulated American leftist critiques against American foreign policy and re-cycled established cultural representations of Asians and Asian-Americans more than it brought kabuki or other Japanese cultural arts to the Broadway stage. Both Sondheim and Weidman/Prince's use of Japanese idioms inevitably fell short of any notions of authenticity. Although the three men each researched Japanese culture to varying degrees – Weidman, with a degree in East Asian Studies from Harvard, did so in great depth; Prince and Sondheim both traveled to Japan to see kabuki and noh; Prince consulted with experts in kabuki – *Pacific Overtures* remains a problematic product of Jewish New Yorkers of European descent. The abandonment and critique of yellowface on the American stage inherent in the show's casting remains commendable, both for its political stance and the real, material opportunities it afforded (and continues to offer) Asian-American actors. But the show as text and production did little to alter the hegemony of white men in the higher, creative levels of the Broadway hierarchy, and perpetuated the notion that Asian stories can be told by white men (if they do enough research).

This chapter, then, focuses on how and why each collaborator sought to *represent* the East rather than focusing on interrogating the creators' notions of accuracy or authenticity in and of themselves. The chimerical goal of accurate representation led the show's creators to take an oblique approach through politics focusing on issues of representation and imperialism. Theatre scholar Joanne Gordon argues, "Despite all the best intentions of its creators, the preponderant impact of the drama is undoubtedly anti-imperialist, and consequently anti-West."<sup>5</sup> Though Gordon correctly identifies the final product as anti-imperialist and anti-West, it is not "despite all the best intentions of its creators" but *because* of their intentions, or at least the intentions of Prince and Weidman – not to be anti-West, but to create a show that attempted to *be* Japanese, and therefore, center around the Japanese, rather than Western, point of view.

Furthermore, Prince's insistence on an all Asian (specifically Asian American) cast generated a symbiotic relationship with Asian and Asian-American theatre troupes – many founded in the 1960s and 1970s – through the casting of solely Asian-American men. Yet, when not enough Asian-American actors could be found, Prince searched outside the United States. His decision to cast non-resident Asians also required Prince to interact with institutions that created barriers to non-normative casting, Actors' Equity and the State Department, revealing what Sara Ahmed refers to as "the wall" impeding diversity at institutional levels.<sup>6</sup> According to Ahmed, this wall becomes visible only when one butts up against it, something that happens often to marginalized groups, but the wall also appears when non-marginalized people attempt diversity work. Prince's fights with Actors' Equity and the State Department reveal antagonism

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<sup>5</sup> Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 177.

<sup>6</sup> Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 174.

derived from competing marginalized groups – the purpose of this particular wall for both institutions is to ensure that Americans in precarious fields continue to have work. Class interests then conflict with the interests of diverse racial and ethnic representation on stage, a problem derived from other walls in other institutions, such as the use of yellowface and the historical inability of Asians to move to the United States due to racialized immigration policies.

Nonetheless, it was Weidman and Prince’s socio-political agenda that drove the need for a more authentic, less racist representation of East Asia, considering the climate of the Cold War and the United States’ involvement in East Asia.<sup>7</sup> These two creators’ goal of authenticity led them to fortuitously engage in similar discourses promoted by the developing Asian-American movement in the United States. In *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, Asian-American Studies scholar Daryl Maeda explains the goals of the Asian American movement and what made it different from other race-based social movements. He argues, “The Asian American movement was fundamentally committed to the ideologies of *interracialism* and *internationalism*.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than working to erase differences like many other identity movements, the Asian American movement framed itself as a coalitional force made up of a variety of ethnicities, nationalities, and spaces rooted in historical and cultural differences. The movement also had an international focus, connecting the United States’ continual military actions in East Asia with the same racism that Asians and Asian Americans in the US faced on a daily basis. In this way, a musical about Japan in the nineteenth century would also politically concern contemporary Asian Americans.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Eden Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003), 67.

<sup>8</sup> Daryl Joji Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1.

The chapter begins with Prince and Weidman because the story of *Pacific Overtures* begins with them. The show was Weidman's first musical. Prince helped him considerably in crafting the book and included himself as co-author on at least two drafts (see Appendix 1). Weidman and Prince connected ideologically on the two fronts important to the Asian American movement of the 1970s: first, criticizing American imperialist action in East Asia, including both military and global capitalist intervention, and second, improving representations of Asians and Asian Americans in popular culture by eschewing stereotypes and creating opportunities for actors of Asian descent. Prince's decision to make the show into a musical required finding a composer and lyricist – Prince chose Sondheim to do both. With little influence on or interest in the political content of the show, Sondheim focused on creating a Japanese-Broadway aesthetic hybrid within which to place his own notions of “authenticity,” motivated by his usual goals of musical integration, narrative cohesion, and virtuosity.

### **A Brief Summary of the Project**

The project that became *Pacific Overtures* began in the early 1970s when Weidman approached Prince with a play about the opening of Japan to the West. Weidman most likely chose Prince because his father, Jerome Weidman, had worked with Prince previously on the political musical *Fiorello!* (1959). As this was John Weidman's first attempt at writing a play, he also most likely felt he needed Prince's experience in the theatre. The subject of the play is derived from Weidman's experience and knowledge of Asia and Asian history from his Bachelor's degree in East Asian History at Harvard University.<sup>9</sup> His original play – the

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<sup>9</sup> Weidman studied at Harvard in the mid-1960s, right before the department of East Asian Studies was highly criticized by leftist East Asian scholars/activists for engaging in scholarship that promoted United States imperialism



manuscript available in the Boris Aronson Collection at the University of Texas – displayed Weidman’s investment in critiquing US intervention in the Far East, as well as his desire to write positive and historically-accurate Japanese characters.<sup>10</sup> The critique of imperialism in the play Weidman showed Prince was quite heavy-handed and has accurately been called a “bluntly one-sided condemnation of Western imperialism.”<sup>11</sup> After some initial work, including at least two full drafts, Prince felt that the play would work better as a musical, so he enlisted the help of Sondheim.<sup>12</sup> Even though turning a historical play about American foreign relations into a musical was a strange choice, as musicals usually concern themselves with some sort of marriage or romance plot, Sondheim and Prince were both interested in nontraditional topics and pushing the boundaries of the musical. Furthermore, their earlier musical experiments into structure, tone, and form had proven generally profitable. *Pacific Overtures* eventually premiered in January 1976, and although the show enjoyed some critical approval and ten Tony nominations, including Best Musical, it was a commercial flop, running only six months and losing most of its investment.

The story of *Pacific Overtures* concerns the opening of Japan to Western cultures by the United States Navy. In 1634, Japan began an era of seclusion from the West; this policy, known as *sakoku*, was forcibly ended by American Commodore Matthew C. Perry’s expedition in 1853.<sup>13</sup> Through the lives of two Japanese men, Manjiro, a fisherman, and Kayama, a samurai,

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in East Asia. For more, see Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 43.

Weidman and Sondheim tell the story of Perry's operation and its effects on Japanese life and culture. The fisherman, Manjiro has been living in America, but he returns to Japan, risking the punishment of death, to warn the Shogun about the Americans' plans to send an expedition to his home country. Kayama is asked by the Shogun's advisors to meet the American ships and get them to turn away. Kayama and Manjiro devise an elaborate scheme to build a treaty house so that the Americans will not touch Japanese soil, as is decreed by law in Japan. They are successful, but Kayama's wife, seeing the ships still in the bay, assumes they have failed and commits suicide. The first act ends when the Americans leave the bay. The second act begins with a myriad of Western powers asking the Shogun, with the support of cannons and large fleets, to trade with them and allow them to establish ports in Japan. The act then follows the changes in Japan after the invasion of Western culture and values through Kayama's and Manjiro's characters. In the plot, the samurai Kayama embraces the West, assimilating to Western culture, whereas the fisherman Manjiro begins to see the problematic aspects of a Western culture he once loved. Manjiro becomes a samurai and kills Kayama and the Shogun's advisors. The Emperor, who at the beginning of the play was a child but is now an adult, then takes his rightful place as leader and declares that Japan will embrace Western culture—a political and policy transition known as the Meiji Restoration. The show ends with a critique of capitalist and American influence in the region, as well as a demonstration of Japan's rising dominance in the post-World War II era.

Prince, Weidman, and Sondheim did not want *Pacific Overtures* to present a caricatured version of the story, but rather an accurate (if somewhat fictionalized) and genuine representation of Japanese culture and history. They decided to accomplish this goal by synthesizing the two

cultures, using the Broadway stage and Western conventions while simultaneously employing characteristics of *kabuki* theatre. Kabuki, along with the puppet theatre *bunraku*, formed the basis of popular Japanese theatre during the Edo period (1693-1868). There are some obvious reasons why Weidman might have wanted to draw on kabuki for *Pacific Overtures*. First of all, kabuki would have been the main type of theatre in Japan during Commodore Perry's expedition, drawing a connection between the then of kabuki and the now of Broadway. Second, kabuki was an art that developed almost exclusively during the period of Japan's isolation, making it an arguably uniquely Japanese art form. Mixing it with Broadway would then create a synthesis of Japanese and American theatrical forms. Third, the importance of music and dance in kabuki theatre also suggested the appropriateness of the mix. Japanese theatre critic Masakatsu Gunji explains, "All in all, it can be said that the Kabuki resembles the musical of the West in certain ways. In that respect, therefore, the music in Kabuki is quite...important."<sup>14</sup> To combine kabuki with Broadway, then, would be more practical and intuitive than other types of Eastern, and in particular, Japanese theatre.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, kabuki could also be viewed as anachronistic: though popular during the time period of most of the show, kabuki had by the 1970s become a theatrical tradition associated with an older and more elite Japanese culture. Kabuki and Broadway, then, did not offer reciprocal or comparable forms of Japanese and American theatre in the 1970s.

Weidman and Prince integrated kabuki elements but they were adamant that *Pacific Overtures* was not a kabuki show nor a Broadway production, but a synthesis of the two.<sup>16</sup> All three men may have attempted some level of cultural mixing, but their insistence that the show

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<sup>14</sup> Masakatsu Gunji, *The Kabuki Guide*, trans. Christopher Holmes (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1987), 57.

<sup>15</sup> The show also includes a moment of *bunraku* – a brief puppet show to illustrate how the young Emperor is himself a puppet to the Shogunate.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy*, 176.

contained both American and Japanese elements allowed them to hedge their bets and deflect questions around the Japanese content – they claimed a certain kind of Westernized authenticity. This specific claim allowed them to avoid criticisms of inaccuracy and appropriation because they stated they were not trying to make a kabuki show but bring kabuki into the Broadway idiom. Nevertheless, in reality, this mixing created a work that had the potential to become popular by remaining in a familiar idiom while adding kabuki accoutrements, like other Orientalist works. Weidman and Prince drew on kabuki as inspiration, utilizing some of the more recognizable parts of the tradition, including the use of a Reciter (who narrates the story), a *hanamichi* (or runway that goes through the audience, providing space for dramatic entrances and exits), kabuki-style costumes and make-up, and choreography inspired by kabuki, including a dance at the end of Act I choreographed and performed by Haruki Fujimoto, a Japanese-born American who was trained in kabuki. Strikingly, Weidman and Prince decided early on to follow the kabuki tradition of casting men, in particular Asian and Asian-American men, to play all of the roles.

The creators attempted to learn about Japanese kabuki traditions and Japan more generally, but there seemed to be little effort to bring in a co-creator of equal stature who specialized in kabuki (and who might receive similar billing beside Sondheim, Prince, and Weidman). This was in part due to practical reasons: Broadway unions and immigration laws made it difficult to collaborate more closely with Japanese artists familiar with kabuki, as both institutions were and are invested in protecting jobs for Americans.<sup>17</sup> Prince did try to hire Saeko Ichinohe, a dancer trained in both traditional Japanese and contemporary dance, as a consultant

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<sup>17</sup> This could have been avoided if Japanese kabuki experts had been hired at the creative, non-unionized level, highlighting again Prince's decision to not have a Japanese co-creator.

for the show. Ichinohe studied under Martha Graham, and in 1970, founded her own dance, company, which exists today. Ichinohe's work is especially known for "merg[ing] traditional Japanese movement, music and costumes with modern Western movement," the aesthetic combination Prince envisioned.<sup>18</sup> Letters between general manager Howard Haines and Vincent Donahue at Actors' Equity reveal the difficulties of creating transnational works of art, especially when dealing with ethnocentric immigration policies. Haines opened the letter by explaining that Ichinohe had applied for permanent residence in 1973, yet her application had still not been processed. Because she had applied for a "J" visa, a temporary visa for those with special skills, the State Department had allowed her to continue working in the United States while her application was being processed. Nonetheless, the lack of a work visa kept her from being eligible to consult for the show's choreography according to Actors' Equity.<sup>19</sup> This conflict between the expectations of the State Department and those of the union ultimately kept Ichinohe from being employed as a choreographic consultant for the show. Despite this setback, Prince did assign dancer Haruki Fujimoto, a Japanese-born American who played Commodore Perry, to assist in the Japanese elements of the show, particularly the dance; Fujimoto is credited in the Playbill as "kabuki consultant."<sup>20</sup> However, choreographer Patricia Birch, a white choreographer who studied with Martha Graham and with whom Prince and Sondheim had previously

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<sup>18</sup> Biographical Information from the Finding Aid for the Saeko Ichinohe Dance Company Records at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, <http://archives.nypl.org/dan/23933> [accessed February 28, 2019].

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Howard Haines to Vincent Donahue, September 30, 1975, Harold Prince Papers, Box 165, Folder 7, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>20</sup> Playbill for original production of *Pacific Overtures*, MWEZ + n.c. 27,575, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

collaborated on *A Little Night Music* (1973), ultimately held both the position and authority of choreographer for the show.<sup>21</sup>

Sondheim had different ideas around authenticity than did Weidman and Prince. *Pacific Overtures*, according to Sondheim, did something different than previous “Asian” musicals: “The main thing about [*Pacific Overtures*] is that it is so *deeply* Japanese, as opposed to, say *The King and I* or *Madame Butterfly* which are merely Western treatments of Eastern subjects.”<sup>22</sup> Prior to working on *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim had almost no exposure to Japanese culture. His claim that the show is “*deeply* Japanese” proves deeply problematic—a typical claim by a Westerner to have actual knowledge of the Eastern Other. Still, Sondheim’s claim should be situated within his own aesthetic goals. Sondheim’s interest in authenticity remained grounded in his native Broadway aesthetic: his goal was the creation of a sonic “feeling” of Japan, rather than any claim to be writing actual Japanese music.<sup>23</sup> Propelled by the narrative transition from isolation to cultural mixing, Sondheim found inspiration in the artistic challenge to create lyrics and compose in a manner that moved the show gradually across both acts from a Japanese aesthetic to a more Western one, a challenge that does carry some political meaning as an interpretation of the larger trajectory of Japanese culture and history. Sondheim also desired to show lyrical dexterity by writing songs that, though fictional, reflected detailed historical precision. Here, he relied on Weidman’s research and expertise for guidance.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 2nd edition (New York: Harpers & Row, 1986), 215. Birch said of her involvement, “I didn’t want to fool with Oriental forms and make a mess. But then when Hal said that it was our own Kabuki, I started a month of research... Then I realized that my background with Martha Graham was really helpful: there was a definite Oriental influence in a lot of the stuff she had done.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. *Flower Drum Song*, of course, provides a different way of dealing with East/West relations, to be discussed more below.

<sup>23</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 39-40.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 260.

The antagonistic collaboration between Weidman/Prince and Sondheim resulted in a show that, though problematic, contained a nuanced explanation and critique of American Imperial actions in East Asia, if ultimately proving too experimental (and perhaps too political) for the popular stage.

### **John Weidman's Anti-Imperialist "Untitled Play About the Opening of Japan"**

Evidence of Sondheim's collaborative influence on *Pacific Overtures* can be traced more clearly than in other shows because Weidman and Prince began working on the book as a play two years before involving Sondheim. The earliest surviving draft, a manuscript called "Untitled Play About the Opening of Japan (Second Draft)," dates to October 1973<sup>25</sup> By comparing this draft with the later drafts and the final production, Sondheim's interventions on the show and the contours of the antagonistic collaboration that made *Pacific Overtures* can be traced (see appendix 1).

The October 1973 script reads like a morality play against the United States rather than a nuanced and compelling stage drama. Meryle Secrest called it "a Brechtian polemic about what happens when capitalism and industrialism invade an ancient and poetic culture."<sup>26</sup> The play focused solely on Perry's interaction with the Japanese, lacking any critique of Japanese culture or positive proclamations of Western-influenced progress, which became central to the final version. Also, Kayama remains the clear hero of the story, which ends triumphantly when he keeps Perry from firing his cannons on Uraga by sitting in front of the guns and forcing Perry not

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<sup>25</sup> While the folder itself is labeled February 1975, the notes from Prince at the end of the script are labeled October 22, 1973. This earlier date makes more sense, as this script is drastically different from the final project.

<sup>26</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 279.

to shoot.<sup>27</sup> The second act of the musical, which shows the results of American intervention, is completely absent from Weidman's play.

Weidman used kabuki techniques in this early draft to mark dramaturgical shifts between the American and the Japanese points of view. Weidman gives the American characters a substantial presence in this first draft, but they were subsequently cut down to caricatures by the actual production. Unlike in the final show, the Americans in Weidman's play speak alone on the ship in between meetings with the Japanese and are represented in traditional Broadway sailor garb. When they arrive in Japan and the audience is supposed to be viewing them from a Japanese perspective, the Americans are transformed into villainous kabuki costumes.<sup>28</sup> Such costume changes continue throughout as the point-of-view shifts between the American and the Japanese. Beyond using specific costuming and make-up from kabuki to designate the Americans as villains, changing costume on stage in front of the audience is also part of the kabuki tradition. This change, from standard Broadway show to kabuki-influenced play, signals a shift in point of view, like a novelist changing narrators between chapters. Though this complex costuming was jettisoned from the script in the next draft due to anticipated logistical difficulties, the technique would have allowed Weidman to direct the audience's sympathies and move them in between worlds, declaring both points of view equally biased and unreliable.<sup>29</sup>

This original conceit proved too complicated for the Broadway stage, but Weidman's use of

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<sup>27</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>28</sup> *Pacific Overtures* Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>29</sup> Notes on draft from Harold Prince to John Weidman, *Pacific Overtures* Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.



kabuki techniques remained in the final version to add a veneer of Japanese legitimacy to the play, as well as showcase Weidman's knowledge of Japanese culture.

The earliest extant draft of Weidman's play also includes moments that show a critical understanding of the continued US policy of Asian intervention. Although Weidman himself was not active in the fight for Asian American rights at this time, his studies at Harvard most likely brought forth a sympathetic expertise that inadvertently aligned itself with the tenets of the Asian American movement. First, the play connects this moment of American imperialism in Japan to later troubles, just as the Asian American movement connected colonialism, including Commodore Perry's expedition, with the war in Vietnam. The plan that the Japanese government adopts - both historically and theatrically - repeats the cycle of violence after the country has caught up technologically. Hayashi, one of the governors explains, "Now, when we are weak, we must give the westerners what they demand, but later on, when we are strong and have made the nation as united as one family, we will be able to give the westerners what they deserve."<sup>30</sup> This line strongly references Japanese imperialism in East Asia, as well as the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the Pacific theatre during World War II, but places at least some of the blame on the United States for humiliating Japan. This monologue demonstrates Weidman's belief that violence begets violence, and that the West's continual interference in the East will only bring more bloodshed and pain for everyone, as it so recently had in Vietnam.

Another aspect of imperialism Weidman criticized in this early draft was the proliferation of capitalist values in the East. Exploitation of cheap labor for global capital has continually been a problem, with American businesses using labor forces in foreign countries to avoid paying

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<sup>30</sup> *Pacific Overtures* Script by John Weidman, February 1975, page 73, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

higher wages in the United States. The leaders of the Asian American movement were particularly concerned with how the culture of Western capitalism dominated the East primarily for exploitation and cheap labor. Weidman painted a picture of a pre-capitalist society, interested in honor and family more than wealth, and then framed the Americans as greedy. One exchange between the Americans and the Japanese:

Perry: I am sure your countrymen are eager to trade with us

Hayashi: Excuse me, but I do not think they are...The day may come when we are forced into commerce with other nations, but that day is not here yet.<sup>31</sup>

Perry assumes that the Japanese would want to expand their wealth through trade, and he cannot understand why they would prefer isolation, highlighting the lack of understanding that Americans had of the culture they were invading.

To further villainize the Americans and extend the historical accuracy of the show, the first draft of the Weidman's play contained a minstrel show on board the American's ship. This bizarre show within a show made it into the first collaborative version of the musical with Sondheim, and Weidman (from May 1975), and Sondheim and Prince cut it only because they expanded the show to cover more of the after-effects of Perry's visit to Japan. The instructions for the minstrel show stated:

It should be emphasized here that what takes place on stage during the succeeding minstrel show is a strange multi-leveled exercise in impersonation- orientals imitating whites imitating blacks. The performance should have none of the grace and charm of the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" sequence from "The King and I." On the contrary, it should be extremely awkward and slightly grotesque, reflecting some of the undertones of the imitation and exploitation of one racial group by another which runs through the play as a whole.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, page 83, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>32</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Weidman's description hints at two prominent themes in the final staged production (discussed below): First, he singles out *The King and I*, which shows that Weidman had conceived of his play in dialogue with the Hammerstein musical. Second, Weidman unmistakably states that the point of the minstrel show, and one of the main points of the "play as a whole," was to critique the exploitation and racist representations of Asians and Asian Americans in American popular culture.

The use of blackface minstrelsy moves the discussion of racism from Asian Americans to African Americans, a subject with which more white New Yorkers would have been familiar, due to both the prominent work of African-American Civil Rights activists within the last two decades and also the tense racial inequalities within New York City itself. For the white creators and audience, the use of blackface might have clarified the violence and immorality of racism against Asians and Asian Americans. The minstrel show begins only a few pages into the second act. As the real Commodore Perry did, the fictional one invites the Japanese politicians on board his ship and presents them with a blackface minstrel show, which he calls "an American tradition." The show begins with a Master of Ceremonies introducing the "Ethiopian Minstrels," including Mister Bones and Minster Tambourine. His introduction displays the worst stereotypes of blacks – unacceptable to most of the audience in the post-Civil Rights decade – including use of the word "nigger," as well as a thick dialect absent in the speech of the Japanese characters in the show. This is the example of "American culture" presented to the Japanese and simultaneously, to the audience – one based in exploitation and stereotypes. For those who enjoyed the "Small House of Uncle Thomas" sequence in *The King and I*, this moment provides an opportunity for self-reflection.

The minstrel show also inadvertently engages with the tense connection between Black and Asian oppression within the US and the continued relationship between the Black power movement and the Asian American movement. The stage directions indicate that the Japanese men in the audience watch the Americans' responses to the show and begin to mimic their laughter and clapping. The Master of Ceremonies replies to their gestures, "Thank you, gents. Des darkies sho' do love de soun' of white folks slappin' hands...yellow folks too, I 'spects!"<sup>33</sup> Perhaps this moment shows that with the spread of Western culture comes the spread of racism, including racism between marginalized racial communities. Mainstream Asian Americans often embraced the notion of the model minority that relied on the disparagement of African Americans, but the more radical Asian American movement was devoted to eradicating racism at all levels and had ties with the Black Power movement, often in conflict with Asian Americans promoting the "model minority" as a means to equality. Maeda, in *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, explains, "One cannot understand the Asian American movement without considering how Asian Americans' racial identity has been intertwined with the racial identities of other people of color."<sup>34</sup> The notion of a "Third World" identity put forth by some members of the Black Power movement contributed greatly to the construction of Asian American identity and connected the two movements both culturally and politically.<sup>35</sup> Intimate ties existed between the two movements; for example, leader Richard Aoki, who served as the chairperson for the Asian American Political Alliance, served prior as Field Marshal of the Black Panther party.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>34</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

Both the aims and tactics of the more extreme left wing movement created the backbone of the younger movement.<sup>37</sup>

Although the minstrel show was cut by August of 1975, far before rehearsals began, one bit of this minstrel show does remain in the final production: Perry's "Lion Dance" at the end of Act I contains a cakewalk. The musical and dance genre, originally created by enslaved African Americans, became strongly associated with blackface minstrel shows during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, which often utilized the dance in the finale.<sup>38</sup> Perry's cakewalk in his Uncle Sam kabuki-costume as performed by an Asian actor creates an uncanny re-making of an American icon. The dance feels familiar and triumphant, but the stylized kabuki costume creates an alienation, even Brechtian, moment, allowing the audience to view the American representation without intrinsic, perhaps uncontrollable feelings of nationalist excitement. In performing the cakewalk, Perry at once embodies both American-ness and whiteness, drawing on the historical ways in which imitating other races, such as in minstrelsy shows and yellowface, redrew and reestablished the boundaries of whiteness and white-as-Americaness. If Perry is the villain in this moment, then so is American culture.

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<sup>37</sup> The rest of the number lacks description, with Weidman writing simply "(Number: with the MINSTREL PLAYERS)."

<sup>38</sup> Claude Conyers, *Grove Music Online*, "Cakewalk"

<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002092374> (accessed February 27, 2019).



Figure 2.1: Still of Commodore Perry's cakewalk during "The Lion Dance" at the End of Act I.

Returning to Weidman's original play, the text does make space for a white ally, a character that allows Weidman to write himself into the play. Colonel Williams, the interpreter for Commodore Perry, continually implores Perry to treat the Japanese with more respect. In the scene that introduces his character, Williams tells Perry, "It seems to me, sir, that we have a duty to these people to treat them as considerately as we can, and demand of them as little as possible...I am convinced that the only thing we have seen today is an ill-considered and unprecedented violation of the sanctity of Japanese soil."<sup>39</sup> Unlike the other Americans, Williams shows empathy towards the Japanese people, and he sees the possible future consequences of treating the Japanese poorly, even as his views are ripe with paternalism. One assumes this empathy comes from Williams's experiences studying Japan and Japanese culture, as he is the only one who speaks Japanese on board the ship, much like Weidman – therefore, Williams's

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<sup>39</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman, February 1975, Act II page 33, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

voice is Weidman's voice. Williams does not serve completely as a white savior, as it is Kayama who ultimately persuades Perry to back down with his act of selflessness, but Williams does assist Kayama and Manjiro. By the time the show is a musical, Williams has disappeared, and any hint of white allyship has vanished, as have any fleshed-out white characters. Only caricatures of mostly symbolic Europeans and Americans remain, critiquing yellowface but also providing a humor-filled, firmly Western, bombastic opening Act II number.

The inclusion of Williams creates slightly more nuance, but the ultimate conclusion of Weidman's "Untitled Play" is that the West's—more specifically America's—economic and political imperialism in East Asia caused and continues to cause unnecessary pain and suffering for people living in Asia and in the United States. Weidman also makes sure to point out that these aggressive actions do not go unanswered. In the final moments of the play, Perry makes an indirect reference to the creation of an American Naval Base in Hawaii.

As you know, I have long advocated the expansion of American commercial and political interests in the Hawaiian Islands. If you are forced to lay over in Honolulu waiting for the mail steamer, I would very much appreciate your investigating the nature of the coastline in and around the city. I have been told that there is a natural harbor there which might make an ideal coaling station or naval base. Its name escapes me at the moment.<sup>40</sup>

Although the name Pearl Harbor is never uttered, the implication is clear. This reminder of Japan's aggression in the 1930s and 1940s towards both its direct neighbors and the United States ensures that the audience would have connected what had just been seen on stage with current events, including America's most recent failed endeavor in Vietnam.

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<sup>40</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, February 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

This connection between Perry's expedition and twentieth-century US/Asian conflict continued into revisions and ultimately, the staged musical. A statement made by the Emperor in the musical paralleled the connection with World War II: "Each of us will strive toward one great goal – the building of a modern Japan which will, in the community of nations, take a place second to none....And we will do it – sooner than you think."<sup>41</sup> This final version proves more explicit in blaming American imperialism for later Japanese imperialism. The Emperor says, "We will organize an army and a navy, equipped with the most modern weapons...we will do for the rest of Asia what America has done for us!"<sup>42</sup> The implication that American imperialism caused Pearl Harbor and the Pacific theatre during World War II paralleled other critiques made by the Asian American anti-war movement, such as that violence between Asians – in Vietnam, in Korea, and even Japanese imperialism – were often spurred and encouraged by Western colonialism..

### **Making *Pacific Overtures* a Musical**

The setting of East Asia and the theme of Western influence have a long history in Western theatre. Operas, such as Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and operettas, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, have long used exoticized Asian settings to attract Western audiences. In some such works, political critique of racist ideals sits beside racist or stereotypical depictions and narratives. For example, Rodgers and Hammerstein's 1949 musical *South Pacific*, which takes place during World War II, critiqued racism, particularly against East Asians, particularly in the number "You Have to be Carefully Taught." Rather than making Asians the villain,

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<sup>41</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, August 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

<sup>42</sup> John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim, *Pacific Overtures* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1977), 133.



Hammerstein wrote a story where racism itself became the main instigator of conflict.<sup>43</sup> Yet the show also contained stereotypical Asian characters and tropes, and the happy ending for a mixed-race couple proved impossible. The show, which revolved around the harm of racism, also perpetuated certain forms of racism – one does not negate the other.

Such a problem would continue to *Pacific Overtures* as it moved from play to musical. Prince instigated both the move to a musical and the continued use of kabuki. In an article in *Cue*, Weidman remembers, “Right from the word go, Hal had some very interesting ideas. The whole notion of trying to tell the story from the Japanese point of view, trying to use Japanese theatrical techniques was his.”<sup>44</sup> Aware of the history of the “Asian” musical, Prince and Weidman, and later Sondheim, created *Pacific Overtures* in dialogue with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1951 musical, *The King and I*, another East-meets-West narrative involving powerful political characters. Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote two other musicals about Asians, but *The King and I* most closely resembles *Pacific Overtures*. Both it and *Pacific Overtures* are about real historical figures, whereas Rodgers and Hammerstein’s other two Asian musicals, *South Pacific* and *Flower Drum Song* (1958), are about fictional characters in near contemporary times. Also, *Flower Drum Song* takes place primarily in the United States and is about those from the East adapting to Western culture.

*The King and I* and *Pacific Overtures* are both about intrusions of the West in the East. The creators intended *Pacific Overtures* to be an inversion, a reversal of viewpoints from *The*

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<sup>43</sup> Sheldon Patinkin, “No Legs, No Jokes, No Chance:” *A History of the American Musical Theatre* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 287; Jim Lovensheimer, *South Pacific: Paradise Rewritten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 82-107.

<sup>44</sup> “A New Musical Brings Japan to Broadway,” *Cue*, January 10, 1976. This claim from Weidman is somewhat challenged by archival sources that show Weidman also interested in using kabuki elements in his earliest drafts. That does not negate, however, that the idea may have been Prince’s in an oral discussion.

*King and I*.<sup>45</sup> In Hammerstein's work, the King of Siam wants to bring Western influence into his land. He and his people are exoticized, such as his continual use of the phrase "et cetera" to highlight his misuse of English and the use of standard Western musical "exoticisms" to depict the land of Siam. The plot of *Pacific Overtures*, on the other hand, concerns the forced intrusion of the West on a nation that was not interested in being Westernized.

There are differences between the two, though. First of all, Anna in *The King and I* is invited by the King of Siam to teach because he wants a Western influence on his country, whereas Perry is an unwelcome intrusion forced upon the Japanese. The audience is supposed to empathize with Anna—she directly represents the white Broadway audience—but in *Pacific Overtures*, the Americans are villainized and caricatured, and it is Kayama and Manjiro who are the most sympathetic. Also, the second plot of *The King and I* revolves around two lovers defying "exotic" beliefs in polygamy and desiring the heteronormative love of the West and the Western musical. *Pacific Overtures*, on the other hand, does not present a traditional love story. Finally, *The King and I* ends with a hint that Siam will be improved due to Anna's interference, but *Pacific Overtures* ends with a more complicated message that Japan was changed, both positively and negatively, by American imperialism.

Bringing Sondheim into the project further strengthened the connection and comparison between *The King and I* and *Pacific Overtures*, particularly because of Sondheim's close relationship with Hammerstein, who served as his first musical mentor. Unlike Hammerstein, however, Sondheim was not interested in the politics of the work.<sup>46</sup> Instead, he wanted to show

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<sup>45</sup> Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 280.

<sup>46</sup> Hammerstein had a long history of writing politically progressive musicals, beginning with *Show Boat* (1927). For more, see Todd Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

his skills by creating a sound world that bridged Japanese kabuki and the Broadway musical while accurately portraying the historical event. This political disinterest changed the show from a polemical play to a complex musical, exploring the long-lasting effects of the West's gunboat diplomacy in Japan and affording Sondheim the chance to mix his Broadway idiom with Japanese music as he understood it.

Sondheim's notion of "authenticity" deviates from contemporary scholarly and cultural definitions. He describes thusly,

[The music of *Pacific Overtures*] *feels* like the music belongs in that show, that milieu, in that country... That's my idea of authenticity. I think authenticity is useless otherwise... it doesn't matter whether it's true or not, it suggests something exotic – in the real sense of the word.<sup>47</sup>

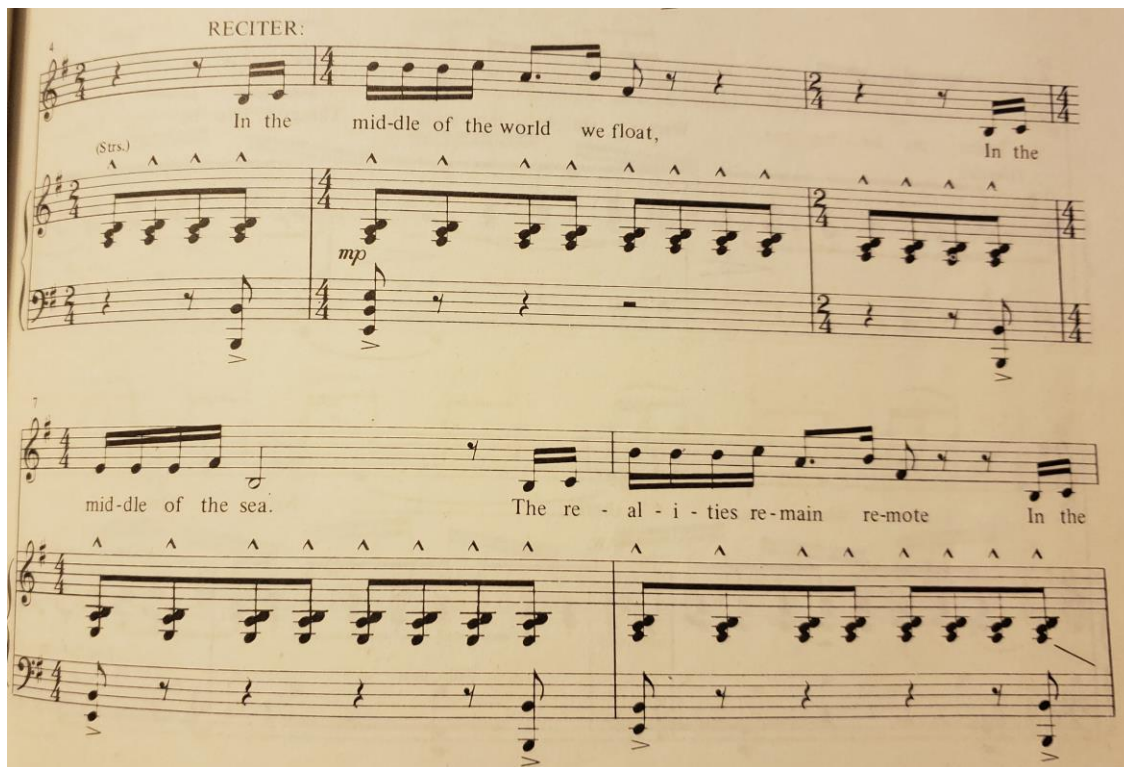
As Sondheim's statement about authenticity clearly demonstrates Said's "orientalism" – "suggests something exotic" implies an object for white audiences to consume rather than a culture to understand – his strange explanation for his less-than-authentic music suggests the impossibility of the project itself. His version of authenticity is completely divorced from any actual Japanese culture, existing in antagonism with Weidman and Prince's more researched intent. Instead, Sondheim wanted to imply Japanese-ness to his white Broadway audience by reinforcing their essentialized assumptions about Eastern culture, naturalizing such tropes into his own Broadway idiom.

Sondheim's musical contributions to the show reflect his antagonistic views on authenticity. He derived the soundscape for *Pacific Overtures* from a few claims and dubious insights into Japanese music. His first is his claim that Japanese music is based on the minor pentatonic scale as compared to Chinese music, which he claims is based in the major pentatonic

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<sup>47</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 39-40.

scale.<sup>48</sup> The minor pentatonic scale became the base for his score – far from being non-Western, the minor pentatonic scale is found throughout Western music, and pentatonicism has been utilized by Western composers more generally to represent the “Orient.”<sup>49</sup> In the opening number, “The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea,” Sondheim uses the notes of the A minor pentatonic scale – ABCEF – except, he alters the F to F#, an alteration he found in a booklet on Japanese music.<sup>50</sup> He changes the tonal center to E instead of A (yielding E/B as the tonic and B/F# as dominant), a choice that allows him to still ground the music in traditional Western harmonies that would be familiar to audiences.



**Figure 2.2** Opening melody to “The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea.” The melody and harmony use an altered minor pentatonic scale that allows for creating the sound of dominant and tonic.

<sup>48</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 161,

<sup>49</sup> Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 51-54.

<sup>50</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 161-162. On page 162, Horowitz publishes the notes that Sondheim took from that booklet he found in a three-LP set on Japanese music that then provided the basis for his “Japanese”-style music.

Second, Sondheim correctly identified the influence of East Asian music on Western composers, such as Maurice Ravel, Manuel de Falla, and John Cage, and employed their compositional techniques throughout the show – again, drawing on an “Eastern” sound as already translated for Western consumption.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, Sondheim later connected what he was doing with the work of contemporary white American minimalist composers, both deriving their techniques from East Asian music. He explained, “It is not insignificant that when I met Steve Reich, he told me how much he loved this show...It’s similar to his own music, because so much of it is influenced by oriental music.”<sup>52</sup> In “The Advantages of Floating,” Sondheim employs minimalist techniques, particularly the use of process music such as in the final measures where he alters the repeating melody slightly until it becomes a constant stream of eight notes moving towards the end (see figure 2.3). In his interview with Mark Horowitz, he explained his compositional process,

I wanted to echo musically the whole [Japanese] cultural idea that less is more. Meaning, we’re just going to take this one chord and, by making tiny little variations on it...it’s sixty bars of one chord. But the rhythm keeps changing, and the texture keeps changing, and *where* the chord keeps getting placed just changes a little bit at a time...it’s minimalist music. Nothing’s going on, but everything’s going. It’s phase music.<sup>53</sup>

The continued eighth-note cluster harmonies also call to mind works by composers such as Reich and John Adams, creating a feeling of rhythmic stasis where building happens through layering on top. While the sonic association between *Pacific Overtures* and these composers comes from their interpretation of Asian music rather than direct influence, the connection shows the ways in which white Americans were appropriating and reinterpreting specific elements of East Asian

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<sup>51</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 157, 160.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

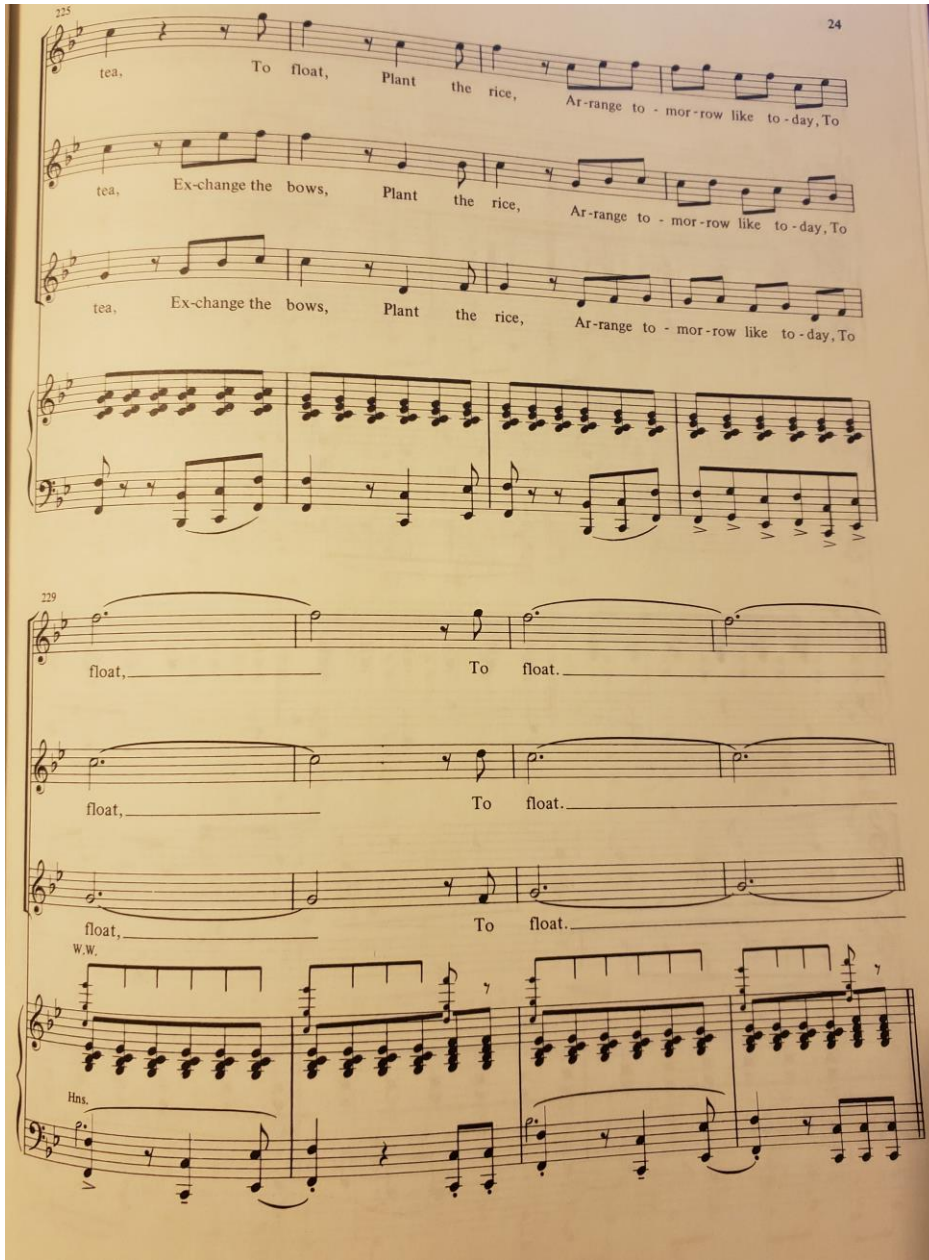
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

musics for their own compositions. All of this gives the feeling of “Otherness,” but second-hand, by way of white, Western composers. Sondheim wrote numbers that New York audiences could hear as somehow “not Western” but still part of an understandable musical language based in Western art music and Western tonality.

The most authentically Japanese part of the soundscape came from outside of Sondheim’s creative contributions. Prince hired Japanese kabuki musicians Fusako Yoshida (*shamisen*), Joey Ginza (*nohkan*), and Genji Ito (percussion) to perform on stage, as is traditional during kabuki shows. Their contribution to the score was improvised and used primarily for underscoring dialogue rather than an integral part of Sondheim’s soundscape.<sup>54</sup> These parts are generally not notated in the final score (except in the introduction, which has some shamisen cues), but the sounds exist in the production and on parts of the cast recording.

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<sup>54</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 217.



**Figure 2.3** Sondheim used techniques from process-based music inspired by Eastern music to create a sonic world that sounds Japanese.

Despite Sondheim's surface "Japanese" contributions, Sondheim and his co-creators sincerely *believed* they were creating a more "authentic" Asian musical than those by Rodgers and Hammerstein. To do this, they created a convoluted framing where *Pacific Overtures* was the idea of a hypothetical Japanese playwright writing a Japanese version of an American

musical.<sup>55</sup> Sondheim explained to Clive Hirschhorn in 1976, “And that’s how we’re preventing it from being *The King and I*. Because we’re seeing it through completely Oriental eyes.”<sup>56</sup>

Sondheim’s claim, though, paradoxically illustrates the impossibility of this endeavor, as no one on the creative team was of Asian descent – their elaborate conception still required their own Western filter. Despite the fact that they desired to create a show that went beyond *The King and I* in its sympathetic and authentic portrayal of East Asia and Asians, the creators never considered their whiteness as a limiting factor in their work.

Furthermore, by using *The King and I* as an antagonistic model, rather than for example *Flower Drum Song*, the creators inadvertently reinforced problematic notions about Asians in the United States and erased the voices of Asian Americans from the stage. As will be discussed more below, Prince strove to present Asian-American actors on the stage, but the actual content of the show did little to tell the stories and experiences of those actors as Americans. Rather, they were placed on stage as non-white, as Other, rather than as Americans themselves. Though Manjiro begins the show as a Westernized Japanese man and Kayama ends the show as one, they are both framed as being Japanese, not Americans. This framing follows theatre historian Karen Shimakawa’s criticism of mainstream representations of Asianness: “To the degree Asian Americans are abjected in representation, they are frequently conflated with Asian foreigners...as ‘ordinary’ Americans, Asian Americans are often simply incomprehensible or invisible.”<sup>57</sup> The creators were attempting to write a show from an Asian point of view, but not from an Asian American point of view, even as they worked with American citizens and

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<sup>55</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 174

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 17.



permanent residents of Asian descent throughout the project. Though Weidman and Prince were attempting to write a politically progressive show, they undermined their project by continuing to frame Asians as other, as foreigners, and giving them little room to be considered part of the American national body.

### **Challenging Modernization Theory in the Final Script**

The addition of Sondheim to the creative team coincided with a new second act that extended the story into the present, focusing on the long-lasting effects of Western influence and “progress” on Japan.<sup>58</sup> The addition of Japanese progress moved the show into the debate of modernization theory, loosely based on Social Darwinism and the work of Max Weber, which posits that modernization inherently increases quality of life, and that by modernizing other societies through colonization and (often forced) trade, Western powers are aiding the people of those societies. By the 1950s, modernization theory had become a common justification for America’s wars in Korea and Vietnam and the Cold War more generally, as ideas of modernization were (and continue to be) tied closely to Western capitalism. Weidman would have been exposed to this theory as Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons’s work was fundamental to the field of East Asian studies at the time of Weidman’s studies at Harvard.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, by the mid-1960s modernization theory was being called into question by a younger generation of East Asian students and faculty called the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars

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<sup>58</sup> The new second act also contains contributions from Hugh Wheeler, though the extent of his contributions to the show seem limited. He does receive billing for “additional material,” but according to Sondheim, he mostly worked on Weidman’s ideas to help turn them more into a piece of dramatic work than contributing anything significantly new. See Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 214.

<sup>59</sup> Leon H. Mayhew, Introduction to *Talcott Parsons on institutions and social evolution: selected writings*, Leon H. Mayhew, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), xii, 52-55.

(CCAS). The tail end of Weidman's studies would have overlapped with the beginning of their demands for a new understanding of the violence and damage done to East Asian countries for the sake of progress and modernization.<sup>60</sup> Weidman expressed a view aligned with CCAS's foundational argument when discussing *Pacific Overtures*, saying, "The show is about Japan, about an extraordinary culture that was overwhelming in purity...that no longer exists in that way."<sup>61</sup> To Weidman, modernization destroyed an "extraordinary culture" rather than improving upon it. Like the CCAS, Weidman criticized modernization as a form of violent imperialism. However, Weidman's positive view of Japan still suffers from being as essentializing as more negative racist portrayals of East Asia and Asians. Weidman's beliefs, however, clearly resisted modernization theory, and therefore, American imperial practices.

On the other hand, Prince brought a more equivocal view of modernization theory: "What I want to say clearly is not that there was intended villainy on our part, not that the Japanese were party to their own corruption, but that we all had better pay attention because we are savaging the quality of life and the sensibilities of people in the name of technology and progress."<sup>62</sup> Prince's statement firmly questions modernization theory, but he avoids placing blame solely on the actions of either the United States or Japan. Perhaps, Prince's political view here provides as a small example of what he would present in *Sweeney Todd*: a critique of capitalism and industrialization, rather than a critique of imperialism. Furthermore, this public statement in *Cue* avoided alienating potential audiences by discussing intentions rather than consequences of

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<sup>60</sup> Fabio Lanza, *The End of Concern: Maoist China, Activism, and Asian Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 55.

<sup>61</sup> "A New Musical Brings Japan to Broadway," *Cue*, January 10, 1976.

<sup>62</sup> "A New Musical Brings Japan to Broadway," *Cue*, January 10, 1976.

America's East Asian interventions, and therefore, avoided taking a side on the recently ended Vietnam War.

One example of questioning the morality of modernization occurs in Act II, scene v, where an American showing a Japanese merchant his invention of the rickshaw.<sup>63</sup> In this scene, the American is trying to get an investment for his invention, and as he shows the merchant his rickshaw, old men who are pulling it keep getting tired and collapsing, quickly replaced by other old men. The American explains, "The motor's self-contained, requires very little maintenance – and can be easily replaced."<sup>64</sup> This critique of capitalism's dismissal of humanity was inherently a critique of the United States trying to champion capitalism as the ultimate sign of progress, even as it relies on the exploitation of Asian labor.

Less versed (and interested) in contemporary criticisms of modernization theory, Sondheim presented a less critical view of progress, as in the two different final numbers he wrote for the show. The first, cut around the time rehearsals began in early October 1975, appeared in both the August and September 1975 drafts. He titled this number "Civilization Song," explaining in the August 1975 draft – "It should deal primarily with pointless knowledge, mixed occasionally with discoveries and inventions. Somehow it arrives at Railroad or Train."<sup>65</sup> As noted by Stephen Banfield, this song was most likely inspired by a children's song from 1878 mentioned in G. B. Sansom's *The Western World and Japan*.<sup>66</sup> This children's song epitomized modernization theory, intended to "impress on young minds the advantages of Western culture"

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<sup>63</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim, May 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

<sup>64</sup> Weidman, *Pacific Overtures*, 120.

<sup>65</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim, September 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

<sup>66</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 256.

by having children name technological advances from the West.<sup>67</sup> In the script, this scene goes through different aspects of modernity, including a housewife cleaning her carpets and a baseball game. The song also demonstrates the changing of eras, including a soldier in a World War I uniform and music changing throughout the scene to become more modern. The general tone of “Civilization Song” supported mainstream ideas about progress and modernization, and therefore, worked against Prince’s and especially Weidman’s views of modernity in Japan.

Conversely, some of Weidman’s stage directions in “Civilization Song” challenged this sunny picture of modernization. Weidman wrote a series of short vignettes to visually illustrate Japan’s progress from the 19<sup>t</sup> century to the present, and some presented negative effects of modernization. In particular, the final visual that Weidman wrote for the show would have left the audience feeling discomfort:

The lights come up Stage Left where a woman, who looks very much like Tamate [Kayama’s wife, see below] enters in traditional dress. Her head is hidden by a parasol. Behind her is the screen which concealed the Shogun’s Court at the beginning of Act I. The woman pauses in front of the screen and, as the onstage musicians play appropriate music, a “Stage Hand” – the Reciter perhaps? – enters and begins to remove clothes. It is a strip without the tease. When she is naked to the waist, the screen behind her drops suddenly, revealing the rest of the company. They perform their own version of the Lion Dance to music which is lively, rhythmic, and angry. The play is over.<sup>68</sup>

The stripping in this number is not sexual – “a strip without the tease” – but instead represents the way the Meiji Restoration stripped Japan of its traditional culture and values. Progress’s price, as represented by the naked woman, is the loss of tradition, of modesty, and of protections – she (or in this metaphor, Japan) is left vulnerable and must learn to defend herself. The representation of Japan as woman contains layers of meaning – one can see the woman as the

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<sup>67</sup> G. B. Sansom in Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, 256.

<sup>68</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, August 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

general representation of nationhood and nationalism, much like Lady Liberty – but the continued feminization of the East and Eastern culture also sets up the West as the masculine penetrator, leaving the East vulnerable to Western colonization and influence. Further, the use of a woman brings forth the particularly complicated nature of progress and modernization for women (discussed more below) who often shed the restrictions of traditional culture, only to embrace the differently-constructed sexism of Western culture. All of these meanings would have coexisted for audiences.

Sondheim replaced “Civilization Song,” a number never fully developed, with the finale “Next.” A driving, Western-style, quasi-rock number, Sondheim wrote “Next” only a month before the out of town tryouts in Boston in November, as the number does not even appear in the September 1975 draft (the show opened in January).<sup>69</sup> “Next” summarizes Japan’s assimilation to the West and its ascension economically, culturally, and militarily from the nineteenth-century to the present.<sup>70</sup> Sondheim wrote “Next” to aesthetically mimic the rapid change Japan experienced in the post-Meiji era to the present. He explained in 2010, “‘Next’ is the perfect word for a song which deals with the apocalyptic effect of Western cultures, especially contemporary Western cultures blasting open a serene, self-contained society.”<sup>71</sup> However, Sondheim’s understanding and portrayal of the two cultures aesthetically and lyrically continue to bifurcate notions of East/West. By portraying the East as “serene” and “unchanging” as opposed to the rupture of “Next,” Sondheim reinforces Orientalist stereotypes. Even though

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<sup>69</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, Script by John Weidman and Stephen Sondheim, September 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

<sup>70</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 201.

<sup>71</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 329.

Sondheim's statement reflects the catastrophic and devastating nature of colonial and imperialist practices, he simultaneously idealizes a culture about which he knows little.

"Next" complicates simplistic good/bad arguments around modernization while fulfilling the expectations of the commercial theatre finale. The number includes spoken examples of modern developments in Japan, both positive and negative. In Japan: "Fifty-seven percent of the Bicentennial souvenirs sold in Washington, D.C. in 1975 were made in Japan," and "1975 Weather Bureau statistics report 162 days on which the air quality in Tokyo is acceptable."<sup>72</sup> The rise of Japanese corporations, such as Sony and Toyota, were already beginning to dominate US markets and advertising. More importantly, the show never explicitly mentions World War II, even though one could easily read a connection between Perry and Pearl Harbor through the Reciter's use of the word "humiliation," avoiding a controversial subject.<sup>73</sup> While highlighting both the gains and losses through progress, the upbeat, driving song with the incessant repetition of "Next" satisfies the Western audience's need for action and spectacle, something denied by the use of kabuki throughout the production. The number includes the entire cast embodying the changes of Japanese culture, with a wide variety of colorful Western costumes. Rather than the small changes and slow pace of kabuki-inspired Broadway to this point in the show, "Next" fills the stage with movement and choreography, derived both from kabuki dance and Western dances. The sound also fulfilled Broadway expectations, as women were used for this scene, creating an ensemble sound more in line with American musicals. Not necessarily happy, the song's frantic energy ends the show on a high note, sending the audience out energized rather

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 136-137. Also, these statements are changed in the 2004 revival to reflect a 2004 Japan.

<sup>73</sup> The 2004 production includes a very different version of "Next" that includes references to World War II, including the United States' use of nuclear weapons.

than depressed, softening Weidman’s critical blows through Sondheim’s inclusion of positive results of modernization.

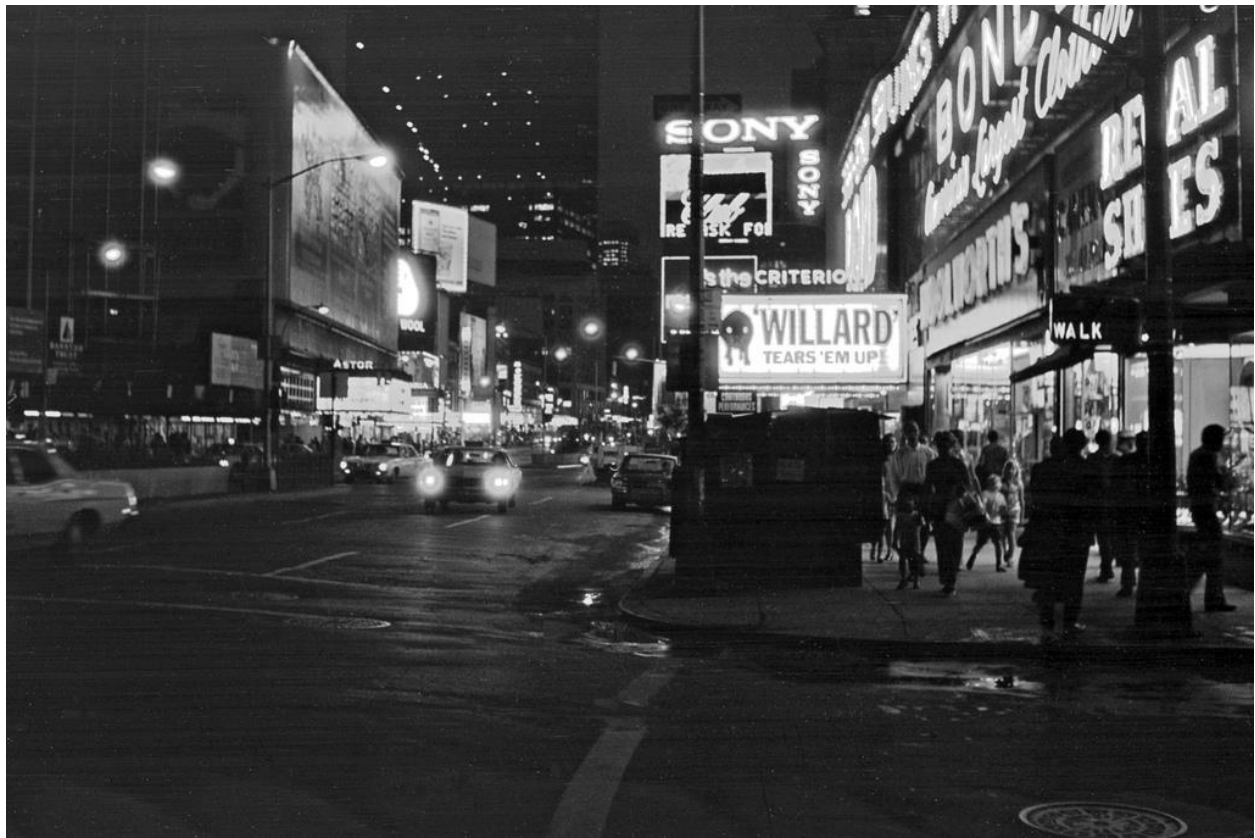


Figure 2.4 Sony prominently advertised in Times Square in 1971.

### Reversing Racial Stereotypes through Music and Language

Positive representation of Asians and Asian Americans played an important role in the creation of *Pacific Overtures*. When discussing the show, Sondheim revealed the extent to which he himself had been influenced by negative representations of Asians in the media. He explained, “I was brought up on movies, so I thought the Japanese were a lot of little people with buck teeth and glasses who tortured Americans. It was Weidman – being a sinophile [sic], and having

written this play – who introduced me, in that sense, to Japanese culture.”<sup>74</sup> Prior to working on this project, Sondheim had no awareness of East Asian culture or in representations of Asians. It took the intervention of Weidman, a “Sinophile,” to engage Sondheim’s interest and intellect and direct it towards a more positive and authentic musical about Asian culture.

In order to contrast itself with *The King and I* and to make a claim at authenticity, *Pacific Overtures* had to divorce itself from previous stereotyped and racist depictions of East Asians in musicals. One way that the creators did this was through reversing language stereotypes. The score states that the Americans should speak in “Pidgin English.” Different Asian immigrant groups in America utilized Pidgin English to communicate and organize together because they did not speak the same language. White writers and yellowface performance often appropriated Pidgin English for racist comedic effect in movies, television, and theatre.<sup>75</sup> Unlike in other musicals, such as *South Pacific*, where the Asian characters spoke in broken, exaggerated English, it was the foreigners, the Americans and other ambassadors in *Pacific Overtures* who spoke English poorly. The idea to reverse stereotypical language norms was Weidman’s—according to Sondheim, “One of Weidman’s most inventive ideas: the Japanese would speak elegant, formalized King’s English, whereas all the foreigners would speak a pidgin form of their native language.”<sup>76</sup> This deliberate reversal of language expectations had two important results: one, it encouraged audiences to align themselves with the Japanese rather than the American characters, and two, like the cut minstrel show, this dramaturgical choice forced audiences to

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<sup>74</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 156. This quote demonstrates Sondheim’s continued misunderstandings of East Asian culture – a sinophile loves China, not Japan.

<sup>75</sup> Takaki, *Strangers on a Different Shore*, 473.

<sup>76</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 327.



confront the offensive and demeaning depictions of Asians and Asian-Americans in mainstream culture.

The opening of Act II, “Please, Hello,” relied on this linguistic reversal for both meaning and humor. Even though the song provided a comic opening to an otherwise thoroughly depressing act, this number opened the door to commentary about contemporary practices of writing minority characters in popular culture. “Please, Hello” depicted foreign emissaries from the United States, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Russia, and France using gunboat diplomacy to force treaties with Lord Abe, the First Councilor to the Shogun. Sondheim strove for historical accuracy by writing lyrics that followed the historical facts as much as possible, including having the ambassadors enter in correct historical order and having them ask for ports in specific cities. For Sondheim, this song was more puzzle than political statement – he wanted to show off his talent as a composer and a lyricist within very tight constraints. Sondheim did contribute overall to Weidman’s political goals, but he also simultaneously created a brilliant, clever, historically accurate comic number.

Beyond historical accuracy, Sondheim presented the ambassadors as cultural stereotypes and amplified these stereotypes through pastiche, writing songs that imitate music from each country. Sondheim had already proven himself an expert at parody in *Follies* and *Company*, and this number gave him the opportunity to do so once more. For example, the English ambassador sings a patter song reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan—though reports Sondheim feeling obliged to write better lyrics than W.S. Gilbert could, judging his own work to be superior.<sup>77</sup> Sondheim desired to show his virtuosic skill in writing both music and lyrics that both mimicked

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<sup>77</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 324.

and improved on prior genres. The British number begins, “Hello, I come with letters from her Majesty Victoria / Who, learning how you’re trading now, sang ‘Hallelujah, Gloria!’” in a quick tempo. The American is accompanied by a Sousa-like march, and his lyrics include broken English, such as “Last time we visit, too short. / This time we visit for slow. / Last time we come, come with warships, / Now with more ships – say hello!” Besides the poor grammar, the lyrics highlight America’s glorification of military violence. The Dutch admiral, who sings to a clog dance, brings stereotypical gifts of tulips, chocolate, windmills, and wooden shoes.

The sonic and visual stereotypes in “Please, Hello” create a comic effect that reverses and mimics the comedy that Asian characters had often provided in American media. The presence of Asian-American bodies playing racially white stereotypes supposedly underlines this character, as stereotyped Asian characters were (and are) often presented by white actors in yellowface. Nevertheless, “Please, Hello” undermines the parallels in distinct ways that illustrate the limitations of the creators’ political and aesthetic goals. First, Sondheim’s desire for both historical and aesthetic accuracy make these characters into extremely accurate cultural versions of themselves, rather than the nonsensical stereotypes used for Asian characters: these short snippets of identifiably “national” music prove more accurately American, Russian, or British than any of the Japanese-inspired music Sondheim wrote for the rest of the show. And the humor comes from the audience’s recognition of each style as stereotypically “authentic,” further exoticizing the “Japanese” sounds as “other” in the show’s underlying Western context. In short, Sondheim’s desire to be clever undermines Weidman’s desire for critique.

Second, the scene reveals the ways in which Asian and White as written by white authors and performed by Asian actors are not interchangeable. It is the ambassadors in the scene who

have all of the power, stereotyped as they are, rather than Lord Abe, who is being subjected to their demands – a different power balance than one sees in yellowface casting, where the accurately-casted racial character (the white character) is the hero, presented as powerful and generally victorious in the end. As Homi Bhabha argues in his article “The Other Question,” stereotypes matter less in how they positively or negatively portray their subjects but matter instead in “the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.”<sup>78</sup> Although the Western ambassadors are shown as silly, simple, and violent, their portrayal as such does not subjugate the West – in fact, they are doing the exact opposite in this scene. Casting Asian Americans as white characters is not the same as casting Whites as Asian characters. People of Asian descent *can* be Americans, but their presence in “whiteface” in this scene perpetuates belief in their inability to become Americans. Race is a hierarchical construction: flipping the roles cannot flip the hierarchy.

Parsing the intricacies of representation, race, and nationality proved especially difficult in a show attempting to be both Japanese and American. Utilizing Western stereotypes rather than Asian ones countered normative theatrical expectations, yet also reinforced the division between White as American and Asian as Other. Sondheim’s goal of historical accuracy, pastiche virtuosity, and narrative humor were all undoubtedly reached in “Please, Hello,” but the efficacy of the number in undermining Asian stereotypes as championed by Weidman and Prince proves questionable.

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<sup>78</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism,” in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66.

## **Antagonistic Collaboration through Gender and Sexual Representation**

The complex intersection of race and nationality, as well as gender, confused Weidman's original conviction, as presented in "The Untitled Play," that American imperialism in Japan only brought negative consequences to the country – for women, American imperialism and the modernization that follows can sometimes bring specific freedoms previously unavailable to them. However, this presentation of gender relations (West: progressive, East: regressive) has been problematized by theorists of Orientalism and Third World feminism, particularly the way women's rights have served to justify US imperial projects.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, though modernization might bring new freedoms, it can also bring new dangers, restrictions, and gender norms, all of which are present in the final production of *Pacific Overtures*.

Due to overwhelming patriarchal structures in the American navy and the Japanese government during the Meiji restoration, *Pacific Overtures* focuses primarily on men. Women, instead, come in and out of the narrative, generally in stereotyped ways that undermine Prince and Weidman's goals. A show written by men about men, *Pacific Overtures* does not provide female characters the space to overcome normative exoticist tropes relating to gender and sexuality. Therefore, the representation of women and their sexuality becomes an axis on which Weidman and Prince's intent to write against Western tropes of the East collides with their own assumptions and stereotypes around gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Sondheim's definition of

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<sup>79</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, Lordes Torres, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 16-18; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 305.

“authenticity” led him to write Westernized numbers using Westernized understandings of Eastern femininity and cross-gender casting.

In the beginning of the show, Japanese women are presented solely as the submissive property of men, even if those men love them. Sondheim and Weidman firmly establish this relationship through the character of Tamate, Kayama’s wife. She only has one song, where she demonstrates her perfect adherence to traditional gender roles, even when such adherence makes her feel helpless.<sup>80</sup> In fact, Tamate does not sing her own song – it is instead sung by two observers, an established kabuki technique. As she is silenced, Tamate never fully develops into a character of her own.

Unlike her final representation, Tamate was originally conceived as the “liberated woman,” and she was to be played by a woman.<sup>81</sup> Yet, as the collaborative process continued, Tamate became more and more a familiar stereotype of a sacrificial woman from other Orientalist texts. Like Cio-Cio-San in *Madame Butterfly*, Tamate “liberates” herself through suicide, believing that her husband is going to die for his failure to get rid of the Americans. This action is not really liberation at all: Tamate is the first casualty of Perry’s visit.<sup>82</sup> Her adherence to gender roles and her subsequent “liberation” through suicide reflect simultaneously oppressive gendered practices in Japanese society and the stereotypical imaginings of Western men.

The other number with only women characters, “Welcome to Kanagawa,” questions Western stereotypes and problematizes Prince’s decision to use an all-male cast. Sung by

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<sup>80</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 183.

<sup>81</sup> *Pacific Overtures*, May 1975, Boris Aronson Scene Design Papers, Box 4, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin

<sup>82</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 189.

“geishas” in a brothel, Sondheim intended the song as a parody of other South Sea Island songs, such as “Bali Ha’i” in *South Pacific*, undermining the romanticization of the East and of Eastern women through humor.<sup>83</sup> The song’s humor registers on two levels. First, the Madam of the brothel is complaining because all of the well-trained geishas have left Kanagawa out of fear, so she has to train new workers. Unlike the Western vision of the geisha, the new girls are awkward, clumsy, and brash, knowing little about sex or how to be sexy. This image negates stereotypes of submissive, Asian women who intuitively know how to please men. Second, all of the women are played by men, whose voices slip into their male register at times, specifically for humorous purposes.<sup>84</sup> Here, Sondheim’s play with gender and vocal range and timbre for comedic effect undermines Prince and Weidman’s “authentic” kabuki aesthetic. *Onnagata*, or men who play women in kabuki, are well-respected for their abilities and Japanese audiences do not view cross-gender casting as unnatural or comedic.<sup>85</sup> In this way and in a Broadway context, “Welcome to Kanagawa” ruptures Prince’s intended refined Japanese aesthetic: the number itself feels more like a musical comedy number than anything belonging to kabuki or Japan.

“Welcome to Kanagawa” presents the geisha as comedy, but stereotypes of Asian women as prostitutes also led to violence in real life and within the stylized world of *Pacific Overtures*.<sup>86</sup> The number “Pretty Lady,” based on a real incident, presents the ways that Western men objectify Eastern women. During “Pretty Lady,” three British sailors sing to a Japanese woman whom they mistake for a geisha. They try to offer her money in exchange for sexual

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<sup>83</sup> Raymond Knapp, “Marking Time in *Pacific Overtures*: Reconciling East, West, and History within the Theatrical Now of a Broadway Musical,” in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary*, ed. Steve Bauer, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2008), 167.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> For more, see Maki Isaka, *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering in Kabuki Theatre* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

<sup>86</sup> Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 110-111.

services, but the language barrier keeps them from communicating with her. After they surround her, she calls for her father, who is a samurai; her father kills one of the British sailors. The song is unclear about what is being depicted, permitting the audience to decide whether it was harmless flirtation, attempted rape, or rape.<sup>87</sup>

Unlike “Please, Hello,” the British men here do not speak in broken or stereotyped English, and Sondheim chooses to musicalize the scene in a Western way, moving the point-of-view momentarily to the Westerners – the only moment in the show to do so. Sondheim’s decision to create a Westernized number in this moment works against Weidman’s aesthetic of the total Japanese perspective – one could imagine a song from the woman’s point of view, afraid of the leering men in her backyard. The sweet music, reminiscent of “Pretty Women” from *Sweeney Todd* which also contains violent undertones, creates a sense of misguided intentions from common stereotypes rather than a violent sexual sadism.<sup>88</sup> The song, in a flowing triple, contains traditional I-IV-V-I progressions throughout with only two measures containing chromatic pitches. The three cockney sailors sing in a round throughout starting with the words “Pretty lady,” speaking to the quiet (and probably scared) Japanese girl. They mention that they “got paid today” implying that they think she is “one of those geisha girls” whose body they can purchase. They also plead with lines like “Don’t you know ‘ow long I been without it?” She never responds to them, and the song ends with one of the sailors lamenting, “I sailed the world for you.” This final line underscores the mentality of these three Western men – that Asian women are submissive and there for taking, unlike Western women. Despite the fact that the

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<sup>87</sup> Knapp, “Marking Time in *Pacific Overtures*,” 174.

<sup>88</sup> Gordon, *Art Isn’t Easy*, 200.

beautiful, consonant song lulls like a lullaby, the violence inherent in sexual stereotypes of Asian women lingers always beneath the surface.

This scene is based on a real-life incident, and the earnestness of the three sailors highlights the way that stereotypes cause miscommunications, especially here, when the audience understands that the men and the woman do not speak the same language. The sailors, of a lower, uneducated class as marked by their cockney accents, make assumptions about the woman based on their racist beliefs – beliefs they were taught in England. They do not intend to cause harm or scare her; after all, they are willing to pay. However, that does not negate the fear they are most likely instilling in the girl, which causes the girl's father to kill one of the sailors. Weidman, in this scene, shows the fallacy of believing that intent matters more than effect. The scene overall creates a feeling of immense sadness, as it presents the tragic consequences of the near-impossibility for complete cross-cultural understanding, especially with the continued existence of hurtful stereotypes. This moment, then, directly questions Prince, Weidman, and Sondheim's belief that they can somehow translate Japanese culture to the Western stage – mistranslation and miscommunication presents as inevitability.

Violence against women related directly to the violence done to Japan by the West, or East Asia in general during the Cold War, as such dominance was inherently gendered. The rehabilitation of Japan and Japanese Americans after World War II was both racialized and gendered, emasculating Japan through their paternal relationship with America.<sup>89</sup> Americans also interfered with how Japan reconstructed gender forcing perceived Western notions of white,

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<sup>89</sup> Jodi Kim, *End of Empires: Asian American Critique and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 99.



middle-class womanhood onto Japanese culture.<sup>90</sup> Sondheim inadvertently recalled the gendered implications of American imperialism when he explained the end of the show: “The reciter is outraged at what happened to the country... This is a man who is telling us without ever saying it: ‘We were raped.’ And they were, though it was highly controlled and ritualized.”<sup>91</sup> Like the three sailors in “Pretty Lady,” many Westerners who believed in colonization and Western influence believed, paternalistically, that they were doing what was best for the nations they invaded and influenced; however, also like the three sailors, their intent could not negate the negative violent consequences of those beliefs and actions, resulting in a nation that would fight back, both literally and economically, as presented in the trajectory of *Pacific Overtures*.

### **Casting and Representation in *Pacific Overtures***

As Weidman and Sondheim were occupied with the book and score, Prince began working on another way that *Pacific Overtures* would avoid being *The King and I*: having an all Asian and Asian-American cast. Prince was not the first director to attempt this kind of casting. Rodgers, Hammerstein, and director Gene Kelly tried to recruit an all-Asian cast for the 1958 musical *Flower Drum Song*. The move was considered risky at the time, and even though they searched across the country, including in San Francisco’s Chinatown, two leading roles were played by non-Asian actors. The African-American performer Juanita Hall played Madame Liang and the role of Sammy Fong was played by the white performer Larry Blyden. In fact, as historian David Lewis notes, only twelve of the forty-six actors in *Flower Drum Song* were

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>91</sup> Horowitz, *Sondheim on Music*, 164.

Chinese or of Chinese descent.<sup>92</sup> The use of “Chinese” as a marker of authenticity by Lewis in his book on *Flower Drum Song* rather than “Asian” or “Asian-American” reflects a change that occurred a decade after *Flower Drum Song*, where those more over-arching terms that erased ethnic differences in the United States could be used as acceptable identity categories, rather than essentializing ones.

*Pacific Overtures* casting differed from *Flower Drum Song* in other essential ways that complicated recruitment and meaning. First, all the characters in *Flower Drum Song* were Asian, but many of the characters in *Pacific Overtures* were white. Still, Prince and Weidman decided to cast even the white characters with Asian actors, a sort of reverse yellow-face. This technique allowed the creators to parody the longstanding practice of casting white actors in Asian and Asian-American roles. As discussed earlier, this was reinforced by having the Americans speak in broken English, thus differentiating the Japanese and the American linguistically but not bodily or racially, mirroring yellowface practices.

Antagonistic collaboration appears through Sondheim’s disinterest in race and casting practices. Though Sondheim enjoyed Weidman’s play with language reversal, recent comments from Sondheim reveal his complete disinterest in what we now call race-conscious casting. In a recent interview on St. Louis public radio, Sondheim opposed protests against white-casting of Latinx characters in a regional production of *West Wide Story*. He explained, “That kind of protest, I just find sort of silly. If you carry that to its extreme than you’d have to say that an actress couldn’t be played by anyone but an actress and that a mother couldn’t be played by

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<sup>92</sup> David H. Lewis, *Flower Drum Songs: The Story of Two Musicals* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2006): 69.

somebody who hadn't been a mother. I mean, it's ridiculous."<sup>93</sup> This statement only reinforces that the interest in an all-Asian cast came from Prince and Weidman and not Sondheim. Sondheim's definition of "authenticity" for this show, as for others, did not depend on race-conscious casting.

*Pacific Overtures* differs from other race-conscious casting – all of the characters, both Asian and white, are played by Asians and Asian-Americans, and all are played by men. The decision to only include male actors made it even more difficult for Prince and Weidman to cast, as excluding half the population exacerbated the difficulty in finding qualified Asian American actors. However, they had an advantage that Kelly and Hammerstein did not have: The Asian-American movement, grounding itself in theatrical activism both in New York City and on the West Coast, had, since the time of *Flower Drum Song*, provided a training ground and new opportunities for actors of Asian descent.

### **The Importance of Asian-American Theatre**

Whereas the creators of *Flower Drum Song* wanted a Chinese or Chinese-looking cast, Prince wanted an "Asian American" cast, a then new term covering all Americans of East Asian descent. He asserted, "One thing about this show is very important. It's a company mainly of *Americans*. But *Asian-* Americans... This is an American musical done *by* Americans playing Asian roles, and that's intentional."<sup>94</sup> Prince's inclusive conception of "American" reflects his liberal and socially antagonistic viewpoint, but his use of the term "Asian American" relied on

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<sup>93</sup> Jeremy D. Goodwin, "Legendary Lyricist Sondheim Dismisses Protests Calling for Color-Conscious Casting as Ridiculous," *St. Louis Public Radio Online*, October 4, 2018. <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/post/legendary-lyricist-sondheim-dismisses-protests-calling-color-conscious-casting-ridiculous#stream/0> [accessed February 28, 2019].

<sup>94</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," March 22, 1976, 26.

contemporary civil rights movements to be legible. The term “Asian American” as a political coalition made up of Americans of Asian descent was coined in 1968 by Yuji Ichioka, one of the co-founders of the Asian American Political Alliance.<sup>95</sup> Without this term and its specific meaning, Prince’s approach might have looked very different. The coalitional and homogenizing term allowed Prince to hire actors of *any* Asian descent without appearing to essentialize, as the concept originated with Asian Americans themselves. The cast of *Pacific Overtures* ultimately included actors whose roots went back to Japan, China, Korea, the Philippines, and other Pacific Islands, among others. Yet, generally, this casting practice was viewed as inclusive, as Asian Americans themselves had already formed theatre troupes consisting of artists from a variety of backgrounds under the umbrella of Asian American.

Beyond providing an important framework for Prince, the movement also provided trained actors able to play leading roles. Representation of Asian Americans in art and media was a key issue for activists, and theatre proved to be one of the most important outlets for working towards improving representation. Stereotypes of Asians in the media, including suicidal fantasies, cowardice, and hypersexual women strongly affected the experience of Asian American, specifically Asian American soldiers and those involved in anti-war protests.<sup>96</sup> Although there were already theatres on the West Coast where specific ethnic traditions were performed, such as Chinese Opera or Japanese Noh, Asian Americans felt that their unique experience as immigrants or children of immigrants were not being represented on stage. These activists took the initiative to create their own theatre companies to give Asian American playwrights and actors a chance to showcase their talents and tell their stories.

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<sup>95</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Maeda, *Chains of Babylon*, 99.

The first of these companies to be founded in the United States was the East West Players in Los Angeles, California in 1965. The founders, a mix of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans born in the United States, sought to create a multiethnic theatre troupe that would give opportunities for Asian and Asian American artists. One of the founders, Mako, observed the difficulty many actors had when they first began at East West Players, as they had trained their bodies and minds to inhabit specific stereotyped roles that at first, they struggled with reconnecting their minds and bodies to complex roles; East West Players served as a safe space for “retraining” Asian-American actors to “reconnect with their own subjective responses.”<sup>97</sup> Beyond creating a space to train Asian-American actors for roles such as those in *Pacific Overtures*, Mako directly connected East West Players with the original production in the featured role of the Reciter, and he would play the role again in 1998, when the East West Players opened the new David Henry Hwang Theatre in Los Angeles with a revised version of *Pacific Overtures*.<sup>98</sup>

Asians and Asian-American artists also worked in New York City to create meaningful Asian art and theatre. Basement Workshop, located in Chinatown, was the center of Asian American cultural production on the East Coast. A community-based, grassroots organization, Basement Workshop’s goal was to create art that spoke to the lives and politics of Asian Americans in New York City. They were also a site of publication, including *Bridge*, the main Asian American magazine at the time, and *Yellow Pearl*, an important collection of art and

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<sup>97</sup> Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 59.

<sup>98</sup> Willard Manus and Robert Viagas, “East West Players Opens Pacific Overtures in New Theatre Mar. 18m” *Playbill*, March 19, 1998. <http://www.playbill.com/article/east-west-players-opens-pacific-overtures-in-new-theatre-mar-18-com-74109> [accessed February 28, 2019].

essays by and for Asian Americans.<sup>99</sup> Asian-American playwrights, such as Frank Chin, used these outlets to showcase their work as well as convey their larger political views.

The main Asian-American theatrical company in New York City grew out of La MaMa, a still-existing off-off-Broadway experimental theatre collective. In 1970, African American founder Ellen Stewart collaborated with Peking opera director Ching Yeh to create the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre.<sup>100</sup> Utilizing LaMaMa's space, Yeh wanted to create art that was neither European nor Asian, but something different that mixed the experiences and talents of the Asian-American artists participating.<sup>101</sup> In June 1970, PART and LaMaMa opened "the first Japanese musical to be seen in America," Itsuro Shimoda and Yutaka Higashi's *Golden Bat*, a rock musical compared to *Hair* (1968) minus the political overtones.<sup>102</sup> Although it is unclear as to the overall impact of this musical on Broadway creators or audiences, the appearance of a musical written by and starring Asians and Asian-Americans may have inspired younger actors of Asian descent to engage in musical theatre training, even as roles for them were sparse. The frequent (and continued) excuse of not casting Asian-Americans or writing roles for them because there are no trained Asian-American actors could be countered by the proliferation of Asian-American theatre troupes in the United States. By staging Asian and Asian-American musicals, these theatre companies provided the base from which Prince would cast *Pacific Overtures*.<sup>103</sup>

## Difficulties in Casting

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<sup>99</sup> Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 86-87.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 99.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>102</sup> *The Village Voice*, June 18, 1970.

<sup>103</sup> For more about Asian American Theatre companies in the 1960s and the way they helped foster growth for Asian American artists, see Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23-91.

Even with the increases in opportunities and training, finding enough qualified Asian-American actors in New York City proved difficult for Prince. The final version of the show employed twenty-three actors covering sixty-one parts, as well as three actresses for the final sequence. Including understudies, *Pacific Overtures* employed thirty-one actors of Asian descent.<sup>104</sup> Some of the actors lived in New York, but many held permanent residence on the West Coast or in Hawai'i, places where there were larger populations of Asian Americans and more work for Asian American actors. However, even after holding auditions throughout the United States and in Japan, Prince still struggled to cover parts for the show. In March 1976, *The New Yorker* ran a story after several cast members fell ill, focusing on the challenge of keeping the show running.

The article reveals how tempting it must have been for Prince to give-up and cast either non-Asian minority actors in certain roles or to have the Americans played by white actors. Prince complained, "It took a year and half, and three different people making seven trips to the West Coast just to hold auditions, to get the company together."<sup>105</sup> Auditions were also held in Tokyo, and efforts were made to recruit refugees from Vietnam. While the addition of Vietnamese refugees would have added another level of critique to the show, these attempts proved unsuccessful primarily due to the language barrier.<sup>106</sup>

Prince's staff suggested that he look at Puerto Ricans or other minorities in the United States, but for Prince, it was important that the cast fit his vision.<sup>107</sup> Actors' Equity's policy regarding "Ethnic Minority" casting recommended that "all roles could be played by Asian or

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<sup>104</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," March 22, 1976. Revivals have cast the show differently, resulting in a variety of solutions for covering the number of roles necessary.

<sup>105</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," March 22, 1976.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

any Ethnic Minority actors.”<sup>108</sup> Actors who are less easily categorized are often able to fill roles of a variety of ethnicities; for example, African-American actress Juanita Hall played a Tonkinese woman in *South Pacific* and a Chinese woman in *Flower Drum Song*. Prince refused this option.

Moreover, it was also important that the actors be American as well as Asian. Prince explained, “This is an American musical done *by* Americans playing Asian roles, and that’s intentional. I’d like to see it played in England by Americans, too. I don’t want to see it played in Japan or by Japanese. If you do that, you lose the point of the show.”<sup>109</sup> The show as a synthesis of Broadway and kabuki required actors that were a synthesis of Asian and American, ie. Asian American. After surveying biographical information for 28 of the 31 original cast members, 22 were born in the United States, most in California or Hawai’i, though some from as disparate as Georgia and Wisconsin and five were permanent residents or citizens of the United States, though born outside. Only Isao Soto was not a citizen or permanent resident. At least half of the cast were Japanese or of Japanese descent. Prince’s view of who gets included in “Asian American” proves highly progressive: he cast not only actors of Asian descent born in the United States, but also individuals who had been born elsewhere and were currently citizens or permanent residents – a radical view only thirty years after Japanese internment in the United States.

Prince aimed to produce a show that was a synthesis of American and Asian aesthetics and ideals, and he grounded that belief in the embodied Asian-American actor – a notion that eliminates the unique position of Asian-American as neither Asian or fully American.

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<sup>108</sup> Letter to Harold Prince from F.V. deDiego at Actors’ Equity Association, April 11, 1974, Harold Prince Papers, Box 165, Folder 8, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

<sup>109</sup> *The New Yorker*, “Talk of the Town,” March 22, 1976.



As Karen Shimakawa illustrates in *National Abjection: The Asian American Body on Stage*, Asian Americans are never fully Americans: even though the complicated process of creating an Asian American identity came from the community, it was necessitated by exclusion of those of Asian descent from the national project. She writes, “*Asian American* is a category both produced through and in reaction to abjection within and by dominant U.S. culture – a discursive formation that both describes a demographic category and calls that category into being.”<sup>110</sup>

Even though subsequent productions have seen these roles occupied by non-American actors of Asian descent, Prince viewed *Pacific Overtures* as an *Asian-American* show, requiring actors who understood this identity from within their own experience offstage. This way of thinking is in line with contemporary Asian-American playwrights and actors. Playwright Frank Chin wrote in *Bridge*, an Asian-American publication in New York City, that “There is no cultural, psychological Bridge between me and the Chinese immigrants. There are [only] social, racist pressures that connect us.”<sup>111</sup> Chin’s extreme views were highly controversial, but the sentiment that Asian-Americans were neither Asian nor white American, but their own unique identity, continued to be perpetuated by Asian Americans and Asian-American theatre companies.<sup>112</sup> Ironically, this view contradicts Prince’s notion that Asian America could be represented by fusing kabuki and Broadway. Chin, for example, believed that a completely new type of theatre would be needed, rather than a theatre derived from pre-existing American or Asian forms. Such a theatre would also need to be created by Asian Americans, something still almost impossible on the commercial Broadway stage.

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<sup>110</sup> Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Maeda, *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*, 92.

<sup>112</sup> Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 54-56.

The use of Asian-American actors was not just important for Prince, but also for Actors' Equity. Nationally-defined unions exist to advocate for the employment and well-being of domestic workers, and Actors' Equity is no exception. While Equity would have been fine with Prince hiring an actor with a different (non-Asian) minority background, they showed concern when Prince was forced to turn to Asian actors and performers from outside the country.

The conflict with the union occurred when Prince attempted to hire Isao Soto, a Japanese citizen who would eventually fill the role of Kayama. Soto had flown to the United States to audition after missing the audition in Tokyo.<sup>113</sup> Desperate for qualified Asian actors, Prince had begun looking outside of Asian Americans and wanted to hire Soto. Still, Equity and the State Department first made him prove that he had tried to hire an American for the role. He protested, "To get Isao, we had a devil of a time with Immigration and with Equity. When they looked over our files, though, they saw we'd left no stone unturned in hunting for *Asian-Americans*."<sup>114</sup> Even after getting approval for Soto, there were some difficulties in getting his visa renewed after its expiration. In a letter to the State Department, Soto's lawyer wrote, "The alien is a talented actor of the Japanese Kabuki theater."<sup>115</sup> Rather than emphasizing the need for Broadway actors of Asian descent, the more persuasive argument in this context hinged on Soto's ability to bring a "Japanese" perspective. This argument would have only been valid for shows with non-white themes, which further highlights the barriers non-white, and in this case, foreign, actors face in trying to breakthrough to Broadway. Soto would not have been considered for a part that wasn't specifically Japanese. Overall, though, Prince's emphasis on Asian-

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<sup>113</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," March 22, 1976.

<sup>114</sup> *The New Yorker*, "Talk of the Town," March 22, 1976.

<sup>115</sup> Immigration paperwork and letter from Albert C. Lum to the United States Department of Labor, September 28, 1976, Harold Prince Papers, Box 165, Folder 7, New York Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

*American* actors had the practical effect of not needing the approval from Actors' Equity or the State Department for most of his casting choices.

## Conclusion

Both the Asian-American community and the Japanese community responded positively to *Pacific Overtures* and found it to be an important breakthrough for Asian representation on the overwhelmingly white Broadway stage. On September 26, 1976, the Pacific/Asian-American Coalition of New York awarded "The Producers and Cast of 'Pacific Overtures'" an award for "improving the image of Asian-American performing arts."<sup>116</sup> Even as the Asian-American community focused primarily on the cast of the show, ie, the Asian Americans actors with Broadway jobs, Prince received some praise for his decision to mount a show with an all Asian cast. In the review for the show from the New York-based Asian-American magazine *Bridge*, David Oyama wrote, "One must respect [Prince's] courage in putting this show together and breaking new ground." Oyama believed that *Pacific Overtures* provided an opportunity to show that Asian American actors "can carry a Broadway show alone – and in fine style."<sup>117</sup> Representation on the Broadway stage proved of primary importance for Oyama.

The show was still a creation of white, orientalist imaginations, and Oyama did not praise Prince, Weidman, and Sondheim's endeavor unequivocally. He continued, "Since I will have some uncomplimentary things to say about his production as well, one might as well give credit first where credit is due."<sup>118</sup> Oyama complained that though the show purported to be derived

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<sup>116</sup> Plaque from the Pacific/Asian-American Coalition of New York, Harold Prince Papers, Box 164, Folder 10, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>117</sup> David Oyama, "Pacific Overtures," *Bridge: An Asian American Perspective*, 4, no 3 (July 1976): 46.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

from kabuki and noh, the result resembles that of Broadway and the Western gaze. He wished that Sondheim and Prince “had only gone all the way and gotten more Asian or Asian American input into the writing and directing of the show as well as into the acting.”<sup>119</sup> Oyama understood the necessity of having big names in the creative team for such a risky show, but he believed that rather than consulting Weidman, a white “expert” on Japan, they should have gone one step further and collaborated with someone who was actually Japanese. They did “consult,” but consultation does not imply an equality of creative input that collaboration does. Perhaps if they had chosen a Japanese co-director, the show would have been less problematic.

In the end, the interplay and support between *Pacific Overtures* and the Asian American theatre company continues to have a lasting impact on Asian and Asian American representation in the theatre, providing an opportunity for interaction and interplay between Asian American theaters and more mainstream Broadway productions. The review of the show in *Bridge* contains a post-script:

Here in New York, one of the most considerable benefits of ‘Pacific Overtures’[sic] run on Broadway has been the new interest and sense of possibility it has stirred among young Asian Americans headed for a career in the theater – whether in acting, writing, directing, or designing. Things seem to be happening. Mako himself is conducting a workshop for beginning actors...at the Basement Workshop.<sup>120</sup>

Mako, both with this workshop and with East West Players, used the opportunity created by Weidman and Prince to break the cycle of underrepresentation of Asians in the media. He worked to train more Asian and Asian American artists, especially actors, and give them opportunities to learn the skills to step into the Broadway roles that Prince and Sondheim had provided.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. 47.

*Pacific Overtures* continues, due to the legacy of its white creators, to be one of the best opportunities for actors of Asian descent, as diversity continues to be a struggle in both stories and casting on the Broadway and off-Broadway stages. Forty years later, Jay Kuo's *Allegiance* (2015) became the first Broadway show with an all-Asian creative team. George Takei, on whose childhood *Allegiance* was based, starred in the show, and he followed that role with the Classic Stage Company's off-Broadway revival of *Pacific Overtures*, playing the Reciter. *Allegiance*'s second run was with the East West Players in the spring of 2018. Prince and Sondheim's most idiosyncratic show has continued to bolster and support Asian Americans in the United States, while still representing Asianness as "other."

## Chapter 3

### *Follies* (1971): Performers as Antagonistic Collaborator

In 1971, Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim opened their first musical about the theatre business, *Follies*. Unlike traditional backstage musicals, the plot of the show did not concern the making of a new production, but the memory of past productions and what happens after the curtain falls and the theatre closes. *Follies* was about women who had left show business returning for one night, and the original cast had similarly left show business years earlier and were returning for this production. Nevertheless, since the 1985 in concert version at Avery Fisher Hall, revivals of *Follies* have moved away from the content, context, and complex verisimilitude of the original production. The 1985 production as well as other major revivals, including the 1998 Paper Mill Playhouse Production, Broadway revivals in 2001 and 2011, and a recent West End revival in 2017 turned toward casting practices that celebrated well-known divas and actresses, such as Bernadette Peters, Donna McKechnie, and Imelda Staunton, and such casting significantly altered the themes from the original production.<sup>1</sup> By revisiting the creative choices of the 1971 show, including casting, set and lighting design, and staging and choreography, as well as emphasizing the antagonistic collaboration between Prince and

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<sup>1</sup> The 1987 London production, the first major revival, used a new book that attempted to be more optimistic and relevant; neither Sondheim nor James Goldman were happy with the result, and all subsequent revivals reverted back to the original script.

Sondheim, this chapter aims to contextualize the gendered implications of the production during the early 1970s, in particular, discourse around aging and women.<sup>2</sup>

*Follies* tells the tale of what happens when actresses “age out” of show business. The action consists almost entirely of introduction and exposition, revolving around a reunion of *Follies* girls, thirty years or more after they left the stage, most for marriage and more “normal” lives. Even though the sliver of plot concerns a long-ago love triangle, most of the show consists of solo numbers taken in turn by the cast of thirteen older women, who sing their songs of yesteryear, sometimes accompanied in song or dance by the “ghosts” of their younger selves (played by young women). In musical style, the score alternates between pastiche songs written in older Broadway styles, with the women performing their own numbers from the *Follies*, and book songs composed in Sondheim’s signature style (i.e. dissonant harmonies, extended and complex melodies, witty internal rhymes), which feature the four main characters mulling over present and past relationships.

*Follies* begins with an elided prologue and overture, which, rather than presenting the main themes of the show, provides a backdrop against which the large cast of characters arrive at the party and briefly introduce themselves. The older women then take their places on the top of a staircase and reenact the famous *Follies* descent to the Irving Berlin-style song “Beautiful Girls.” The book numbers, written in Sondheim’s own musical voice follow with “Don’t Look at Me” and “Waiting for the Girls Upstairs.” These two songs explain the complex backstory

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<sup>2</sup> Men and aging are also a part, though a smaller part, of the show. However, I am choosing only to focus on women because aging for men presents itself quite differently. For example, women often age out of show business and then make a comeback, whereas age does present such a barrier for men. In Hollywood, leading men in their 40s and 50s are often romantically paired with women in their 20s, making it more difficult for older women to get leading roles. The pressure of aging for men often comes from the denial of financial success or from the internal feelings of a lost youth, rather than the pressure to look younger and more attractive or feelings of invisibility.

between the two main couples, Sally/Buddy and Phyllis/Ben. By alternating between the past and present, the songs and scenes reveal to the audience that Ben cheated on Phyllis with Sally, but ultimately, chose to marry Phyllis. Thirty years later, Sally, discontent in her marriage, idealizes her brief relationship with Ben, while Buddy cheats on Sally with a younger woman. Unhappy in turn, Phyllis and Ben barely tolerate one another and both continue to stray from their marriage. In between the various book numbers, the other eleven women at the reunion perform numbers that they had once performed in the *Follies*, still in their dresses for the party, but often copied by past versions of themselves in black and white *Follies* costumes. The show's extended finale, the "Loveland" sequence, is a dream-like, multi-part, surrealistic mini-*Follies* where Buddy, Sally, Phyllis, and Ben each perform a pastiche number that expresses their inner longings, disappointments, and psychological issues: in Ben's case, leading to a complete breakdown that triggers the end of the show. *Follies* ends with everyone going back to their lives, no one making any real changes to their own unhappiness.<sup>3</sup>

Revivals of *Follies* that feature famous divas and working actresses fail to tap the power of the original cast in its 1970s moment, a context where the actresses, like the characters they portrayed, personified the themes of the show. In the Broadway seasons prior to *Follies*, older women and their stories began to take center stage, such as *Mame* (1966), *Hello, Dolly!* (1964), *Applause* (1969), and *Coco* (1969). Maya Cantu, in an article on 1969 shows, argues, "Like *Coco* and *Applause*, *Follies* makes explicit connections between the aging body of the diva, and the

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<sup>3</sup> This open ending calls to mind Elinor Fuchs explanation of age as alienation, specifically Brecht's alienation. She says, "Brecht goes beyond life course analysis in his scheme of epic theatre, for this chart – not as drama but as a gerontological prescription – is telling us, telling me, that there is no finish. The epic theatre of estrangement shrugs off the empathic scene of recognition to tell me that Brecht's characters are specks in an unending process and that every point of recognition becomes only a new illusion in an ever-evolving dialectic. The only way to break the grip of decline ideology, he might say, is to stop seeking that state so valued in pop psychology discourse – closure." By avoiding closure at the end of the musical, *Follies* evokes the politics of epic theatre, as well as the realities of aging as described by Fuchs. See Elinor Fuchs, "Rehearsing Age," *Modern Drama* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 153.



aging Broadway musical.”<sup>4</sup> Although all three shows mix cynicism and a critical nostalgia, *Follies* diverges from the earlier two in that it is *not* about the aging diva – the show is about the aging chorus girl, the woman who left show business in her twenties—by choice or by force—to pursue a different life. Unlike the diva, the women of *Follies* did not continue to practice their craft, but instead retired, and their bodies retired with them. These are average women. Prince and Sondheim’s show troubled the simplistic, normative narratives by providing a public stage for the “average” (or at least not superstar) woman.

These casting decisions led Martin Gottfried, in his review for *Women’s Wear Daily*, to write,

As for the company, the casting could be looked upon as cruel...[they] have not been hired just for the sake of camp. They are there to embody the point of ‘Follies’ in their very presence. The audience knows these people from its own past, remembers their faces from a performing youth. Now they are aging and we see them aged, and ‘Follies’ is about aging and age. In a sense, these actors are being used as people rather than as performers, but the morality of this usage is another subject. The effect is achieved and it is because of their talent even more than the memory of them.<sup>5</sup>

Gottfried’s review focused on the complicated web of meaning being enacted by the performers on stage. These were the women that time forgot, both in the show and out, a casting which created a unique opportunity to explore the middle-aged woman, an unusual subject for a genre more often focused on youth, beauty, and the marriage plot. But as Gottfried noticed, more than just the memory of these women made the show successful: *Follies* also relied on their talent in performance.

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<sup>4</sup> Maya Cantu, “‘The World Belongs to the Young?’: Age and the Golden Age Diva in *Coco* (1969) and *Applause* (1970),” *Studies in Musical Theatre* 12, no. 1 (2018): 38.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Gottfried, Review of *Follies*, *Women’s Wear Daily*, April 5, 1971.

Research surrounding *Follies* has tended to focus on nostalgia and loss rather than on aging and the inevitable passage of time as expressed in the aging female body. No scholarship on the show deals with its themes in an explicitly feminist light. James Fisher's article in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook* explores the relationship between the show and feelings of disappointment and loss in the Nixon era.<sup>6</sup> His analysis contextualizes the despondent representation of marriage, the family, and the American dream found within the four main characters. Olaf Jubin's 2012 article in *Studies in Musical Theatre* uses nostalgia as a basis for comparing the original *Follies* production and the 1987 London revisions, concluding that "a show that so mercilessly exposes the follies of sentimentally yearning for the happiness of a former time or place, itself has become a prominent victim of the very thing it takes as its subject."<sup>7</sup> In the *Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies* (2014), Robert Lawson-Peebles uses musical pastiche and historical and modern performance to underlay observations concerning nostalgia's changing contexts.<sup>8</sup> Even as each author focuses on nostalgia, they present a variety of views and methodologies to understand the show through this particular lens.

This framing is not unique to scholars. Many reviews of the original production centered around the idea of nostalgia, especially in connection with the concurrently running *No, No, Nanette*, a revival of the 1925 musical by Vincent Youmans, Otto Harbach, and Irving Caesar. Donald Saddler, the show's choreographer, has often been credited with bringing tap dance back

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<sup>6</sup> James Fisher, "Nixon's America and *Follies*: Reappraising a Musical Theatre Classic," in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 1997): 69-84.

<sup>7</sup> Olaf Jubin, "There's No Escaping Nostalgia: The 1987 London Version of *Follies*," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 6, no. 2 (September 2012): 199-212.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Lawson-Peebles, "*Follies*: Musical Pastiche and Cultural Archaeology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, ed. Robert Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 384-403.

to Broadway through this show, where it had been largely absent for three decades.<sup>9</sup> *No, No, Nanette* also featured the sixty-two-year-old Hollywood musical star Ruby Keeler who, like the many of the actors in *Follies*, was making a comeback for this one show.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the pessimistic *Follies*, *Nanette* was a celebration and recreation of an idealized past, one that only ever existed in the popular imaginary. Reviews of both shows pitted *No, No, Nanette* and *Follies* against one another as providing a positive or negative interpretation of nostalgia.<sup>11</sup>

But as Gottfried's review noted, *Follies* was less about nostalgia and the past and more about aging and the present. The analytical lens of nostalgia cannot account for the focus on both the past *and* present found in *Follies* and, hence, leaves much of the show's meaning—especially its perhaps unintentional address of contemporary feminist issues—unexplored. Nostalgia also implies a longing for an idealized past, but the lessons of *Follies* illustrate that the naiveté of youth creates the hardships of the present. Indeed, the persistent scholarly focus on nostalgia has missed the actual thrust of the show and undercut the critical and recuperative work *Follies* did in 1971 around important, still urgent feminist issues. This reading of *Follies* restores the show's focus on the present lives of older women.

As with *Sweeney Todd*, where Sondheim's thriller became a critique of neoliberal ideals (see chapter 1), antagonistic collaboration between Prince and Sondheim turned the original murder mystery plot into a more interesting and relevant exploration of what it means when women age. Prince and co-director Michael Bennett's vision for *Follies* challenged societal

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Seibert, *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 375-376.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, Ruby Keeler was originally slated to star in the stage musical *Whoopie!* (1928), but was replaced before the opening by Ethel Shutta, the original Hattie Walker in *Follies*.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on *No, No, Nanette*, see Don Dunn, *The Making of No, No, Nanette* (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1972).

beliefs around the idealization of feminine youth in a nostalgic past. This exploration occurred primarily through an embodied elision of character and actress. Creative collaboration among the show's designers, Prince, and Bennett further explored the theme of feminine aging in the physical aspects of the production.

In this light, *Follies* in its original context contributed to important feminist discussions of the time, a hinge moment in the feminist movement similar to the placement of Sondheim and Prince's *Company* at a crux of gay history in America (discussed in chapter 4). Popular writers like Susan Sontag and Simone de Beauvoir published critiques on aging women in society, critiques that resonate in *Follies* in a feminist and political way. Using these critiques, this chapter analyzes the original *Follies* – casting, staging, choreography, design, performance – to contextualize the production and its reception and restore critical and feminist engagement with the personal and political implications of the show.

### **Development of *Follies* from thriller to art**

Bookwriter James Goldman and Sondheim's idea for *Follies* contained none of the flashbacks and ghost-like figures that would come to define the show. Originally titled *The Girls Upstairs*, Goldman and Sondheim conceived the show as a tense thriller where the plot hinged on the inevitability of a murder. According to Prince, it was “a totally realistic musical about two girls and the two fellows they had married thirty years earlier, meeting at a real party in a real theatre, with real decorations and real food and drink.”<sup>12</sup> Very little besides the setting and the

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<sup>12</sup> Harold Prince, *Contradictions: Notes on Twenty-six Years in the Theatre* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1974), 158.

names of the characters remained in the final show.<sup>13</sup> The *Follies* book went through some twenty-five drafts over six years before finally reaching Broadway, featuring extensive revisions and a number of songs that were never used.<sup>14</sup>

Harold Prince did not contribute to these first drafts, as he was not the writers' first choice to produce and direct *Follies*. Sondheim and Goldman initially approached Leland Hayward and David Merrick to produce the show in 1967 under the title *The Girl Upstairs*. After Hayward and Merrick showed little interest, the script was offered to producer Stuart Ostrow and director Joseph Hardy in 1969: they similarly declined.<sup>15</sup> Sondheim then approached Prince, who agreed to produce *The Girls Upstairs* only if Sondheim would do *Company* with him first. *Follies* was the promise that brought Sondheim to *Company*. Sondheim agreed, and Prince joined *Follies* as both producer and director.

As with *Sweeney Todd*, Prince was originally reluctant to work on *Follies*: he did not find the original book all that compelling and claimed in 1989, "I wasn't remotely interested until I started to wonder about where the characters come from."<sup>16</sup> Even though Goldman and Sondheim had been working on *Follies* independently, as soon as Prince signed on, he wanted creative input. He observed, "My needs as an artist require involvement at an early time. That can be exceedingly annoying to certain writers...*Follies* was a perfect collaboration, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Script RM 5870 *The Girls Upstairs*, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center, New York, New York.

<sup>14</sup> At least six different scripts are available at the NYPLPA, but they are scattered around the archives, including in the script section, the Harold Prince papers, the Ruth Mitchell papers, and the Boris Aronson papers.

<sup>15</sup> Ted Chapin, *Everything was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2003), xxii-xxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 93.

most fun. Sure I liked being part author.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike other directors, Prince demands to be part of the creative process of writing, not just staging, the text. Prince called for drastic changes to *Follies* to fit his need for the show to have an important and relevant theme. He began to rework the book, inspired by a photograph in the November 7, 1960 issue of *Life* magazine featuring Gloria Swanson, dressed in a black evening gown with a red feather boa standing in front of the rubble of the Roxy theatre.<sup>18</sup>



**Figure 3.1** Gloria Swanson in front of the rubble of the Roxy theatre from *Life* magazine. This photo would inspire Prince's vision for *Follies*.

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Harburg, *The Broadway Musical: Collaboration in Commerce and Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 137.

<sup>18</sup> Prince, *Contradictions*, 158.

For Prince, this photo became the “metaphor” for *Follies* as a Prince-Sondheim-Goldman collaboration: the show would explore the rubble and ruins of the present in contrast with the glamour of an imagined past. The unifying theme would be the inevitability of change and the costs of refusing to confront the passage of time. The aged Swanson poses as if promoting her next Hollywood film; her glamorous clothing and stance contrast with the half-demolished Roxy Theatre behind her, as if defying time and social conventions. A giant movie palace in New York City’s theatre district, the Roxy showed films, sometimes complemented by live performances, from 1927 to 1960 and stood for the glitz and decadence of the Golden Age of Hollywood and Broadway. In the photo, the Roxy becomes a representative casualty of the decimation of the Times Square area, the Hollywood studio era, and the “Golden Age” Broadway musical. The short paragraph under the photo highlights Swanson’s career in relationship with the Roxy, including the fact that she starred in the first movie shown in the Roxy, *The Love of Sunya* (1927).

The photograph simultaneously shows the past – through Swanson’s clothing and pose – and time’s inevitable destruction of that past – through Swanson’s aged body and the rubble of the Roxy. Prince used this metaphor of time and decay to take Sondheim and Goldman’s thriller about a showgirl reunion and turn it into a live version of this photograph. The caption under the picture said, “A wry and witty woman, [Swanson] remarked, ‘Wherever I go I hear people saying, “Is it?” or “Isn’t it?” and once I heard a man say, “It is. It is the original”...Perhaps she also heard the man who said loudly, ‘It is, and looking better than ever.’”<sup>19</sup> As the Roxy became rubble, Swanson retained her glamour and presence; she aged, yes, but she remained a star. Yet

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<sup>19</sup> “Swan Song for a Famous Theater,” *Life Magazine*, November 7, 1960: 46.

the man's comment also underscored a deeper truth about being an actress – Swanson is an “it,” not a “she.” Swanson's persona had elevated itself to something larger than a real person. Even more telling, the man responded to Swanson's looks alone. While his comment reinforces a nostalgia for the glamour of Hollywood past, it also perhaps hints at surprise that Swanson could still be beautiful, and in this case, even more beautiful, with age. For women, aging and beauty are rarely societally compatible, but Swanson's style and class allowed her to continue to be sexualized by a passing male gaze, even in her sixties.

Prince used Swanson's history as inspiration for *Follies* as a production where women's bodies mattered profoundly to the meaning of a story. By this time, Swanson herself had become an emblem of entertainment past as Norma Desmond, the lead in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Through the film, Desmond became a figure of dual representation, as the character and the actress elided in the minds of audiences. Desmond is an aged actress who failed to transition from silent films to the talkies, partially due to age. The film's story depicts how she tries and fails to make a comeback, ending in tragedy. Swanson's life closely paralleled Desmond, the character she embodied, down to both of them having been directed in silent films by Cecil B. DeMille. For audiences watching *Sunset Boulevard*, the line between Norma Desmond and Gloria Swanson was blurred, creating a doubling effect and strengthening the film's emotional content and historical resonance. Prince used this “Norma Desmond Effect” to its full extent in the original production of *Follies*, though unlike Swanson/Desmond, the women in the show and in real life enjoyed only moderate success in their prime and returned to the stage for a moment of reminiscence and re-lived stardom.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Though revivals use big stars like Swanson, that is not the comparison to make here, as they are big stars playing chorus girls, whereas Swanson played another big star.



## The Norma Desmond Effect

The Norma Desmond effect creates an especially strong tie between fiction and reality within embodied art forms such as musical theatre. The muddling of character and performer persona by audiences has been discussed by scholars such as Philip Auslander, but the blurring of boundaries as found in *Sunset Boulevard* and *Follies* presents differently than the persona of a specific celebrity.<sup>21</sup> Unlike performer personae, the characters are separated from the actresses, they have different names and stories, but the similarities pull them together, making it difficult or even impossible for audiences with preexisting knowledge of the actress to disentangle the two while watching the original production. The effect further blurs the already indistinct boundaries in theatre between the representation of an act and the performing of the act itself. As noted by scholar Rebecca Schneider, “For theatre, while composed of and in time, is also a medium of...the mimetic, the copy, the double, the gaffe – all give to interruption and remix.”<sup>22</sup> The original cast of *Follies* embodied this overlap of the performer and the performance in a variety of ways, inflected by each performer’s biography and featured number.

The women in *Follies*, with the exception of Justine Johnston who played the elderly Heidi Schiller, were all about the same age or older than the characters they were performing on stage. Most of the actresses, like their characters, had not performed regularly for ten or more years, and would exist only as their younger selves in the memories of the audience. Table 1

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<sup>21</sup> See Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 89.

shows the age difference between each actress and the character they played along with the date of their last significant performance.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 2**

***Follies* original cast: comparison of performer and character ages and last known major appearance by performers**

(Ages of characters determined by textual evidence or visual clues, such as pictures of the women’s sashes that list the year they were in the *Follies*.)

<b>Actress’s Name (Character’s Name or Song)</b>	<b>Age Difference</b>	<b>Date of Last Significant Performance</b>
Ethel Shutta (“Broadway Baby”)	+12	1930 (Broadway)
Justine Johnston (“One More Kiss”)	-22	1940s (Tours)
Alexis Smith (Phyllis Rogers)	+1	1959 (Film)
Dorothy Collins (Sally Durant)	-4	1961 (TV)
Mary McCarty (“Who’s That Woman?”)	-4	1961 (Film)
Yvonne de Carlo (“I’m Still Here”)	-3	1966 (TV)
Fifi D’Orsay (“Ah, Paris!”)	-2	1944 (Film)
Helon Blount (Dee Dee West)	-7	1965 (Broadway)
Ethel Barrymore Colt (Christine Donovan)	0	1944 (Broadway)
Sonja Levkova (Sandra Crane)	0	1951 (Film)

As shown, the actresses in the show were generally close in age to their characters. Most of them had not been engaged in show business for ten years or more. Yvonne de Carlo, recognizable by the audience for her television role in *The Munsters*, had most recently been

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<sup>23</sup> Significant here means roles for which they might be recognized by the audiences – starring or featured roles, hosting a television show, etc. Small, walk-on roles were not counted in making this chart.

employed; Carlotta Campion, her character, was also the only Follies girl to have a continual acting career. Like their characters, most of them had aged out of showbusiness, either by choice or by force. For example, Ethel Shutta and Fifi D’Orsay had both actually been Follies girls in the 1910s and 1920s before moving on. The one exception, Justine Johnston playing the elderly Heidi Schiller, occurs out of necessity, as the operatic number “One More Kiss” would have been too difficult for a woman in her seventies to sing eight times a week (discussed more below).

In short, most all the actresses in the original production were simultaneously playing a character and playing themselves. Media articles consistently primed audience memories of the actresses by juxtaposing photos of the actresses in the show with headshots from their pasts.



Figure 3.2 Advertisement from *The Chicago Sun Times*, reminding audiences of the performing pasts of the actresses in *Follies*.

Such articles answered in advance audience questions as to who these actresses were and encouraged a view of the show that blurred the lines between fact and fiction, between story and

reality. Moreover, these advertisements and feature articles demonstrate that audiences needed such reminders: these women's careers had stalled.

### **Embodying the Past: The Ghosts**

The aging body of an actress comes into deeper focus in the presence of their younger selves. Wilder, with the resource of film, could insert images of a young Swanson into *Sunset Boulevard*. Photographs found around Desmond's mansion, as well as the silent film Desmond and Joe watch – *Queen Kelly* (1929) – present Swanson from early in her career. Such juxtapositions proved more difficult for the makers of *Follies*. Actual younger selves were impossible in the context of live theater. However, this apparent limitation proved advantageous for *Follies*: Sondheim and Bennett chose to double cast the featured and leading female roles, writing and choreographing for the younger and the older, having them perform similar moves and even sing duets together.<sup>24</sup> The simultaneity of young and old performance enhanced the disparities between young and old bodies with tremendous immediacy in the flesh-and-blood context of live theatre.

Giving flesh to the show's ghosts was Prince's idea, as Sondheim noted:

Before Hal became involved we never had the past embodied on the stage. We had the principals falling into the past and talking and behaving as though they were twenty years old – they were middle-aged people sort of playing a charade. Hal said that he thought we were assiduously avoiding the use of flashbacks... Through a series of discussions, Jim got an idea to utilize the flash back images. So during the summer of 1970, the book changed drastically with the addition of the young people, the shadows, the ghosts.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Only Buddy and Ben among the male characters have younger doubles.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Ilson, *Harold Prince: From Pajama Game to Phantom of the Opera* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 181.

Sondheim's reference to the ghosts as "flashbacks" fails to account for the complicated and unique dramaturgy of *Follies*. Through the use of similar choreography and vocal duets and quartets, youth and age are embodied on stage simultaneously. Simultaneity opens the show up to performance of/as memory, questioning the veracity of nostalgia, and as Rebecca Schneider explains, creating the "mythic" through highlighting the impossibility of the "original."<sup>26</sup> By folding time, the show presents the past not as something gone, but something that, as (mis)remembered, continues to be present and affect our present lives. *Follies* deals not in flashback but in juxtaposition, staging the then and the now at the same time, presenting what once was and what inevitably will be.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than focusing on the past, the ghosts haunted the present.<sup>28</sup> They provided comparisons between the aged and aging female body and the cultural valorization of youth. Through this comparison, they forefronted the tragedy of time and either the present experience or future inevitability of aging for the audience. *Follies* insisted that the past is gone, never to return; decisions made cannot be undone. In consolation and despair, the youth and beauty of the *Follies*' girls has turned into the wisdom and cynicism of middle-aged and old women. By show's end, the four main characters (and, perhaps, the audience) have learned this lesson.

Prince conceived of this effect—"I asked for young counterparts to the middle-aged couples"—but his fellow collaborators, Sondheim and Goldman, as well as co-director/choreographer Michael Bennett, set designer Boris Aronson, costume designer Florence

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<sup>26</sup> Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 100.

<sup>27</sup> The recent musical, *Fun Home* (2015), uses a similar technique of having the main character present at different ages simultaneously.

<sup>28</sup> This haunting becomes a theatrical production of Marvin Carlson's theory of "haunting" in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

Klotz, and lighting designer Tharon Musser, were tasked with making it work.<sup>29</sup> They had to create a production that would present multiple time lines at once without the audience becoming confused. The folding of time required creative staging, utilizing every possible resource to make the story both fragmented and coherent.

Set designer Boris Aronson transformed the setting from a realistic to a more abstract and suggestive theatre. The bare and abstract stage gave the other collaborators more room to work and created an atmosphere where chronological fantasy could be performed. Prince described Aronson's work:

Metaphoric rubble becomes visual rubble...Is the theatre torn down? Will it be torn down tomorrow? Or was it torn down yesterday? Keep it ambiguous, a setting for the sort of introspection that reunions precipitate, a mood in which to lose sight of the present, to look back on the past.<sup>30</sup>

Aronson traded realistic furniture or rooms for a suggestive "theatre" of rubble, resembling the Roxy from *Life* magazine. The stage was largely bare, lacking conventional seating, with Sally and Ben sitting on boulders to sing "Too Many Mornings" and a wrought-iron staircase to reenact "The Girls Upstairs."

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<sup>29</sup> Ilson, *Harold Prince*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Ilson, *Harold Prince*, 180.



**Figure 3.3** Diorama created by Boris Aronson for the party scenes, from the Boris Aronson Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Color and light were also important aspects of transforming *The Girls Upstairs* into *Follies*. In order to differentiate between the past and the present, costume designer Florence Klotz used color for the present-day characters and black and white for the Follies ghosts. This use of color reinforced the two dimensions of time being represented (already evident in the bodies of the performers). During the final “Follies” sequence, when the past dominates the present, the entire stage is flooded with color, including the ghosts’ costumes. This use of color jars the audience and signals the main characters’ crossing of the blurry line between memory and fantasy. Though the past up to this point had been represented solely as (assumed) accurate memories, the “Loveland” sequence begins with a large production number that may or may not be a memory, questioning the validity of memories, even those that are embodied on stage.

Lighting proved essential for the simultaneous representation of different time periods on stage. Lighting designer Tharon Musser played an important role in the success of the production. Sondheim remembers:

When we first presented the show to Hal Prince to persuade him to direct it, he asked, ‘Where are the flashbacks?’ We explained the directorial problem – to a director, no less – and he quickly explained back that, as in a ballet, every scene could be conjured up in a pool of light...He went so far as to suggest that we write flashback scenes on the blank facing pages of each contemporary scene...and to think of them as overlapping, even simultaneous.<sup>31</sup>

Prince himself credits Musser for the idea, helping him overcome the perceived limitations of the stage. The lighting enabled a coherent but radical fragmentation of time. For example, during “The Girls Upstairs,” a number that involves alternating between the two younger main couples and the two older main couples, spotlights and fades were used to draw the audience’s attention to either the young or the old couples, depending on which was singing.

Musser’s lighting scheme pushed against the limits of available theatrical technologies in 1971. During her next project with Bennett, *A Chorus Line* (1975), she would introduce computer-controlled lighting systems, *Follies* relied upon manual lighting. She remembered,

[*Follies*] was difficult to do because we were still on old resistance boards – control-wise – in those days. It was a normal set-up for a musical, control-wise, and there were three guys running it because you always had one guy on two boards...If we’d had the boards that we have now, the computerized boards, it would have been no problem at all for *one* man.<sup>32</sup>

Resistance boards, also called piano boards because they constituted a large box with a row a “keys” i.e. dimmers, could be preset into a variety of lighting combinations but had to be controlled manually. For *Follies*, Musser used six separate lighting boards, run by three different

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 200.

<sup>32</sup> Oral History for Southern Methodist University, March 25, 1986, pg. 50, Tharon Musser Collection, Box 74, Folder 5, NYPLPA.



people who had to work perfectly in sync with each change in order to enable the audience to follow the various timelines of the story. Utilizing lighting to shift between time periods would become a common theatrical approach in subsequent years—as in *A Chorus Line* and Prince’s *Evita* (1979), but it was new in *Follies*. With limited technology, Musser’s approach brought innovative creativity, supported by much manpower, to support Prince’s vision of the show.

All the components of *Follies* – lights, costumes, set, script, choreography, performers, direction, music – came together to create a unified theme around age and the passing of time. Prince’s new vision for the show changed the overall theme, but Sondheim’s interest and keen ability to imitate earlier styles and composers, as well as his love of tension and character, worked antagonistically to make a production that seamlessly incorporated both entertainment and critique. The structure of *Follies* contended with the realities of the female aging body in ways that had previously gone unexplored on the Broadway stage. Yet, these realities were being contended with in feminist literature about women and aging, making the show both relevant and political, providing what Prince saw as lacking in Sondheim and Goldman’s original script.



Figure 3.4 An old resistance board, about 4.5 feet tall. For more, see <https://blog.etccconnect.com/2017/06/monthly-museum-piano-boards/>

### Concurrent Feminist Literature on Aging

Chorus girls, such as those present in *Follies*, have been an index of beauty and femininity for decades: indeed, the *Ziegfeld Follies* (1907-1925, 1927, 1931) generated new ideals around the white, youth-centered notion of the “American girl.”<sup>33</sup> Even as the musical revue died out in the 1930s, the image of the Follies chorus girl continued through movies,

<sup>33</sup> Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 2.

television, and photographs. This idealized image represented a number of cultural norms against which second-wave feminists fought, including the infantilization of women and glorification of youth, the sexual objectification and patriarchal control of the female body, and the dismissal of older women as possible romantic partners and competent employees. The dark, cynical tone of *Follies* presented a foil to this romantic idealization of the chorus girl that resonated with such feminist critiques. Prince's vision presented the audience with the reality of these women's lives, past and present, moving them from the category of object to that of subject. By presenting realistic (and in some cases, real) chorus girls from the past in their present form, *Follies* engaged in feminist discourses of the period around objectification and the aging female body.

Two important and enduring feminist works about age and aging, especially for women, were published during the run of *Follies*. The first was the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's 1970 book *The Coming of Age* (1972), a comprehensive study of age and aging across both space and time. De Beauvoir established herself as a leader in feminist philosophy with her 1949 publication *The Second Sex*. Her study on aging twenty years later emerged at a time when feminists in the United States were beginning to discuss the intersections between ageism and sexism.

De Beauvoir's book analyzed how aged persons are differently valued across time and geography by younger generations due to economic, political, and religious circumstances. De Beauvoir constructed the notion of age around three axes, "the biological, the psychological, and the social."<sup>34</sup> According to her, though our bodies and minds do go into physical decline, how we

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<sup>34</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), 24.

view and value the last years of our lives is determined by our individual health, our thoughts about age and aging, and how our society values and cares for the old.

De Beauvoir also noted that the decline of age “can exist only in relation to some given goal” and gave this example: “From the moment she skied less well than her younger competitors, Marielle Goitschel was obliged to look upon herself as old – old on the plane of sport.”<sup>35</sup> For *Follies* girls, as well as for many other chorus girls of the past and present, the goal is to be physically robust (able to perform) and youthfully attractive. Once these competencies fade, one is “old on the plane of” show business. The exception, of course, is the diva—a more mature female performer who defies aging and rises to a sort of wisdom and skill inaccessible to youth. But Prince, as noted, did not cast any divas in the original production. Unlike revivals of the show, where audiences flock to see their favorite celebrities perform in *Follies*’ iconic roles, the original production featured actresses who barely existed in the memories of its audiences. In short, *Follies* provided a complex example of de Beauvoir’s theory, as the physical, psychological, and social intermingled throughout the night in the bodies and presence of the performers.

The second major publication was Susan Sontag’s 1972 article for the *Saturday Review*, “The Double Standard of Aging.” Sontag wrote:

Getting older is less profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity. Society is much more permissive about aging in men...Men are ‘allowed’ to age, without penalty, in several ways that women are not.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Sontag, “The Double Standard of Aging,” *Saturday Review*, September 23, 1972, 31.

As Sontag argues, men do face ageism, but women face special hurdles as they age. One penalty particular to show business stems from the relationship between sexual attractiveness and aging. Sontag noted, “Being physically attractive counts much more in a woman’s life than in a man’s, but beauty, identified as it is for women with youthfulness, does not stand up well to age.”<sup>37</sup> Aging influences perceptions of women in two important and connected ways: first, women are judged by their physical beauty across their entire lives, and second, cultural standards of women’s beauty are in large part dependent upon the visage of youth.

De Beauvoir’s three axes of aging – biological, psychological, social – along with Sontag’s gendered double-standard provide a significant backdrop for understanding *Follies*. However, *Follies* can also be used to critique or refine De Beauvoir and Sontag. For example, *Follies* suggests that De Beauvoir’s three categories are not static; they work through, within, and against one another to create a complex, sometimes contradictory picture of aging. In the original production, representation of the aging female body was at times both brutal and celebratory, but overall, challenged normative assumptions about the proper role for older women. The older women’s bodies performed differently than younger women’s bodies, which could be read through the social as lacking or even unprofessional, yet the performers’ psychological belief in themselves, their experience, and their showmanship went against the grain of cultural expectations around aging. For many audience members and critics, watching these women perform was profoundly pleasurable and perhaps, unexpectedly so. The women’s zeal, earnestness, and hard work created one of the most prestigious musicals of the period,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

partially through the creation of a new aesthetic that celebrated both the benefits and impediments of age.

This feminist reading of *Follies* partially relies upon discourses outside of the theatrical world and heavily leans on the performers through their bodies and their pasts. In tension with this feminist reading, the male creative team ultimately chose these collaborators and controlled the majority of the elements of the show, just as producers like Florenz Ziegfeld did in the early twentieth century. This leads to questioning whether Prince served as a more “benevolent” or “progressive” version of Ziegfeld, as the show, and therefore the women, were controlled by men.<sup>38</sup> Though this paper does not definitively answer this, the rest will look more closely at the relationship between the vision of the male creators and the reality and creativity of the women performers.

### **Bolero D’Amour**

Men on the show’s creative team exercised considerable control over the women in the *Follies* cast. For Michael Bennett this control meant dictating the physical movement of bodies on stage. De Beauvoir’s physical axis defines age in part as inevitable bodily decline. Even though the type and rate of this decline varies greatly among individuals, the longer one lives, the more likely they are to have physical impairments and limitations. *Follies* did not shy away from showing these limitations, but instead, highlighted them through the show’s pervasive dramaturgy of simultaneous presentation of old and young selves.

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<sup>38</sup> One wonders what a major revival directed by a woman would look like and how it would differ from recent revivals and the original production.

An example of this is the ballroom dance number, “Bolero D’Amour,” performed side by side by two couples, older and younger embodiments of Vincent and Vanessa, comparatively minor characters in the show (neither sing solo). The two couples performed the same choreography. The older couple, however, was limited by their bodies’ loss of stamina, strength, and flexibility.

“Bolero D’Amour” is easily forgotten, as the music was not included on the original cast album; also, it can feel superfluous to the show, not moving the plot forward nor creating a feeling of theatrical wistfulness or gutsiness, as the other pastiche numbers do. Bennett remembered significant difficulty choreographing “Bolero,” but instead of curtailing his efforts and cutting the number, Bennett “fixated” on it, spending hours reworking the choreography.<sup>39</sup> One reason for his fixation might have been that the number gave the less-established Bennett a moment to add his own artistic signature without Prince or Sondheim—the “Bolero” alone in *Follies* contains no singing and staging, but only dancing. As Prince often worked in a different room, Bennett had the freedom to explore this number on his own. In the end, rather than being extra, Bennett created a dance that offers a way of understanding the show through his interpretation, one that ostensibly fears the decay of age.

Bennett, the youngest of the collaborators, struggled with *Follies*’ intense focus on aging, as well as the aged bodies of the performers themselves. Unlike other talents in musical theatre, dancing at the professional level requires a young body, and as De Beauvoir noted, one becomes “old in the plane of” dance quite early. Moreover, age affects the body more if performers have not put in the labor to keep their bodies in shape. Prince’s choice to cast out-of-practice actresses

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<sup>39</sup> Chapin, *Everything Was Possible*, 65.

exacerbated the effects of aging on the body. Throughout the process, the older performers' limitations frustrated Bennett. He grew irritated when cast members, many of whom had not danced publicly in decades, could not perform his choreography to his standards. Still, part of the frustration for Bennett came from seeing his own future. Ted Chapin, who worked as a gofer for the production, remembered:

In a weak moment [Bennett] had confessed that he hated the idea of getting older, and here he was, working on a piece dealing with the confrontation of youth and age. He was pushing the cast to do things they might not be able to do, and he hated seeing his dances not at peak form...something about watching Gene [Nelson as Buddy] work through ["The Right Girl"] in rehearsal piqued him to say in a quiet moment that no one should be surprised if on his forty-fifth birthday he were found with his wrists slashed, so real was his terror of getting old. Musical theater, he believed, was a place for the young.<sup>40</sup>

Bennett's words resonate in retrospect with his early death from AIDS at age forty-four, even as they also haunt the bodies of every older dancer who performed in *Follies*. It is through dance that the deleterious effects of aging on the body become most apparent. Although older singers can still play Dolly Gallagher in *Hello, Dolly!* or Mama Rose in *Gypsy*, dancers age out sooner as their bodies are no longer able to perform the moves they once could. Dancers also do not become divas, so there are very few career opportunities in dance as one ages.<sup>41</sup> For Bennett, for other dancers, and for some audience members, watching the dancers in *Follies* was a violation of dance as a celebration of the (youthful and strong) body and a devastating reminder of their own probable future.

A film of the original *Follies* offers glimpses of "Bolero d'Amour." Though the exact origins of this film remain unknown and the quality is poor, the footage captures Bennett's

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<sup>40</sup> Chapin, *Everything was Possible*, 93-94.

<sup>41</sup> The characters Vincent and Vanessa find one possible place – teaching at an Arthur Murray dance studio.



original choreography of “Bolero d’Amour” as performed in 1971.<sup>42</sup> Nothing in Bennett’s choreography acknowledged aging; instead, age became legible in the actual bodies of the dancers, in their execution of Bennett’s choreography and the contrast between the old and young couples. Aging was not performed in the sense of using stage make-up or deliberately acting older, as some shows do. The corporeal transformation from young to old was embodied in the contrast between the two couples. Figure 5, a still from the video, illustrates how Bennett’s ballroom choreography, when performed simultaneously by the two couples, highlighted the limitations of the aging body. The “past” Vincent and Vanessa (Michael Misita and Graciela Daniele), on the left, and their current selves (Victor Griffin and Jane Turner), on the right, perform the same deep dip. At the bottom of the dip, the younger Vanessa arched her back into almost a perfect semi-circle, whereas the older Vanessa’s back remains much straighter, Turner’s older body less flexible due to the natural weakening of ligaments, tendons, and muscles.

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<sup>42</sup> This video is from the Theatre on Film and Tape Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, but it can also be found on Youtube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTD9H-yshUg> (accessed 8/26/2018). This video compilation, along with a handful of still photographs, remain the only direct pieces of evidence of what the original *Follies* looked like.



**Figure 3.5** The younger Vanessa (left) is able to arch her back into a downward line; the older Vanessa (right) ends the move with her arm parallel to the floor.

The line created by the two women is drastically different. Daniele's line flowed almost perpendicular to the floor, showing off her flexibility. Turner's stayed parallel to the floor, her body at a right angle rather than a curve: a stiffer, less pliable effect. Even in a split second, the line created by the arm due to the inflexibility of the back reflects the differing bodies.

In a few moments of the dance, Bennett adjusted the difficulty level of specific partner moves—such as lifts—that the older couple likely could not execute because of the strength and buoyancy they required. Reasons for this inability might be the weakening of Griffin's muscles, inhibiting his ability to lift Turner, lack of balance, or general wariness around the precarity of the older human body. While Misita lifted a leaping Daniele into the air, Griffin merely turned Turner, juxtaposing what the older couple once could do with what they can do now.

Bennett himself focused on physical decay, but the older couple in this dance was not without grace, skill, and romance. Partner dancing holds a rare cultural space where public displays of affection, even between older couples, is accepted, showing the intersection between

De Beauvoir's cultural and physical axes. Although the older pair danced differently than the younger couple, their dancing still showed years of passion and practice. The bolero, often marked as an erotic dance between couples, provided a place to show the continuation of sexual interest with one's partner throughout life, into older ages. Unlike Bennett's probable view, *Follies*' "Bolero" need not be taken as tragedy, but instead can be enjoyed as a celebration of the years this couple has been dancing together. To see a man romantically and expertly dancing with an implied sexual interest in an older woman presented the audience with a radical act. As Sontag's article explained, "For most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification."<sup>43</sup> The old Vanessa suffers no such fate in *Follies*. Both the audience and the dancers themselves can derive pleasure from the continuation of sexual attraction between two people in youth and later life. Unlike the dysfunctional main couples, Vincent and Vanessa defy stereotypes around sexuality and aging. Bennett's artistic decision to simultaneously present old and young couples in the same choreography turned "Bolero d'Amour"—perhaps in defiance of Bennett's intentions—into a profound study of dance, desire, and the aging body.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," 32.

<sup>44</sup> More detailed analysis of this number is difficult if not impossible, as the video is of poor quality and cuts between multiple productions. It is also highly likely that parts of the dance itself are lost completely between these cuts.



**Figure 3.6** The younger Vincent and Vanessa (left) do a lift, while the older couple (right) do a quick turn, one of the few dissimilar points in choreography during the number.

### **Aronson's Set: A Perilous Place**

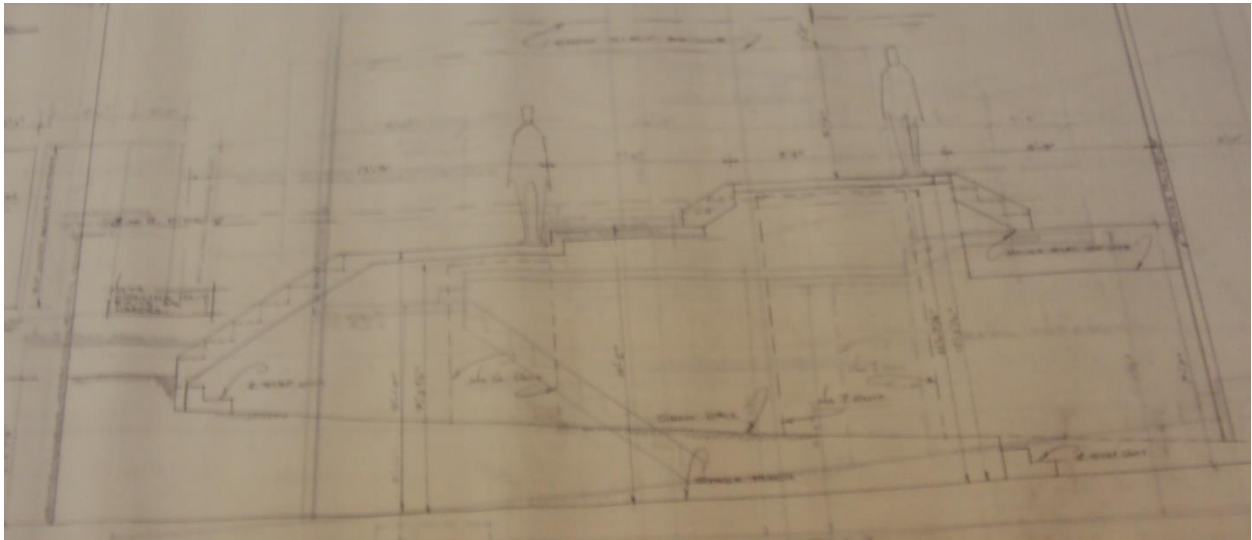
Bennett's uncompromising choreography was made more difficult for the performers by Boris Aronson's complex set designs. With numerous levels, most all raked, Aronson created a highly precarious set on which to walk, sing, and dance. The main playing area was raked at 1:16 with various smaller areas raked differently or not raked at all.<sup>45</sup> For comparison, Actors' Equity, the actors' union, currently requires special training for actors when a rake exceeds 1:24 and 1:1 equals a 45-degree angle. Today, Aronson's rake for *Follies* would have required hazard pay and specialized training.<sup>46</sup> The set also included a tall staircase stage right providing access to "the

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<sup>45</sup> Blue prints for *Follies* set, Boris Aronson Collection, Box 88, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>46</sup> Actors' Equity Association Production Guide, 2016.

girls upstairs” and numerous levels in the center of the stage to imply the stairs of the *Ziegfeld Follies*. This beautiful but complicated set served multiple purposes: it resembled the rubble of a broken down theatre; the broken floor and furniture could serve as chairs and tables; and specific areas and levels could be adjusted for theatrical moments like the staircase entrance of “Beautiful Girls” and the final “Follies Sequence,” which involved a complete transformation of the run-down theatre into a beautiful memory.



**Figure 3.7** An elevation blueprint for *Follies* set, showing the rake on the bottom, a staircase, as well as multiple levels of differing heights.

The multiple levels and steep rake created problems for everyone, even the young dancers. Chapin, while doing research for his memoir about the show, discovered that a number of the dancers later reported having injuries they never quite recovered from due to performing on the *Follies* set.<sup>47</sup> Bennett insisted that the dancers practice on the actual set, a choice that forced relocation of rehearsals to Aronson’s studio in the Bronx. Well aware of the difficulties this particular set was going to hold for the actors, Bennett knew that working there was going to

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<sup>47</sup> Chapin, *Everything Was Possible*, 78.

be the best way to get results and prevent injuries. This proved to be even more important for the older actors dancing and moving on the set.



**Figure 3.8 Michael Bennett works with the young dancers on the complicated set at Boris Aronson's studio in the Bronx.**

Navigating a precarious and complicated set only further highlighted the age disparities between a young body and an old one. This contrast was immediately exploited by *Follies*' first big number, "Beautiful Girls," a pastiche imitation of Irving Berlin's "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody" – originally written for the girls of the *Ziegfeld Follies* to enter in beautiful gowns and large headdresses.<sup>48</sup> The two songs have a number of directly audible similarities. Most obvious, both songs utilize a similar tempo and metrical style, with two big beats suggesting a walking pace. The "A" phrases of both songs have a similar melodic structure, ascending from the tonic, or main note in the key, to the fifth scale degree, where both songs end their first phrase on a

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<sup>48</sup> Popular culture derived from the film *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945) connects this number with the staircase descent. However, in the theatrical *Ziegfeld Follies*, the women entered an empty stage. For more, see Jeffrey Magee, *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theatre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 84-85.

held note. In addition, the second four bars of these opening phrases increase the melodic motion and harmonic rhythm. Even as Sondheim's harmonies are more complex than Berlin's, both employ songwriters use an oom-pah rhythm in the bass.

REFRAIN

A pret-ty girl is like a mel-o - dy That  
haunts you night and day

Figure 3.9 Irving Berlin's "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody", used in the Ziegfeld Follies when chorus girls descended the staircase.

Hats off, Here they come, those Beau-ti-ful girls.  
 Care-ful, Here's the home of Beau-ti-ful girls,  
 That's what You've been wait-ing for.  
 Where your Rea-son is un-done.

Figure 3.10 Sondheim's "Beautiful Girls," which accompanied the women walking down the stairs in reference to the Ziegfeld Follies.

These sonic similarities were reinforced through an embodied performance of the famous Follies' staircase descent. Linda Mizejewski describes this recognizable ritual in her summary of the Ziegfeld chorus girls, "often in her trademark six-foot feather headdresses...floating down staircases and ramps, demonstrating the haughty Ziegfeld walk."<sup>49</sup> The older women of *Follies* reenacted this famous ritual, dressed in contemporary party dresses wearing sashes that pegged each to a specific Follies year (inviting quick calculations as to their age) and, of course, limited by their now older bodies. For example, the video shows the older women looking down as they descend or relying on men to guide them. Their bodies lack the grace of their younger

<sup>49</sup> Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl*, 1.



counterparts who could easily navigate the stairs in complicated costumes and large headdresses while looking straight ahead. Nonetheless, the older women attempted to perform the moves as they remembered them, including walking across the stage at the bottom of the staircase with their arms out, mimicking the parade of costumes in the *Follies*. They performed the number with the confidence and showmanship of their younger selves, even if restrained by their older and out-of-practice bodies.

De Beauvoir's concept of the social dynamic of aging intruded into the production, as audience members brought prior assumptions and experiences about what would be contained in a show with the word "Follies" in the title. Rather than the expected parade of tall, slim replicas of a historically defined body type in ornate gowns descending the staircase, *Follies* confronted its audience with a variety of body shapes, wearing different styles of dresses with differing levels of frumpiness, all descending the staircase with some difficulty. The moment created discomfort by defying expectations around an iconic moment – rather than "beautiful girls," the audience was presented, in the words of reviewer Emory Lewis, with "a gaggle of Follies matrons – fat, aging, confused, reliving their past showgirl glories."<sup>50</sup> The number was at once glorious and grotesque, women reenacting their pasts and celebrating their present by performing a number heretofore belonging exclusively to young women.

The uncanny quality of the moment, derived from deep cultural memory of the youthful walking showgirl undercut by frustrated expectations, brought forward the reality of aging bodies at the start of the show. As described by Marvin Carlson in *The Haunted Stage*,

An audience member, bombarded with a variety of stimuli, processes them by selectively applying reception strategies remembered from previous situations that

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<sup>50</sup> Emory Lewis, "Past, Present Mingle in Glittering 'Follies'," *Follies* Clippings Files, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

seem congruent. The process is a kind of continuing trial and error, since many interpretive possibilities are always present, and as the reception experience continues, strategies remembered from a great many previous experiences may be successively tried in search for the one apparently most compatible with this new situation.<sup>51</sup>

The complicated mix of stimuli in “Beautiful Girls” provides the audience with contradictory interpretive possibilities including both the aged bodies of the women and the memories of younger women on stage. The performers presented themselves without resolving De Beauvoir’s three axes of aging: the physical reality of aging (the hesitant descents by some); the psychological expectations of what properly “belongs” to a certain age group (and the evident defiance by the characters and performers playing them of those expectations); and the shared sociocultural memory of the audience. *Follies* first big number illustrates the complex way De Beauvoir’s three modes interact while also setting the tone for the rest of the show.

### **The Aging Voice**

Prince, Bennett, and Sondheim paired together age and the body and age and the voice to help direct listeners to jumps in time, as well as strengthen the spectacle of aging on stage. Even though vocal change and aging is most dramatically evident as boys’ voices deepen during puberty, the human voice changes continually throughout one’s life. Aging and use cause the muscles to deteriorate, the ligaments and tendons to become less elastic, and cartilage to ossify into bone. All of these natural processes have an audible and perceptual effect, changing the sound, abilities, and range of the voice.

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<sup>51</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 6.

Listeners perceive such vocal changes in both the speaking and the singing voice, distinctions used to aurally separate the past and the present in *Follies*. The complex physiology of the human voice combines a variety of mechanisms, many of which are affected by age. General bodily fatigue can affect the abdominal muscles and the diaphragm, compromising breath control. Lungs lose their elasticity, making breathing more difficult.<sup>52</sup> Over time, the cartilaginous larynx which surrounds the vocal chords ossifies into bone – fully by the age of eighty – decreasing vocal flexibility. This is exasperated by the loss of elasticity of the vocal chords and the weakening of the vocal folds, the muscles that control the vocal chords. Over time and use, the vocal chords begin to stretch, similar to a used rubber band, lowering the pitch of the voice. The weakening of the muscles in the vocal folds and epiglottis can cause the chords to not close completely, which can lead to a hoarse, rough, or breathy sound.<sup>53</sup> Shakiness, loss of volume, and loss of pitch variation when speaking are also noted.<sup>54</sup> Although aging men experience the above in relation to incremental hormonal changes, women face a starker and swifter aging process due to menopause.<sup>55</sup>

Listeners can readily hear the difference between young and old voices. Studies have shown that these changes in voice are audible to the point that people can tell the age of someone fairly accurately by only hearing their voice, including a single vowel sound. Anne Marie Scarinzi in “Effects of Aging on Some Perceptual and Acoustic Features of the Adult Female Voice,” notes, “It has been found in several studies that listeners are able to group subjects by age and to estimate accurately the age of individual subjects solely on the basis of hearing the

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<sup>52</sup> Marilee David, *The New Voice Pedagogy* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 131.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* 133.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 127.

subject's voice."<sup>56</sup> Her experiment then showed that the roughness of the voice combined with the lowering of fundamental vocal frequency were the most indicated perceptual reasons for assigning a voice a certain age.<sup>57</sup> Her experiments on the speaking voice could be applied to the singing voices in *Follies*, many of which were untrained or out of practice.

*Follies* dwells on the aging female voice in two ways. First, older women sing songs they performed in the past. In these cases, the impetus is on the audience to imagine what such songs would sound like sung by a much younger actress. The suggested but unheard younger voice sounds only in the mind of audience members, who may have heard a particular style of song before. The pastiche numbers in *Follies* generally work this way. For example, Ethel Shutta as Hattie Walker sang "Broadway Baby," a 1920s-style number similar to the songs of DeSylva, Brown, and Henderson, such as "The Birth of the Blues" and "The Best Things in Life Are Free." The lyrics indicate the singer is a young performer, just starting out. One can imagine a young Ethel Merman or even a young Ethel Shutta herself, who was in the *Ziegfeld Follies* and the musical *Whoopie!* (1927), belting this number, the sound of her voice reaching the back of the auditorium. Yet, Shutta's older voice, as heard on the cast recording, sounds her age. Though her voice and showmanship are superb and completely intact, Shutta's voice shakes slightly, especially while speaking rather than singing her lines, and it is difficult for her to sustain longer notes, such as on the word "dough", where she takes a breath between the low and the high note, lacking both her younger stamina and flexibility. At softer dynamics, her voice is also slightly hoarse, even on the cast recording.<sup>58</sup> Belting is particularly hard on the voice, as it relies on

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<sup>56</sup> Ann Marie E. Scarinzi, "Effects of Aging on Some Perceptual and Acoustic Features of the Adult Female Voice," Phd diss., University of Oklahoma, 1981, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 60-61.

<sup>58</sup> *Follies: Highlights from the 1971 Original Broadway Cast*, cast and orchestra, Angel: B000002SNP [CD], 1992.

inhibiting the elongation of the vocal folds, weakening the muscles over time.<sup>59</sup> This increases the raspiness of the voice, as the vocal chords become too weak to close completely.

Nevertheless, even as the musical inevitably projected the limitations of the aged voice, the performative frame honored the wisdom and self-assurance that can come with age. Shutta, the oldest actress on stage, stopped the show almost every night with her number. Her age served the comedy of the number, which depended upon the older body imitating movements of youth and her older vocal timbre belting out the words of a young woman just starting out. But Shutta was never the butt of the joke: she was in on it, enjoying and embellishing her performance with hip thrusts and other moves deemed “inappropriate” for older women except on stage. Sondheim commented, “Seventy-four-year-old Ethel Shutta’s sly, unsentimental performance appropriately saved the song from any hint of self-pity.”<sup>60</sup> The audience took pleasure in her performance *because* she embraced her age and maintained the youthful enthusiasm necessary for the number.

The second way *Follies* thematized changes in the female voice echoes the “Bolero d’Amour,” folding time and letting the older women sing duets with their younger selves. The differences in timbre, range, and vocal agility become immediately audible through direct comparison. This technique first occurs in “Waiting for the Girls Upstairs,” a book number rather than a pastiche number. The number begins with the four principals reenacting their younger days as performers and “stagedoor Johnnys.” Ben and Buddy start singing as Phyllis and Sally ascend a staircase where their dressing rooms used to be. Then, the two women sing about “the boys downstairs;” they climb down the stairs and combine with the two men. As the four leads sing, they are joined by their younger selves. The younger counterparts then take over and

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<sup>59</sup> Richard Miller, *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>60</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 211.

reenact a night after the show. Older Buddy then starts again with the A section, and the four principals return to sing the number out without their younger counterparts. This number occurs quite early in the show and is the only number where all four principals sing together, introducing the audience both to their interpersonal dynamics and the way time will be manipulated throughout the night.

The structure of “Waiting for the Girls Upstairs,” alternating older and younger versions of the four main characters, highlights the differences in range and timbre of older and younger voices. Though all the female singers stay in their chest voice throughout, the younger singers are able to reach up to high E in the chest voice, whereas the older women get up to high D but generally stay around the octave above middle C. When Dorothy Collins, playing the older Sally, sings the C above middle C on the word “hair,” she is forced to flip up into her head voice, changing timbre. Collins, a trained soprano, does sing one number that reaches into a higher range and out of the chest voice – “Too Many Mornings.” Her lighter, younger-sounding head voice reaches up to high G in this number, but this “younger” range feels appropriate as the number itself is about going back in time to make a different decision and be with Ben rather than Buddy. Her head voice gives the number a more hopeful feel, one of the few such moments in the show. In “The Girls Upstairs”, the younger singers have the clearer, more youthful tone, whereas Collins and Alexis Smith as Phyllis have the rougher sound of middle-aged women. Part of this is in the casting, as Marti Rolf as Young Sally and Virginia Sandifur as young Phyllis have especially youthful sounding voices. The listener can distinguish between the older and younger female voices more easily than the young and old male voices. Both the older and younger timbres provide interest and pleasure, but the differences related to age allow the back

and forth between the two time periods – even audiences enjoying the cast recording at home can tell when the older and younger couples are singing.

The image shows a musical score for two characters, Sally and Phyllis, from the musical 'The Girls Upstairs'. The score is written in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

**SALLY:**  
The vocal line for Sally is written in a soprano clef. The lyrics are: "Hold-ing our ground— for the boys be-low,— Fuss-ing a-round— with our". The piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The dynamics are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and *(b)* (breve).

**PHYLLIS:**  
The vocal line for Phyllis is written in a soprano clef. The lyrics are: "hair, Gig - gling, wrig - gling out of our tights,—". The piano accompaniment is written in a grand staff. The dynamics are marked *cresc.* (crescendo) and *mf* (mezzo-forte).

Figure 3.11 Older Sally and Phyllis stay in their chest voice for "The Girls Upstairs."

The image shows a musical score for two vocal parts and piano accompaniment. The top system is for 'YOUNG WOMEN:' and the bottom system is for 'YOUNG MEN:'. The piano part is marked 'loco'. The lyrics for the Young Women part are: 'Ta-ta, good-bye, you'll find us at Tony's - Wait till you hear the band!'. The lyrics for the Young Men part are: 'You told us To - ny's, That we'd go to I told you'. The score is in a key with three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 2/4 time signature.

Figure 3.12 The younger women stay in a higher register, creating a lighter, younger sound.

Another number that combines both the pastiche memory and the contrasting older and younger voices is “One More Kiss,” the last number sung by a minor character in the show – Heidi Schiller, played by Justine Johnston, and Young Heidi, played by Victoria Mallory. “One More Kiss” effectively ends the party: the Loveland sequence and the four principals’ features follow. “One More Kiss” also takes *Follies* to the most distant point in the past, with Heidi being



the oldest character in the show; she sings a soaring waltz similar to those sung in operettas by Victor Herbert or Franz Lehar in the 1900s and 1910s.<sup>61</sup> Heidi/Johnston is an operatically-trained soprano, and “One More Kiss” calls for a wide range and a strong voice. Johnston was also much younger (fifty) than the character she was portraying (seventy-two). The large age difference between the character and the actress is in part due to the unlikelihood of finding a seventy-two-year-old who would be able to sing this number in the given range eight times a week. Yet, even with casting the younger Johnston, musical elements indicate the difference between her and the younger counterpart. Young Heidi’s part showcases her range and flexibility to contrast Johnston’s performance. She is given the coloratura line over the last verse, and she is the only one of the two who sings high A’s.

The musical score for "One More Kiss" features three staves. The top staff is for Young Heidi, marked "A tempo" and "YOUNG HEIDI:", showing a highly ornate melody with many trills and grace notes. The middle staff is for Old Heidi, marked "Ah" and "OLD HEIDI:", showing a simple, direct melody. The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, marked "a tempo" and "p.", with lyrics "One more kiss be - fore we part,". The piano part includes dynamic markings like *f* and *p*.

Figure 3.13 Young Heidi sings an ornamented counter melody over Old Heidi's simple melody.

The contrast between Johnston’s more mature soprano voice and Mallory’s lighter soprano voice features prominently when the pair sings in unison, but even more so when they alternate singing

<sup>61</sup> Examples include “The Butterfly Waltz” from *Babette* (1903) by Victor Herbert and “Maytime” from *The Merry Widow* (1905) by Franz Lehar.

the words, “Never look back.” When Young Heidi begins singing, the audience hears both the contrast between younger and older voices and the tone quality expected in operetta. Johnston might also be choosing to alter her voice to sound older, a performance choice that would ultimately expand the distinction between the two voices. The lyrics of the number, sung primarily by the older Heidi, instruct her lover – and the audience – to move on from the past and not get stuck wishing about what might have been. This number provides a beautiful, expressive pause before the show dives into its exciting yet ultimately cynical denouement, but the lyrics ask for “one more glimpse of the past,” a summary of the night, and even more, of what comes next. This moment allows Sondheim to further explore the themes of the show, both musically and lyrically, and the words comprise his signature subtle ambivalence. “One More Kiss” gives one last example of the aging voice as compared to the youthful one. After the book number “Could I Leave You?” the show moves into the final “Follies Sequence” with the two numbers sung by the young couples alone, who by this time sound almost alien in their youth, clarity, and hopefulness.

Bodies age in ways that are both visual and auditory. These older women, some untrained and most out of practice, struggled to maintain volume, stamina, tone, and range as they got older due to muscle deterioration, cartilage ossification, and tendon and ligament inflexibility.<sup>62</sup> However, the new timbres created by the older female voice were prized in different ways, such as Carlotta Campion’s vocal triumph “I’m Still Here,” where her vocal timbre became a symbol of authentic wisdom gained through a life of hardships. The tone of the number contains both self-deprecation and celebration, and Yvonne de Carlo did not shy away from either emotion.

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<sup>62</sup> Richard Miller, *Solutions for Singers: Tools for Performers and Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151-152; Richard Miller, *On the Art of Singing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 202-203.

Rather than hiding her age or remembering the past, her number prizes her age, what she has been through over the years. The show does not privilege one type of voice over another, young or old, but instead, presents them side by side in a complex, specifically female sonic palette.

### **The Mirror Number**

*Follies*' exploration of female aging finds its most direct expression in the production number "Who's That Woman?" also known as "The Mirror Number" for its use of mirrors as props and costumes. The song brings together two groups of women, old and young, and develops contrast between the voice and the body by way of vigorous song and dance. The number occurs about half way through the show and is often now staged as the Act I finale (the original production did not have an intermission). In this moment, the women decide to attempt a tap dance that they had performed together in the past.<sup>63</sup> "Who's That Woman?" features a solo by the minor character, Stella. After she sings an introduction, she is joined by the other women who sing and tap back-up as she continues her solo at a quicker pace. They are then joined by their younger selves, dressed in elaborate "mirrored" costumes, tap dancing and singing with one another.

"Who's That Woman?" exemplified the spectacular and multivalent results antagonistic collaboration can yield. Sondheim wrote the number as a campy pastiche, as Bennett's staging deepened its meaning. Sondheim admits, "What Michael did was to take a lightweight, semi-camp pastiche lyric and mine it for all its emotional resonances as well as its imagery."<sup>64</sup> Though Sondheim's lyrics have more depth in them than one usually grasps in the first listen, the

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<sup>63</sup> This is just one moment of impossibility in *Follies*, as there would be no way all these women would have ever been on the stage together in the *Follies*.

<sup>64</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 219.

addition of both the choreography with young and old and the mirror costumes provided by costumer designer Florence Klotz added weight to Sondheim's lyric about peering in the looking glass and barely recognizing one's aged face.

The lyrics of "Who's That Woman?" recall issues of feminine aging and the folly of youth. Stella's opening verse concerns a promiscuous woman who spends her life looking for love in all the wrong places, only to realize "that woman is me!"<sup>65</sup> This line of inquiry brings to mind the necessity for women to hurry up and settle down before they are too old to be eligible for marriage, as discussed by Sontag (see above). Still, the women's enthusiastic, joyous dancing, along with the subsequent lyrics, challenge the notion of age as inherently negative. Though the refrain, "Mirror, mirror, on the wall" recalls Snow White's stepmother and her desire to maintain supreme beauty with age, the end of the line "Who's the saddest gal in town?" reveals a different meaning. Rather than asking "who's the fairest one of all?", the woman asks whether she made poor decisions in her youth that have led to an unhappy middle-age. By spending the years chasing men "like a carousel / beau after beau after beau" and relying on her looks, her later life is empty: "The kind of love that she couldn't make fun of / she'd had none of." The lyric leads to an epiphany when, at the end, the singer realizes "That woman is me!" Age allows her to see the poor choices she made in her past. Such is the ultimate message of *Follies* – that our happiness in our later years is dependent upon the choices we made earlier – She regrets her earlier decisions but makes the best of those choices and develops the wisdom derived from lived experience.

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<sup>65</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 217.

Bennett's use of tap dance added another layer of memory to the number, though it was not without its problems. 1971 was the year that precision tap began to make a comeback on Broadway with the nostalgic musical *No, No, Nanette*. Many later musicals, such as *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* (1980) and *My One and Only* (1983), followed the trend of nostalgia, but tap in *Follies* was something different. Rather than the accumulated force of many dancers tapping the same rhythms found in most post-*No, No, Nanette* tap production numbers, the effect of "Who's That Woman" relied on what Stacy Wolf terms "individuation," a key quality of the amateur performance.<sup>66</sup> In an individuated dance, each dancer performs the steps slightly differently than the others, reinforced, in this case, by the different body types on stage. The older women struggled with the steps, lifting their arms to different heights, some of them behind and some ahead of the beat. The effect was one of women who had not danced in years attempting to remember a dance in the past – the exact situation in the show. But it wasn't just the visual element of tap that the older women struggled with – the sound of the taps was also a problem, as was fatigue, and new technological tricks were required to make the number possible. Aronson had raked the stage too steeply to safely wear tap shoes, so the taps were done backstage by assistant choreographer George Martin and two other male dancers on a Masonite board, amplified to sound as if the women were tapping.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the women's voices were prerecorded and mixed into the end of the number as they became winded: this separation of voice from body allowed facilitated the powerful effect of simultaneous singing and dancing. In the end, technology enabled these "regular" women to successfully complete the number, but the end effected differed from the aesthetic of professional tap.

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<sup>66</sup> Stacy Wolf, "This is Not a Broadway Body," Keynote address at *Broadway Bodies: An Interdisciplinary Conference on the Musical*, Washington University in St. Louis, September 28, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Chapin, *Everything was Possible*, 152.

Most likely, the creators, or at least Bennett, did not intend to utilize a more amateur aesthetic. Bennett became very frustrated with the older women while working on this number, as his choreography was often too difficult for them to perform or even remember. Used to working with professional dancers, he refused, or maybe was unable, to create a dance that would have been more performable for these women. The tension between Bennett's difficult choreography and Prince's casting choices inadvertently highlighted the women's faults rather than their skills, but also revealed the realistic situation of the cast, as these women embodied their characters' age and lack of practice, unlike current revivals that often feature excellent dancers with manageable choreography.

With "Who's That Woman?" tap became a symbol of what is lost with age. The iconic sounds of the taps did not come in until the younger women joined the older, connecting the precise sounds and sights of tap dancing with youth. But these older women were still performing in a Broadway show, doing these dances and singing these songs eight times a week, a celebration of feminine resilience and a love for the theatre.

## **Conclusion**

*Follies* is a show about women created by men. Reviewer William Goldman's observations about the Mirror Number reflected the gendered biases that Sontag so rightly criticized: "The physical impression you got from [the number] was anguishing. To see the decay of the flesh – all those bright young beautiful girls and their lovely bodies with the sense of youth and the promise of what's to come contrasted against what *actually* became of it. That's

devastating.”<sup>68</sup> The devastation does not come from the women themselves, but from the displeasure of the male gaze, the objectification of women, and society’s avoidance of the aging female form. One can imagine a completely different analysis of this spirited number, where the women are celebrated for their gumption, just as *Life*’s photographer celebrated Gloria Swanson.

Though *Follies* deftly illustrates the effects of aging on the body, aging is presented as an inevitability, not a tragedy. The show is without a doubt melancholic, nihilistic, and anti-nostalgic, but unlike other works that discuss older actresses, like *Sunset Boulevard*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, and even *All About Eve/Applause*, the women of *Follies* are not presented as grotesque or monstrous, and they are not trying to hold on to a past that is gone. With the exception of Sally, they all have moved on with their lives, informed but unbound by the past. Even Sally by the end is forced to acknowledge that she cannot go back and rewrite history with Ben, and that even if she could, the past is not how she remembered it. Like the crumbling theatre that will soon be a parking lot, the body decays and the voice falters over time. The women relive their pasts for one night, knowing that tomorrow, they cannot go back.

*Follies* is a tragedy though, but not a tragedy of age and aging. *Follies*—at least the stories of Sally, Buddy, Phyllis, and Ben—demonstrates the failure of what Sara Ahmed calls “the promise of happiness.”<sup>69</sup> The promise of happiness tells women that if they find a man, leave the world of work, settle down and have kids, they will be happy. Yet, both Phyllis and Sally, regardless of social class, are presented as extremely unhappy though they followed the rules of “aging gracefully,” following norms that proscribe a move from work and into the home. Whether the audience believes it is Betty Friedan’s “problem that has no name,” the devastating

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<sup>68</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1980), 159.

<sup>69</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 30.

combination of ageism and sexism, or the possibilities of the future that have disappeared, societal beliefs around aging concern primarily loss. What *could* be becomes what will never be. One looks in the mirror, and sees an old woman, knowing that the future is closed. This is the real lesson of *Follies*.

Yet, *Follies* provided a more complex view of the aging woman that looked beyond loss. Women like Hattie Walker in “Broadway Baby” and Carlotta Campion in “I’m Still Here” celebrated their age, but they also struggled to maintain dignity against societal rules. Harvey Cox, in his review of the show for the left-wing, Protestant publication *Christianity and Crisis*, wrote, “The definition of being ‘old’ in our society is controlled by men, naturally to our own advantage...the man, says our chauvinist culture, is just reaching his grey-templed prime at fifty...A woman at fifty? She’s on the way down. She spends more and more time at the vanity table, to less and less avail.”<sup>70</sup> Attending *Follies* sparked Cox to acknowledge and reconsider the ethics of his beliefs about older women and the way the media, run by men, portrayed aging men versus aging women. He noted that these female singers and dancers will be “flung on the refuse heap” when they can no longer “tickle male egos and incarnate male dreams.” For Cox, the women on stage brought to the fore the consequences of glamorizing and sexualizing their younger selves and gave them a way to tell their story in a world when older women were and still are so often silenced and ignored. Rather than turning away or turning off, the original production of *Follies* forced the audience to engage with those they had avoided, the consequences of their constant yearning for the new, the young.

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<sup>70</sup> Harvey Cox, “The Cultural Captivity of Women,” *Christianity and Crisis*, May 31, 1971.



As for the performers themselves, Sondheim and Prince provided these immensely talented women with an immense opportunity. Mary McCarty, Justine Johnston, and Helon Blount all went on to do more Broadway shows than they had before *Follies*, and Alexis Smith's career was revived in film, theatre, and television. The show also gave Fifi D'Orsay, Ethel Barrymore Colt, and Ethel Shutta one last chance to enjoy life on the stage. The show gave these women a second chance. They could strut their stuff again, regardless of age, and proclaim that they were "still here."

## Chapter 4

### *Company* (1970): Audience as Antagonistic Collaborator

Fictional characters are not real people. Fictional characters in the theatre amalgamate the creative work of many artists: writer, composer, director, performer, costumer, wigmaker, make-up designer. Audience members, in turn, complete the character by way of personal reaction and response. Characters portrayed on stage are thus continually remade. Their identities are not fixed. Supposedly fundamental qualities such as race, gender, and ability-status can be played with, reinterpreted, or altered, such that the theatrical embodiment of characters can radically alter the audience's expectations, even between iterations of the same text or production.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual orientation, an identity often at once invisible and flexible, has provided artists and audiences with numerous examples of characters who are open to a multiplicity of interpretations; individual audience members ultimately determine the "truth" of a character for themselves, without recourse to authorial intent and beyond the explicit content of a given text or production. Sondheim himself believes that "the audience is the final collaborator."<sup>2</sup> By

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<sup>1</sup> There have been a number of high profile examples lately. The musical *Hamilton* represents how stories based on real people can still alter their identity – in this case, by making the Founding Fathers people of color. An example of a fictional character's identity being altered is in the *Harry Potter* franchise, where Hermione was played by the white Emma Watson in the film and the black Noma Dumezweni in the play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Though Hermione's race is never explicitly mentioned in the text of the source material, most readers likely chose to make Hermione white; however, in live performance, audience members were forced to see Hermione as black. While some could have read the performance as color-blind casting, others may have embraced a new, canonical Hermione whose racial identity is open to a variety of interpretations.

<sup>2</sup> "Interview with Stephen Sondheim: Raw Footage," New York 1999, Archive for Theatre on Film and Tape, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, New York.

including the audience as a collaborator, and a sometimes antagonistic one at that, a show can ultimately have no one unified or definitive interpretation. No matter how united a collaborative team may be (or in the case of works with one author, a single person) the audience, as discussed by Barthes, Carlson, and others (see Introduction) will generate many interpretations of a work, some that will directly conflict with one another, including those of the author. The results of this messy process appear when critics publish vastly different reviews of the same show, when awards do not reflect popular opinion, and even when we argue with friends over the meaning and value of different musicals. In order to uncover antagonistic collaboration in the audience, this chapter focuses on two differing opinions of one aspect of one production. In *Company* (1970), some audience members read against Sondheim's intentions and concluded that the main character, Bobby, was a gay man, and that, rather than a story about marriage, the show documented a man coming to realize his own homosexuality.

This chapter looks at how audience interpretation and performer persona influence meaning, focusing on an extraordinary example where audiences continue to directly defy authorial intent. I explore how gay readings of Bobby became common knowledge and more importantly, *why* some audiences in 1970 read Bobby, a character without traditional, pre-Stonewall gay signifiers, as an obviously gay character, even with the continued resistance and insistence of his heterosexuality from the creators. Answering these questions allows historians of gay and lesbian culture to better understand this moment of rupture, a generational gap where visibility became the defining aspect of being part of the gay community. This rupture also affected the history of musical theatre, a genre dependent upon heteronormative romantic plots, as changes in marriage and sexuality opened the door to more experimental narrative devices.

First, this chapter lays out a brief history of gay readings in popular culture in the United States. Next, I attempt to answer where and when did gay readings of *Company* originate, in part to find out who read Bobby as gay in 1970. Then, I look at generational differences created by Stonewall and the gay and lesbian rights movement, and how these differences demarcated who read Bobby as gay, why reading him this way was important, and why the authors were surprised at such readings. Finally, this chapter explores how performance and performer persona may have incidentally triggered reading Bobby as gay by focusing on the final number, “Being Alive.”

### **Reading Homosexuality in Popular Texts**

There is a long history in the theatre of reading characters as gay who are not explicitly stated as such. Writers of early musical theatre and cinema delighted in creating characters that could and would be interpreted as homosexual by those “in the know,” but whose sexuality would be invisible to those without such knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Secondary characters, such as Benjamin Kidd from Sigmund Romberg and Oscar Hammerstein’s operetta *The Desert Song* (1926) and Egbert in Cole Porter’s film *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), continually spurn advances from female secondary characters and play up effeminate characteristics read at the time as evidence of homosexuality. Authors and actors used such codes to elude censorship, creating musicals that would be acceptable to a wide audience, yet still exploring alternative sexualities.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1981), xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> See Richard Dyer, ed., *Gays and Film* (New York: New York Zoetrope, 1977); Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essay on Representation* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-50; Brett Farmer, *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

Secondary characters coded as gay usually served as comic relief, using common stereotypes about gay men, even when written by gay men. Activist Vito Russo, in his book *The Celluloid Closet*, wrote, “What especially depressed me, though...was that [gay writers and audiences] reflected the oppressive assumptions that form the basis for most screen images of lesbians and gay men. They reflected the closeted mentalities of gay people themselves.”<sup>5</sup> For example, the lion in the iconic *Wizard of Oz* represents a “sissy,” an effeminate gay man who wants “courage” or to be straight. This reading, of course, is not directly in the text, and one can understand and interpret the story in a completely normative way. However, gay men who grew up before the 1960s were accustomed to reading between the lines, looking for double entendre, and gender-bending the conventional heterosexuality of the musical. These characters were neither gay nor straight but were both or neither – able to be read in a multiplicity of ways. Authors intended, though, for these characters to be read as a gay by a certain subsection of the audience, different from Bobby in *Company*.

This deployment of performative gay stereotypes has long connected the musical to male homosexual culture within the collective subconscious of the United States, especially New York City. Writers such as D.A. Miller and John Clum have discussed at length the pervasiveness of truth and exaggerated stereotypes of the “show queen” – a homosexual man, often born before 1950 or so, whose gay identity, culture, and social circle is tied inextricably to an obsession with the Broadway musical.<sup>6</sup> Piano bars, such as the still-surviving Marie’s Crisis in the Village, as

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<sup>5</sup> Russo, *The Celluloid Closet*, xi.

<sup>6</sup> John M. Clum, *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 8; D.A. Miller, *Place for Us [Essay on the Broadway Musical]* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

well as midtown haunts like the Astor and The Oak Club were central to white, middle and upper-class gay culture before the Stonewall riots in June of 1969.<sup>7</sup>

Generational changes created a substantial shift in the aesthetics and culture of Broadway during the late 1960s and 1970s. Related to a rise in gay representation in mass media responding in turn to the burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement, gay culture became more “out” on the Broadway stage, culminating in Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* (1982), the first show on Broadway explicitly about gay life.<sup>8</sup> Closeted readings and a shared secret language lost their necessity and significance. Creators of an older generation, like the men who made *Company*, continued to write and view gay men as closeted stereotypes, but younger audiences wanted something more. Younger gay audiences began looking for stories with radical, political undertones and characters whose journeys reflected their own, utilizing the less-expensive, more experimental off-Broadway theatres. Young gay composers and lyricists began writing their own musicals and performing them in small off-Broadway venues. Even as the foundation of their creations was the culture of the older show queen, they moved towards a more liberated, and some like John Clum argue, heavy-handed, representation of gayness such as *La Cage aux Folles* (1983, Broadway), *Boy Meets Boy* (1975, off-Broadway), *Falsettos* (1992, Broadway), and *The Gay ‘90s* (1997, off-Broadway).<sup>9</sup>

The musical that writers and critics often point to as the beginnings of these explorations was Stephen Sondheim and Harold Prince’s 1970 show *Company*. Opening less than a year after the Stonewall riots (June 1969; April 1970), the show concerns an unmarried bachelor and his

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis: 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> This show, like most gay shows, started off-Broadway. Off- and off-off-Broadway theatres served and continue to serve as the primary space for gay works, such as Matt Crowley’s ground-breaking *Boys in the Band* (1968), which just recently had its Broadway debut.

<sup>9</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 245-282.

married friends. *Company* lacks a linear plot, but instead, features a series of vignettes where Bobby interacts with four different heterosexual couples and three possible romantic interests in the world of white, upper-class New York City. Most scenes feature Bobby with one of the couples, asking them about the pros and cons of marriage, or observing them engaging in bizarre marital rituals, such as practicing karate with one another or trying pot. Other scenes, such as the one with his girlfriend April, feature Bobby trying to navigate dating in a New York City that alienates him from commitment and encourages one-night stands and casual relationships. The tension between his interest yet distance from marriage and his non-interest in serious relationships with three different women opens a window for reading Bobby as either an immature bachelor or as someone for whom traditional marriage seems impossible, i.e. a closeted gay man. Unlike the traditional musical theatre form where the ending demands a wedding or at least a kiss between the romantic leads, *Company* ends ambiguously, with Bobby, still alone, not showing up to a surprise birthday party with his friends. Something has changed, but no resolution to his character is offered.

*Company*'s relationship to homosexuality proves remarkable. Unlike other coded representations of queerness in the musical, the creators of the show had (and declared) no intention of writing a gay protagonist, and Bobby had none of the traditional signifiers of homosexuality found in earlier works. Instead, the impetus to read the show as about homosexuality and Bobby as gay originated solely with the audience. The ambiguity of the ending opened the door for gay audience members, mostly of the cohort younger than the show's creators, to read *Company* as not about marriage and commitment at all, but instead about the closet. Discourse surrounding the show continues to include interrogations into Bobby's

sexuality, even though both composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim and book writer George Furth repeatedly insist on Bobby's heterosexuality. Although some argue for and some against the plausibility of such readings, all these arguments about Bobby's sexuality treat him as if he is a real person with a "true" sexual identity, rather than a character on to whom identities are applied by audiences, based on the show's text and on the persona of and choices made by performers. Sondheim and Furth have continued to vehemently deny intentionally framing Bobby as a homosexual. Of course, authorial intent is but one piece when it comes to understanding a work's impact on audiences.

### **Tracing the Discourse**

Who read Bobby as gay and who insisted otherwise? Historians of the show reference the ubiquity of gay readings of *Company* but offer little support in the way of primary evidence (see below). Furthermore, there has been no effort to substantiate or track the discourse surrounding the belief in a gay Bobby. Some popular historians write from their personal experience of the show's initial run and rely on their memory as evidence. More substantially, the continued vitality of the show and the surrounding discourse through near-constant revivals make *Company* a living work of art, constantly reinterpreted across the years. Revivals, many with substantial revisions, and the enduring discourse around Bobby's sexuality combine to suggest that gay readings of the show have always occurred, will always occur, and that there is an inevitability around reading a bachelor with commitment problems as a closet case. A genealogical approach



to this question promises to reveal the contours and point of origin for this significant question of musical theatre and gay history. At the most basic level, to establish *why* gay readings existed during the original production, one must establish *that* they existed in 1970 at all and who first posited a reading of Bobby as gay.

Tracing this discourse has proven especially problematic.<sup>10</sup> The first barrier is recognizing the unspeakableness of the topic in 1970. While Stonewall was an early climax of an already active gay and lesbian rights movement, the event did not suddenly throw open the closet door. Public discussions of homosexuality, much less *printed*, public discussions, were still quite rare during *Company*'s initial run, April 26, 1970 to January 1, 1972, making it almost impossible to find archival proof that gay readings of the show existed at its inception. For example, even the liberal *Village Voice* would not print the word "gay" in an advertisement until a 1971 demonstration in the Village.<sup>11</sup> Homosexuality was still a taboo topic in 1970, one not discussed in polite company.

Nevertheless, even in this repressive context, Bobby as potentially gay made it into print in reviews of *Company*. In his April 27, 1970 review in *Women's Wear Daily*, Martin Gottfried wrote, Dean Jones as Bobby "can seem sexless and must watch it or the show's theme (and honesty) will be confused by hints of homosexuality."<sup>12</sup> For Gottfried, who is of Sondheim's generation, any possibility of a homosexual reading should be avoided, as it confused the

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<sup>10</sup> An excellent example of tracing this sort of discourse for a real person is in Geoffrey Block's recent book about Franz Schubert. Block skillfully presents and weighs the evidence for his readers, while still allowing them to draw their own conclusions. However, his dismissal of academics who believe sexual orientation is a social construct is based on an inaccurate understanding of the argument – social constructionists do not argue that desire itself is purely a social construction, but that the meaning placed on that desire as an identity is a social and historical construct, which is addressed in this chapter. Geoffrey Block, *Schubert's Reputation from His Time to Ours* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2017), 285-320.

<sup>11</sup> Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, 213.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Women's Wear Daily*, April 27, 1970.

primary thematic focus on marriage. More interestingly, Gottfried's comment highlights the ability of a performer to open up thematic space for a gay Bobby (discussed more below).

Gottfried's review provides the only piece of primary evidence, aside from personal anecdote, that scholars use to support gay readings of the show at the time of its original production. Scholars and writers also use a 1991 comment by playwright William Goldman published in Meryle Secrest's 1998 biography *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*. Goldman recalled, "I remember seeing *Company* five times and I loved it, and I had a huge, fucking problem, which was that the main character's gay but they don't talk about it. Hal, George, and Steve all think it's about a guy with a commitment problem."<sup>13</sup> Goldman's personal experience with the original show paired with his extensive experience on Broadway gave weight to this comment for Secrest's readers, as it has continued to be quoted in popular and scholarly writings about the show.<sup>14</sup>

Goldman's view of *Company* proves problematic when taken in context with his 1969 book *The Season*, published shortly before *Company* opened. *The Season* uses the 1967-1968 Broadway season to reveal the inner workings of the industry. In a chapter titled "Homosexuals," Goldman argued, "In general, the homosexual on Broadway, especially the playwright, has to dissemble: he writes boy-girl relationships when he really means boy-boy relationships; he understands boy-boy relationships, but is forced to write them as boy-girl."<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that Goldman goes on to admit that a writer can often write outside his or her own experience, citing war as an example, he insists that plays with homosexual authors would be better and more

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<sup>13</sup> Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 371.

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 2 for more information.

<sup>15</sup> William Goldman, *The Season: A Candid Look at Broadway* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969): 238.

authentic if they could write about their own personal experiences. His reading of *Company* was likely shaped by his default view of gay creators' inability to write straight characters and his knowledge that both Sondheim and Furth were gay men.<sup>16</sup> Just as, for him, Albee's women in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are really gay men in drag, Bobby is actually a homosexual—if only because Sondheim and Furth are. Thus, Goldman's reading of *Company* cannot be disentangled from his problematic understanding of homosexual authorship.

The plethora of publications, both popular and scholarly, that discuss gay readings of Bobby tend to cite Gottfried and Goldman as their primary evidence (for more detail see Appendix 2). Gottfried's continued writing on the subject alone traces the discourse of Bobby's gayness. Though not gay himself, Gottfried, who four years after his review for *Women's Wear Daily* became a critic for *The New York Post*, advocated for edgy and experimental theatre, both on and off Broadway. Over the years, his writing grew more and more explicit regarding the possibility of homosexuality in *Company*. Nine years after his assertion that Jones has "hints of homosexuality," Gottfried wrote,

Any way [Bobby] slices it, marriages don't look good to him...It is such pessimism toward marriage and the hero's inability to love a woman that make his heterosexuality suspect. Depending on one's sensitivity toward this, a subtle element of homosexuality might be considered a distracting aspect of *Company*.<sup>17</sup>

Even though homosexuality is still a "distracting" possibility, the impetus has shifted from Jones's performance to the text itself. Is it the performance or is it the text that hints at

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<sup>16</sup> While Sondheim and Furth's sexuality might not have been common knowledge to the general public, Sondheim during this period worked closely with William Goldman's brother, Jim Goldman, on the book for *Follies* (see chapter 3), so it is likely that he would have known at least about Sondheim, if not also Furth's sexuality. As discussed, Furth never saw himself as "closeted" and Sondheim had already discussed his sexuality with his close friends, making an even stronger case that William Goldman would have known about their sexuality. Furthermore, by 1992, when Goldman made that statement, both Sondheim and Furth were known to be gay men, even if Sondheim had not yet publicly declared his sexuality in print.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Broadway Musicals* (New York: Harry N. Abrams., Inc., 1979), 322.

homosexuality? Regardless of Gottfried's intentions, in the theatre the text and the performance are inseparable experiences. In his next publication on the matter, *Sondheim* (1993), Gottfried went further:

Another problem lies with Robert: He is less a character than a subject... What is his problem? Why can't he fall in love? The answer is another question, one *Company* never faces: Is there an unspoken or subconscious level of homosexuality to explain him?<sup>18</sup>

Other writers from the 1990s were more certain of Bobby's homosexuality, but Gottfried stayed with his original assertion from 1970 – that while one can read Bobby as gay, it is only one possibility and distracting from the main theme of marriage. But as shown, his assertions got stronger as the years went on, perhaps due to the gaining presence of explicitly gay characters across media or the increasing popularity of discussing Bobby as a gay character in person or in print.

Trade and popular publications on the musical often contain few to no citations, making it impossible for scholars to validate assertions. Popular histories of the musical such as Gerald Mast's *Can't Help Singin'* (1987), Kevin Kelly's *One Singular Sensation* (1990), and Boze Hadleigh's *Sing Out! Gays and Lesbians in the Music World* (1997) present gay and queer readings of *Company* as simple fact rather than readings created by people, perhaps later, to support specific narratives.<sup>19</sup> Even more scholarly publications that employ citations, such as Foster Hirsch's biography of Prince, at times present a gay Bobby (without, however, citing specific sources):

Although in 1970 the creators couldn't suggest that Robert's partner would be a man, their reluctance to join him to the heterosexual mating dance is underlined in the show's final ambiguous image, when, after his song, Robert mysteriously fails

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Sondheim* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 88.

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Kelly, *One Singular Sensation: The Michael Bennett Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 68-70; Boze Hadleigh, *Sing Out! Gays and Lesbians in the Music World* (New York: Barricade Books Inc., 1997); Gerald Mast, *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1987), 326.

to show up at the surprise birthday party his friends ritualistically prepare for him each year.<sup>20</sup>

Hirsch implies that if Furth and Sondheim could have made Bobby gay, they would have, and that having him not actually find a woman at the end implies homosexuality. Like Gottfried's later observations, Hirsch finds hints of homosexuality in the openness of the text and the impossibility of a gay protagonist on the Broadway stage at the time. Yet, Hirsch, as well as Mast, Kelly, and Hadleigh, offer no evidence to support their gay readings. These uncited assertions drive a line of discourse that runs contrary but parallel to the creators' continued insistence of Bobby's heterosexuality.

Not all authors agree with reading Bobby as gay, however. Joanne Gordon, whose book *Art Isn't Easy* has been cited by many of these authors, believes that those who read Bobby as gay are merely uncomfortable with questioning the normative positive assumptions around commitment and marriage. She argues,

But there is no suggestion in text or score that Robert is homosexual. The emphasis of the work is to persuade Robert to make a commitment, 'to want something,' 'to want somebody,' not simply to conform with societal norms. Critics who dwell on Robert's possible homosexuality are clearly uncomfortable with the show's antiromantic, unsentimental depiction of marriage.<sup>21</sup>

Gordon cites those who believe in Bobby's homosexuality and disputes their claims based solely on the evidence in the "work." She does not take performance into account, so Gottfried's original assertion, that the undertones of homosexuality were in Jones's performance, lie beyond her scope of analysis. Interestingly, though, Gordon reads the text as putting marriage based on

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<sup>20</sup> Foster Hirsch, *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 87.

<sup>21</sup> Joanne Gordon, *Art Isn't Easy: The Theatre of Stephen Sondheim* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 55.

love and commitment outside of “societal norms.” For her, then, Bobby wants to find someone to love, regardless of gender – Bobby being gay or straight is immaterial to the text.

Stephen Banfield also dismisses a gay Bobby in a brief parenthetical aside. Banfield’s primary interest in structure and musical content pushes the issue to the margins. Still, that he brings homosexuality up at all indicates the sizeable shadow this question has cast over *Company*. He observes,

[Sondheim’s] agonized ambivalence about the single and the coupled state hit home...[and] is a major reason gays respond so powerfully to him, and why, in a sense irrelevantly, questions were raised about Robert’s sexual orientation in the first reviews, and have been raised again since.<sup>22</sup>

Like those before him, Banfield assumes from his experience that since its premiere in 1970, audiences have questioned Bobby’s sexuality without further evidence. But, for these scholars looking primarily at the text of *Company*, Bobby’s sexuality is beside the point. For Gordon and Banfield, Bobby’s sexuality is “irrelevant,” as both gay and straight men might have commitment issues.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, when taken in the context of the 1970s, assumed heterosexuality required that if Bobby were gay, then his primary problem with commitment would *have* to be about homosexuality, rather than a general hesitancy towards relationships. By looking at the text outside of context, Banfield can dismiss gay readings of the show as not important, but in 1970, when the grip of assumed heterosexuality loosened only slightly, Bobby’s sexuality would only be “irrelevant” if he were “normative;” an abnormal – and at this point, still pathologized – sexuality would spur an entirely different interpretation of the show.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 162.

<sup>23</sup> This is very similar to Sondheim’s actual position and why he allowed for the reading of a gay version of *Company* in 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Homosexuality was finally removed from the DSM in 1973.

Gottfried is the only period source cited by the above writers, but there were, in fact, two other, even higher profile reviews from the opening run that hint at or mention homosexuality. *Variety*'s reviewer of the Boston tryout remarked, "There's a chance with four weeks of break-in time for Broadway, for the waspish piece has potential. As it stands now, however, it's for ladies' matinees, homos and misogynists."<sup>25</sup> Although the review does not explicitly point to Bobby as being gay, some historians, including theatre historian Bruce Kirle, utilized this review to discuss Bobby's potential homosexuality.<sup>26</sup> This reviewer, unlike Gottfried, does not direct the homosexual comment at any performer or even at the text, but instead posits a list of, by implication, anti-marriage audiences (or women who go to all the shows regardless of quality) that would not be enough to make the show a success in New York.<sup>27</sup>

*The New York Times* reviewer Clive Barnes, in what was generally considered the most important and most widely read notice for any Broadway show of the period, never explicitly used the word homosexual, something unsurprising for the squeamish *Times*. He did, nonetheless, hint at it. His review explained, "In case you had any doubts about [Bobby's] sexual inclinations - and I am not sure that I did - he has three girls on the side."<sup>28</sup> Barnes acknowledged the potential for reading a marriage-phobic bachelor as a gay man; then, he immediately dismissed the notion. For him, Bobby's three female sexual interests were enough to put anyone with suspicions—Barnes tentatively not among them—at ease. Yet, many gay men, both then and now, have sex and relationships with women; sometimes, they do not know that they are gay

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<sup>25</sup> Guy, *Variety*, April 8, 1970. The "ladies' matinees" refers to women's groups that go see every show, no matter what.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University of Press, 2005), 182.

<sup>27</sup> This is in part because the last number was not "Being Alive," but instead, "Happily Ever After" (discussed below).

<sup>28</sup> Clive Barnes, "Theater: 'Company' Offers a Guide to New York's Marital Jungle," *New York Times*, April 27, 1970.

or are trying to deny it by dating women; other times, they may be looking for a so-called beard, a traditional marriage and family; or their sexuality may be more complicated than a simple binary. So-called “New York marriages,” when a gay man would marry a straight woman for friendship and social gain, were still quite common in the 1960s, especially in the upper-classes and for public figures.<sup>29</sup> Leonard Bernstein, one of the most famous gay men of the period, was married from 1951 to 1978 and had three children. Michael Bennett, the choreographer of *Company* who was also gay, married dancer and actress Donna McKechnie before the end of the decade. However, for Barnes, Bobby’s interest in women was enough to put such explanations to rest; for others, it would have done little to discourage a gay reading. Though heterosexual acts and heterosexual identity are related, they are not synonymous. Even in places where the text itself may seem to contradict audience readings, such as Bobby literally being in bed with one of his girlfriends, performance and outside experience can leave the text vulnerable to reinterpretation.

Though these contemporary reviews hint at Bobby’s homosexuality, none definitively support the notion that readings of a gay Bobby were common or widespread in 1970. One unpublished article by Mel Gussow, however, does imply that not only were audiences interpreting the character as gay, but it had become a major point of interest for those in the theatre world. Gussow’s article, written for *The New York Times* in 1971 but never published, was intended to be a feature on Prince as both a director and producer. Despite the fact that much of the article focused on *Follies*, Prince and Sondheim’s current production, Gussow made space to inquire into past shows. He directly asked Prince about homosexual readings of the show.

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<sup>29</sup> David Ehrenstein, *Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928-1998*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), 71.



Gussow's notes, preserved in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, record Prince's response:

It's a comic effort to talk about heterosexual men in 1970. There's no problem [for straight men?] getting laid or getting a free dinner. The economy of our society says you need never get chattelled [sic] to do working, gardening and bearing. You can run around with some equanimity. Easier (to write about this) than about a homosexual. Could have done it about a woman. There are a lot of them. Its [sic] not irrelevant – everyone can get laid these days. There's no trouble getting sexual gratification, but its [sic] empty, which is Robert.<sup>30</sup>

Gussow's notes show that gay readings of Bobby were common enough in 1971 to ask Prince about it in an interview, and Prince, like Gordon and Banfield later, found the character's sexual orientation less important than the show's larger commentary on commitment and marriage in a time of "free love" and urban alienation. In his final unpublished draft, Gussow cut the above notes down to Prince saying, "[*Company*] could have been about a homosexual," followed by Gussow's own observation that "much of the criticism [of *Company*] centered around Robert. Some felt he was too much the catalyst, too little a character. Others asked, wasn't Robert really a homosexual and the show a misogynist view of marriage?"<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Gussow implies that audiences who read Bobby as gay were not necessarily wrong, that Bobby could be read as gay or straight. He also repeats a recurring criticism of the text of *Company*, that the character of Bobby is underdeveloped. As discussed below, Bobby's character, or lack thereof, makes it possible to read Bobby as gay and for performers to insert their own interpretations into the role. Thus, the text opens multiple possibilities for performers to participate in the rich discourse around Bobby's sexual orientation.

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<sup>30</sup> Notes from Interview with Harold Prince, May 1970, Mel Gussow Papers, Box 132, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

<sup>31</sup> Draft Article: Interview with Harold Prince, pg 13, Mel Gussow Papers, Box 132, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

A second document in Gussow's archive dispels any doubt that reading Bobby as homosexual in 1970 was common. In a short, half-page letter from editor Gerald Walker asking Gussow for the article, Walker makes sure to request that Gussow cover "How does [Prince] feel about [*Company*'s] embodying what some playgoers [sic] feel to be a homosexual's-eye view of marriage?"<sup>32</sup> Readings of Bobby as a homosexual were apparently common enough for Walker to feel that failing to address the question would leave the article incomplete. Conversely, Walker's question could also be interpreted as audience members viewing the show as Sondheim and Furth's (and not Prince's) view of marriage. Asking such a question in print would effectively out Furth and Sondheim, something still quite taboo. More likely, Walker assumed that audiences interpreted the show as marriage through Bobby's (potentially) homosexual point of view. Or perhaps, like Goldman in *The Season*, audiences who suspected such could not uncouple the autobiographical implications of Bobby with Sondheim and Furth. These unpublished documents from Gussow's archive show that readings of Bobby as a gay, closeted character not only existed in the gay community, but were common enough to be of interest to general readers of *The New York Times*.

Tracing the discourse provides evidence that a younger generation of gay men read Bobby as gay, whereas an older generation of critics resisted such readings. Until now, readings of a gay Bobby during the show's original run have been assumed but never documented. The unpublished Gussow article demonstrates that homosexual readings of the show were common enough for a heterosexual theatre critic to ask Prince about such readings. The discourse also shows that the memories of gay men a generation removed from Sondheim (b. 1930) and Furth

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Gerald Walker to Mel Gussow, May 6, 1970, Mel Gussow Papers, Box 132, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

(1932-2008) – Bruce Kirle (1948-2007), John M. Clum (b. 1941), DA Miller (b. 1948) and Ethan Mordden (b. 1947) – remember the show as being formulative in their youth; for them, Bobby came out of the closet – an important tenet for defining oneself as gay for homosexual baby-boomers.

## **Generational Differences**

The stark differences between claimed authorial intent and audience interpretation of *Company* comes from a generational difference in understandings of homosexual identity. Age gaps have helped historians to document the evolution of homosexual identity in the United States. For example, Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer write,

The concept of cohort (or generation unit) is central to understanding how members of a generation respond to their cultural circumstances; the significance of this larger historical content has long been recognized as an important defining characteristic of particular life patterns...Stonewall and the advent of AIDS are cohort-defining events for multiple generations of men.<sup>33</sup>

One cannot separate *Company* from its historical context, i.e. The Stonewall Riots, especially for younger gay men. Stonewall separated them from those born even ten or fifteen years earlier, providing them with opportunities and political obligations that those like Sondheim and Furth could not imagine. Even the terminology began to change. Herdt and Boxer continue, “For more than a century, ‘homosexuality’ reigned supreme, until, riding a wave of social activism, ‘gay’ began to overtake it. Today, they are competing identities in every sense.”<sup>34</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also notes that “‘Homosexual’ and ‘gay’ seem more and more to be terms applicable to distinct, nonoverlapping periods in the history of a phenomenon for which there then remains

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<sup>33</sup> Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer, “Introduction: Culture, History, and the Life Course of Gay Men,” in *Gay Culture in America*, Gilbert Herdt, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 17-18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 4

no overarching label.”<sup>35</sup> For Herdt, Boxer, and Sedgwick, “gay” applies to post-Stonewall understandings of homosexuality as a minority identity category, to be treated similarly to other categories such as race. “Homosexuality” belongs to earlier times when same-sex desire was treated as a sexual abnormality or a disease that needed to be cured.<sup>36</sup> Homosexuality belongs to the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century field of Sexology, whereas gay is the property of identity rights’ activists. For Furth and Sondheim, both of the pre-Stonewall generation, homosexuality was not, at least in 1970, part of their identity in the same way being gay might be for younger audience members.<sup>37</sup> The discursive act of proclaiming an identity, either through the use of a specific term, like “gay,” reappropriating a phrase such as “coming out,” or reading another’s discursive act, such as *Company*, in a subversive or new way cements the creation of an identity group, often specifically for political purposes, as well as what it means culturally to be part of that group.

This is not to suggest that there were not men and women who felt that their same-sex desire was part of their identity dating back to Oscar Wilde and before.<sup>38</sup> Whether called “inverts,” “fairies,” or “dandies,” these men and women formed subcultures with their own meeting places and coded languages. Gender (mis)representation played a large part in defining themselves outside the norm, leading to stereotypes of feminine men and masculine women as

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<sup>35</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 17.

<sup>36</sup> Both of these categories belong outside the term “queer,” which is often applied in an ahistorical way to refer to a number of non-normative sex/gender identities and practices, usually with a radical political bent that has continually interacted with the gay and lesbian movement, often in conflict.

<sup>37</sup> In Secrest’s biography, Sondheim even discusses going to therapy for his homosexual tendencies (180).

<sup>38</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 91.

necessarily homosexuals. Nevertheless, same-sex desire alone was insufficient to make an individual part of this subculture, especially if one preferred discretion.<sup>39</sup>

Affluent men and women were specifically able to avoid being grouped in with these “degenerates” if they were adequately discreet.<sup>40</sup> Both Sondheim and Furth belonged to this class, as did other homosexuals in the theatre, like Cole Porter and Leonard Bernstein. Porter and Bernstein, one generation older than Sondheim, both entered into New York marriages, as was expected by their peers. Despite the fact these men engaged in homosexual acts and even had long-term lovers, they conducted their public lives as if they were straight.<sup>41</sup>

Such lives were not a charade, though, as some modern-day queer people might claim. For this older generation, homosexual feelings were shameful and the idea of living openly as a gay couple was almost impossible to fathom. Jack Dowling described life in the 1950s for upper-class gay men:

[Life] was furtive... We met people in very elegant apartments. West End Avenue was filled with gay guys sharing apartments... I don't think we thought about being gay as something that would eventually become a lifestyle, you know? There wasn't any example of it. Occasionally we would meet older men who would say that they had been together for a long time, and it seemed peculiar that two men had set up life together, and were living together and had been for thirty-some years. We had a certain admiration for them. But it seemed very odd.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For more, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, Robert Hurley trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); David M. Halperin, *How to be Gay* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); Jeffrey Esoffier, *American Homo: Community and Perversity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Gilbert Herdt, ed., *Gay Culture in America: Essay from the Field* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Michael Bronski, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

<sup>40</sup> Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, 13-15.

<sup>41</sup> William McBrien, *Cole Porter: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998); Nadine Hubbs, “Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography,” *Women and Music* 13 (2009): 24-42.

<sup>42</sup> Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis*, 106.

Men could have long term lovers, even live with other men if certain conditions related to class, race, and occupation were met.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the concept of “open,” of living a life where one takes their same-sex partner to work functions, to family events, or to church or synagogue, was completely alien.<sup>44</sup> In this culture, a homosexual Bobby would face tremendous obstacles, insurmountable on the commercial stage, to commit to someone. If Bobby’s crisis hinged on commitment and his misgivings are about marriage, it’s unlikely this would be unrelated to his sexual preference, as same-sex marriage was only a cursory interest of the gay and lesbian rights movement, framed as assimilation politics.<sup>45</sup>

The generation of gays and lesbians after Sondheim, however, grew up seeing the power of the Civil Rights and Feminist movements and believed that they deserved rights equal to those held by heterosexuals. They believed that they deserved the right to live openly, without fear of retribution, whether it be physical harm or losing their job. The Stonewall Riots in June of 1969 were in reaction to police harassment at bars, where cross-dressing and same-sex-couple dancing were illegal. Both before and after Stonewall, gay men and women worked to form an identity bloc in order to leverage their influence and voting power to gain civil rights. Unlike other groups, homosexuality cut across all other identities, so that powerful, white, wealthy gay men could use their other identities to improve the situation for all homosexuals. Still, these advances would only be possible if they were willing to announce publicly that they were homosexuals, or “come out.”

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<sup>43</sup> Homosexuality was construed as a liability for those in powerful positions, as it opened the door for blackmail. Homosexuality has often been tied in the popular imagination with pedophilia, so jobs around children were also forbidden, even for women, as demonstrated for example in Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*.

<sup>44</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 62.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this, see Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1999), 81-147.

Even the term “coming out” had differing definitions for lesbians and gay men depending on generational identification, influencing interpretations of the ambiguous ending of *Company*. For older gay men, those born before World War II, coming out carried a narrow meaning within the gay world; one “came out” as gay to other gay men, going to gay clubs and participating in gay culture, which was, for legal reasons, itself hidden. Coming out did not hold the contemporary connotation of telling one’s sexuality to heteronormative society.<sup>46</sup> In 1965, Evelyn Hooker observed, “Very often, the debut, referred to by homosexuals as coming out...will occur when he identifies himself publicly for the first time as a homosexual in the presence of other homosexuals by his appearance in a bar.”<sup>47</sup> Most gay men knew that the only way to protect themselves was to maintain discretion, relying on the concept of the “open secret,” the notion that those who knew would keep the knowledge to themselves. Revealing another’s sexuality was frowned upon, both in the gay world and in the press, and could lead to social ostracism within gay circles and even allegations of libel or slander.<sup>48</sup> Use of the term “closeted” for these men implies that they were choosing to hide their “true selves,” rather than just keeping their sex life private (at a time when homosexuality could still result in legal sanctions, such as arrest). During the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, homosexuals, “out” in sympathetic and safe contexts only, preferred to think of themselves as “discreet.”<sup>49</sup> Because homosexuality was not yet a viable and legitimate public identity, homosexual acts were in many

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<sup>46</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 20.

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Hooker, “Male Homosexual and Their ‘Worlds,’” in *Sexual Inversion: The Multiple Roots of Homosexuality*, ed. Judd Marmor (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 99.

<sup>48</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 79.

ways seen as similar to having an affair or participating in other non-normative sexual practices.<sup>50</sup>

The current operative definition of coming out of the closet – as the revelation to all of one’s homosexuality – was pioneered by gay and lesbian activists of the late 1960s and 1970s. For that generation, coming out, either in private to one’s family or in public, was among one of the most powerful tools of gay liberation. According to scholar David Ehrenstein, “Activists learned that the social ‘discretion’ that had helped so many in the past was a hindrance to achieving [their] political ends.”<sup>51</sup> Predicated on the idea that if one knew a homosexual or was even related to one, one would be more likely to accept homosexuality more generally, the practice of coming out became essential to one’s journey as a lesbian or gay man and how one showed individual solidarity with the cause of gay liberation. The open secrecy of the past kept the heterosexual world from knowing that their favorite celebrities, writers, and politicians were homosexuals or that homosexuals faced harassment by the police.

For a younger generation, then, reading *Company* as a coming out story would have had powerful reverberations with their current experience. But coming out requires that a person accept homosexuality as not just an act, but as an inherent, immutable identity – as a part of who they are, not just a matter of what they do. For the older generation, like Sondheim and Furth, identifying as a homosexual meant potentially putting themselves in earlier gay male categories such as “sissies” and “fairies.” Because they associated homosexual identity with mixed-gender expression and sexual deviancy, coming out was anathema.

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<sup>50</sup> This of course doesn’t mean that these men did not have intimate, romantic relationships. These relationships, however, were the kind that could never be fully embraced by the government or by society, and were often illegal, so they had to be kept out of public spaces – much like a man having an affair.

<sup>51</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 50.



This generation gap cut strongly between *Company*'s creators (in their forties; Bennett being the young exception at age 27), and a significant chunk of *Company*'s audience, gay men seeing the show in their twenties. Publicist Howard Bragman, who would have been twenty-three when *Company* opened, describes the difference in generational understandings of gay identity starkly: "I look at my friends who are a generation older than me. They say, 'It's nobody's business. We don't have to talk about it.' That was sort of the liberal accepted thing of the past."<sup>52</sup> The older generation, the generation of Sondheim, Prince, and Furth, viewed homosexuality as a private matter, not something that one proclaimed to the world. They definitely did not view "coming out" as something one did in heterosexual society. Therefore, the idea of Bobby's journey being one of coming out would probably never have crossed their minds during their writing of *Company*.

### **Homosexuality in the Text**

The text of *Company* makes no mention of Bobby's homosexuality, yet both Furth and Sondheim reference specific conceptions of queerness in the lyrics and source material for the show. Textual tensions between two contradictory understandings of homosexuality are present in the language used by Sondheim and Furth. In the song "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," the three love interests sing, "I could understand a person/if a person were a fag." General, normative notions of a "fag," based on popular representation and fantasy, guaranteed reading the more traditionally masculine Bobby as heterosexual. Use of the derogatory term "fag" indicated not simply a man who engages in homosexual acts, but a man who is effeminate, non-

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<sup>52</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 142.

gender conforming, and spends his time primarily with other homosexuals. However, gay men familiar with the variety of masculinities encompassed in gay life and culture might have heard this line as Bobby passing as straight rather than being straight. The audience's life experience, then, would dictate their reading of this line, especially in the campy, Andrews sisters-pastiche style of the number. Bobby's three romantic and sexual partners, who together sing this song, see no signs of his being gay or having a gay identity. For younger audience members, especially those who were in the gay community, Bobby's normative presentation would not have precluded him from being gay or participating in gay culture. Perhaps these three young ladies could understand Bobby in a more complex manner if they were written by a younger, gay lyricist.

Meaning in *Company* can also be found in text and productions that were tried, attempted, or implied but never made it to the final show. Such lost productions can shine a light on seemingly unimportant or confusing parts of the finished production, show insight into how the creators were thinking about a show, or generally ghost the final production, influencing audience reception. Cut portions of *Company*'s text offer evidence that Bobby was, at one point, imagined as having engaged in homosexual acts. *Company* began as a series of short, unrelated vignettes by bookwriter George Furth, each juxtaposing a married couple and a single man. Furth had wanted to turn these into a play. Prince suggested they might work better as a musical. Some of these short scenes were cut completely from the musical, but Sondheim and Furth retained material from others, and they derived the overall themes of the show from Furth's creation. This original, never produced play is available in Furth's papers at the New York Library for the Performing Arts.

In one vignette, Furth wrote about a homosexual/homosocial interaction. This scene between Peter and Bobby (in this play “John”) was initially included almost verbatim in *Company* but was cut before the show opened (The 1995 Roundabout Theatre production reinstated it). This short play is between two married men who discuss whether or not they have had a “homosexual experience.” Dialogue early in the play:

*Peter: Did my lawyer call? Did Fred call?*

*John: Yes, at least I think he did. Does he have a breathy voice and very clipped speech?*

*Peter: Yeah, kind of fag speech.*

*John: He called.*

*Peter: He really is a homosexual, you know.*

*John: No, I didn't.*

*Peter: Jesus Christ, yes. I went to bed with him once, just to see what it was like.*

*Not my scene.*

*John: You didn't like it.*

*Peter: I didn't think anything. I told my wife about it. My first wife, Marianne.*

*John: Did she find it interesting?*

*Peter: She didn't say anything. We were already splitting up. Do you have any furniture wax?*

*John: For what?*

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*John: It's in the closet with the dust rags, but forget it.*

*Peter: I'm very anal. You can tell you're not.*

*John: No, I'm genital.*

Furth's use of the term "fag speech" here denotes the lawyer as a "real" gay man, in contrast to Peter. Even though Peter had sex with Fred as an experiment, Peter did not find sex with a man satisfying enough to repeat the act. Sexuality here is not determined merely by sexual act, but by sexual preferences combined with effeminate behaviors, in this case, Fred's voice. Sexual acts, non-sexual gender non-conforming behaviors, and self-identification work together to create what John and Peter define as homosexual.

The scene then shifts to sexual tension between Peter and John. The anal/genital joke provides a moment of coy flirtation between the two, as does Peter admitting he has had sex with a man before. Peter and John—understood to be Furth's age—proceed to compare themselves with the younger generation, the generation who was pushing for an acceptable gay identity.

*Peter: Jesus, John, this is when I should be being born. This is my age. Wild ass kids with probing minds rebelling against all the crap. I identify with those kids.*

*John: Shouldn't. You're the enemy the same as their parents.*

*Peter: No, sir. Not I.*

*John: Peter, you're square to those kids.*

The dialogue that was initially used but then cut from *Company* during rehearsals follows:

*Peter: John, did you ever have a homosexual experience?*

*John: What do you mean?*

*Peter: I don't mean as a kid. I mean since you've been an adult. Did you?*

*John: Yes, I have.*

*Peter: So did I. You're not a fag, are you?*

*John: No, no. Are you?*

*Peter: No, no. For Chrissake. I've done it more than once, though.*

*John: So have I.*

*Peter: I think sometimes you meet somebody and you just love the crap out of them. Y'know?*

*John: Yes. I know exactly.*

*Peter: Sometimes you just want to manifest that love, that's all.*

*John: That's true.*

*Peter: I think that sometimes you can even know someone for a long time and then suddenly you just want to have them – even an old friend. You just desire that closeness.*

*John: Probably.*

*Peter: I mean, sometimes two men really would, if it wasn't for society and conventions and all that crap, just go off and ball and be better off for it, don't you think?*

*John: I think that's possible.*

*Peter: I mean like us, for example.*

*Peter: Do you think you and I could have anything like that?*

*John: Like what, Peter?*

*Peter: A homosexual experience.*

First, Peter and John/Bobby confirm for each other that they are not “fags.” They are not effeminate, and they are not interested in having relationships primarily with other men. Even though they both have had multiple sexual encounters with men, this is not enough to make them gay. For the younger generation viewing *Company*, Peter and John/Bobby might have been viewed as closeted, denying their true selves, rather than as men who happened to have slept with other men.

Furth’s play and book for the musical both use the term “homosexual experience” as a sly invite from Peter to John/Bobby. They also use the term to differentiate homosexual acts from gay identity, a key generational understanding of same-sex relations. The play and the musical end this scene differently, however. In the musical, Bobby deflects Peter’s advances as a joke. The play ends with something more profound:

*John (in a monotone – after a long pause): We’re having it right now.*

*Peter: Jesus, John. I just realized. When you get better, you just go to a whole other plateau. A whole new set of problems.*<sup>53</sup>

Furth’s ending leaves the audience questioning what qualifies as a homosexual experience. How do we categorize intimacy between two men, whether emotional or physical, whether acted upon or simply suggested or invited? Furth’s play freely admits the men’s homosexual experiences yet questions the basis for those such actions. What is the role of male friendship? What is the overlap between male friendship and homosexuality? Such important questions were being overwhelmed by the rise of gay identity, with its equation of all homosexual acts as also

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<sup>53</sup> George Furth, Script for *A Husband, A Wife, and a Friend*, Boris Aronson Collection, Box 3, Folder 3, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

romantic/sexual intimacy, even as Furth wrote this scene.<sup>54</sup> Furth's play – in retrospect – compelled, asked, and refused to answer a large social question of the time. The remnants of such questions lingered on in *Company* and its reception.

Although the scene adapted from Furth's play was ultimately shortened in the musical to remove any discussion of homosexuality between Peter and Bobby, the tension between homosociality and homosexuality remained. Both Bobby and Peter appeared shirtless in this scene, heightening the sexual tensions of their talk. This is also one of the few scenes that Bobby is alone with another man, rather than being alone with another woman. One can read undertones from Furth's original script, where both men are coyly flirting with one another while maintaining their heterosexual identities. How the actors playing Bobby and Peter read these lines and how the director stages the moment opens the door to performance shaping meaning in *Company*.

Such moments in the text reveal the possibilities for reading Bobby as gay, as well as generational differences in understanding what exactly that word means, even as the script itself is thoroughly ambiguous. Bobby may not be a "fag," but he might be gay; he might have sex with April, but in Furth's original imagining and later revivals, he has also had sex with men. Through his original play, Furth demonstrated his older generational understanding of homosexual identity and by implication suggested why he and Sondheim were so resistant to gay readings of Bobby – for them, his sexual practices were irrelevant to the main theme of marriage and commitment.

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<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Interviews, 1961-1984*, Sylvere Lotringer, ed. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 308-312.



**Figure 4.1** Larry Kert as Bobby and John Cunningham as Peter, shirtless in the scene that originally contained mentions of homosexual acts by both men.

### **Biographical Readings of *Company***

Furth and Sondheim were “closeted” homosexuals when they made *Company*.<sup>55</sup> Though they were part of the older generation that was “out” to gay society, they had not yet made a public declaration to those outside of their immediate circle. (Furth would do so in the 1980s; Sondheim in the 1990s.) Many of their friends knew about their homosexual tendencies and were homosexuals themselves – nonetheless, they decided to keep their personal life discreet.

A telling example occurred in 1983 when Furth sent out a letter encouraging his friends and fans to boycott *The Christian Science Monitor* because they refused to hire homosexual writers. He received a response from Steve Smith, sarcastically thanking him for finally coming out. In reply, Furth wrote,

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<sup>55</sup> Tyler Coates, “Does Bobby Need to Be Openly Gay in Stephen Sondheim’s Revised ‘Company?’” *Flavorwire*, October 16, 2013, <http://flavorwire.com/420408/the-revised-company-does-bobby-need-to-be-openly-gay> [accessed May 1, 2017].



My letter was not a letter of ‘coming out’. I was never ‘in’. I may not have been out as you would have it but that has little to do with me and the way I conduct my life. As a public person I have always made privacy very important in my life...I am careful not take on more than I can meet. This would be so whatever my sexual orientation would be. I resist being public except in my work.<sup>56</sup>

Furth’s insistence that he was not closeted, just private, implies that those close to him would have known he was a homosexual. Further, his belief that he did not need to come out reveals his generational thinking that his sexuality was only a private matter and of little real consequence to the public. He was “out” in the older sense, but to his young fan, Steve Smith, this was not enough; Furth, who was a successful public figure, had the obligation to be as out and proud as possible.

Sondheim seems to have struggled more with his sexual identity. In his biography by Meryle Secrest, Sondheim admitted,

I was never easy with being a homosexual, which complicated things...I don’t think I knew more than maybe four homosexuals in the fifties and sixties who were openly so...Everybody knew the theatre was full of homosexuals, but nobody admitted to being so.<sup>57</sup>

Though he already had a serious partner in the early 1990s, Sondheim did not publicly discuss his gay identity until the Secrest biography was published in 1998. The mid to late 1990s was a time when numerous celebrities were publicly coming out – though many of their fans may have known that they were homosexuals, these women and men were finally giving the press express permission to write about their private lives.<sup>58</sup> Theatre historian David Savran notes Sondheim’s reluctance to come out, writing that in the late 1990s, “Even Stephen Sondheim tiptoed out of the

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from George Furth to Steve Smith, July 8, 1983, George Furth Papers, Box 1, Folder 4, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>57</sup> Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 180.

<sup>58</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 22-23.

closet.”<sup>59</sup> Although Sondheim had not given the press permission to write about his homosexuality until Secrest’s biography, it is probable that some in the theatre knew of his sexuality before then, as he had already disclosed his feelings to close friends by the mid-1960s.<sup>60</sup> But like Furth, Sondheim preferred to keep his sexual life private, and as he had no long-term serious partners until the 1990s, he had no relationship with which to announce his sexuality and no urgent desire to simply declare his homosexuality outright.

Like Bobby, Sondheim had very close friendships with a number of heterosexual couples, including Judy and Harold Prince and Mary Rodgers and Henry Guettel. As Elizabeth Wollman points out,

One doesn’t have to make much of a leap to envision Sondheim – or Furth, for that matter – as the autobiographical inspiration for a thirty-something bachelor in the early 1970s, who loves and yet feels disenfranchised from his heterosexual circle, and who feels endless pressure to adopt a heteronormative lifestyle, despite serious and persistent doubts that he wants or would be happy in one.<sup>61</sup>

Wollman’s assertions are drawn from hindsight – now that audiences know about Sondheim’s hesitations towards commitment and issues with his own sexual identity, it is easy to read Bobby *as* Sondheim. Significantly, Gussow’s published review from 1970 also drew this parallel to Sondheim’s life. He wrote, “Since the composer himself is just 40, unmarried, and a much-invited guest, he feels especially close to ‘Company.’”<sup>62</sup> The show reflected the realities of Upper East Side New York as Sondheim had experienced it as a single man.

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<sup>59</sup> David Savran, “The Queerest Art,” in *A Queer Sort of Materialism: Recontextualizing American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 57.

<sup>60</sup> Scott Stoddart, “Queer Sondheim” in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, ed. Robert Gordon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 416.

<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth L. Wollman, *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 48.

<sup>62</sup> Notes from Interview with Harold Prince, May 1970, Mel Gussow Papers, Box 132, Folder 2, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

Bobby also reflected Sondheim's general feelings about *all* romantic relationships, heterosexual or homosexual. Rodgers herself believes that the lyrics of the final number, "Being Alive," reflected Sondheim's personal feelings about relationships, saying, "'Someone to sit in my chair,' that's really the way he feels."<sup>63</sup> This ambivalence around relationships is unsurprising for a man whose first serious relationship occurred in his sixties; however, separating Sondheim's issues with commitment from his issues with his sexuality is impossible. Gay men accepting of their sexual desires can still struggle with commitment, just as straight men can struggle with ideas of marriage, but being gay can also add to one's fear of future relationships outside the normative paradigm and the difficult life that implies. Gay identity exists in a world where serious same-sex relationships and their recognition by friends, family, and even the state are possible. For audience members identifying as gay, then, reading Bobby as Sondheim – a man who struggles with both commitment and sexuality – would be possible. Yet, for Sondheim, whose understanding of what it means to be a homosexual existed at this moment outside the paradigm of "gay," one cannot be both a homosexual and be interested (or not!) in traditional marriage: one excludes the other.

### **Performer Persona as Biographical Influence**

An individual actor, his past roles, and his public personal life can all influence audience interpretation of a show, though often in complex and unpredictable ways. As theatre scholar Marvin Carlson writes, "Celebrity, as we noted in speaking of its relationship to the work of the individual actor, while a powerful source of ghosting, is an ambiguous one, which may work

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<sup>63</sup> Gottfried, *Sondheim*, 88.

either to reinforce or subvert the desired effect of the production.”<sup>64</sup> This proves especially in true in the case of Bobby, whose weak characterization needs extratextual information. The sexual orientation and identity of the man playing Bobby was and continues to be an important part of discourse and audience interpretation around *Company*.<sup>65</sup> During the original run, two men played Bobby: Dean Jones, a straight actor, and Larry Kert, an actor known by 1965 to be gay. Unlike the character they played, both men had real, established sexual identities – though Kert’s was an “open secret” – and audiences, especially gay men already interested in the theatre, could not avoid the interpretive implications of this knowledge.

Even as Jones and Kert influenced the role, Bobby was not written with either in mind. Neither was originally cast in the part. Furth, Sondheim, and Prince conceived of *Company* with Anthony Perkins in mind. Perkins and Sondheim met when Perkins starred in Sondheim’s made-for-television musical, *Evening Primrose* (1966). They would remain friends until Perkins death from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1992. The two even collaborated on a film, *The Last of Sheila*, in 1973. Perkins inspired the role, and in the imaginations of fans and critics, is the original but never realized Bobby.

Perkins was a model of the Porter and Bernstein generations’ call for discretion. Though he eventually married a woman in 1973 and had children with her, up until 1971, he had only had homosexual relationships.<sup>66</sup> As mentioned above, this move towards heterosexual marriage was quite normal for gay men of his age; however, Perkins’s death from AIDS-related causes in

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<sup>64</sup> Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as a Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001): 111-112.

<sup>65</sup> Raul Esparza used the role in 2006 to come out publicly as interested in men; Gay icon Neil Patrick Harris played the role in a New York Philharmonic broadcast, which played in theatres across the nation the same month that marriage equality passed in New York State.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Winecoff, *Split Image: The Life of Anthony Perkins* (Boston: Dutton, 1996).

1992 hints that, like Bernstein, he continued to have homosexual relations after marriage.

Ehrenstein explains, “Anthony Perkins was, for the better part of his life, involved with members of his own sex...Still, being attendant on the received psychoanalytic wisdom of the post-World War II period, Perkins wasn’t ‘gay’ in the sense that activists struggled for decades to make socially viable.”<sup>67</sup> Perkins lived the “open secret”; still, his situation might have resonated with younger gay men as ripe with the opportunity to publicly come out, like Bobby does for such audiences at the end of *Company*.

Many of Perkins’s roles associated him with a homosexual identity. His first major film role was as Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). Film critics often classify Bates as a pathological homosexual stereotype, particularly in his obsessive relationship with his mother.<sup>68</sup> On stage, his breakthrough role was as Tom, the lead in *Tea and Sympathy* (1954). The story revolves around Tom’s inability to participate in normative masculinity at his all boys’ prep school. His perceived femininity leads the other boys to continually harass him for being a homosexual, even as Tom pursues the much older House Mother in secret. Though Tom is not a homosexual, the part requires an actor to project “homosexual” behavior and mannerisms. Perkins’s success in this role strengthens the ties between his public persona and homosexuality, as one who can convincingly “act gay.” Perkins had only ever starred in one musical on Broadway before 1970: Frank Loesser’s *Green Willow* (1960). He may have had a star persona on film and stage, but his very loose associations with the Broadway musical made him a strange and interesting choice for *Company*.

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<sup>67</sup> Ehrenstein, *Open Secret*, 169.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Genter, “‘We All Go a Little Mad Sometimes’: Alfred Hitchcock, American Psychoanalysis, and the Construction of the Cold War Psychopath,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 40, no. 2 (2010): 133-162.

Perkins was not very committed to *Company*. Though he was excited by the script and originally signed on, as indicated in the *New York Times* and elsewhere, he eventually dropped out claiming a desire to focus less on acting and more on directing. Perkins explained, “I told them...that I know I agreed to do their show and I will do it, but what I *really* wish was that I was not acting but directing some other show. And they reacted with such class and with such understanding and let me go.”<sup>69</sup> Though he left before the show began rehearsals, the shadow of Perkins and his persona lingered both as an influence on the creators and as a hypothetical Bobby for audiences, critics, and historians.

Because it had been publicized that the part was originally going to Perkins, critics often comment on – and continue to imagine – what the show would have been like if he had stayed. Hobe Morrison’s review in *Variety* mentions Perkins as the initial Bobby before stating that Jones’s was “admirable,” though Morrison’s overall review of the show skewed negative.<sup>70</sup> Secrest, in her biography of Sondheim, discusses the perceived emptiness of the character by critics that may have been filled by a bigger star persona: “Prince and Sondheim had originally engaged Tony Perkins to play Robert, which would have enhanced the role with someone whose film personality was well established... Both Jones and Kert received respectful reviews, but because their personalities were not as well established as Perkins’s, the missing dimensions of Robert may have seemed more evident.”<sup>71</sup> The textual hole in Bobby’s character can be filled in several ways: one being with a large personality. Audiences more familiar with Perkins may have been thinking about him during the show, even as Jones or Kert played the part. Bruce Kirle agrees, stating, “It is conceivable that Perkins’s appeal as a film star and his ingratiating

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<sup>69</sup> Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Harper & Row Publishers 1980), 120.

<sup>70</sup> Hobe Morrison, *Variety*, April 29, 1970.

<sup>71</sup> Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 199-200.

charm would have made the character less of a cipher.”<sup>72</sup> The general consensus among critics is that Perkins would have made the best Bobby, his persona compensating for the character’s textual flaws. Gay audiences aware of Perkins’s sexual leanings, combined with the implications of a “bachelor,” may have also read homosexuality into the character before even seeing the show. Like the discourse around a gay Bobby, the potentialities of a Perkins-led *Company* demonstrate the way life and discourse outside the theatre and the text influences textual readings during performance.

Those desiring Perkins in the leading role may have been disappointed with the reality. After seeing the show, Perkins himself felt relieved to not be in it. In an interview with Craig Zadan, he remarked,

I think that it was inappropriate to have someone starring in that role. The character is there to make the other scenes possible and the show is really a musical with a cast of fourteen – all of whom have equal responsibilities. It’s brilliant ensemble playing, but it’s not a show that features a performer. For some reason, I was the first person to turn up backstage after the opening night performance, and Dean was standing there and he said, ‘Man, I really tried. I tried to make this part mine but I couldn’t.’ I sympathized with him. He was good in that role, but the person who plays that part is always unappreciated. And having turned down the role, I thought to myself, not knowing what the part turned out to be, that when I went to the opening I should bring along my gun because at the end of the first act I’m going to put it against my temple and fire. But I didn’t. I thought that it was a brilliant show...and I was happy I wasn’t in it.<sup>73</sup>

Perkins believed that Bobby was not a star turn. While he is in almost every scene and has many solos, Bobby’s character is too passive to allow a virtuosic actor a star role. This problem lies in the text: as Perkins’ noted, no actor can overcome that. No one can keep Bobby from being a

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<sup>72</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 182.

<sup>73</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 129.

cipher – making him a character that the audience could fill with whatever reading they found necessary.

In November 1969, two months before *Company* went into rehearsal, newspapers reported that Perkins had withdrawn and was being replaced by Dean Jones.<sup>74</sup> Jones, like Perkins, was primarily a movie star living in Los Angeles. He was best known for leading roles in family-friendly films, such as *The Love Bug* (1968) and other Disney releases, and he had last appeared on Broadway in the comic play *Under the Yum-Yum Tree* in 1960. Also like Perkins, his profile was more national than New York. *Company* offered him the opportunity to move back to Broadway and appear in a serious, adult piece—albeit a musical.

Jones performed to mixed but generally favorable reviews, both of the show and of his performance specifically. Of the sixty-two reviews of Jones, seventy-five percent were positive.<sup>75</sup> (This number includes out-of-town reviews before some major revisions, discussed below, were made.) Many of the reviews found Jones to be “handsome,” “attractive,” and “charming,” but they also found him to be “blank,” “cool,” “hollow,” and “unnaturally without theatrical goals.”<sup>76</sup> Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* called Jones “Peter-Panish,” a mixture of “Dean Martin and Tom Jones” that “lacked charisma.”<sup>77</sup> Some of these comments are reflective of the nature of the Bobby the character – observational, goalless, passive – others reveal something of Jones’s interpretation.

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<sup>74</sup> Joyce Habert, “The Noise Kept La Hepburn Awake,” *The New York Post*, November 25, 1969.

<sup>75</sup> I judged a review as positive if it recommended the show. Some of these reviews had criticisms of the show, but the critic liked the show overall and told her/his readers to go see it.

<sup>76</sup> Reviews of *Company*, *Company* Clippings File, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, NY.

<sup>77</sup> Clive Barnes, “Theater: ‘Company’ Offers a Guide to New York’s Marital Jungle,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1970.



Most damning, of course, was Martin Gottfried's review from *Women's Wear Daily*. As discussed above, Gottfried said, "[Jones] can seem sexless and must watch it or the show's theme (and honesty) will be confused by hints of homosexuality."<sup>78</sup> In Gottfried's estimation, Bobby had to be played with sufficient direct and conventional sex appeal, especially in scenes with his three love interests, for the character to be read as straight.<sup>79</sup> Jones's apparent lack of sex-appeal perhaps correlated with his reputation as a Disney actor rather than as a serious, adult performer. William Glover, the AP Drama Critic, made sure to mention that Jones was "on loan to Broadway from television and Disney filmland"; he also commented that Jones's Bobby was "naïve" – another word for sexless, perhaps.<sup>80</sup> Patrick O'Connor, from Channel 13 – WNDT, also commented on Jones's previous employment and described him as "a graduate of the Walt Disney factory," a snide comment about the actor's training. However, O'Connor also credited Jones's flaws as working to create a successful show because one could read themselves into the character: "Mr. Jones is a kind of animated cartoon character and you insert your face where a real face should be. If the part had been played by a better performer, say Jerry Orbach, the impact of the show would have been lessened."<sup>81</sup> For the TV critic, the power of *Company* stemmed from one's ability to put themselves in Bobby's shoes, to feel the ambiguities about relationships and marriage expressed by the couples in scene after scene without interference from Bobby's perspective as a character. O'Connor confirmed Perkins's view that Bobby is not a star-role and declared this an asset for the audience. A star would fill up the part too much with himself. Though it may be difficult for the actor playing Bobby to allow the character to be

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<sup>78</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Women's Wear Daily*, April 27, 1970.

<sup>79</sup> Bobby had to be played straight and sexy, even though the three women complain of his disinterest in them. He's a "zombie."

<sup>80</sup> William Glover, "New Musical Sparkles with Lively 'Company,'" *AP Drama Critic*, April 27, 1970.

<sup>81</sup> Patrick O'Connor, *Company* Review, Newfront Channel 13 – WNDT, April 27, 1970.

empty, this emptiness affords the audience a position of empathetic projection. For homosexuals in the audience, particularly young, gay men, this level of empathy would have meant reading Bobby as gay and closeted, rather than a straight man afraid of commitment.

A month after the show opened in Manhattan, Jones left the cast and was replaced by Broadway veteran Larry Kert. The official reason for Jones's departure was illness: hepatitis. However, Jones later admitted to Craig Zadan that this was not why he left.

I liked *Company*...don't get me wrong. I just felt unsatisfied in the role and I was going through my own divorce at the time. I felt that the show was antimarriage, perhaps because at the time *I* was anti-marriage. Every night after the performance, I would be on the phone with the attorneys. I'd gotten soft on the Coast, I guess. I'm not built for a year's run. I can never do that again. I was miserable and obviously I *didn't* have hepatitis, but Hal was nice enough to let me out.<sup>82</sup>

Jones's reasons for leaving were twofold: first, he was going through his own marital problems and the role served as a constant reminder, and second, he did not want to work quite so hard. It had been a long time since Jones had been on Broadway – almost ten years – and doing eight shows a week is very different than making a movie. Both reasons seem legitimate.

Rumors have persisted, though, concerning other reasons why Jones may have left the show. According to Kirle, there were reports that Jones was “terrified of the homosexual implications of the character and its long-range effect on his film career as a star of family comedies.”<sup>83</sup> Kevin Kelley, in his biography of Michael Bennett, makes a more colorful claim: “Dean Jones panicked. Playing even a faintly perceived homosexual might damage him in movies...If fairies were thought to be fluttering forth more and more, and less and less being

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<sup>82</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 128.

<sup>83</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 182.

swatted back, they still weren't allowed to fly through family movies."<sup>84</sup> These claims rely on the assumption that gay readings of *Company* were common or at least, were perceived as common enough to reach the mainstream. Jones could not afford to be publicly associated with homosexuality, as he was primarily employed by Disney. As Jones was about to be a bachelor again, he may have also felt insecure in his new status and worried that fans might believe that his divorce stemmed from his sexuality due to it coinciding with him playing a questioning character.<sup>85</sup> Yet, no citations or evidence are supplied for these claims, making room for skeptics to dismiss them and giving little weight to them as evidence of widespread homosexual readings of Bobby.

No matter his reasons for leaving, Jones's departure seems to have benefited the show overall. Kert was in many ways a more traditional choice for the role than Jones. He had worked for Sondheim and Prince before as the original Tony in *West Side Story* (1957), as well as a replacement Cliff in *Cabaret* (1966). At the time of the casting of *Company*, Kert was living in California following his passion for animals by breeding dogs and horses. Hiring Kert was Prince's idea: "I had gotten Larry Kert to be his standby long before we ever left for out-of-town tryouts. I didn't have in mind that he would replace Dean; what I planned was for Larry to play the national company. Larry was a guy who was selling dogs in California and I felt that he should get the hell out of there and back into the theater where he belonged."<sup>86</sup> Although Prince preferred Jones for the part, he saw Kert as a reliable replacement, especially for audiences outside of New York City. Prince was also invested in Kert's career and wanted to help him get back into the spotlight.

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<sup>84</sup> Kelly, *One Singular Sensation*, 69.

<sup>85</sup> This was the actual situation actor Raul Esparza found himself in in 2006.

<sup>86</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 128-129.

Kert might have also been worried about homosexual associations, though his career was mostly over by this point. As discussed above, it would have been unlikely for such suppositions to have been printed or remarked upon in public – nonetheless, his homosexuality was well-known by those in the theatre world. Arthur Laurents, in his memoir *Original Story By...*, quotes Jerome Robbins (who was also gay) derogatorily calling Kert a “faggot” during rehearsals for *West Side Story*.<sup>87</sup> Robbins, Laurents, and other big names, as well as other actors, were most likely familiar with Kert’s sexuality, something that Ethan Mordden remarks on as well in his 2017 essay on Sondheim.<sup>88</sup> Though most of the discussion of sexuality was kept within the family, so to speak, Joyce Haber, theatre critic for the *Chicago Sun Times*, did write that Kert had been “hiding in someone’s closet since *West Side Story*.”<sup>89</sup> Even though there is no way to know for sure if this was a nod towards Kert’s sexual preferences, the use of the phrase “coming out of the closet” had been used within gay circles for at least ten years.<sup>90</sup>

Kert’s sexuality did not factor into the decision to cast Jones first in the role. Rather, Jones was viewed as more emotional and somber than Kert and a better fit for the part. The creators’ preference for Jones is well-documented. Prince remembers, “So Larry [Kert] replaced Dean [Jones]...it was more of a musical comedy with Larry. The show with Larry wasn’t the show we intended...it wasn’t pointed up as well...it was softer...the laughs were more indulgent...but the *audience* liked Larry better, and had Dean stayed, there’s no telling whether

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<sup>87</sup> Arthur Laurents, *Original Story By...* (New York: Applause, 2000), 358; As discussed above, the derogatory use of the term “faggot” by homosexual men was common, especially when a man was perceived as gender non-conforming or feminine in some way.

<sup>88</sup> Ethan Mordden, *On Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 69.

<sup>89</sup> Joyce Haber, “My Favorite Manhattan Couple,” *Chicago Sun Times*, May 27, 1970.

<sup>90</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 6-7. This is contrast to earlier understandings of “coming out” as coming out into gay culture, as discussed above.

the show would have been successful.”<sup>91</sup> Kert brought a more light-hearted interpretation to the show, alleviating the non-traditional, depressingly realistic analysis of marriage. Bennett agreed, stating,

I was very sorry that Dean left. Larry was very busy performing [inauthentically], and Dean was a man who was troubled and it worked brilliantly with the part. In ‘Being Alive’ Dean suffered; with Larry it was Larry Kert doing the show-stopper. The difference was that Larry performed with the fourth wall gone and with Dean it was there – you were witnessing as opposed to being a part of something.<sup>92</sup>

For Bennett, Kert’s persona got in the way of his performance. Jones was more serious, more introspective; Kert was more extroverted, more performative. This may have been related to Kert’s more polished performance style; he had played a musical theatre leading-man before and had a trained voice. He was also more used to live theatre, perhaps better able to connect with the audience and break the fourth wall, as Bennett observed. Kert’s better performance may have somehow lessened the overall impact on the audience or at least, drastically altered audience interpretations. Kert filled Bobby’s emptiness with his own personality, making it more difficult for the audience to see themselves as Bobby, watching and judging these other couples and the merits of marriage. With Jones’s less bombastic performance, the audience could more easily see themselves in Bobby, even become Bobby at some level, as there was room for their own personal interpretations and experiences around marriage and commitment.

Unlike the creators of the show, critics preferred Kert to Jones.<sup>93</sup> Their main reason was the quality of singing: Kert’s Broadway voice was favored over Jones’s untutored singing. In a

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<sup>91</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 128-129.

<sup>92</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 129.

<sup>93</sup> Looking at reviews of the show, performances with Jones received more negative reviews than those with Kert. The discrepancy may be in part due to the fact that many reviews for Jones come from the Boston try-out. Try-outs often receive more negative reviews because changes are still being made and the show is still being perfected by

typical comment for reviews of Kert, John O'Connor of the *Wall Street Journal* remarked, "The replacement is every bit as good as the original and, as far as singing is concerned, perhaps just a bit better."<sup>94</sup> Critics also found Kert to be more charismatic than Jones. One of the biggest complaints of *Company* with Jones was that Bobby's character was empty. As Patrick O'Connor of Channel 13 found this to be a strength, others found Kert more compelling because he filled in the character with his own persona. Mel Gussow for *The New York Times* remarked, "Jones was effective, but perhaps too passive. Kert apparently realizes that Robert is not merely an observer, that he moves from bemused detachment to a final quest for commitment."<sup>95</sup> For Gussow, Kert's Bobby was able to have a journey in a way that Jones's was not. Perhaps this was a journey towards a relationship, but others could have read it as a journey out of the closet. These two readings, of course, are not mutually exclusive.

Bennett's observation that Kert improved over time also holds, as shown by positive notices from London where Kert played Bobby from January 18 to November 7, 1972. Most interestingly, Harold Hobson from *The London Sunday Times* found, "Before the opening, it had been suggested...that the central character, Robert, was a cipher...Robert, on the other hand, is anything but a cipher. He is the wary, yet sparkling centre which gives significance and colour to all that revolves around him with calculated reckless audacity."<sup>96</sup> Hobson did not concur with most of the reviews from Broadway that Bobby was a hollow character. As the script and the music had not changed, the change was in the performance. Kert was able to fill in the character of Bobby – perhaps by, as Bennett noticed, putting Kert in the place where Bobby would be.

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the authors. Also, *Company* is very much a New York show, so it follows that there would be more positive reviews in New York than Boston.

<sup>94</sup> John J. O'Connor, "Broadway Fragility - and Vitality," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 28, 1970.

<sup>95</sup> Mel Gussow, "Theater: 'Company' Anew," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1970.

<sup>96</sup> Harold Hobson, "The Company We Keep," *The London Sunday Times*, January 25, 1972.

Reading Kert as more charismatic also reinforces Prince's statement that audiences preferred Kert because he made the show more of a musical comedy. By filling out Bobby and making him more likeable, more "boy-next-door" as the critic from *The Times* (London) called him, the show became less of a bleak pondering of the drawbacks of marriage and more of a traditional musical, where the wily bachelor is tamed, even though *who* tamed him is not yet answered.<sup>97</sup> This may also have been due to Kert's more traditional acting and singing style, which put him squarely in the realm of the traditional, heteronormative (but with homosexual undertones) musical.

Overall, critics preferred Kert to Jones, whereas the creators preferred Jones to Kert. The hollowness of Jones's performance, due to his lack of persona on stage in comparison to Kert, may have made gay readings of the show easier than with Kert, as the audience would have been more likely to see themselves in the character.<sup>98</sup> However, Kert's "open secret" may have made the character of Bobby and the persona of Kert more aligned, privileging a coming-out story to those who wanted to see it. Kert believed the show to be pro-marriage, but Jones did not, which may also have led to the differences in performance and reception.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps Jones's apparent inability to fill out Bobby and give him a journey can be explained by Jones himself not believing in the words he was singing in *Company*'s final number, "Being Alive," as he found the number underwhelming and the show anti-marriage.

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<sup>97</sup> John Higgins, "Musical Life Begins at 35," *The Times* (London), January 19, 1972.

<sup>98</sup> Most later commentators who write about Bobby's possible homosexuality who comment on seeing the original production imply that they saw it with Jones and Kert. They may also be referring to an unstaged reunion performance at the Vivian Beaumont in 1993, after Kert had passed away, where Jones re-stepped into the role. Also, cast recordings exist with both Jones and Kert.

<sup>99</sup> Louis Botto, "'Company': Broadway's Oddest Love/Hate Hit," *Look*, September 8, 1970.

## The Ambiguity of “Being Alive”

As theatre historian Bruce Kirle astutely asserts, “Whether Bobby is straight or gay is (or is not) answered in performance.”<sup>100</sup> In particular, how an audience perceives Bobby’s journey hinges on the performance of “Being Alive,” *Company*’s final number. Depending on one’s leanings, this song implies either marriage or coming-out. The song is the only moment in the show where Bobby displays any kind of desire for a real relationship and perhaps marriage, though the word is absent in the lyric. Besides being the crucial end to Bobby’s journey through the show, it is also the number most remarked upon by critics, proving an actor’s successful performance or revealing his failure. Recordings of both Kert and Jones singing this final number are available for comparison to better understand their differences in performing Bobby. If the audience can read “Being Alive” as a coming out number, a triumph over the heterosexual norms of Bobby’s friends and his world, *Company* becomes a show with a political/personal bent for the young gay men in the audience; if an actor closes off such possibilities, the show maintains its presumed heterosexuality.

The final number was also the most difficult to write for Sondheim. “Being Alive” was the fourth number written for the finale. The first two, “Multitudes of Amys” and “Marry Me a Little,” were written when the show ended with Bobby proposing to Amy after she left Paul. “Multitudes of Amys” would have given the show a somewhat sunnier and heterosexual ending, a choice not made by the composers. The song contains romantic images like “Galaxies of Amys dot the night skies. / Girls pass and look at me with Amy’s eyes.”<sup>101</sup> These images contrast the more acidic and sardonic lyrics of “Being Alive.” The music is also more optimistic, with a

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<sup>100</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 183.

<sup>101</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 195.



sweeping romantic melody and a lush counter melody that has since been orchestrated with romantic strings.<sup>102</sup> Most of all, the end is definitive, with Bobby singing “I’m ready, I’m ready, I’ll say it: Marry me now!”<sup>103</sup> It is difficult to imagine a gay reading where the show ends with “Multitudes of Amys”. The lyrics, equating all women as possible marital partners, can be heard as Bobby wanting to marry “some *body*,” but the lush music and the naming of the love object with a female name – “Amy” – deters all doubts that Bobby is finally ready to settle down with a woman.

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<sup>102</sup> Stephen Sondheim, *Unsung Sondheim*, Varese Sarabande [CD] September 1993.

<sup>103</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 195.

# MULTITUDES OF AMYS

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Music and Lyrics by  
STEPHEN SONDHEIM

*Molto rubato* (♩ = 120) ROBERT:

Mul - ti - tudes of A - mys

Crowd the streets be - low. Av - en - ues of A - mys,

Of - fice - fuls of A - mys Ev - 'ry - where I go.

Figure 4.2 The opening to the original final number - lush and romantic, celebrating Bobby's feelings for Amy, a traditional musical ending.

“Marry Me a Little,” which was also supposed to end the show as a proposal to Amy, is more in line with Bobby’s doubts about marital coupling. The lyric extends the equivocal title and describes a marriage with reservations and withholdings. The song seeks to mitigate the vulnerable aspects of marriage by asking Amy to “Keep a tender distance / so we’ll both be free.”<sup>104</sup> The words closely reflect the Bobby the audience gets to know throughout the evening. The music, which begins upbeat with a syncopated accompaniment and short melodic bursts, moves towards melancholy during the bridge, when Bobby mirrors the line at the end of “Multitude of Amys,” “I’m ready now.” Here, the constant accompaniment is interrupted and the music moves into a more ballad-like section, with a slower tempo and longer melodic lines. The number ends with repeated forte, almost screaming cries on a stepwise descending melodic figure, “I’m ready!” The insistent repetition carries a kind of falseness: does Bobby repeat that he is ready for marriage because, as the earlier lyrics of the song have demonstrated, he really is not? Or perhaps, he is ready for a “New York marriage” – looking for a life-long friend and partner, but one who allows him to explore his homosexual desires.

“Marry Me a Little” queers Bobby, both in 1970 and now, as it names an alternative to monogamous marriage. The lyric posits a compromise between marriage and bachelorhood. Bobby wants someone to “love me more than others/not exclusively.” This ambivalent yet somehow also passionate song contains a singing subject who is either not ready for commitment or desires a non-traditional marriage, perhaps the Bernstein possibility of having a family while practicing homosexuality. “Marry Me A Little,” unlike “Multitudes of Amys,” does not straighten Bobby, but in fact, enables genuinely queer readings. It also ends the show

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<sup>104</sup> Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 185.

inconclusively for most audiences, because though Bobby might sing “I’m ready now,” he is definitely not ready for traditional marriage.

The creators cut this number along with “Multitude of Amys” during rehearsals when they changed the plot to have Amy marry Paul at the end of Act I. “Marry Me a Little” would have rung truer for Bobby than “Amys,” but would have felt like an unsatisfying ending. With “Marry,” Bobby has learned very little, and he is still not ready for a serious, committed relationship. This song was eventually added to the end of Act I during the 1995 Roundabout production – the one that also added Robert and Peter’s discussion of homosexuality – and continues to be sung in revivals to the present. These two numbers represent a Bobby who thinks he is ready to get married, who might even want to get married, but who is not actually prepared for it. He wants to get married, but not *be* married.

The Boston tryout opened with yet a third closing number, “Happily Ever After,” sung by Jones. The lyrics resemble “Being Alive” but arrive at a dire and dark conclusion, with Bobby mockingly singing, “Happily ever after.” He concludes that being single is “Happily ever after...for now.” The song has a faster tempo and is set with clipped triplets making the song jaunty in a sarcastic way, unlike “Being Alive,” which is deliberate and contemplative. The cascading “Happily ever after / ever, ever, ever, after” sets up an acid stinger for the song and show: “in hell.” Unlike “Being Alive,” here Bobby has no revelatory moment and remains firmly in his bachelorhood. The expressive tension between the acrid words and the uplifting, major music put a sarcastic period on the show.

ROBERT:

Some - one to hold you too close, \_\_\_\_\_ Some - one to hurt you too deep, \_\_\_\_\_

*mp*

Some - one to love you too hard, \_\_\_\_\_ Hap - pi - ly ev - er af - ter. \_\_\_\_\_

*cresc.* *dim.*

**Figure 4.3** Opening to "Happily Ever After," which was the final number when the show opened for previews in Boston.

Though Sondheim himself preferred “Happily Ever After,” negative reactions from the critics forced Prince to request that Sondheim write a new number. Prince recalls,

What happened in Boston was that we had a song for Robert to sing called ‘Happily Ever After.’ It was the bitterest, most unhappy song ever written, and we didn’t know how devastating it would be until we saw it in front of an audience. It scared them and it scared us because it was too complicated...If I heard that song I wouldn’t get married for anything in the whole world.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 124.

The creators wanted the show to explore the complexities and difficulties of marriage while still being, on balance, in favor of the institution of marriage. Prince felt this song did not do that. For audiences, the final number crossed the line and left a bitter taste in their mouths.

Sondheim disagreed with both Prince and the audience. For him, the song was not meant to be taken literally, but instead to have a more psychoanalytic reading. He explains the number:

It *was* a little bleaker, but ‘Happily Ever After’ was a scream of pain. Bobby was fighting something he *knew*, instead of *suddenly* realizing it. But my collaborators kept using the word ‘negative’...the song was really ‘The Lady doth protest too much.’ It seemed clear that it was a fellow trying to convince himself that committing oneself to one person leads to grief, anguish, loss of privacy, loss of individuality. It was also related to a larger subject: that you can avoid committing yourself to somebody in today’s society because there are so many distractions like drugs, drink, chrome and glass and cars...You can easily like your life enjoying the distractions. But apparently the audience got the message wrong, so I had to change it.<sup>106</sup>

Interestingly, “Happily Ever After” forestalls any reading of Bobby’s final number as a coming out anthem. As Sondheim notes, “Happily Ever After” is not a realization – of coming out or anything else – but instead, a larger societal critique. Sondheim’s preferred number required a deep level of psychological understanding that he was unable to convey successfully to the audience. He also was trying to connect the show to the larger theme of the alienation of New York City, that all of the social noise made it easier to be alone. Still, the Bobby of “Happily Ever After” may or may not be a homosexual, but that isn’t what is keeping him from finding someone.

Critics in Boston, however, seemed to agree with Sondheim, not Prince, that “Happily Ever After” was a powerful number. Kevin Kelly, of the *Boston Globe*, gave an overall rave review of the show, including, ““Mr. Jones will haunt me for a long time with Mr. Sondheim's

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 124-125.

unforgettable 'Happily Ever After,' in which Robert's pleasures and pains are sorted and sized."<sup>107</sup> Elliott Norton, who found the show "bleak and bitter," found a moment of hope for the show in the final number,

Another song in a different vein gives the whole show a new note, but too late in the evening. In it, Dean Jones sings with a real trace of feeling of the impossibility of living 'Happily Ever After.' And here you feel that there might have been a strain of pathos, of hurt at the heart of 'Company' if it had been differently focused.<sup>108</sup>

By using the well-known phrase "happily ever after," Sondheim afforded a reading where Bobby came to a sober understanding that such a thing does not exist, a message that Norton felt needed to be more strongly reiterated throughout the show.<sup>109</sup> "Sorry, Grateful" is one song that may have supported such a reading, but Norton seems to have wanted it to be spelled out for the audience. With "Happily," Bobby breaks down the assumptions of the marriage trope that pervades the musical and offers a more realistic view of the institution, one that insists on highlighting both the advantages and the burdens of marriage.

### **Jones and Kert Sing "Being Alive"**

The critics may have liked "Happily Ever After," but audiences did not, so Prince convinced Sondheim to exchange it for "Being Alive." Though this replacement number contains many of the same lines, the framing and general tone are quite different. The song begins much in the vein of "Happily," but has a revelatory change in the middle as indicated by both text and music. "Being Alive" provides the only moment in the show where Bobby shows genuine desire for a sustained and intimate relationship, something defined in the show as the

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<sup>107</sup> Kevin Kelly, "You're in Brilliant 'Company'," *Boston Globe*, March 25, 1970.

<sup>108</sup> Elliott Norton, "'Company' Musical Bleak and Bitter," *Boston Record*, March 25, 1970.

<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, Sondheim does use this phrase later in his career in the exact same way in *Into the Woods*.

province of marriage. The revelation of “Being Alive” is also sometimes interpreted as a song of “coming out” in the younger generational sense – Bobby coming out to a wider society as gay and ready to find someone.

Jones and Kurt, as captured on the show’s cast recordings, interpret “Being Alive” differently. The two use different rhythmic approaches and emphasize different words. While these may seem like small changes, the openness of the end and vagueness of “Being Alive” – it never once mentions marriage – means these subtle inflections carry weight. Harold Hobson, of the *London Sunday Times*, emphatically observed of the number and Kert’s performance:

This song - 'Being Alive' - is used to get out both the advantages and the disadvantages of marriage. *There is a world of differences which are expressed merely by a slight change of intonation.* Larry Kert, who throughout is admirable as Robert, sings this song with great delicacy and discrimination [Emphasis mine].<sup>110</sup>

The song itself is divided into two distinct sections: in the first, Bobby sings about “you;” in the second after a key change and bridge, he sings about “me.” The shift from “you” to “me” signals a change in his thinking: the negative aspects of relationships that he lists in the first half become positives in the second.

In the “you” section, Jones and Kert employ different rhythms that emphasize different parts of each phrase. Jones uses quarter note triplets in the middle of the phrases, such as “hold you to” or “hurt you to.” This elongates the word “you” from Sondheim’s written notation, which only indicates an eighth note. He also accents both “some” and “you”. For Jones, the emphasis on “some” and “you” has a distancing effect – relationships are something that happen

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<sup>110</sup> Harold Hobson, “The Company We Keep,” *The London Sunday Times*, January 25, 1972.



to someone else, not to him. This interpretation fits the first part of the song, where Bobby makes excuses for not wanting a relationship.

The image shows a musical score for a tenor (T) in G major, 4/4 time. The first staff contains the lyrics: "Someone to hold you too close, Someone to hurt you too deep, Someone to sit in your". The melody features triplet markings over the words "too close" and "too deep". The second staff continues the lyrics: "chair, to ruin your sleep," with an accent mark (>) over the word "chair".

Figure 4.4 Transcription of the Opening of "Being Alive" as sung by Dean Jones.

The image shows a musical score for a tenor (T) in G major, 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled "Tenor" and contains the lyrics: "Someone to hold you too close, Someone to hurt you too deep,". The melody uses quarter notes for "too close" and "too deep". The second staff contains the lyrics: "Someone to sit in your chair, to ru-in your sleep,". The word "ru-in" is written with a hyphen.

Figure 4.5 Transcription of the Opening of "Being Alive" as sung by Larry Kert.

Kert sings “hold you too” as two eighth notes and a quarter note. Unlike Jones, Kert glosses over the word “you,” often to the point where it sounds like “ya.” Rather, Kert emphasizes the negative aspects of relationships for a person by elongating them through full quarter notes, accented differently throughout the phrase to draw attention to them: they are “*too* close” and they sit in “*your* chair.” The relationship Kert’s Bobby discusses is his own, rather than “you”. Jones asks the audience to consider relationships from a general hypothetical level, while Kert’s Bobby actually considers the pitfalls of his own relationship, centering the show around himself rather than the audience.

In the second half, when Bobby has his revelation about being with someone, Jones takes a new approach. Again, he changes the rhythm, this time to emphasize the “body” in the word “somebody.” This change reflects a recurring line in the show to want “something,” as in an actual relationship with another person, not just a placeholder. He does this by hesitating on the word “body,” singing it slightly after the beat. Jones performs a man thinking theoretically about relationships and then pivoting to thinking about “somebody,” a specific object of his emotional desire. This opens the door to interpreting “Being Alive” as being a coming-out song; rather than being about Bobby himself, Jones’s is a revelation about the other.

Figure 4.6 Transcription of the key change of "Being Alive" as performed by Dean Jones.

Figure 4.7 Transcription of the key change of "Being Alive" as performed by Larry Kert.

In the second section Kert uses Jones’s rhythm from the first half, emphasizing “me.” Kert’s interpretation emphasizes Bobby himself, focusing on the word “me,” the object of his affection. Kert’s Bobby is afraid of commitment but realizes he wants to take the risk. Here,

Bobby focuses on the change that he, himself, makes to become a person open to the risks and pains of a relationship. Bobby's problem is that he needs to change his way of thinking, rather than change the object of his desire.

Although my analysis of these differences is more conjecture than fact, anecdotal evidence points to Kert's interpretation being more convincing of a traditional, heteronormative reading. Stanley Kauffman of the *New Republic* said of Jones, "At the very end a number called 'Being Alive' is slapped on his role to convince us that something has really happened to the protagonist, but the effort only emphasizes that this is not true."<sup>111</sup> Or perhaps, something has happened to the protagonist, but it isn't the kind of revelation one expected. Emory Lewis of *Record* was even harsher on Jones in particular –

At the end of the show when our hero, or anti-hero, sings 'Being Alive,' Jones turned it into a corny bit of melodrama, and he belted out the number like a vaudevillian grabbing the spotlight. His teary histrionics destroyed the special bittersweet flavor of the musical.<sup>112</sup>

Jones's more desperate and emotional version of the song did not fit the tone of the rest of the evening. Rather than a finale where Bobby steps safely into societal expectations, Jones's Bobby is hysterical, grappling with both the hope and despair that comes with relationships, perhaps especially homosexual ones.

Reactions for Kert were more positive. His traditional Broadway voice makes "Being Alive" the triumphant end that one expects – Kert's Bobby is going to go out and get the girl.

*Variety* noted,

His best song, 'Being Alive,' is the show's final number. Kert seizes an opportunity to shed his seemingly forced passivity with the enthusiasm of a critic

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<sup>111</sup> Stanley Kauffman, *New Republic*, May 23, 1970.

<sup>112</sup> Emory Lewis, "'Company' Gets Just What It Needs," *Record*, July 27, 1970.

reaching for a pair of comps. His rendition of the song is clearly one of the show's highlights.<sup>113</sup>

Here again, Kert is able to overcome the emptiness and 'passivity' of the textual Bobby and fill it in with his own persona. Kert's less bombastic, more inner-focused version of the final number was more convincing to reviewers, and perhaps as Kirle claims, straighter.<sup>114</sup>

This comparison of performance does not definitively answer why younger audience members tended to read Bobby as gay or why Jones was read as gayer than Kert, but it does offer a possible window into how performer and audience create a multiplicity of meanings within the use of one text or even one performance. While Jones did not intend to make "Being Alive" a coming out anthem or indicate that Bobby was gay, his performance choices, which may have stemmed partially from his belief that the show was anti-marriage, opened a window to allow audiences who desired it such a reading. His decision to leave Bobby more open, filling the character with less of his own self may have also bolstered such readings. Kert, on the other hand, filled in the text with his own persona and his belief that the show was pro-marriage, performing Bobby as heterosexual, something he spent most his life practicing as a gay actor playing primarily heterosexual roles. This may have led audiences to a different conclusion about Bobby. Yet, Kert himself represented both a gay and pro-commitment stance, being a homosexual who had a long-term partner, thus keeping the door cracked for reading the end as both gay and pro-marriage, a sentiment that was already making rounds with some gay and lesbian activists.

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<sup>113</sup> "Legit Follow-ups: *Company*," *Variety*, August 5, 1970.

<sup>114</sup> Kirle, *Unfinished Show Business*, 183.

## Use of Gay Readings as Political Statement

Readings of Bobby's sexuality matter because the audience not only collaborated by reading Bobby as gay, but used that collaboration to create new works, ones with openly gay characters, drawing on *Company*'s form and Bobby's character. As Clum writes, the early 1970s "signaled a time when gay men wanted to switch from gay readings of straight narratives to gay narratives."<sup>115</sup> Bobby was not a female diva with whom male homosexual desire could be projected, but an open text where performance could allow for a male protagonist to be read as gay. *Company* became a beacon for younger, aspiring activist-artists who wanted to bring their own stories to life.

A number of these works, including Fred Silver's 1974 Off-Broadway musical *In Gay Company*, directly cite *Company* as inspiration.<sup>116</sup> The title recalls Sondheim's show, and unlike other adult musicals of the period, was modest in sexual content, focusing more on the relationships, culture, and politics typical of gay life. Like *Company*, it was more of a revue format around a single theme, and the lyrics and tonalities both have a Sondheim-esque quality. Silver himself said, "Let's face it – Bobby was gay, and I wanted [my revue] to be a bunch of sketches and scenes about homosexuality, and my experience as a gay man." No longer content with the open secret or the closet, Silver wanted a show that allowed him and other gay men to come out and be politically and socially engaged, a future that might be imagined for a gay Bobby. Wollman herself observes, "[*In Gay Company*] may be read as the continuation of Bobby's story – or perhaps of Sondheim's and Furth's – in post-Stonewall New York."<sup>117</sup> The show was quite successful for an Off-Broadway production, and attracted a number of non-

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<sup>115</sup> Clum, *Something for the Boys*, 231.

<sup>116</sup> Wollman, *Hard Times*, 80.

<sup>117</sup> Wollman, *Hard Times*, 80.

homosexual audience members, including firemen, due to a tongue-in-cheek number about a gay man being in the firehouse. Silver's parodic, witty, and insightful work into contemporary gay identities, inspired by his collaboration in *Company* through gay reading, created a bridge for the gay and lesbian movement to reach those who might otherwise be afraid to enter gay space or engage in civil rights discourse. The ambiguity of *Company* and of the performative liveness of musical theatre more generally enabled gay activists inspired by Stonewall to create sympathetic works without closeting their characters.

As textual clues and performance choices may tilt an ambiguous character such as Bobby in various directions, it is ultimately up to audiences to decide a character's sexual identity for themselves. Persistent gay readings of Bobby raise the question: what is gained by certain audiences in reading against the authors' intent? In the case of the original production, *Company* allowed a younger generation of gay activists to see themselves onstage, to understand the importance of representation and recognition, and to be inspired to create their own art that continued to tell their stories. While many years would pass until gay characters were regularly occurring on Broadway, Sondheim, Furth, and Prince created a show that would continue to be read as gay and queer by those searching for themselves on stage.

## Afterword

After finishing his collaborations with Prince in 1981, Sondheim began working with director/writer James Lapine. Unlike Prince, Lapine had significantly less experience in the musical theatre and Broadway world, and therefore, Sondheim's preference for stories centered primarily on the intra- and interpersonal rather than the epic and political dominated both *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) and *Into the Woods* (1987). Such a focus on the individual nestled itself neatly into the neoliberal milieu of the 1980s. Sondheim's next project, *Assassins* (1991), once more entered the political with bookwriter John Weidman, yet this time, proved to be impossible to move to Broadway, as focus on the individual combined with the nationalist impetus of the Gulf War served to undermine Sondheim and Weidman's work. While the show eventually made it to Broadway in 2004, the short-lived revival served more as a tribute to the legacy of Sondheim than as a commercial product. Sondheim's last project to make it to Broadway, *Passion* (1994), focused on a personal, grotesque love story in Italy. For this project, Sondheim went back to working with Lapine, and the final production resembled more an opera than a musical, the culmination of Sondheim's interest in integration.

Prince, on the other hand, continued to work on political shows, including *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1993) with John Kander and Fred Ebb, with whom he worked on *Cabaret* and *Parade* (1998), as well as revivals of political musicals, such as *Cabaret* (1987), *Show Boat* (1994), and *Candide* (1997). For the 1994 revival of *Show Boat*, Prince publicly emphasized his interest in bringing out the racial politics of the show, keeping in line with his career-long

interest, but the actual results of his efforts were uneven at best.<sup>1</sup> Though Prince’s political works continued to bring him prestige in the critical and scholarly realm, his only big financial and popular hit after working with Sondheim was with the megamusical *The Phantom of the Opera* (1987). As discussed by musicologist Jessica Sternfeld, megamusicals that do engage directly with politics (of which *Phantom* is decidedly *not* one) tend to engage in a way that makes them more open to a wide variety of political viewpoints – in contrast to Prince’s preference for the specificity of sociopolitical antagonism.<sup>2</sup>

Neither Prince nor Sondheim had a particularly lucrative or successful career in popular theatre after they ended their collaboration. They both continued to achieve critical acclaim, but neither produced as prolifically or successfully as they had together. In part, this is due to the instability of 1970s New York City, which opened up space for their experimental, ambiguous, and multifaceted collaborations. The 1970s also proved to be a transition period for the musical, and by the late 1980s, different styles of musicals – megamusicals, jukebox musicals, and rock musicals, for example – began to dominate Broadway. Costs to produce musicals also rose, and continue to rise, exponentially, making it less likely that a show that champions Levitz’s model of “abandoning the dream of a coherent and unified happy end, and...persisting on the heterogeneity of theatrical means, affects, goals, intentions, and temporal planes” would ever make it to Broadway.<sup>3</sup>

Prince and Sondheim did come together one last time for the musical *Road Show* – previously titled *Wise Guys* with Sam Mendes directing (New York Theatre Workshop, 1999),

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about the racial politics of this revival, see Todd Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 212-241.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Sternfeld, *The Megamusical* (Bloomington: Indiana Press University, 2006). 175-224.

<sup>3</sup> Tamara Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries: Persphone* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 621-622.



*Bounce* (Goodman Theatre, Chicago; Kennedy Center, Washington DC, 2003) with Harold Prince, and finally, landing on *Road Show* with John Doyle (2008, The Public Theatre, New York City). This collaboration also included John Weidman as bookwriter and prominently features a same-sex relationship, once again engaging in antagonistic politics. The show has bounced around venues in the United States and London but has yet to find critical or popular success. The moment for the antagonism for the Prince-Sondheim shows appears to have closed, except of course in revival: on Broadway, Off-Broadway, the West End, and in other community and college theatres across the world. However, as each new version is produced, the collaboration between the new artists and the texts brings out new interpretations, allowing the show to continue to be both culturally relevant and aesthetically satisfying.

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# Appendix 1

## *Pacific Overtures* Scripts

### Appendix: Archival Sources for the Original 1976 Production of *Pacific Overtures*

Listed are the surviving scripts for *Pacific Overtures* that I used for this chapter. The ones that I primarily consulted are listed first, with alternative copies in other archives listed second in parenthesis.

**October 22, 1973 (Mislabelled February 1975)** “Untitled Play about the Opening of Japan (Second Draft)”

Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, Boris Aronson Papers, Box 4, folder 2. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Script RM 2642.)

A straight play in three acts, this script shows Weidman working with Prince before Sondheim’s involvement. This version contains numbers, though incidental music is sometimes indicated. The play concerns the story up to Perry’s original exit from Japan (the end of Act I in the final production), and writes the story with Kayama as a hero, risking his life to keep Perry from shooting his cannons and scaring the Japanese.

While there is no mention of casting, the minstrel show does indicate that there are “Asians playing whites playing black,” assuming an all Asian cast, but no indication of gender. The play shifts between the point of view of the Japanese and the United States, using kabuki-influenced elements (hanamachi, costumes, make-up) during the Japanese point of view.

Script contains two pages of typed notes from Prince to Weidman about how to improve the show. No mention of a musical.

**May 23, 1975**

Pacific Overtures Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by John Weidman and Harold Prince

Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, Boris Aronson Papers, Box 4, folder 3. (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Ruth Mitchell Papers, box 17, folder 3.)

This script shows the beginning of Sondheim's involvement with the show, the first two songs present with lyrics, and a few other indicated numbers scattered throughout the first act, but not the second act. The second act, however, more closely resembles the final production, though it still contains a minstrel show. The show also continues to oscillate between the American and Japanese points of view.

The first page of the script reads: "All the roles in Pacific Overtures will be played by Asians. The female roles, with the exception of Kayama's wife (the liberated woman), will be played by male members of the company."

The script has extensive edits in pen, probably from Prince, who is listed in this version as the book's co-author.

**August 7, 1975**

Pacific Overtures Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by John Weidman and Harold Prince

Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, Boris Aronson Papers, Box 4, Folder 4.

Act I of this script resembles the final version, but Act II remained quite different. The minstrel show has disappeared, and the Americans are no longer given private conversations, but the numbers “Pretty Lady,” “Bowler Hat,” and “Next” are still absent.

In the place of “Next” are two loose endings, one titled “Last Section (mélange) that lists the scenes in a montage bringing the show up to the present, accompanied by “Civilization Song.” The second section is a scripted realization of this list.

The script still opens: “All the roles in Pacific Overtures will be played by Asians. The female roles, with the exception of Kayama’s wife (the liberated woman), will be played by male members of the company.”

### **September 29, 1975**

Pacific Overtures Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by John Weidman

Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, Boris Aronson Papers, Box 4, Folder 5.  
(New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Script RM 2603.)

This copy, while bound, still contains an incomplete Act II, with the appearance of a description of “Bowler Hat,” but no “Pretty Lady” and “Civilization Song” with the “mélange” in place of “Next.” The copy is generally clean, with a handful of light pencil markings.

The first page is changed: “All the roles in Pacific Overtures will be played by Asians. The female roles will be played by male members of the company, until the ‘mélange’ sequence at the end when female roles will be assumed by actresses.”

Harold Prince’s name is removed as book co-author



**January 11, 1976** (Opening night) “Final Playing Version”

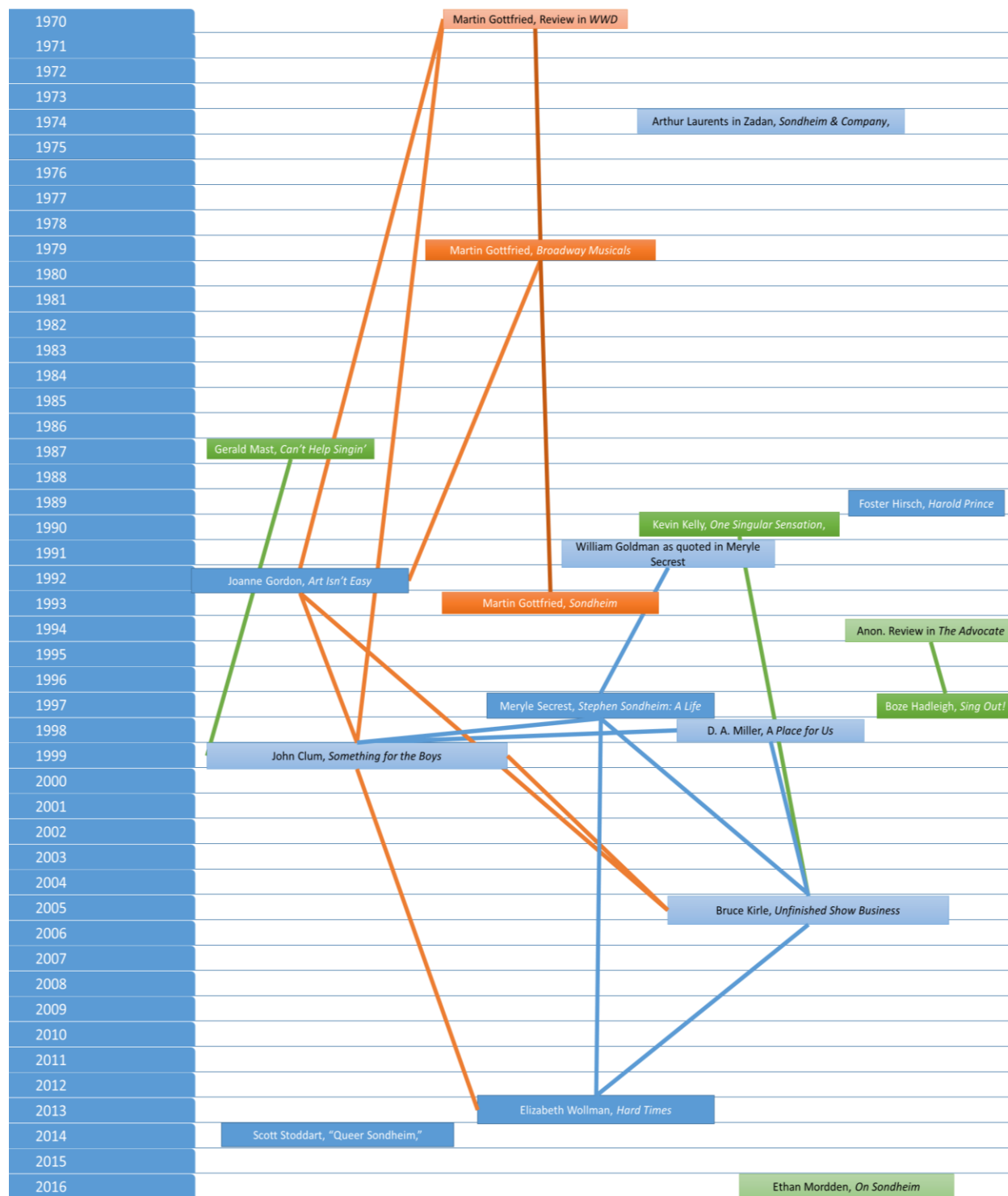
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Script RM 2429.

(New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, Ruth Mitchell Papers, Box 17, Folder 4 [clean copy], Folder 5 [with stage manager cues].)

This script reflects the 1976 production. However, this copy contains hand written stage directions from Prince and extensive edits in pencil, pen, whiteout, and even sections glued in. This was probably the version to be retyped for the final version; a clean, final version is available in the Ruth Mitchell Papers (see above).

## Appendix 2

### Tracing Homosexual Interpretations of *Company*



## KEY

Orange – Relating back to Martin Gottfried’s publications

Blue – Published scholarly sources

Light blue – Published scholarly sources that also include the author’s personal account

Green – Published popular sources

Light Green – Published popular sources that also include the author’s personal account

Lines indicate that a source is quoted in a later source.

Orange lines indicate quotation of Gottfried through another source.

Anonymous. Review of *Company*. *The Advocate*. September 19, 1995.

“Starring Boyd Gaines, Kate Burton, and *Jeffrey’s* Debra Monk, this is an eagerly awaited revival of one of Stephen Sondheim’s best, about Bobby, an allegedly hetero hero who just can’t find the girl of his dreams. Maybe it’s time for Bobby to come out of the closet – and bring the composer with him.” 54

Clum, John M. *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture*. New York: Palgrave, 1999.

“After ‘Being Alive,’ Bobby disappears to start a new life apart from the world of his married friends. Gay men read Bobby’s disappearance as a move from the world of compulsory heterosexuality...in 1970, coming out often meant cutting ties with one’s straight friends.” 222

“Gay men in 1970 and since read Bobby as gay.” 222

Gottfried, Martin. *Women’s Wear Daily*. April 27, 1970.

“The New York of Fire Island and the Hamptons” ... “[Jones] can seem sexless and must watch it or the show’s theme (and honesty) will be confused by hints of homosexuality.”

Gottfried, Martin. *Broadway Musicals*. New York: Harry N. Abrams., Inc., 1979.

“Any way he slices it, marriages don’t look good to him...It is such pessimism toward marriage and the hero’s inability to love a woman that make his heterosexuality suspect. Depending on one’s sensitivity toward this, a subtle element of homosexuality might be considered a distracting aspect of *Company*.” 322

Gottfried, Martin. *Sondheim*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.

“Another problem lies with Robert: He is less a character than a subject...What is his problem? Why can’t he fall in love? The answer is another question, one *Company* never faces: Is there an unspoken or subconscious level of homosexuality to explain him?” 88

Gordon, Joanne. *Art Isn’t Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1992.

“But there is no suggestion in text or score that Robert is homosexual. The emphasis of the work is to persuade Robert to make a commitment, ‘to want something,’ ‘to want somebody,’ not simply to conform with societal norms. Critics who dwell on Robert’s possible homosexuality are clearly uncomfortable with the show’s antiromantic, unsentimental depiction of marriage.” 55

Hadleigh, Boze. *Sing Out! Gays and Lesbians in the Music World*. New York: Barricade Books Inc., 1997.

“By actors’ standards, composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim is nearly out. But gay fans have long puzzled at the homophobic lyrics in some of his works. Some fans of *Company* have wondered at protagonist Bobby, the allegedly hetero hero who, one gay critic says, ‘just can’t find the girl of his dreams. Maybe it’s time for Bobby to come out of the closet – and bring the composer with him.’”

Larry Kert: “True, Bobby’s thirty-eight and a bachelor. That gets funny looks. That’s the conundrum at the heart of the story...Is Bobby gay? Nowadays [1983] you might think he’s experimented, just to be sure...I think as conceived by [Sondheim], you’re safe in assuming Bobby’s 100 percent straight.” 255-256

Hirsch, Foster. *Harold Prince and the American Musical Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

“Although in 1970 the creators couldn’t suggest that Robert’s partner would be a man, their reluctance to join him to the heterosexual mating dance is underlined in the show’s final ambiguous image, when, after his song, Robert mysteriously fails to show up at the surprise birthday party his friends ritualistically prepare for him each year.” 87

Kelly, Kevin. *One Singular Sensation: The Michael Bennett Story*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.

“Although Prince and Bennett drilled Dean Jones into a solid performance, Jones didn’t have the confidence, or stamina, for Broadway. Further, he wasn’t able to overcome the possible indication that Bobby’s marital worries evidenced latent homosexuality. Jones didn’t want to be associated with any of that.” 68-69

“Cold hard truth is often mistaken for cynicism when it’s simply cold hard truth. *Company* may – or may not – have had homosexual allusions behind its motivation.” 69

“Dean Jones panicked. Playing even a faintly perceived homosexual might damage him in movies...If fairies were thought to be fluttering forth more and more, and less and less being swatted back, they still weren’t allowed to fly through family movies.” 69

“Jones’s career after *Company* might be in jeopardy. And as life imitating art would have it, he happened to be in the midst of a divorce. To add to the terror of playing someone who might be interpreted as a closeted gay, he risked being considered anti-marriage. Stating that he was ‘unsatisfied’ in the role, he fled the cast five weeks after the show opened and was replaced by Larry Kert.” 69

“*Company*’s implicit homosexual theme threaded through Michael Bennett’s life. Donna McKechnie says that Bennett’s homosexuality wasn’t an issue at the start of their relationship, admitting only that ‘it might have been later.’” 69-70

Kirle, Bruce. *Unfinished Show Business: Broadway Musicals as Works-in-Process*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University of Press, 2005.

“It is conceivable that Perkins’s appeal as a film star and his ingratiating charm would have made the character less of a cipher and more subject to heterosexual reading. He was replaced by Dean Jones, a Disney film star, who reportedly was terrified of the homosexual implications of the character and its long-range effect on his film career as a star of family comedies...Jones, a straight actor, walked away from his contract after five weeks and was replaced by Larry Kert, who played the role through the remained of the Broadway engagement and in London. Although Kert was gay, his performance had a great deal of sex appeal and could easily be read as interpreting Bobby as straight. Ironically, Perkins and

Kert, both gay men, were perceived as deemphasizing Bobby's homosexuality, whereas Jones, a straight actor with a wholesome Disney image, was perceived as lending more of a gay subtext to the character." 182-183

"Whether Bobby is straight or gay is (or is not) answered in performance." 183

Mast, Gerald. *Can't Help Singin': The American Musical on Stage and Screen*. Woodstock: Overlook Press, 1987.

"In the end, Robert breaks the pattern when he fails to appear for his annual surprise birthday party. Perhaps he has decided to get married after all, tired of providing company for others. Or perhaps Robert has discovered he needs company – but not with heterosexual couples and female companions. The gay subtext of the show – Sondheim and Furth know about being unmarried men in a coupled world – peeks out of the closet at its conclusion." 326

Miller, D.A. *Place for Us [Essay on the Broadway Musical]*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

"And not the least thrill in being thus *en marche* is finding our kind (if not necessarily in the form of fellow travelers) everywhere emergent, even, in 1970, on the Broadway stage. The show of course is *Company*... So many winks does Bobby share together with us that if we don't take this character for a gay cryptogram, it is only because there seems nothing cryptic about him." 124

"But as it happens, what flaws *Company* is not the obviousness of a homosexual stereotype (to which the power of the closet can sometimes give polemical validity), but the incoherence of deploying it to depict a heterosexual character. For as everyone knows, though his profile so strongly resembles the Homosexual's before Stonewall, and his dating game so pointedly refuses the heterosexual institutions of Marriage and the marriage-tracked Relationship, this Bobby bubbi is a Bobby bubba nonetheless. It is not just the characters in *Company* who all think so; in interview after interview, the show's creators continue to put their authority behind the same presumption, repudiating the possibility of gay representation with an emphasis that couldn't be firmer if they were organizing a Saint Patrick's Day Parade. We end up, then, falling into the same furious incomprehension as Bobby's other girlfriends: we could understand a person if a person was a fag, but if he is not, he must be as crazy as he makes us." 125

Mordden, Ethan. *On Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide*. New York: Oxford University Press,

2015.

“As it was, Larry Kert was glad to play such a charismatic character, and he certainly looked the part. I knew a bunch of gay men who developed crushes on Kert at least partly because George Furth had given him a remarkably charming persona to fit into. I even knew one man who waited outside the stage door and knocked out an affair with Kert starting that night.” 69

Secrest, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, 1st edition. New York: Knopf, 1998.

When Sondheim asked Goldman in 1991 to write a script for *Company* film: “*Company* is one of those shows, along with *Gypsy* and *Pal Joey*, that I think of as the greatest, quintessential, most beloved musicals. I remember seeing *Company* five times and I loved it, and I had a huge, fucking problem, which was that the main character’s gay but they don’t talk about it. Hal, George, and Steve all think it’s about a guy with a commitment problem.” 371

Stoddart, Scott. “Queer Sondheim.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, edited by Robert Gordon, 416-431. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

“Queerness remains a haunting question in regard to Sondheim’s *Company* (1970), though Sondheim has dismissed critics who suggest that Robert, the protagonist, might be gay because of his inability to commit to a woman.” 418

Wollman, Elizabeth L. *Hard Times: The Adult Musical in 1970s New York City*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

“*Company* is very easy to view queerly, and when it opened – not even a year after the Stonewall riots – it quickly struck a chord with many gay men who read Robert as a coded gay or bisexual character. There are a host of reasons for this interpretation, which not only persists, but has become more prevalent over time, even despite Sondheim’s frequent insistence to the contrary.” 46

“Yet the widespread and persistent interpretation of Robert as gay or bisexual does not rest solely on these brief snippets of song and (once-excised) dialogue. Some of it has to do with Sondheim’s general tendency to gravitate toward disenfranchised nonconformist characters, as well as with his own admission that as a gay Jewish man, he has often felt like an outsider himself. One doesn’t have to make much of a leap to envision Sondheim – or Furth, for that matter – as the

autobiographical inspiration for a thirty-something bachelor in the early 1970s, who loves and yet feels disenfranchised from his heterosexual circle, and who feels endless pressure to adopt a heteronormative lifestyle, despite serious and persistent doubts that he wants or would be happy in one.” 48

“Yet even if it had been the creative team’s intent, *Company* could not have featured an openly gay leading character when it first ran. For all the strides being made in the years immediately after Stonewall, the very insinuation . . . . would likely still have seemed threatening to many Broadway theatregoers in 1970.” 48

Zadan, Craig. *Sondheim & Co.*, 2nd edition. New York: Harpers & Row, 1986.

Arthur Laurents: “Because Bobby doesn’t exist. Let’s say, truth was no considered when Bobby was written. Mind you, I’m not saying that Bobby *had* to be homosexual, but he had to have something in him, particularly in the culture we live in, to explain why a man of that age was not married.” 361