

# education

ROUNABOUTTHEATRECOMPANY

## Sondheim on Sondheim Lecture Series

**On April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department, interviewed Peter Filichia, theater critic for The Star-Ledger in Newark, New Jersey and News 12 New Jersey, about Stephen Sondheim. A question & answer session with the audience followed.**

**Ted Sod:** Peter Filichia is one of my favorite people because he knows so much about musical theater. He's been here a number of times to talk about it. Today is especially exciting because of the subject matter: Mr. Sondheim. Since Sondheim is essentially the leading actor in this piece, did you learn anything new about his life and his process?

**Peter Filichia:** This was really fun for me; it was like a time machine. Since 1965, I've seen every original cast of every Sondheim show. What was really exciting was growing up in Boston because many of the shows were tried out there, so the memories really came flooding back today. Especially when the song "Happily Ever After" was being sung because I was there the first night of *Company* in Boston. There was Dean Jones singing that song, and while he was singing I saw his eyes widen, as if he were saying, "Oh my God, they hate this song. They hate me. I have got to get out of this show." And he did. He quit the show. I swear this is a true story: about thirty years later, I was asked to go down and do a press conference for the Alabama Stage and Screen Hall of Fame. (Yes, there is one). That year they were inducting Jim Nabors, the guy who played Gomer Pyle on *The Andy Griffith Show*, and Mary Badham who played Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and Dean Jones who had been in Boston doing *Company*. And Jones said, "I'll never forget that first night, singing 'Happily Ever After.' I was saying, 'Oh my God, the people hate me. They hate the song. I've got to get out of this show.'" So that came back to me today.

I have so many amazing memories from the first night of *Follies*, where I heard two songs that were magnificent and were cut. One was a song called "Uptown, Downtown" about a woman who wanted to live uptown, but she really had some downtown feelings. She was trying to be something more than that. So the lyric actually went, "She sits / At the Ritz / With her splits / Of Mumm's / And starts to pine / For a stein / With her Village chums / But with her Schlitz / In her mitts / Down at Fitz- / Roy's Bar, she thinks of the Ritz, oh / It's so schizo." I mean, that's amazing. And to think that Sondheim wrote that and said, "No, it's not good enough. I'll throw it out." There was also a song called "Can That Boy Foxtrot!" and the joke was that Yvonne De Carlo kept saying, "Can that boy Fffffoxtrot." It became a one-joke song, but it was still terrific because there were lyrics like, "But who needs Albert Schweitzer when the lights're low?" And, "He may be full of hokum, but I've / No com- / plaint." When I heard that they were dropping "Can That Boy Foxtrot!" I thought, "What can they write that's going to be better?" The new song was called, "I'm Still Here," so he really made the right decision. Shakespeare talks about

the seven ages of man, and there's Sondheim writing, "First you're another / Sloe-eyed vamp / Then someone's mother / Then you're camp." He did it in three steps.

**Ted Sod:** He is an amazing artist. He talks a lot about being mentored by Oscar Hammerstein. Do you sense where Oscar may have influenced him in terms of lyric writing?

**Peter Filichia:** It's often said that Oscar had a much better world view of life than Sondheim did because he had a very different upbringing and because of that, Sondheim is a little dark compared to Hammerstein. But it is interesting to see him tackle so many of the same subject matters in so many of the shows. Oscar Hammerstein wrote *The King and I*. Sondheim wrote *Pacific Overtures*, another take on East/West relations. There was a backstage musical that Oscar Hammerstein wrote called *Me and Juliet*, so *Follies* seems to be a version of that. *Allegro* is a musical Oscar Hammerstein wrote about a guy going from birth to middle age and the compromises he had to make. *Merrily We Roll Along* does the same thing. But *Allegro* is the story of a man who gets worse as he goes along, and by doing the story backward as *Merrily We Roll Along* does, by the second act, you're only seeing people being nice to each other, which is something I can watch all the time.

**Ted Sod:** There were wonderful sections from today's performance from *Merrily We Roll Along*.

**Peter Filichia:** The "Opening Doors" sequence comes from *Merrily We Roll Along*, and so does that wonderful song "Good Thing Going."

**Ted Sod:** And "Franklin Shepard, Inc."

**Peter Filichia:** We also heard "Now You Know" that Leslie Kritzer performed. It's also fascinating how many people want to interpret Sondheim. Look at the people we have up here today. You have a woman who's played Marian the Librarian, a former Miss America and TV star, a Duke of Hazzard. That's quite a mixture. There's a fifty year span in the ages here because young, old, straight, gay, male, female, everyone wants to do this material because it's so rich.

**Ted Sod:** Since you've mentioned the cast, we should talk about Ms. Barbara Cook who is making her return to Broadway. The last time she was seen on Broadway proper was 1972 in a production of *Enemies*.

**Peter Filichia:** The last musical she did was a personal favorite of mine called *The Grass Harp*. It only lasted five performances.

**Ted Sod:** Sondheim's lyrics are truly unparalleled – would you agree?

**Peter Filichia:** It's so refreshing to hear this material today because we are hearing perfect rhymes, accents on the right syllables, and intelligent dialogue in song. You don't get that on Broadway as much anymore. Last night I saw this show where Elvis Presley was a character. Think of the Elvis Presley songs that have lyrics like, "She touch-a my hand / And what a chill I

got / Her lips are a like a volcano that's hot / I'm proud to say that she's my buttercup." That's what you call a girl who's got lips like a hot volcano? Let me tell you, when I was growing up, in my neighborhood we had a very different expression. And in *FELA!*, which is a musical down the street, they actually project the lyrics on the back wall because it's done in a African accent and as a result, you have to read the lyrics. And it's a little embarrassing when you see how simplistic they are compared to this writing. Sondheim has talked about the craft, especially in his song "Liaisons": "Where is style? Where is craft?" And that's a good point. This year *Time* magazine decided on what the best song of the decade was, and it's called "My Life Would Suck Without You." So it's really wonderful to be able to hear intelligence in lyrics.

**Ted Sod:** It's often said that Sondheim has influenced most of the musical theater writers who've come after him and yet no one can quite imitate him because he never imitates himself.

**Peter Filichia:** He once wrote a song called "I Never Do Anything Twice," and it was a song from a Sherlock Holmes movie called *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*. Frankly, it's the song Cole Porter wishes he had written because it's a song about sexually not doing anything twice. However, when you look at this guy's career, it's really fascinating that he's never done anything twice. *West Side Story* was an adaptation of Shakespeare. *Gypsy* was based on a memoir. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was based on well-made plays by Plautus. *Do I Hear a Waltz?* was based on an American play. *Company* was based on one act plays that were never produced. *Follies* was actually based on a photograph of Gloria Swanson standing in the rubble of the Roxy Theater after it had been torn down. *A Little Night Music* was based on a foreign film. *Pacific Overtures* was based on an unproduced play about East/West relations. *Merrily We Roll Along* was based on a Kaufman and Hart play of the same name. *Sunday in the Park with George* was inspired by a painting. He never repeats himself.

**Ted Sod:** Let's talk about his collaborators because he talks about how important they are to him. There are the early years where he's still writing just lyrics.

**Peter Filichia:** Yes, *West Side Story*, *Gypsy* and *Do I Hear a Waltz?*

**Ted Sod:** And then there's *Forum* where he does both. And *Anyone Can Whistle*, which is now down the street at City Center in a wonderful production and is often called his biggest flop.

**Peter Filichia:** It's a very strange a show, really. It's never quite clear as to what's going on. But that's not really his fault; his work is very good on that.

**Ted Sod:** He says in today's video that because Oscar had more or less asked him to, he collaborated with Richard Rodgers as lyricist only on *Do I Hear a Waltz?*

**Peter Filichia:** It opened March 18, 1965. Sondheim is much too hard on it. He says it's respectable, but his work was sensational. And so was Richard Rodgers'. It's a really lovely score. I'm not saying that if there's a production, you should necessarily go out and see it, but I do think it's a very good cast album. I wish he wasn't so hard on it. I can't tell you how many times I've been in rooms where someone asks him, "Mr. Sondheim, what's your favorite show?"

and he always says, “I don’t have a favorite. I have a least favorite: *Do I Hear a Waltz?*” But get that CD and you’ll see that it’s really quality work.

**Ted Sod:** Although Rodgers composed the music, if you listen to the song “We’re Gonna Be All Right,” you can almost hear what’s going to come next from Sondheim.

**Peter Filichia:** If you listen to the cast album of *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, it would seem to be a throw-away number between a husband and wife. In 1973, there was a benefit concert for Sondheim, and they included “We’re Gonna Be All Right.” I remember thinking, “Why did they choose this throw-away number?” But at this concert you actually heard what he really wrote and was dropped because Richard Rodgers was not only the composer of the show, he was the producer. As a result, he made most the decisions about songs, and that’s one of the reasons Sondheim doesn’t like the show.

**Ted Sod:** The 1970s were a fertile time for him. I always think of that decade as the Hal Prince decade. Within that decade, he created such an amazing group of musicals. Do you want to talk about them?

**Peter Filichia:** Sure. *Do I Hear a Waltz?* was 1965 and the next Broadway show was *Company*. In between there was a TV show called *Evening Primrose*. It’s just about to be released on video.

*Company* came probably just about forty years ago today. In 1971 *Follies* debuted, which was considered one of the great musicals of all time. It was a tough show for people to take because it showed unhappy narratives and a lot of times people have problems with that because they’re looking at their own lives and realizing how unhappy they are. The end of the show comes and most of the people get back together, but you’re not quite convinced that they’re really going to be happy. Again, I’m from Boston and we had previews of *Company* and we had *Follies*. Two years later, we had *A Little Night Music*. I went to the first performance and saw every human being I ever knew who was interested in Broadway musicals. Most of the songs were waltzes, but not all. That’s the show “Send in the Clowns” comes from. I will never forget, too, the night I went to see *Pacific Overtures*. I had to see it. It was about this very isolated country (Japan) that little by little learned to interact with the world which was supposedly bad. There’s a very interesting lyric at the end: “See what’s coming / See what’s going.” A lot has changed there.

Of course the show that came after *Overtures* was *Sweeney Todd*. I remember Leonard Bernstein saying, “Someday, Steve is going to write an opera, and he’s going to knock your socks off.” *Sweeney Todd* truly is an opera in its own terms, and it was amazing to see that happen. Of those shows, *Company*, *Night Music*, and *Sweeney Todd* all won Tony Awards. *Follies* did not win and people still hold hard feelings over that. *Pacific Overtures* lost because that was the *Chorus Line* year. But as Ethan Mordden, a great musical theater scholar, says in one of his books, those five shows really do rival the first five Rodgers and Hammerstein shows which were *Oklahoma!*, *Allegro*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*.

**Ted Sod:** The collaboration with Prince more or less ends with *Merrily We Roll Along*.

**Peter Filichia:** Yes, that is the show that lasted only two weeks. It turned out to be a problem between them. But nevertheless, he did find a different collaborator in James Lapine. He had seen a play of Lapine's called *Twelve Dreams*, which dealt with psychology. Together they came up with *Sunday in the Park with George* and then *Into the Woods*, which is really Sondheim's most popular show. That's the one that gets done most in high schools and community theaters, and summer stock and deals with fairy tale characters who meet each other in the woods.

**Ted Sod:** Their third collaboration is somewhat operatic as well.

**Peter Filichia:** *Passion* in 1995, to be frank, is the Tony-winning musical that has run the fewest performances of any Tony-winning musical. It only ran 250 performances. There's no question that Sondheim is caviar to the general

**Ted Sod:** Lapine conceived the show we watched today and directed it. It's really a remarkable accomplishment given the scope and how he put it together. Lapine started as a design person. I remembering reading when he was at Yale, some students asked him to direct. He directed a Gertrude Stein piece, which came into New York at the invitation of Lee Breuer. What do you think about the Lapine/Sondheim shows? They are really unusual because they don't follow a formula.

**Peter Filichia:** It does seem that Sondheim has always been anti-formula. He claims to have learned some of that from Oscar Hammerstein. And Hammerstein said when he wrote "People Will Say We're in Love," it's a love song that involves don'ts. "Don't throw bouquets at me". Similarly in *Carousel*, "If I love you..." not I love you. In operettas and musicals up until that time, people only sang, "I love you." Hammerstein didn't want to commit himself. So it's very interesting that in *Sweeney Todd*, one of the most beautiful songs, "Johanna" is being sung while Todd's slitting somebody's throat.

**Ted Sod:** We should also talk about the collaborations with John Weidman. We did mention that *Pacific Overtures* was something that came about when Weidman met with Prince and showed him this play.

**Peter Filichia:** John Weidman was graduated from Harvard in 1967, and not long after he went to Harold Prince. His father, Jerome Weidman, was a very famous author who wrote *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* among many other things and was his bridge to Prince because the elder Weidman had written *Fiorello!* which Prince produced. So when John showed him his play about Japan changing, imagine the thrill he must have had when Hal Prince said, "You know, this might make a good musical. We've got to talk to Steve Sondheim" who had just come off *Company*, *Follies*, and *A Little Night Music*. Their collaboration has continued for a great many years because they also worked on *Assassins* and *Road Show*.

**Ted Sod:** I want to talk, too, about the collaboration with Arthur Laurents. They've done four shows together.

**Peter Filichia:** Yes: *West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Anyone Can Whistle*, and *Do I Hear a Waltz?*

**Ted Sod:** And it was Arthur, I believe, who introduced Steve to Bernstein and Robbins as a possible lyricist for *West Side Story*.

**Peter Filichia:** The oft-told tale is that Sondheim was at a party and Laurents was there and he said, “What are you doing?” “Well, I’m working on this new musical version of *Romeo and Juliet*,” and Sondheim said, “Gee, who’s doing the lyrics?” He always says that Arthur smote his forehead and said, “Let me recommend you.” If you have one of the early posters of *West Side Story* it says “Lyrics by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim.” Sondheim came in late and Leonard Bernstein had already written a number of lyrics. To this day, I don’t think it’s ever been told which lyrics that exist are Leonard Bernstein’s. As time went on, Bernstein said, “I’m just going to give the young guy sole credit.” Bernstein also said to him, “I’ll give you a certain cut of the money,” and Sondheim said, “No, credit is enough.” And he says he’s regretted it to this day.

**Ted Sod:** Were there any songs you were dying to hear today that didn’t get included?

**Peter Filichia:** I will mention a song that would have never shown up today but is so clever. In 1960, there was going to be a TV show called *The Fabulous Fifties*, and they asked a number of songwriters to submit a song that could be used as the theme song. What Sondheim did was put new lyrics to “London Bridge” about how times had changed in ten years. The lyric goes: “Who had heard of Salk Vaccine / Dexadrine / Mr. Clean? / Who had heard of Fulton Sheen / Or *My Fair Lady*?” The joke there, of course, is that “My fair lady” is the actual lyric in “London Bridge.”

**Ted Sod:** Now it’s your turn to ask questions.

**Audience Member #1:** I know Stephen Sondheim’s father remarried, and I believe he had two sons with his second wife. Did Stephen Sondheim have a relationship with his father and two step brothers?

**Peter Filichia:** I won’t tell you a story about his personal life. I’m only interested in the work. So while it’s a very good question—I don’t mean to demean it—I’m not the person to answer that.

**Ted Sod:** If you will stay briefly after this program and give me your e-mail, I will try to find out the answer for you. Great question, it’s just not something we’ve come across in our reading.

**Audience Member #2:** I’m curious how involved Sondheim gets in the productions of his shows, in the staging, specifically in *Sunday in the Park with George*.

**Peter Filichia:** He’s astonishingly hands on. There’s no question about that. He’s often said to people, “No, that note is just a tiny bit slower than I want it to be; you’re not singing it quite correctly.” He’s always there from stem to stern. There are collaborators, no question about it, who will stay away from a production for a few days or a few weeks, but he’s there most of the time, wondering about how to improve it.

**Ted Sod:** He's been involved in this production. They did three different video shoots, which you can tell by the different color shirts. And he has a very close relationship with Lapine. Lapine actually wanted him to start working on this in the late 1990s. We did a workshop of a possible revue like this in 1997, so it's taken a long time for this to come to fruition. Some of you may know that it was supposed to be presented down at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, and at that point it was called *iSondheim*, as in iPod. It didn't happen down there because it was too expensive. You can see how expensive this particular set is. This is all state of the art technology, and is designed by Peter Flaherty along with Beowulf Boritt, who did the set and they collaborated with Peter Jones, Sondheim's archivist.

**Peter Filichia:** I think this should get a Tony nomination for Best Choreography because those screens really dance.

**Ted Sod:** David Loud did the new arrangements, many of the songs you heard today are different arrangements from the originals. Sondheim is always there and he will listen to what the other artists are doing and will say what does work and what doesn't, so he is involved. This is the sixth Sondheim show that we've done. We've done a revival of *Company*, and then *Follies* in 2001, *Pacific Overtures* and *Assassins* and *Sunday in the Park with George*. And we recently, as his birthday present, renamed the Henry Miller Theatre the Stephen Sondheim Theatre.

**Peter Filichia:** It's wonderful to have a theater named after an artist because we are in an era where we have the American Airlines Theatre. The Winter Garden Theater was known as The Cadillac Winter Garden Theater. With corporate sponsorship, the day will come when we go to see a show at the Kaopectate Theatre.

**Audience Member #3:** Because Sondheim is so able to touch people, did he ever use psychology in his work?

**Peter Filichia:** When he was doing *Into the Woods*, he got a great deal from Bruno Bettelheim who did a study of fairy tales and their psychological underpinnings. When he did that Diane Sawyer interview, he said, "I can't write a song about a woman who's in trouble, but if you tell me she's wearing a red dress and..." all those specifics, he can. So psychology is obviously tremendously important to him, and it's one of the reasons that his songs land with us. "Children go from something you love to something you lose." Is there any one of us who's a parent who doesn't know what he's talking about? When our children thought we were the sun and the moon and then they got to be teenagers and thought we didn't know a thing.

**Ted Sod:** Also, he talks about calling Mary Rodgers and taking notes when he was writing *Company*, a piece about marriage. It's often said that artists comment on the world because they feel they're outside of it. They don't feel exactly integrated into the reality that we're all a part of. They're watching from a distance. Many of the songs are so astute about how we treat people and really hit you hard. For many of these songs, I started to well up because he's able to capture fundamental emotions.

**Peter Filichia:** When I saw *Company* in Boston, I had been married for fourteen months. And when Bobby asks a friend of his, “Are you sorry you ever got married?” he started singing, “You’re always sorry / You’re always grateful.” And at 23 years old, I was nodding my head after being married for only fourteen months.

**Audience Member #4:** Sondheim said in the show that his only real hit was “Send in the Clowns.” Is that because it was commercially successful?

**Peter Filichia:** Hit is a relative term. Ironically, I think a case should be made that his biggest hit was “Putting it Together,” which was used in a computer commercial back in the early 1990s. Many people know “Comedy Tonight,” which was in commercials too. Plymouth used to use it. So people know more Sondheim than they think. But nevertheless, there’s no question about “Send in the Clowns” being the song that was recorded the most.

**Ted Sod:** And *A Little Night Music* was one of the shows that actually recouped, right?

**Peter Filichia:** It is true that many of the Sondheim shows didn’t make much money or any money at all. *Funny Thing* made money and *Company* made a little money and so did *Night Music*. Most of the others have not succeeded with the public because you have to be a smarter type of theatergoer. God bless places like Roundabout, which is a not-for-profit organization that can do these shows. Otherwise, we’d have a hard time seeing them.

**Audience Member #5:** I thought it was poignant when Sondheim said he was sixty when he fell in love. Is it a relationship that continued?

**Peter Filichia:** No, I’m afraid not. It didn’t last all that long. I don’t know how many years it lasted; it did last some. But it’s not still going.

**Ted Sod:** The relationship ended in the late 1990’s but they are still friends. I think if he wanted to talk about it some more, he probably would have. In many ways, we’ve become a culture where our celebrities’ private lives are really out there for anyone and everyone to analyze and judge, and they shouldn’t be.

**Peter Filichia:** People tell me a lot of stories about themselves that I will not print. I’d rather concentrate on the work.

**Audience Member #6:** Sondheim seemed very grateful that Hammerstein thought he taught him something. I think he probably did teach him something, and Oscar was a big enough and generous man to allow that to happen instead of a competition. Do you agree with that?

**Peter Filichia:** Yes, that’s a very good point. He was willing to pass the torch and many people aren’t; they do get jealous of the people they mentor.

**Ted Sod:** Also, when Sondheim was in school, he wrote a musical he was very proud of called *By George*. He took it to Hammerstein to appraise it. Hammerstein basically ripped it apart, and went step by step in terms of how Sondheim could have improved things. Sondheim often says

that in that three-hour session where he went through the piece with his mentor, he learned more about musical theater than he could have ever learned from anyone else. Hammerstein must have been a remarkable human being.

**Peter Filichia:** Yes, Sondheim always says he was the finest man I've ever met—and he'd met a lot of people. Sondheim also says, "I went home after I gave it to him convinced I'd be the first fifteen-year-old with a musical on Broadway."

**Ted Sod:** Oscar gave him an assignment. He had to write four musicals: one based on a well-made play, one based on a play that wasn't very well-made, one was of his own choosing—a novel, I think. Sondheim chose *Mary Poppins*. Can you imagine *Mary Poppins* by Stephen Sondheim? And then a fourth one, an original musical.

**Peter Filichia:** A book came out called *How Sondheim Found His Sound*. What's fascinating is that there are about fifteen that he started and dropped or finished and nothing came of them. The point is resiliency. You must have resiliency when you work in the theater and perhaps in any other field too. But the fact that he never gave up—even when all of his projects were coming to nothing—he still went on. And that's the way you succeed.

**Ted Sod:** Something I really respect about Stephen Sondheim is that when people somewhat lazily refer to his musicals as such and such a musical by Stephen Sondheim, he says, "Wait a minute. There's a librettist who wrote this play." It's Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman. It's Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine. It happens because the music is something you remember, but he's adamant about the fact that he worked with other people.

**Peter Filichia:** With *The Sound of Music*, people forget that Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse wrote the book. You never hear that it's Lindsay and Crouse's *Sound of Music*. But the big people always give credit where credit is due, and Sondheim always does give credit to his librettists.

**Audience Member #7:** I've studied Shakespeare now for four years and loving Sondheim's work as much as I do, I think he really knows the human condition as well as Shakespeare. He is so well-informed it boggles the mind.

**Ted Sod:** True. There's a certain kind of genius there. Let's thank Mr. Peter Filichia. It's always a pleasure. Our next lecture is on April 24<sup>th</sup> for *Everyday Rapture*, and our guest will be Dick Scanlan, who is the co-writer of *Everyday Rapture*. We hope to see you there.