

# HOW TO MAKE (ANOTHER) SONDHEIM REVUE

In 1983 I attended a revue called *A Sondheim Evening*: eight wonderful singers, a six-piece band and twenty-four Sondheim songs. It was an evening I have never forgotten and one I feel lucky to have seen, as it was only presented for two nights. I was probably the only one in the audience who had not seen the shows from which these songs had been plucked, and though there was the simplest of introductions it didn't matter because each song painted a self-contained picture—a complete expression of character and emotion and story.

I had just met Stephen Sondheim six months prior, having been introduced by a producer to discuss a project I was interested in developing. New to the world of the theater—I had been a photographer and graphic designer and had only just directed my first musical—the only Sondheim show I had seen was *Sweeney Todd*. Though Steve ultimately decided not to pursue the project I had in mind, he did leave the door open to our finding another subject to work on together. Over the next several months, he also began to introduce me to his work by giving me cassette tapes of his various cast albums and then inviting me to this concert of his work, which was sponsored by the Whitney Museum and directed by Paul Lazarus.

In 1997, having since had the thrill of writing three shows with Steve and working on a revival of another, I thought it would be fun to see if I could create a new Sondheim revue. I brought the idea to Todd Haimes at the Roundabout, and he provided me the opportunity of a three-week workshop. With a cast of four, led by the amazing Barbara Cook, we managed to assemble one-act that I half-seriously called *The Existential Sondheim Revue*. The promise of a wonderful new show was there, but another revue called *Putting It Together* was heading to Broadway, and we ended up shelving our project in deference to theirs.

In 2002, another Sondheim revue out of London called *Opening Doors* had a short run at Zankel Hall. (I know, so many Sondheim revues.) Created by David Kernan, *Opening Doors* included a voice over of Steve talking about various topics related to his life in New York. By now it had been over 15 years since Steve and I had worked together on a new show, not that we didn't discuss possible projects on a regular basis. The *Opening Doors* revue came and went, but the idea of not only hearing from Steve on stage, but also actually seeing him struck me a unique and intriguing possibility for a different kind of revue. I have spent countless hours working with Steve and observing first hand his creative process; and we have also spent a great deal of time just schmoozing and hanging out together—there is no one more fun to shoot the breeze with. Wouldn't it be an exciting idea to share a little of that experience with others? When I proposed interviewing Steve on film and creating a show that attempted to let an

audience share his company and gain some insight into his life and working process, he thought about it for a long moment and then replied: “Well, I would have loved to have spent an evening with the Gershwins, or Cole Porter or Harold Arlen.” With his endorsement, I began to build the show that has become *Sondheim on Sondheim*.

First, I spent a considerable amount of time going through the voluminous Sondheim song files familiarizing myself with both the well known and the obscure. Having culled a list of songs (far too many) and hours of archival video and film footage, I began to assemble a structure that would lend the show a narrative arc. Once these puzzle pieces were mapped out, we began putting Steve on camera, having him address the subjects that would connect the linear and emotional dots.

It's been a great joy working on this show—though far more complicated and time-consuming than I ever had imagined. And I owe a great debt to our musical director David Loud, and also Peter Jones, Sondheim's archivist. What I hope we have accomplished is an evening with Sondheim for those who know him and his work well; for those who are simply familiar with his work and know little of the man; and for those now and in the future who know nothing of Sondheim or even the artistic process that's involved in the writing of a musical. If I'm lucky, the thrill I had being introduced to the work of Stephen Sondheim at that 1983 revue will now be shared by others, and not just for two nights. And in some small way, I also hope that I have created an evening of theater that reflects my great appreciation and love for the man and his music.

