

INTERVIEW WITH THE MUSIC DIRECTOR: DAVID LOUD

What does a musical director and arranger do?

Well, in this case, it was a lot of different jobs. It was consulting with the director, James Lapine, about the musical content of the show. Sondheim has written many shows and many wonderful songs, and if you did a show of the best of Sondheim's music, it would last about 600 hours. So, it was the process of going through the songs and seeing which were best suited to this evening, which is an examination, not only of his work, but of his life and how the songs from his shows reflect interestingly on his life and his philosophy. My job was finding songs that matched the interviews or historical clips. I am also the arranger for this show, which means I am figuring out how to adapt these songs for this context. We have eight singers, and we don't have a chorus. We're doing different takes of some of the songs and very traditional takes of others. It's about figuring out when and how to best adapt the songs to serve this piece. Then, as vocal arranger, my job is to figure out the harmonies people are going to sing when they are singing together and arrange vocally for these eight singers. In rehearsal, I coach the singers, teach them the music, and work with them on how they are going to sing it. I generally work on every musical aspect of the show, including making sure that the orchestrations are going to fit our singers and our arrangements. It's a lot of different hats, and this show is one I've been doing for a long time.

Were you around for the workshop in the '90s?

No, I was not. James brought me on board for what we thought was going to be a production in Atlanta. It was called *iSondheim* at that point. We did readings and workshops that prepared us for that production which actually never happened. It was a wonderful process we went through to arrive where we are now. We wrote down all the songs that we liked, that we wanted to do. Of course, it was too many, but we recorded a lot of them. We had a week of a sort of Sondheim camp. We had great singers, and we recorded them all. Then James sort of edited it down and saw what matched his video choices. He essentially wrote the show from that Camp Sondheim week.

It seems like the interview portion definitely had an impact on what songs went into the show.

And the availability of archival material. We see Sondheim speaking now, and we see him speaking in the '60s and '70s, and you get a sense of his whole life. You can always tell what year it is by his beard.

Were there songs you wanted to advocate for, but just couldn't because of the interviews? Can you give us some examples of what you were not able to include?

There are many, many songs of his that I love that we don't include. There's a song called "Someone in a Tree" from *Pacific Overtures* that Sondheim often lists as one of his favorite songs that he has ever written. It's a fantastic piece, but it is about nine minutes long. So, that would involve cutting three other numbers. There are certain songs of his that didn't end up in the show that are iconic that everybody knows, like "Another Hundred People." That is not in this show, but it has been in every other Sondheim



Conductor Andy Einhorn, musical director David Loud, Vanessa Williams and director James Lapine

revue in existence. I love that song because it is like no other song in the world. There's a brilliant song called "Getting Married Today" from *Company*. Actually what we do in the show is a rough draft of that song, which is called "The Wedding is Off." It's a song that not many people will have ever heard before, but it is a very good song with an interesting lyric. It's an alternate look at that spot in the play.

So there are songs that were cut from Sondheim's shows that made it into this piece?

Yes, we do include some songs that we cut from various shows. For instance, the three songs that were written for the beginning of *Forum*, two of which were cut and one of which is now the opening, are all performed in the show. It gives you a sense of the process Sondheim went through in coming up with what is the perfect opening to *Forum*. He wrote a very serious military sounding piece, and that was cut. Then he wrote a delightful little foxtrot called "Love is in the Air," and that was cut. Then he came up with "Comedy Tonight," which of course tells you exactly what the show is about. Similarly we go through the songs that preceded "Being Alive," the finale of *Company*. There was a song called "Multitudes of Amy" which was cut and replaced with a song called "Happily Ever After," which was a very negative song. He ended up with "Being Alive," which is a very positive song.

How many songs do you anticipate being in this show?

It's between thirty and forty.

Will each performer get to do an equal amount?

They all get to do a lot, but we have three above-the-title stars, and they are carrying the burden most of the night. But all the performers are featured in beautiful ways. Sometimes they are supporting each other, and sometimes there are just solo turns.

Were you involved in the casting process in any way?

Absolutely. We had lots and lots of auditions because we wanted a very varied group of performers. The work of Sondheim isn't generic, and it requires performers who are smart and incisive and who can give you clarity of character while delivering difficult music and complicated lyrics. It is a very sophisticated performer who can do Sondheim's work well. It took a long time to come up with this group because it is a very varied, very interesting, very individual group. Nobody is like anybody else in the show. It is not a uniform look of tall, beautiful chorus girls or anything like that.

It ranges in age too.

Yes. We sort of based the casting of the show on a number that both James and I love called "Waiting for the Girls Upstairs" from *Follies*, where you have four older characters singing at the same time as their younger selves do. So, in a way we cast four people who are at a very mature place in their careers and four people who are at a very young, fresh place.

You talked a little bit about what it takes to perform Sondheim. Is this your first time working on Sondheim?

No. When I was eighteen I was cast in the original company of *Merrily We Roll Along* as an actor. I played the pianist on stage. The whole cast of *Merrily* was sixteen to twenty-six years old, and a lot of us were making our Broadway debuts. Certainly I was. Tonya Pinkins was in it and Jason Alexander was in it. It was a wonderful experience, but it was ultimately a heartbreaking experience because we only ran for two weeks. But at the age of eighteen, to be working with Sondheim, Hal Prince and Paul Gemignani was the most extraordinary learning experience you could ever have in the theatre. We watched them wrestle with a show that clearly wasn't working and come in with ideas to make it better. We did five weeks of previews on that show, with a different show every single night. We rehearsed on our days off, we rehearsed in the afternoons. We put material in the show that night that had been written that morning and orchestrated that afternoon. It was an amazing experience to go through. During that production I was happy to be on stage singing, dancing and playing the piano, but it occurred to me that the person I really wanted to be in the room was Paul Gemignani, because he is a magnificent conductor and was magnificent with us. We were very young and very inexperienced, and he sort of showed us how to interact with a conductor of a Broadway show. The last thing we were thinking about was interacting with the conductor because we were having so much fun, and we were memorizing our lines, and just doing the show. But you have to have a connection with the conductor, and he taught us that. It is something I have

used in my career as a music director, establishing a strong connection between the person leading the orchestra and the cast onstage. After *Merrily*, I turned more towards music direction. I have actually done a couple of other Sondheim shows. I worked on the 1985 revival of *Pacific Overtures* that was off-Broadway. I music directed the Roundabout revival of *Company* in 1995. And I worked on the John Doyle revival of *Sweeney Todd* as a music director. The cast played the instruments, and it was the hardest job I have ever had. Getting actors to play that score was quite a challenge. So, I've been in the Sondheim world since *Merrily*, and even before that Sondheim's music caught my ear like no other music had. What he was writing was so fresh and so challenging and varied. The variety in the scores is amazing. Six or seven of them easily could be written by completely different people. Look at the beautiful waltzes of *A Little Night Music*, the Asian-influenced sound of *Pacific Overtures*, the very modern New York sound to *Company*, the horror movie-set-as-an-opera feeling of *Sweeney Todd*, and the wonderfully open and accessible almost pop score with a heart of *Merrily*. Then there are shows that sound like no other show in the world, like *Sunday in the Park*. Sondheim is an extraordinary chameleon who finds a new language for every show that he creates. He's never copying; he's never saying, "We had a hit doing that." He's always coming up with something new. I have extraordinary respect for him as a composer, and as a lyricist there is no equal. He can be simple, he can be complicated, he can be funny, and he can give you four internal rhymes that you don't even notice. He clearly has been an inspiration to a lot of people who compose now, but one trap that they fall into is trying to sound like him, and his genius is that he never sounds like himself.

Do you get intimidated if Sondheim is in the room with you?

Everybody is a little intimidated, but he is great to have in the room. He is a wonderful coach of his own material. He is very actor-friendly and knows how to talk to actors. Actors love being coached by him because he'll tell you what he was thinking when he wrote a lyric or why he wanted a word longer or stressed. His music is very specifically written, and for singers the best choice is usually to do it exactly as he has written it because a lot of thought has gone into it. He also has a real knack for setting his lyrics in a very conversational way so that it is almost like you are talking, but it is in rhythm and you are singing a melody that is not always the easiest in the world.

When you say you are doing a different take on a song, do you vet it through Sondheim first?

Actually the way we have worked on this project is that we have done readings and presentations, and Sondheim, rather than go through the whole process, will come and see a more finished version and say, "That didn't work" or "That's a great idea. Let's keep that in the show." We have some new ideas in the show that he hasn't seen yet, so we'll see what his reaction is to that.

I remember reading that there were four shows that Hammerstein assigned Sondheim to write. One was, I believe, a musical version of *Mary Poppins*.

We explored a wonderful song from that called “The Moon is Blue,” where Mary is talking to the children and saying, “The moon is blue and I don’t love you.” She means, of course, that the moon isn’t blue and that she loves the children. It is a wonderful little upside down lyric. As I said, the show could be forty hours long.

Is there something from every show in this piece?

Well, we didn’t really construct it with that as the goal. Right now, there isn’t anything from *Pacific Overtures*, but I’ll probably put something in the overture that quotes it.

What about shows like *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, *West Side Story*, and *Gypsy*?

All of them are included. We do two songs that were cut from *Gypsy*, actually, which most people haven’t heard, and one song that was cut from *West Side Story* that most people haven’t heard. So, there are many treasures to be discovered here.

Do you feel any loss in not conducting the show? Do you feel like you have to be symbiotic with the conductor?

I actually feel like I am symbiotic with the conductor. I have a wonderful assistant who conducts from the piano beautifully. I like to conduct big orchestras, and we have a smallish orchestra for this. Also, because my job on this show is arranger as well as music director, I think it is going to be better that I am out in the house making sure that the show is working the way we want it to work. Because the orchestra is behind the cast in this case, instead of in the pit, I think it was the better choice to be the supervisor on this. I have great trust in the gentleman who will be conducting the show; he will be conducting it the way I would be conducting it.

Are there any medleys in the show?

I would say no, although there are times when songs flow into each other. Medleys, to me, don’t necessarily explore what’s individual and unique about a song. If it is just sort of “Here’s some songs he wrote about foreign countries,” that’s less interesting to me than finding a couple of songs that reflect more surprisingly on each other. What we have is more like sequences of songs that are somehow related.

Do you already have a sense of how it is all going to fit together?

It’s very carefully planned out. James has done a great job organizing the video. We have these huge bulletin boards of songs and what order they could be in. We’ve been playing around with that and with assigning the songs to different people to create balance and flow for the performers as well. It’s basically an enormous jigsaw puzzle, and we are just hoping we get all the pieces in the right place.

I wanted to ask you about your education. Did you start by playing piano?

Absolutely. I started as a pianist at six years old. I always played piano, and I started music directing shows in seventh grade. We did Gilbert & Sullivan shows that I

would teach everyone the parts for and force everyone to sing. I had a wonderful teacher named John Rand who wrote musicals for us in 4th, 5th, 6th and 7th grade. If there was a girl who reminded him of Cleopatra, he would write a little musical about Cleopatra. They were very inspiring and funny. It was a wonderful introduction to how clever musical theatre can be. I used to save up all my money and come to New York, sleep on my grandmother’s couch, see eight shows in a week, and go to Sardi’s at the end of the week. She was a real theatre nut too. So, I saw as much as I could as a kid. Then I went to Yale and majored in music. I didn’t go to graduate school, because at that time graduate schools were not focusing on musical theatre conducting at all. I just went and did summer stock. You learn by doing theatre, and you learn from the people around you.

Usually I would ask, what advice would you give to young people who want to do what you do, but I think you just nailed it.

Well, one thing that I feel that it is very important for people to focus on is to learn the past. Learn the history of musical theatre. Musical theatre didn’t start with *Les Miz*. I’ve done a lot of study and research on old musical theatre. You should know the greats. You should know Kurt Weill, Lerner and Lowe, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Rogers & Hammerstein, and Rogers & Hart. Once you know that, then you can go off on your own. That’s for composers, but also for music directors and pianists as well as actors. Anyone in the theatre should know our history. There are so many programs now that teach musical theatre that were not around when I was going to school. I hope that they focus on the history of musical theatre in addition to preparing people to be in pop shows and rock shows, which is essential now.

Do you ever have a sense of how you want the audience to respond to a show or how they may respond to a show?

My goal is to serve the music and to present the music in an interesting, polished and accessible way. We have many audiences for this show. We have people who have never heard of Sondheim and we have people who know every single lyric and every single note and will be criticizing every choice. I respect that because his work inspires people to be obsessed with it because it is so interesting. You can lose yourself in his scores. I remember that when I saw *Sweeney Todd*, ten minutes in, I just wanted to see it again. And every time I had thirty dollars I went and saw *Sweeney Todd*. Every time you see it, you notice something else or hear a lyric in a new way. You’d see something you’d never seen before in the set. The material is so rich that I understand why people get upset. So that’s one part our audience. As James said the first day, “Stephen Sondheim is eighty and has been around a long time, and people his age will be coming to the show and hopefully young people will be coming to the show.” There are many audiences, and we have to serve them all. I think what, hopefully, they will all come away with is a sense of what it means to be an artist in the musical theatre, and how one’s life ends up being one’s art.