

# INTERVIEW WITH THE ACTOR: VANESSA WILLIAMS



UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH *SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM* ACTRESS VANESSA WILLIAMS ABOUT HER ROLE IN THIS PRODUCTION, JUGGLING A BUSY TELEVISION CAREER, AND THE CHALLENGES OF PERFORMING MUSIC BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM.

**When did you first realize you wanted to be a dancer/singer/ actor?**

Well, I grew up in a musical family, so I always knew that performing and music were something that I felt very comfortable with. I was always exposed to the arts. I would probably say it was when we went to see Stephanie Mills in *The Wiz* on Broadway. Performing seemed like a job that I would enjoy. It seemed like it was just an audition away. I was 11 or so.

**Did you go right into classes? What kind of training did you have?**

I danced from the age of 4 and wanted to be an Alvin Ailey dancer because I danced modern. My first play was in fourth grade when I was nine. At that point I knew the theatre was something that I loved. The second role that I did was in junior high school. In high school we had a theatre department, and our acting teacher was the head of

it. We did productions every year. Then I joined Sawmill, which is a local community theatre in Chappaqua, until I started doing professional theatre.

**Can you tell us a little bit about why you wanted to do this project – *Sondheim on Sondheim*?**

James Lapine called me, and when James calls, I say yes. I had a great time working with him on *Into the Woods*. We had a ball. I respect him, and he's got a great approach to theatre and a great sense of humor. I was honored to get the call. I'm so glad he wanted to work with me again.

**Can you tell us a little bit about performing *Sondheim*? You've done it before. What are the challenges of his music?**

One challenge is articulation because he has so many interesting phrases within one line, so it is easy to run away and get off the track. You really have to concentrate and articulate because his lyrics are very tricky. And the second catch is to pay attention to the intervals he uses. He writes

beautiful melodies, which are not what your ear would normally go to; this makes them hard to sing. That's the other challenge to mastering Sondheim.

**Do you find that his work is something that you gravitate to emotionally?**

I think some of his work is very moving. It is hard to not approach it with emotion. His material lends itself to telling stories and setting the mood. You have to be invested as an actor to perform his songs.

**I would imagine that you have some solos in this. Is that true?**

Yes. There are solos, duets, company numbers, one that's just the boys. He's got such a body of work – it is James' unfortunate job to pair it down.

**Can you tell us a little bit about solo work? Is it like doing a monologue? Do you focus on telling a story in that way?**

I think that is my approach always.

**How do you think audiences will respond to *Sondheim on Sondheim*? Do you have a sense of what's going to happen? Or is that not something you think about?**

The show is featuring Sondheim in a way that I think will make audiences feel like they had an evening with the man. James put the show together amazingly. Sondheim is talking about his life, so they will get a chance to hear the origins of the ideas for songs and for shows, and they will understand what was going on in his life while he was writing them. It will be an open door into the mind that thought up such phenomenally creative work. The audience will not only enjoy the performances, but they will also understand and appreciate the genius of Sondheim.

**Can you talk to us a little bit about the difference between working in other mediums and working on stage? You've been doing a lot of television work, of course. We all love you on *Ugly Betty*.**

I always feel like I'm going back to school when I sit down in front of a music stand with new material. I love it. You get a new lease with each new project –that's the wonderful thing about doing different shows. There are new ensembles, new friends, and new experiences. I love challenges, and it's like going back home for me. I'm really excited.

**Can you talk to us a little bit about roles that you would like to play onstage if you had the opportunity?**

I love being able to create new characters, which I did on *Ugly Betty*. I've also stepped into the roles of the Spiderwoman in *Kiss Of The Spiderwoman*, the Witch from *Into the Woods*, and I did *Saint Louis Woman* at Encores!

I'd really love to create a role, though. I would like to play something with a little bit of an edge, with some darkness and some mystery. Probably in the vein of what I did in *Spiderwoman* –that was so wonderful because I got to act and sing; something like that would be phenomenal.

**What advice would you give to a young person who might want to do the kind of work you are doing?**

Get as much experience as you can. It was great for me to have two parents who valued the arts. I run into so many people who are in my business whose parents told them to get a "real job," who told them there was no real value to the arts. That's crushing when you are a creative person and you have talent. I would encourage students who don't have the support that I did to take programs that do give them the support. And don't stop working. There's theater in schools, there's theatre in the community. Apply to any scholarship programs that help open doors for your aspirations. Every time you do a project there are connections to be made with the people you are working with. Those are relationships that will help you for the rest of your life if you stay in the business.

**Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?**

No, just that I'm doing double duty with this show. I'm rehearsing the show and I'm filming *Ugly Betty*. This is the one show where I haven't had the luxury to rehearse every day from 10-6, six days a week. We've been rehearsing on my days off and shooting most weekdays, so I've just been praying for good health, keeping my voice rested and getting through my double duty. *Sondheim on Sondheim* is so special that I knew I would have to sacrifice sleep and time to do both. I love that I get to do two things that I love.