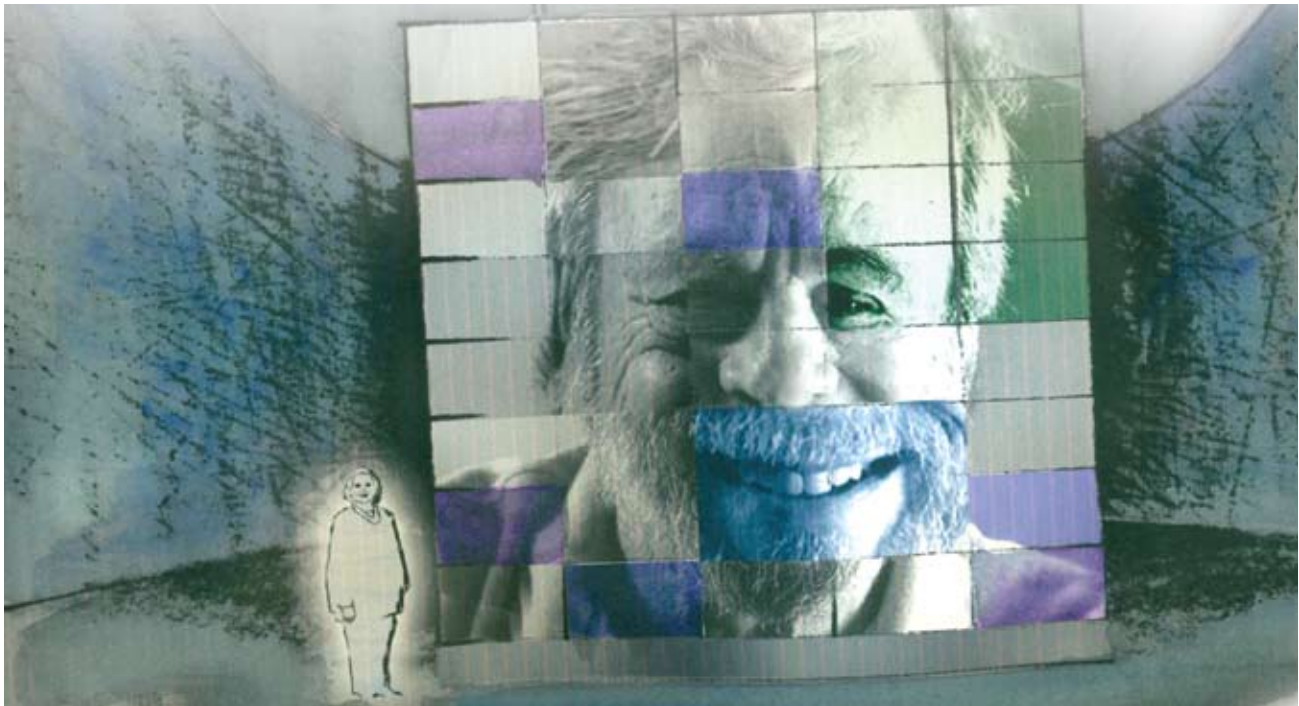


# INTERVIEW WITH THE PROJECTIONS DESIGNER: PETER FLAHERTY

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED PROJECTIONS DESIGNER PETER FLAHERTY ABOUT CREATING THE WORLD OF *SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM* THROUGH VIDEO AND PROJECTION DESIGN.



Set Sketch by Beowulf Boritt

## How did you start doing video and projection design?

When I was in college, I started as a theatre and film director creating performance projects that incorporated a lot of video. To the extent that there were computers that could handle it, I began doing a lot of video and projection installations. I worked as an assistant designer with the Wooster Group. I had an internship with them after college. After that, I did more and more work of my own.

## Tell us about your process on *Sondheim on Sondheim*?

We started with the idea that we wanted to use imagery that looked different than LED projections that you typically see in large scale productions. We started to find some new technology on the market that worked the same as the LCD technology you use when you are looking at your computer screen. It's bright and it's high resolution. LED is lower resolution – it's what you see a lot in concerts and Broadway shows. LCD offers us the opportunity to really showcase the interviews with Stephen Sondheim and produce them at a high resolution using cinematic image power. Before these LCD walls came around, the only way we could really do that was through projection. There are really no projections in this show, in the sense that there are no video projectors that have a light bulb that projects onto a surface. In fact, all of our video is displayed on these liquid crystal displays (LCD).

## When you say walls, are you referring to the projection surface?

Yes, they are like gigantic TV screens. What's really incredible is that they have a very, very tiny edge. A TV at home has a rather thick edge around it that might be 2 or 3 inches wide. These screens have almost no edge, so you can put a whole bunch of them together into a grid or a tile wall. We can put 35 of them in a grid to make a 16-foot-wide and 13-foot-tall surface that is almost seamless.

## So there is a solid surface that you will be showing video on, correct?

Yes. In fact, there is a wall that starts the show that is able to break apart into more panels. The surfaces are able to recompose themselves over the course of the evening.

## Are we going to see multiple versions of the same image?

Well, the technology allows us to stretch a single image over all of the monitors but, at the same time, I can also duplicate the same image multiple times if that was what we wanted to do aesthetically.

## How are you finding the content? It is going to cover different times throughout Sondheim's life, is that true?

Yes, there's a mixture of past and present. There are a couple of different sources for the material. We've conducted three interviews with him, interviews during which he discusses topics that range from his biography to his choices in writing a particular show; there's a whole variety of topics that he covers. There's the interview material that we've shot in the last year and half, and then there's also archival video material that ranges from

television interviews that he did over the last 50 years or so to photos from his archives of him with collaborators or during the opening of a new show. So, the content ranges widely over his life, his choices, his motivation, his artistic output. It's a real full biography of his life, career and artistic work.

**How is the content decided? Do you collaborate with director James Lapine on what is going to go where, or does James pretty much dictate that?**

It varies, of course, like anything, so I can't describe it in absolute terms. For the most part, though, James is conducting the interviews during the shoots, so he's the one who is in conversation with Sondheim. He's also pulling a lot of the archival clips that deal with topics he wants to tackle in the script, as it were. The content is being created as we go. The script has been evolving. It's a really close collaboration. We figure out how to edit the material. I give my thoughts about how a segment might fit together with the script. James also has lots of aesthetic input about how the images work and how the pieces fit together.

**When you did the filming of Sondheim in the past year or so, did you light it and did you operate the camera?**

I was more active as a cinematographer. There is a director of photography who is hands on with the crew and the lighting and all that. James and I are figuring out how it works so we can keep our eyes open and make changes as we go. We've worked with a couple of different directors of photography for the different interview shoots. I think the first shoot was around 2 years ago. Then we did a shoot last March or April. We are doing another shoot a week from today, which will be the third one.

**What about the archival footage? Where does that come from?**

Peter Jones, who works as Sondheim's archivist, had a lot of video material from over the years. He has a variety of analog and digital media. He was the one who really put his hands on a lot of that stuff and gave us the source material that James then culled down. We've also been in the process of trying to get the rights and get the images at a higher quality. I actually love a lot of the texture of old video footage and old photos. A photo might have scratches or be bent or have a piece torn. Or a video might have those colors we associate with the '70s, '80s, or '90s. So, besides seeing Steve age over the course of the piece, we see eras go by and see technology change. I think that's kind of beautiful.

**I love that too, especially in films where they mix film, video and Super 8.**

It's beautiful. We have some old footage that was shot on Super 8. You mix a little clip of that with him being interviewed and talking about his life now and it just makes it very touching. It's getting to be a really interesting portrait at this point.

**What's challenging for you doing a project like this?**

There's the huge amount of material we are trying to put together in a logical, interesting, emotional way. There's the technological and logistical challenge of bringing this technology to the stage. I don't believe I've seen anything like this employed in this type of venue. The biggest challenge is getting those problems solved and then having the head space to step back and think about the piece as a whole and figure out how you can tell someone's story. It's sort of the documentarian's challenge of making sure you are making choices to the best of your ability to show someone's life and spirit. It's like a portrait painter trying to figure out what the right angle is, what the right material is, and what the right texture is. You have to be able to move the microscope to be able to look close up and wide angle at the same time. We don't want this thing to feel like a big whiz-bang, sleek, technological, cold experience. We don't want this to feel like an incredibly sophisticated trade show or something. We want it to feel warm, inviting, and sensitive.

**Is the technology dictating some of your aesthetic choices?**

What's so exciting about some of this technology is that it can speak to the way we process information in this age. There's a sense that we are looking at something kind of similar to our computers – dealing with life in multiple windows simultaneously is very much a guiding principle. Interestingly, one of the things that inspired the design and the way it works was that Sondheim is an avid collector of puzzles and games, and so the way these screens fit together is sort of like a puzzle in that it is one unit and many separate units. It is a mixed metaphor for the digital age. It speaks to the organization of the computer or the i-phone or i-pad, but it also speaks to the 19<sup>th</sup> century board game and chess game, which are all over Sondheim's house and are featured visually in the show.

**Talk a little bit about how the technology works with live singers? Is it a challenge to not have the technology upstage them?**

Yes, it's a big challenge. One of the things that is really interesting about performance is that you want moments when the media takes center stage and is allowed to do something exciting for a moment and really capture the audience's attention visually, but then it has to be able to recede. We've been working on a lot of material where we allow that to happen, where we take a moment where we have interviews mixed with archival footage. We are getting very into that, and then we calm it way down and move into a song. Sometimes there's a watercolor effect on the monitors, so there's this slightly washy sensibility that we are developing in some clips that just works to tie all the pieces together. So, if Barbara Cook is in a number and we want to zero in on her, we just pull way down. We darken the color, zero right in on her, and work to make the video blend into the background. The audience's eyes can check

the image and go right back to the singer. It's always about making sure you don't distract, while at the same time making sure that you are keeping it interesting.

**It sounds to me like the technical rehearsal is going to be really long. Is that true?**

Yes, it will be really long. We have two weeks of dry tech before any actors arrive. It's so long because of the media stuff and because of the automated screens. There's no question it will be an intensive period. Then we have two weeks of actual tech. There's really a month long period between February 22<sup>nd</sup>, which is when dry tech begins officially, and the Gala on March 22<sup>nd</sup>. We open the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April. We're going to be working overtime for the next few months.

**Can you explain to us how the moving screens and the images work technically?**

Well, there's a large system of computers that run the show. The main system is eleven computers with one computer that is kind of the timeline computer that tells the other ten what images to display. The ten computers are feeding the different parts of the wall. We do it with a theatrical display that's called "Watchout".

**Do you have any advice for a young person who might want to do the kind of work you are doing?**

I basically come from a theatrical design background. I have tended to make work that you would see at BAM or at the Lincoln Center Festival. I think that is how I developed my aesthetic and how I established my working processes in this multi-media theatre world. You really get to stretch your legs with the technology and image-making as a tool. Working with a team of collaborators that are used to working with video has been invaluable. I think that people who want to get involved in this kind of stuff should just start making it. Don't worry about the big budgets or the fancy gear –that stuff starts to come naturally if you have good ideas. All the tools that are available now for the individual, like desktop computers and Final Cut Pro are becoming more ubiquitous. There is even software that allows you to work with this kind of stuff for free. I remember it was ten years ago that I was figuring out how to work with the first video projector that I had ever played with. It was one of those projectors with the three colored lamps. I remember messing around with that stuff in college, and just figuring it out. That's my advice – the tools are there, just start creating.

**Were you surprised, coming from a Next Wave Festival background, that you were asked to do this?**

I did a benefit for the Public Theater with James Lapine and that's how I got to know him. I found him to be really adventurous and intelligent. It felt very natural to me for us to collaborate because I respect him. Was it a surprise

to be asked to do it? On some level, maybe it was. I had honestly never thought about it. James just started talking about the project, and off we went. It's been a long time in development now. We probably talked for the first time about three years ago.

**Originally it was called iSondheim, and it was going to be done in Atlanta. Is that true?**

Yes, it was originally called iSondheim, and it was supposed to start off in Atlanta and then come up to Broadway. That was when we were working with the Frankel Group as producers and with the Alliance Theatre.

**Was Sondheim someone whose works you were familiar with, or did you have a steep learning curve?**

I had to learn a lot because I'm not that into musical theatre in general, but I remember in college I was the technical director for a production of *Sweeney Todd*. I was always kind of amazed by that show. I didn't think there could be a piece that had such an interesting narrative and was so dark and so beautiful. Musical theatre is still a form that I have not spent a lot of my life trafficking in, but I'm really interested to learn about it. Steve's story and contribution to the artistic process are always more interesting than I expect them to be

**Do you sense that he is a genius?**

I don't know, but I think so. He certainly transformed the form. He has made an incredible contribution.

**Is there a question I should have asked about the project or your work on it that I didn't?**

Even though we are making this project that is tightly focused, I hope that some of the ideas and technologies that I employ in other worlds come through in this, because I think that there is a place for them in Steve's life story. I hope that the work is heartwarming, but also challenging at certain moments. I hope you feel like you've never seen anything like this before.