

Stephen Sondheim

‘Nearly everything on Broadway is commercial crap’

As Sweeney Todd opens in London, its author explains to Tim Teeman why musical theatre is in terminal decline

In the room where Stephen Sondheim composes, in his Manhattan townhouse, are awards on a mantelpiece, a MacBook Pro on a day-bed, a frayed dictionary on a lectern, a line drawing of Sondheim, a collection of brass letter “S” ornaments and a stained-glass window looking out on communal gardens surrounded by skyscrapers. Most apposite, for a lyricist noted for his fiendish use of words, is a block of stone with the epigram: “Nothing is written in stone.” On a black piano sits sheet music with crotchets, quavers and phrases in pencil. Almost ten years after his last new musical, Sondheim reveals he is writing a new piece.

All Together Now, which he is composing with David Ives, playwright of the Broadway hit *Venus in Fur*, is based on a “small moment” in a past Ives play and focuses on “two people and what goes into their relationship”, Sondheim says. He began working on it in 1991; similar in structure to Sondheim’s *Merrily We Roll Along*, it follows the story of a relationship backwards: from the present to the first meeting. “I’m a procrastinator,” Sondheim admits with his affable growl. “We’ll write for a couple of months, then have a workshop. It seemed experimental and fresh 20 years ago. I have a feeling it may not be experimental and fresh any more.”

Sondheim, 81 and winner of an Oscar, multiple Tonys and Grammys, is compact and white-haired, his black standard poodles — Addie and Willie, named after characters in *Road Show* — at his feet. “I’m writing very slowly. It’s hard to get back on the bicycle,” he says. His last new musical, *Bounce*, opened in 2003 (a revised version, titled *Road Show*, appeared in 2008). “I have spent the past four years writing books [*Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*], so I’m rusty. As you grow older your energies

deplete. Only supreme geniuses like Stravinsky and Picasso worked into their eighties and nineties with vigour and freshness. Look at George Bernard Shaw’s later plays: it’s like, ‘Shut up and lie down.’ He seems avuncular, but sharp. “I’m not a retiring type. I’m not a golf player. I can’t imagine sitting in front of the television. Painful as it is, writing is still fun and I don’t have anything else to do.”

Sondheim calls his home “the house that Gypsy built”, referring to the hit musical for which he wrote the lyrics. While the productions entirely created by him have not been vast commercial successes, they are theatrical totems, including *Company*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Assassins*. Critics haven’t always hailed him — his musicals, like his songs, are lush but complex, peppy but difficult, playful and painful — yet alongside his best-known standards (*Send in the Clowns*, *Losing My Mind*) they spikily endure.

New York recently hosted revivals of *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Follies*, both peppered with those stab-in-the-solar-plexus songs about love, loss and the passing of time; this summer the London revival of *Into the Woods* will play in Central Park, while the much-hailed Chichester Festival production of *Sweeney Todd* is about to open in the West End. Based on Christopher Bond’s play about the homicidal barber and influenced by the unsettling film scores of Bernard Herrmann and a desire to “scare audiences”, Sondheim’s musical was adapted for the screen by Tim Burton (with Johnny Depp in the title role) in 2007.

Awarding the Chichester revival five stars last October, Libby Purves said in *The Times* that though a Sondheim masterpiece is familiar, it is “never so thrilling, dark, wild and truthful as under Jonathan Kent’s direction”. Even the set of the production, originally mounted in New York in 1979 (when it won eight Tony awards), hums with a furious energy: Mrs Lovett’s (Imelda Staunton) infamous pie oven is at first a subtle glow before blooming into “the fires of hell”. Michael Ball’s Sweeney is “intense, pitiable, real”, Purves said.

Sondheim was hugely impressed with Ball and Staunton at a cast recording of the production last week. “It’s gratifying,” he says of the flurry of revivals. “It means the shows have lasting value. But posterity doesn’t interest me. I want to enjoy it while I’m here; I can’t after I’m dead. If I can’t see or hear an audience’s reaction, what’s the point? Maybe the minute I’m dead nobody



MUSICAL MAESTRO
Above: Stephen Sondheim with Sweeney Todd director Jonathan Kent. Left: Michael Ball as the demon barber with Robert Burt. Below: Sondheim at home. Above right: the 1961 film of *West Side Story*

will do any of my shows again, maybe they will do them every day of the year. It’s irrelevant to me.”

He thinks some of his shows have been “unfairly maligned”, particularly *Merrily*, which received brickbats at its premiere in 1981. “It was perceived as a bigger failure than it might have been,” Sondheim says. “When a show is a failure the first time, it is never forgiven, even though we did a lot of work on it.” For every good review “there’s one that says you’re a piece of shit”.

This is said evenly; he doesn’t regret not becoming a Broadway darling. “If you’re writing experimental work, you can’t expect to be popular, in the sense of having large audiences. Very few shows of any real

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freshness are hits. The most popular work is not the best work: that’s true of 500 years of Western theatre.”

He would like a big Broadway hit “providing I can write the stuff I like, and they don’t usually go together. When people ask would I like to write a blockbuster, my answer is, ‘Providing I don’t have to sign my name to it.’” Despite his dark lyrics, haunted characters and unusual structures and melodies, Sondheim denies challenging the traditional musical form. “Never consciously. I just wanted to write

something I haven’t seen before. *Follies* is a dour, experimental work. The nun doesn’t escape from the Nazis in the end.”

West Side Story, for which he composed the lyrics (his big break), and *Gypsy* were not considered successful until hit movies were made of them, he says. “They made their money back, which is my definition of a hit. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was my biggest hit.” He wrote music and lyrics but not the book. “That was experimental but in the tradition of vaudeville, which the audience latched on to. I hardly consider myself a starving artist. I’ve made a very good living, just not a blockbuster one. I don’t have a private jet.”

Sondheim decries modern Broadway. “Most interesting plays are done off-Broadway because there isn’t a public any more for plays, unless they feature a star, in which case they will go to see the star; it doesn’t matter what the play is. The same is true of musicals. There is an anodyne homogeneity that governs Broadway musicals, so I don’t see many. There’s nothing wrong with having a lot of commercial crap as long as you have something else. You want a supermarket. Unfortunately, nearly everything on Broadway is commercial crap. The same is true of the West End. When I scan what’s on, my heart sinks into my boots.”

Is the condition terminal? “I think so. Commercial theatre will only get more narrow as time goes on. There are so many forms of entertainment, theatre is becoming more marginalised. It’s become ‘an event’: you see *Wicked* on your anniversary. I don’t think commercial theatre can

fulfil a function as a constant feeding ground for emotions and thoughts.” Broadway’s most talked-about success, *The Book of Mormon* (by the makers of *South Park*), is a “fun college show”, he says dismissively.

When a customs form asks where he lives, Sondheim would like to write “the past”, though his own past wasn’t much fun. He grew up on the Upper West Side, the only child of Herbert, a dress manufacturer, and Etta, who designed the dresses. He doesn’t remember feeling lonely, though, aged 10, when his parents divorced — Herbert left Etta, nicknamed Foxy, for another woman — “life became unpleasant and scarring”. Mother and son moved to Pennsylvania. “I felt unhappy. She was difficult. She was traumatised by my father leaving and took it out on me: middle of the floor/ Not going not an uncommon situation, the overbearing, grasping, voracious mother who both loves and hates her child. I’m afraid my mother never loved me. I don’t think she wanted children. She was a career lady. I think I was an accidental birth. She said my father had forced her to have two abortions. Since she was a compulsive liar I don’t believe that, but I’ll bet the basis of truth was that she didn’t want a baby. She was certainly no mother to me when they were married. My father was more of a father, he took me to ball games. I think he loved me.” He sought custody of Sondheim, but was refused — he had left his wife for another woman. “My mother had no time for me, but the minute my father left she focused on me because she needed someone to beat up.”

Later, Sondheim says, she wanted him to support her. Did he mind? “My analyst once asked that and I thought, ‘I guess I do.’ She bled me for as much money as she could. She also stole from me.” Once, when she was about to have surgery, she sent Sondheim a letter saying that her one regret was giving birth to him. Was there any reconciliation before she died? “No. She was in a nursing home the last few years. I went a couple of times a year.”

He saw his first musical at 9, but cinema was Sondheim’s first obsession. Aged 10, he became friends with Jamie Hammerstein, son of Oscar, the composer who became Sondheim’s “surrogate father” and mentor. “Everyone forgets Oscar was an experimental playwright. Everyone forgets that *Oklahoma* was experimental. It didn’t sell out on opening night. *West Side Story* was experimental, but if it had been a disaster I’m not sure I wouldn’t have slipped back into something comfortable.”

He was drawn to mathematics but studied music because of an inspirational teacher. “I would have very much liked to have gone into theoretical mathematics, but music is a mathematical art.” Sondheim’s ambition was to see his name on a marquee, “as proof of my existence”. This happened with *West Side Story*. “I saw it, thought ‘Oh my God’, then ‘Now what?’”

Some of his musicals, particularly *Sunday in the Park with George*, and his books are about artistic creation, distilling order from chaos. “I have German blood in me. I like order. I tend to be a conservative artist, then I instinctively go for something outré and pull back. My collaborators push me towards the experimental.”

What pierces in a Sondheim musical are lines such as in *Losing My Mind*: “Sometimes I stand/ Not going left./ Not going right”. He lethally zeroes in on moments. Arthur Laurents, “a serious playwright with a capital P”, and Hammerstein told him to “be specific, not general. Oscar said to write things as I saw them. When I took him my first musical he said, ‘You’re imitating me. Have the courage to be yourself.’ That was a good thing to tell a 15-year-old. It was the seed he planted, which flowered, then covered my life.”

Sondheim came out in his forties, but he didn’t agonise about being gay. “In my generation people didn’t talk about it. The awareness wasn’t there and I was a late bloomer sexually.” He hasn’t formed many relationships and says: “I didn’t fall in love till I was 60. I’ve always enjoyed solitude. It is received wisdom to want somebody or want to be with somebody, but I didn’t until I met Peter [Jones, a dramatist], and if I hadn’t met him I would have gone on perfectly fine.” He and Jones were together for ten years, now Jones works with him. “We are very close friends. He is very happy with his partner,” says Sondheim, who is also happy with his partner, Jeff Romley, 33. “I would miss it [love] if it wasn’t there,” he says. “But I don’t imagine what life would have been like had I been with someone in my twenties. There wasn’t that yearning.”

He doesn’t like ageing. “I feel superannuated. Obviously, I think about my mortality, particularly when your friends are dying — all my collaborators on *West Side Story* and *Gypsy* are dead. I’m the only one left.” He has arthritis, “or it might be tendinitis”, in his right thumb: “There are some days when it’s hard to write my signature.” He has “the usual lower back problems so walking isn’t a pleasure”, and a cataract in his right eye, “but it’s not bad enough to get operated on.”

On he writes; the challenge is to keep the work fresh. “It’s a very thin, maybe invisible, line between your style and cliché. If I play my favourite chord, am I repeating myself or is that who I am?” He avoids such traps “by picking different subjects”. He could “never” write a rock, hip-hop, pop or jazz-influenced score. Of the Pet Shop Boys and Liza Minnelli’s version of *Losing My Mind*, he says: “It was fine, fun, it didn’t thrill me, didn’t turn me off. I grew up with movies. Movie music is based on late 19th, early 20th-century music. Start with Brahms and end with Stravinsky — that’s my period.”

His acclaimed books of lyrics, *Finishing the Hat* and *Look, I Made a Hat*, are full of autobiographical comments — but will Sondheim write a proper memoir? “No, I’ve not led an interesting life,” he claims, preposterously. “I grew up upper-middle class. I found a profession early; [one] I became successful in. There’s very little

struggle.” Yet there is a melancholic thorniness alongside his warmth. Has he suffered from depression? “My general tenor is slightly below the medium line.” His father worked from 14 “and always expected to be bankrupt, no matter how successful he got — it gave him a slightly depressive air, I inherited that from him”. Sondheim only became “seriously depressed” once, after recovering from a heart attack in 1979. “I got home, was starting to recuperate, then one morning thought, ‘I don’t want to live.’ I guess it was a delayed reaction to the heart attack. The next day I woke up perfectly fine.”

Sondheim knows that Hammerstein would have been proud of him, because he has been experimental. “Even if he hated the shows he would have appreciated I didn’t tread the worn path.” In the UK last year he saw Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork’s *London Road* “and felt exhilarated in the first 15 minutes”. Despite bland Broadway fare, “people are using the musical form to do all kinds of things and I’m proud that, in this country at least, I am partly responsible for that”.

He admits to being “entirely nostalgic”, adding: “I would love to live my life again

knowing what I know now. I might enjoy things more fully, appreciating moments for what they were, instead of taking them for granted.” He recalls having Katharine Hepburn as a “very difficult” neighbour, complaining about the noise as he sang, composing *Company*. When her fireplace belched smoke into his house, she charged him half the repair bill. One day, in the gardens, he glanced up and saw Hepburn looking out of a window. “Behind her was the shadow of a man hanging up his trousers. He came forward and put his arms around her waist. It was Spencer Tracy.”

But, as in his musicals, the nostalgia comes spiked, whimsy briskly subverted. Eyeing his awards, Sondheim says: “When you get to a certain age they give you a lot of cut glass. The only awards that mean anything are the ones that come with cash.”

Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, Adelphi Theatre, London WC2 (sweeneytodwestend.com, 0844 8110053), Mar 10 to Sept 22. Times+ members can buy tickets to see *Sweeney Todd* followed by an exclusive post-show Q&A with Michael Ball and Imelda Staunton on Mar 15. For more details, go to mytimesplus.co.uk

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