



## ARTS AND CULTURE

# The soundman cometh: Stephen Sondheim at 80

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Stephen Sondheim, musical theater's greatest living artist

MANILA, Philippines - I first became acquainted with Stephen Sondheim when I was five years old. That was when, my father once told me, I first listened to the LP of "West Side Story." Although too young to fully understand what it was all about, I became a Sondheim fan at that very moment.

Born March 22, 1930 in New York City's Upper West Side, Stephen Sondheim would become, as a former New York Times theater critic called him, "the greatest, and perhaps best known, artist in the American musical theater." Mentored by the legendary Oscar Hammerstein II, no less, Sondheim's illustrious career would take him from the bright lights of the Great White Way in it's golden era, to the warm klieg lights of many Hollywood studios. His career has spanned the '50s and '60s where he wrote lyrics for musicals such as West Side Story, Gypsy, and A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum (which he also composed), to the '70s, which was truly the era of Sondheim, where he matured into a formidable composer/lyricist writing Company, A Little Night Music, Pacific Overtures and Sweeney Todd.

The '80s, '90s and whatever we call the last decade would see him create even more daring and brilliant musicals such as Merrily We Roll Along, the Pulitzer Prize-winning Sunday in the Park with George, Into the Woods, Assassins, Passion and Bounce (which would eventually become Road Show).

During my freshman year in college in New York I was lucky enough to catch Into the Woods at the Martin Beck Theater (now the Al Hirschfeld Theater). It was my first time to see a Sondheim musical on Broadway. And it was magical. It had opened during the same season as the much-hyped The Phantom of the Opera (and about a block away from it). Although Phantom would take the Tony Award for Best Musical that year, Sondheim would win for Best Score for Into the Woods. I made it a point from then on to try and catch every Sondheim show that opened in New York, whether new or a revival. And when I myself matured from theater aficionado to theater director, Sondheim's works would serve as the catalyst of what would evolve to be my own personal theatrical sensibilities. And I think every theater company that produces musical theater today, whether staging his work or not, cannot deny the influence he has had on their works and on the evolution of musical theater.

I, for one, look forward to staging his wonderfully witty and "waltzy" musical A Little Night Music later this year. I have already started to immerse myself in the world of Hugh Wheeler's wildly whimsical and romantic book and am very excited that one of our country's greatest film actresses, Dawn Zulueta, will be taking on the iconic role of fading actress Desiree Armfeldt.

Winner of six Tony Awards including Best Musical, A Little Night Music features Sondheim's biggest hit song to date — the hauntingly lyrical Send in the Clowns. Staging A Little Night Music in Manila this year is our own little tribute to celebrate Mr. Sondheim's 80th year.

Across America, Sondheim's 80th birthday is being marked in many wonderful ways. The New York Philharmonic held a concert entitled



"Sondheim: A Birthday Concert" last week with many performers who have appeared in his shows in the past such as Patti LuPone, Mandy Patinkin, Donna Murphy, Marin Mazzie and Elaine Stritch. The Roundabout Theatre Company will hold a benefit titled "Sondheim 80" on March 22. The benefit concert will include a tribute of new songs by contemporary musical theatre writers, including Tom Kitt and Brian Yorkey, Michael John LaChiusa, Andrew Lippa, Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Duncan Sheik, Stew and Heidi Rodewald and Jeanine Tesori and David Lindsay-Abaire. Bernadette Peters and Barbara Cook will be on board to sing the songs. And the New York City Center will also hold a birthday celebration-benefit concert, with many participants from Sondheim's shows, such as Nathan Lane and with direction by John Doyle, who brilliantly reconceived his Sweeney Todd and Company several years ago.



Currently running on Broadway are the much-discussed revival of West Side Story which incorporated more Spanish into the songs, his stellar revival of A Little Night Music starring Catherine Zeta-Jones and Angela Lansbury and Roundabout's musical revue Sondheim on Sondheim, which features Barbara Cook, Vanessa Williams and Tom Wopat.

As a director, I look forward to being able to stage more of Stephen Sondheim's musicals in the future. Sunday in the Park with George is, for me, the finest musical ever written. I tell my friends and colleagues that it will be my retirement show. Once I have directed it, I believe that I could never again feel as greatly challenged nor as sublimely satisfied directing any other musical after that. It is the Mount Everest of musicals for me. And after you have scaled the tallest mountain in the world, everything else will be less of a challenge. So, as the cliché goes, I will save the best for last.

It is indeed a great year to celebrate the life of Stephen Sondheim, musical theater's greatest living artist, and my own personal real-life hero.

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