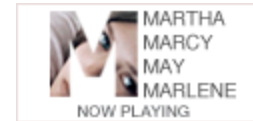


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Spring Theater; It's Sondheim's World But They Get a Shot At Reimagining It

By Barry Singer

STEPHEN SONDHEIM'S 72nd birthday may be next month, but the celebratory mood should last longer. In May, the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington opens a Sondheim Celebration that includes new productions of six of his musicals, to be performed in repertory from May 10 through Aug. 25.

The shows' four directors are part of a younger generation working in the theater, and their approaches to these modern classics inevitably will mark their work. The artistic director of the celebration, Eric Schaeffer, 39 (who will direct "Sunday in the Park With George" and "Passion"), brought the others aboard: Christopher Ashley, 37 ("Merrily We Roll Along" and "Sweeney Todd"); Sean Mathias, 45 ("Company"); and Mark Brokaw, 43 ("A Little Night Music"). Mr. Schaeffer is the artistic director of the Signature Theater in Arlington, Va., where he has gained a reputation for re-examining the works of Mr. Sondheim; Mr. Ashley frequently directs comedies, like the current project he is involved with, "The Smell of the Kill," which opens on Broadway next month; Mr. Mathias's first show on Broadway this season was "Dance of Death," while his second, "The Elephant Man," opens in April; Mr. Brokaw has often directed new plays, including the work of Kenneth Lonergan and Douglas Carter Beane and Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize-winning "How I Learned to Drive."

In separate conversations with Barry Singer, a freelance popular-music and theater critic, the four men recently talked about the project. Excerpts from their comments follow.

ERIC SCHAEFFER

I was in London when I met Michael Kaiser, who was then running the Royal Opera House but who I knew had just been appointed to take over the Kennedy Center in Washington. And he said: "I have this idea -- an all-Sondheim festival. What do you think?"

I said, "Well, I think you're crazy, but I think it's a great idea."

"Will you go and talk to him about it?" Michael asked.

That's how I became artistic director for the series. I picked the designers -- not the costume designers, because I wanted each director to pick his own -- but I chose the set and lighting designers, Derek McLane and Howell Binkley, who will do all the shows.

I also came up with the other directors, Chris, Sean and Mark. Why them? Because they're really good. And also, we wanted people who you'd go, "Oh, I never thought of him." We wanted to give these directors an opportunity to do something that they're not maybe known for.

There were some shows Steve thought should be in the series. We really, really toyed with doing "Anyone Can Whistle." In the end, a big part of our decision was cast size -- for budgetary purposes. We needed a couple of the smaller shows. That's why you have "Passion" and "Company."

We've budgeted \$10 million for the festival as a whole. Each show gets four weeks of rehearsal and a week of tech. The number of performances ranges between 16 and 18 per musical, and the way we've scheduled them, you could come to D.C. for two different weekends and see all six.

There are no plans for any afterlife; this is only for the Kennedy Center at this point. If something does transfer, well, that would just be icing on the cake.

I chose "Passion" and "Sunday in the Park With George" for myself to direct because I feel that "Passion" is misunderstood. People are scared of it. And "Sunday in the Park" is one of my favorites.

I saw the original productions of both on Broadway. "Sunday in the Park" may have one or two lyric changes, nothing substantial, but the set is totally different, totally reinterpreted, as is the second act, in the sense of what makes it contemporary. That's because of computers and graphics. George is still an artist but his colors are now made of pixels -- dots of color, what the set designer calls "the digital equivalent of pointillism" -- which allows you to see how the two Georges are connected in a way that perhaps wasn't as clear in the original.

Steve held a dinner at his house, which was great; all of us around his dinner table. And he said: "Look, I encourage you to explore these works in ways they've never been explored. If you want to try something, come to me. I'm open to anything." Everyone went away and started thinking.

CHRISTOPHER ASHLEY

"Sweeney" is maybe my favorite musical; I've seen it seven times and I think it's perfect. I believe there was really something right in the initial impulse of that first production, with the Victorian melodrama of the plot and the machinery of industrial society. That's an idea I really

like, and we're going for it too.

"Merrily We Roll Along" I'm excited about in a different way. Though it's been done repeatedly, no one's gotten it exactly right, and people can taste how great "Merrily" can be. I love that it's a piece that says, "O.K., work with me."

Why has it been so hard to get right? I think because the characters are at their most disillusioned when you first meet them. How you enter into that unhappiness is the big challenge, how you tell an audience, "Here's why you should invest in these people."

The need for actors an audience will really want to know is crucial. One thing I didn't go for from the original production is youth. We're casting people at the older edge of their 30's, my feeling being if you're 35 you've been 21, but if you're 21 you've never been 35. It's hard to act the disillusionment of midlife.

I've never seen "Merrily" onstage, which I sort of prefer. I've been saying to Stephen, "But what if we do this, what if we do that?" And Stephen has been saying to me, "Oh, no, people have tried that before; don't go down that road."

Still, I was surprised at how open he is about his own work. There's so little "don't" and so much: "Give me. What have you got? What can we do? Let's play."

I have to say, just getting to spend time alone with him talking about his work is some kind of nirvana. You see how revolutionary he was in every one of the pieces being done at the Kennedy Center. So many innovations in them we take for granted now: the ways that dark and lightness can coexist right next to each other, the ways that words and melody kind of flow together freely, not like: "Here's my lyric hook, here's my A section, here's my bridge, back to my A" -- the lyric having to be simple enough, the melody having to stick in your ear.

Yet I think his melodies really do stick in your ear; they're incredibly satisfying. It all has its own voice, its own language, which comes out of the story, which comes out of the character. So much contemporary musical theater writing is like this now, but I don't think it existed at all before him.

The set designer and I were joking about what the show curtain should be that ties all these evenings together. "What if it was just Sondheim's eyes?" we said. And we looked at each other, like, "That would be really cool." He'd hate it. Anything that comes at all close to "look at me" gives him poison ivy. It makes you want to give him a tribute even more.

SEAN MATHIAS

I think you've got to bring a different value, a new, contemporary sensibility to these shows. That's what Nick Hytner did with "Carousel," that's what Trevor Nunn has done with

"Oklahoma!" You want to be able to reinvent them. Of course, some will say that having a Brit like myself direct this quintessentially New York musical is reinvention enough.

I don't believe that I know yet what the conceptual answers are for "Company." The energy will be different, I guess, from the original because you can't do something from the 60's, early 70's, in the year 2002 without the knowledge we have.

For instance, when I was first auditioning people, it was just after Sept. 11. They would sing: "And another hundred people just got off of the train," and it made you cry -- to be in New York and think of all the people who pour into this city and all the dreams people have in this city, and just being here at a time when dreams have been broken down.

I do think for starters there's the whole question of what this "Company" will look like. The sets in their day were so original, so innovative, so legendary.

Our set is completely different, very daring, I think. It's really a vertical view of New York; it's like New York City from the top of a skyscraper. It makes you feel slightly dizzy to look at it.

Another new development, and I think a good one, is that Jonathan Tunick, the original orchestrator, will be conducting; it's the one show he wanted to conduct.

Working with Steve is at first very frightening because he's so sharp-witted; the mind just goes at a billion miles per hour, which always terrifies me. He's very good, though, at giving the kind of notes you need -- three words that can take a scene or a performance or just a line reading a hundred paces forward. His notes are very objective, they can be quite technical and sometimes psychological or emotional but always very precise.

He wants everyone just to do absolutely their own thing. He said, "If you want to put 20 red dwarfs in yellow boots into the show, go ahead." He actually said that. I definitely don't, so it's O.K.

MARK BROKAW

I'm not setting out here to reinvent the wheel in any way. I think it's more just about finding our point of view on the piece. I have no familiarity with what others have done with "A Little Night Music" before or have done with it since -- it's almost like discovering it anew.

I haven't directed many musicals. I'm actually just starting to get involved in them more. I've worked far more with new playwrights. I don't think of musical theater, though, as being the other end of any spectrum. Because in a musical it's the same task. It's all about the extension of the action. Though to me it is the most exciting theatrical form of all. Because it has the best of everything.

From the beginning, Sondheim has been so very open and generous with his time. I had a meeting with him recently specifically to discuss the quintet. The whole piece is so integrated, and the quintet are these wry outsider commentators. So I've been looking at how to create a world that can both accommodate them and incorporate them in the telling of the story.

Sondheim's work I find to be incredibly complex and his music so incredibly challenging. It's like scary smart. When I sit in the rehearsal room and I listen to auditions -- people coming in to sing song after song from "A Little Night Music" or from all of the other shows -- just the range of his insight and his sense of melody, both, are astounding. It's hard to believe it all came from one man. It's not just the music and not just the lyrics, but it's the music and the lyrics as they combine.

The scope and ambition of the event itself at the Kennedy Center this summer is in a way kind of a perfect mirror of the scope and ambition of his work.

Actually, I was in a few of his musicals years ago, during my college days. I was in "Side by Side" and "Company." And I directed a production of "A Little Night Music." I don't remember much about it except that the music was glorious. The show I recall as a beautiful late-summer night with a very strong hint of fall in the air. That's how I see it. Which happens to be my favorite time of year.

Photos: Four directors will mount fully staged new productions of six shows by Stephen Sondheim in repertory at the Kennedy Center in Washington. The series begins May 10 and runs through Aug. 25. From far left are Eric Schaeffer, Mark Brokaw, Christopher Ashley and Sean Mathias. (Joan Marcus) (pg. 12); Elaine Stritch, left, Beth Howland, Merle Louise, Teri Ralston and Barbara Barrie in "Company," 1970. (Martha Swope/TimePix) (pg. 15)