Bradley Rogers

Criticizing Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim was no fan of critics. 'The sad truth is that musicals are the only public art form reviewed mostly by ignoramuses,' he once mused, going on to lament that

> Books are reviewed by writers, the visual arts by disappointed, if knowledgeable, painters and art students, concert music by composers and would-be composers. Plays, at least in this country, are reviewed by people who don't know de Montherlant from de Ghelderode and couldn't care less, whose knowledge is comprised of what they read in *Variety* and gossip columns, and who know nothing, of course, about music.[1]

Indeed, he wrote that he 'rarely read[s] critics anymore … When I look back at the ones I've encountered over the years, however, I have the dismaying thought that if, as the saying goes, a man is best measured by the size of his enemies, I'm in a lot of trouble.'[2] Elsewhere, he called the *New York Times* critic Frank Rich a 'very intelligent reviewer and a very, very good writer,' before adding that Rich inevitably became 'bitchy and mean' because he was 'a first-rate mind in a second-rate job.'[3] And lest academics feel that he reserved such vitriol for only 'second-rate' newspaper critics, he held a similarly cool appraisal of the dramaturg: dismissing his experience with *The Frogs* at Yale Repertory, he complained of 'dramaturges who know everything about plays and nothing about playwriting.'[4]

But Sondheim, it turns out, was himself a critic. Although he never committed to paper his various theses on de Montherlant and de Ghelderode, he *did* occasionally write criticism in the field of musical theatre: to be sure, his two books of collected lyrics were titled as containing 'attendant comments, principles, heresies, grudges, whines' as well as 'amplifications, dogmas, [and] harangues.' These various annotations focused principally on his own works, but he did include passages focusing on the work of other writers—at least of those who had passed away. He wrote that he would offer criticism only of 'those who can no longer defend themselves—[and] who also cannot be upset by anything

I have to say.'[5] Now that Sondheim himself is sadly no longer with us, I have imagined his tacit permission to revisit his own work—to explore how his criticism reframes his own relationship to the genre.

Sondheim's most persistent criticism focused on moments when he felt that the lyricist—rather than the character—took centre stage. And in those terms, who wouldn't resent self-aggrandizing lyrics and prefer instead the self-effacing ones advanced by a humbler writer? He complained, for example, that his lyric for 'I Have a Love,' from *West Side Story*, 'sounds like the writer, not the character,'[6] and that *Company*'s 'The Little Things You Do Together' 'draw[s] attention to the lyricist rather than the lyrics.'[7] For Sondheim, this general failure—a lyricist usurping the ostensibly rightful place of the character—could derive perhaps from creative poverty, as when a lyric writer simply cannot supply the character with the appropriate emotional expression; or it might be a case of artistic narcissism, as when a lyricist shoehorns a trunk lyric or lyrical device into a moment where it does not 'belong,' simply because the lyricist is infatuated with their own cleverness. Regardless of the cause, though, such moments make for a poor lyric—according to Sondheim. This surely echoes his mentor Oscar Hammerstein II, who wrote that 'there are few things in life of which I am certain, but I am sure of this one thing, that the song is the servant of the play, that it is wrong to write first what you think is an attractive song and then try to wedge it into a story.'[8] However, even Hammerstein wasn't spared his protégé's red pen, as Sondheim rakes a *South Pacific* lyric—"I'm bromidic and bright/ As a moon-happy night/ Pouring light on the dew!"—over the critical coals, asking what Nellie is 'doing even with a word such as "bromidic"?'[9]

Nellie's exuberance over being 'in love with a wonderful guy' echoes the joy that Maria, of *West Side Story*, felt at being 'loved by a pretty wonderful boy'—and indeed, it was this very song, 'I Feel Pretty,' that Sondheim invariably trotted out to support his broader argument about the necessary humility of the lyricist. Dismissing his own lyrical work, Sondheim wrote that

> "It's alarming/ How charming/ I feel," sings Maria, a lower-class Puerto Rican girl who has been brought up on street argot and whose brother is a gang leader, but who suddenly sings the smoothly rhymed and coyly elegant phrases of a character from a Noël Coward operetta because the lyricist wants to show off his rhyming skills.[10]

He recalled that right before the show's out-of-town tryout, Sheldon Harnick 'gently pointed out to me that perhaps lines like "It's alarming how charming I feel," words like "stunning" and phrases like "an advanced state of shock" might not belong in the mouths of Maria and her friends.'[11] Sondheim said that he 'had been aware myself of this, and that the play on words in "pretty wonderful boy" drew attention to the lyric writer rather than the character.' But what, then, *does* 'belong in the mouths of Maria and her friends'?

This emphasis on 'character,' while superficially attractive, reveals itself to be far more complex than it might first appear. Who is this 'Maria' who precedes and exists outside of her musical and terpsichorean life? If we grant that Maria wouldn't have uttered the phrase 'alarming how charming I feel,' we must also concede that she wouldn't have spoken in rhyme. Neither would she have spoken on pitch in a melodic line, held certain syllables longer than others, nor danced while she uttered such things. Musical theatre is a fantastical world in which characters are *required* to behave and express themselves in ways that would appear bizarre or even unhinged if one were to undertake such behaviours in actual deserted alleyways, pharmacies, or bridal shops, as the characters do in *West Side Story*. When Maria joyfully sings while twirling about on a theatrical stage, are we really concerned that her use of the word 'stunning' does not conform to the discursive standard one might expect in prose from someone with her socioeconomic, educational and linguistic profile? Noting, in a similar vein, that Alan Jay Lerner's lyrics 'are almost always smooth and tasteful,' Sondheim argues that these are 'virtues particularly inappropriate to *Paint Your Wagon*, his musical about miners and pioneers in the nineteenth century.'[12] However, once we agree that nineteenth-century miners are going to break into song and dance, is it so self-evident *how* they should do so? Is it really more absurd for them to sing in clever rhymes than to sing in an awkward and palpitating meter? Moreover, any recourse to discourses of verisimilitude in musical theatre is necessarily ideological, given that the fragmented and multimodal nature of musical theatre structurally precludes the coherence of any unified 'character.'[13]

Why, in other words, should any song or dance be judged by the standard of mundane speech? While we might counter that a lyric, in its use of language, is continuous with dialogue, the same could be said of movement and dance—yet do we expect characters to move 'as they would' in everyday life? Similarly, we *expect* a song lyric to differ from speech: the verbal dexterity of a character's lyric—the rhyme, the meter, the wordplay—signifies that we have entered some alternate world unique to musical theatre, just as does the musical line and the kinetically active

body. As characters are compelled to sing and dance, these heightened forms of articulation generate revelations about relationships and the self—in ways that exceed the banal constraints of everyday life and customary modes of expression. The stylization of language that marks all lyric writing enables characters to play with words, to access linguistic devices and vocabulary that return us to some oceanic world in which words are just as playful, just as plastic, and, in a sense, just as embodied as the dancing body. This is true of all musical theatre lyrics—including those by Sondheim—so why should a character's quotidian speech be understood as the 'real' ground from which fantastic musical numbers must humbly emerge?

Significantly, more rides on this question than whether lyrics are straightforward or floral; or whether they adhere to everyday 'reality' or deviate from it. What is at stake is actually the cultivation of an entirely different subjectivity, an entirely different mode of characterization, in musical theatre. When Maria sings that it's 'alarming how charming I feel,' her joyous wordplay is an index of how she has been transformed by her love. We understand this joy as emanating from her innermost being—a development in musical theatre directly connected to Freud's influence on American popular culture more generally.[14] This matured around 1940 with *Lady in the Dark*, the brilliant masterpiece by Moss Hart, Kurt Weill and Ira Gershwin. The show follows Liza Elliott, a magazine editor undergoing professional and personal turmoil, as she submits to psychoanalysis in an attempt to resolve the turbulence in her work and romance. The show's inventive structure imagines Liza's dreams as elaborate musical sequences; as these musical numbers give voice to Liza's subconscious, they extend into a realm that is less about earnestness and more about revelation. In other words, the musical episodes exceed the conscious intention of the character. Though *Lady in the Dark* explicitly engages the idea of the subconscious, it actually points towards a much broader hermeneutic demand of modern musical theatre: to understand that the otherworldly musical numbers are generated by the desires of a character, in ways quite different from what the conscious mind would permit. This is in a sense true not just of soliloquy-style numbers that cultivate an effect of interiority, but indeed of every number in modern musical theatre. The elevation into any song or dance signals the necessary insufficiency of dialogue to articulate the needs and desires of the character at that moment. Indeed, in all numbers, the verbal dexterity of the lyricist and the kinetic power of the moving body are catalysed precisely by a desire to exceed the quotidian world of speech.

This is borne out by Sondheim's own account of a number—his 'Not Getting Married' from *Company*—that explicitly focuses on a character's psychic state. As Sondheim writes,

> If I had rhymed the lines in the patter, it would have implied an organized control of Amy's thought processes, when in fact disorder is the essence of hysteria. Simply avoiding rhymes, however, would not have been a satisfying solution … a completely unrhymed song would have been monotonous and shapeless, which is why Amy suddenly starts to rhyme with a vengeance in short, sharp, machine-gun rapidity, bespeaking another kind of dementia.[15]

Significantly, this song's thematic interest in the psyche is echoed in Sondheim's discussion of the *form*: Sondheim treats even the act of rhyming—a fundamental component of almost every song in musical theatre—as a symptom, a manifestation of the character's psyche. If Sondheim understands the basic act of rhyming as having psychoanalytic connotations, we must see all musical numbers—whether depicting pathologies or not—as manifestations of psychic desire.

This understanding of lyrics as manifestations of desire helps to clarify Sondheim's complaint that a lyric 'sounds like the writer, not the character': the appearance of the lyricist—that which Sondheim disdains—must be understood as the intrusion of the lyricist's *desire*. This is quite obvious in cases in which the narrative demands are subordinated to the lyricist's desire to be seen as clever, for instance. However, it is true on a much broader scale: a lyric *always* reveals the lyricist's desire, insofar as lyrics are necessarily a product of the author's own unconscious, of an artistic force beyond the author's conscious control. Lyrics are especially complex—doubly unconscious—as they ask a lyricist's unconscious to generate the unconscious of a dramatic character. Nor can this entire argument be dismissed as arbitrarily psychoanalytic speculation: Sondheim's own rhetoric acknowledges the degree to which the lyricist's desire and unconscious are self-evidently a part of the creative process as well—perhaps most explicitly in his metaphorical declaration that 'I love wordplay, but when there's nothing behind it, […] it becomes masturbatory.'[16] It is present as well in comments like his regret that Maria's lyrics are so inappropriate 'because the lyricist *wants* to show off his rhyming skills.' And when he discusses the creative benefits of sleep, it's hard not to hear an acknowledgement of the work of the unconscious: "I write on a yellow note pad, while lying down. It's not good for my posture. But if you're lying down, you can more easily fall

asleep. I find that so many problems are solved after a bit of a nap. I often wake up and have an idea."[17]

Given Sondheim's implicit acknowledgements of desire and the unconscious, his eagerly stated principle that a lyric should minimize the presence of the lyricist reveals itself to be about *control*. His demonstrative emphasis on the ostensible coherence of a "character" can thus be seen not merely as a dramaturgical principle, but also as a rhetorical strategy for obscuring the engagement of the lyricist's unconscious in the production of the lyric. By insistently linking lyrics to a character's *conscious* life and speech, Sondheim attempts to introduce a mediating presence between the lyricist and the lyric – that this is certainly *Maria* rhyming – and implicitly deflects the centrality of the lyricist's unconscious in generating the lyric.

But—despite what his criticism would purport—so long as a character sings, so must Sondheim. How, then, to keep the lyricist's desire at bay? Sondheim's radical solution to this poietic conundrum is to invent a new kind of musical theatre character: a largely silent one. This was the dramaturgical puzzle he explored with Leona Samish, the heroine of his least favourite venture: *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, the 1965 musical that he wrote with Richard Rodgers and Arthur Laurents. *Waltz* was an adaptation of Arthur Laurents' 1952 play *The Time of the Cuckoo*, which focuses on the emotional ambivalence of Leona Samish, an executive secretary described in the original play as 'well in her thirties, blondish, plumpish, pleasantly attractive.'[18] As Leona arrives—alone—in Venice from America, she exudes a certain desperation for company. Laurents' emotionally explicit stage directions report that

> Close up, Leona seems even more attractive. She wants so much to be liked and is by everyone almost at once. She is warm, she is generous, she is funny and bright. She is also lonely and, despite her many friends, always has been. But Leona's pattern is to hide this, both from herself and the world, always with a joke and often with a drink … There is something comforting and understanding and gay about Leona that makes people glad to see her. Later, there is something else that makes them wonder why they do not cry.[19]

Leona is initially suspicious when an attractive shopkeeper, Renato di Rossi, pursues her, and she struggles to accept his affection—at first because she seems to think herself incapable of being loved. However, once she relents and warms to di Rossi, she discovers that he is married—whereupon her conservative views on marriage and adultery throw up

yet another block. Leona's moralistic outrage is set against the more permissive, romantic and libertine views of the Italians—and of Eddie Yeager, a married American tourist who has an illicit liaison on a gondola with the owner of the Pensione. When di Rossi explains to Leona that he and his wife 'have not loved' for years, Leona criticizes the Italian attitude of 'pretending anything is fine and dandy just because you want to do it.'[20] Di Rossi interprets this as American guilt: 'Now I see. It is fine to *do* as long as you feel bad about doing it.'[21] After Leona protests, di Rossi erupts:

> I know very well what you wish. You come here, you ride in gondola, and you sigh: Ah Venice!…And you dream: he is young, handsome, rich, witty, brilliant. A gondola of his own. A duke, or a count at the very least. And – unmarried. Well, I am a shopkeeper. Not handsome. Not rich, not young, not witty, not brilliant. No title; no gondola. And not unmarried. But, Miss Samish, I am a man, and I want you. But you? "It's wrong, it's wicked, it's this, it's that." You are a hungry child to whom someone brings—ravioli. "But I don't want ravioli, I want beefsteak!" You are hungry, Miss Samish! Eat the ravioli![22]

When Leona finally relents, they kiss—and 'from the distant piazza come faint chords of music.'[23] Leona seems to accept what she has been offered, telling Signora Fioria that 'I used to think when I fell in love, I'd hear a waltz. No waltz, Signora.'[24] However, when di Rossi returns with a necklace of garnets—her favourite stone—Leona tearfully embraces and kisses him. The stage directions indicate that the music is now 'loud enough for us to hear what Leona is hearing finally: a waltz.'[25] Later, when a drunk Leona suspects that she was being used by di Rossi, she explodes, insulting him and also revealing the indiscretions of Eddie and Signora Fioria to Eddie's wife, June. The day following this outburst, she attempts to rekindle things with di Rossi, but he declines.

This, then, was the play that Sondheim set out to musicalize. Reflecting years later on his initial approach to this material, Sondheim recalled:

> Wouldn't it make emotional sense and be dramatically interesting, I thought, if throughout the evening the Italians sang (juicy) and she spoke (arid), and not until she had come out of her emotional confinement at the end of the story would she be able to sing. The leading lady would have only one song, but it would be a glorious aria of emotional release.[26]

Sondheim's idea echoes and extends the dramaturgical experiment he had undertaken in *Gypsy* (1959), the previous show for which he had written only lyrics. Leona's number sounds very much like 'Rose's Turn,' but Rose—a frustrated performer who is always performing vicariously through others—is afforded several major musical moments before the show culminates in her cathartic burlesque turn. Leona would have taken this logic much further, being denied the chance to perform at all until this final moment of release. Sondheim recalled that 'the notion seemed metaphorically and theatrically right, but Rodgers would have none of it.' And indeed in *Waltz*, Sondheim ended up abandoning this idea and writing perhaps the most conventional—though perfectly delightful—musical of his entire career.

Significantly, Sondheim argued that the 'theatrically right' approach to musicalizing Laurents' play was largely to *avoid* musicalization. In other words, the 'emotional sense' of the play would be best served by the silence of the heroine. Rather than understanding songs as giving voice to the sources and effects of Leona's aching loneliness, Sondheim finds silence to be the appropriate musical approach to emotional paralysis. A largely silent musical heroine? Arthur Laurents—at least in retrospect—agreed with Sondheim, writing in his memoir that 'sometimes a character sings before he should,' citing Leona Samish as his example. Laurents writes that 'she herself says that when she falls in love, she'll hear a waltz—i.e., music. That, then, is when she should have sung, but she was trilling away long before that. I should have known it was a mistake … But I was too eager to get the show on and checked my musical brains.' 'Singing too early,' he concluded, 'muddied the character and weakened the show.[27] (We might also note that the metaphorical significance of the waltz could have been utilized without resorting to silence; the climax could have been, for example, the only moment in triple-meter.) But the essential question remains: How can a musical be weakened by the fact that its protagonist sings?

One principal benefit of creating a character who doesn't sing is that it is the only way to ensure that the *lyricist* does not sing either. Only when the character is silent will Sondheim achieve his otherwise elusive goal: that the lyricist disappear. And indeed, Sondheim's discussion of his own creative predicament with *Waltz* bears out this association. Accounting for the show's failure, Sondheim argues that *Do I Hear a Waltz?* 'had no inner energy, mostly because it didn't arise from a need to tell the story: that story had been told perfectly well in *The Time of the Cuckoo*. *Do I Hear a Waltz?* was well written, adequately performed and a failure in every respect.'[28] The phrasing—'a need to tell the story' — is revealing, for indeed this entire critical conundrum revolves

around the question of needs. Sondheim discussed the show by invoking Mary Rodgers:

> It comes under the heading of what Mary Rodgers calls a "Why?" musical: a perfectly respectable show, based on a perfectly respectable source, that has no reason for being … "Why?" musicals usually come from successful novels, movies and plays. Their authors are blinded by the attractiveness of the source material, how easily it could sing, how effectively it might be staged, which actor would be perfect for the leading role. They never question the *need* to musicalize the piece. The never ask themselves what music will do for the story that hasn't already been accomplished by the original author.[29]

Crucially, a 'need' does not exist outside the economy of human desire. And in this case, Sondheim is arguing that *he* does not need to the tell the story. Thus, Sondheim places himself in the same position as Leona, both forced to articulate their desires when they should naturally have remained silent. 'Warmed by the personal aspects of the venture and rationalizing right and left,' Sondheim reflected, 'I agreed to write the lyrics, as wrongheaded a decision as I've ever made.'[30] The wrongheaded decision, in other words, was for Sondheim to sing. Like Leona, he has emotionally repressive tendencies at war with the effusive nature of the genre—and just as Leona 'should' not sing, Sondheim feels that he shouldn't have sung either. As ever, the desire of the character and the desire of the lyricist meet.

Given his eagerness to cultivate the silence of his play's protagonist, we must ask: Could the musical theatre's most remarkable artist be also its greatest antagonist? This is one of the great paradoxes of Sondheim's dramaturgy of silence: that any full account of Sondheim must acknowledge the persistence of an anti-musical point of view. More than once, he suggests that a musical would be better as a straight play. Admiring the complexity of Arthur Laurents' characters in *Gypsy*, he wrote that as Laurents 'started to shape them, I suggested that, given their substance, *Gypsy* might be more satisfying as a straight play; after all, no matter how subtly written, songs can't characterize with the same depth that extended dialogue can.' 'Music,' Sondheim wrote, 'can evoke and sustain an atmosphere and elicit an emotional response quickly and lastingly, but Shakespeare's *Othello* is more interesting than Verdi's, and Higgins and Eliza are more layered and surprising in *Pygmalion* than they are in *My Fair Lady*.'[31]

However, Sondheim's hypothetical Leona was not to be entirely mute; he did intend for her to finally sing at the end—and so there remained a horizon onto which this dramaturgy of lyrical silence could further develop. How fitting, then, that this impulse towards silence would reach its apotheosis in Sondheim's final piece, the posthumously produced *Here We Are*. With a book by David Ives, *Here We Are* was based on two films by Luis Buñuel, *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and *The Exterminating Angel*. In the first act, a group of wealthy people arrive at several restaurants, only to be turned away; then, they end up at an embassy, where they are mysteriously trapped. As Helen Shaw frames the plot in her *New Yorker* review, 'After a lifetime of living like bandits, the rich have to make do.'[32] Significantly, the second act, in which the characters are unable to escape the embassy, is virtually without song. The characters, in other words, are silent. This choice was clearly the biggest aesthetic puzzle in the development of this show.

In reflecting on the piece's long gestation, director Joe Mantello reported that Sondheim had composed songs for the journey the characters take—up until the moment when they are unable to leave the room. 'What he was struggling with was everything that came after,' he noted.[33] Bookwriter David Ives recalled that Sondheim 'was constantly saying, "Why are these people singing when they're in this room?"' Sondheim pointed out that Buñuel, the filmmaker whose works served as the source material for *Here We Are*, had foregone scoring for *The Exterminating Angel*. Mantello recalled that 'Buñuel must have felt that there was nothing that music could add to this story, because he chose not to have a score. I thought, *Oh, we're on the right track. The story is about the absence of music*.' The absence of music!

Mantello argued that 'once they are trapped in a room, these characters expressing themselves in a conventional musical-theatre way would be deeply unsatisfying and detract from the story. One of Steve's big rules was content dictates form. We had to understand that the absence of music *was* the score.' Note here that 'conventional musical-theatre way' is not referring to, say, Rodgers and Hammerstein clichés, but to characters singing at all! The idea of characters singing would, in Mantello's view, 'be deeply unsatisfying and detract from the story.' What does it mean for musical numbers, surely the defining feature of the genre, to 'detract' from the story of a musical? Mantello argued that

> we had to find a way to satisfy the theatrical demands of the piece while coming at it from a different point of view. So that's basically what I pitched to Steve. I said, "I believe that this piece is finished, and I could make an intellectual case why the piece is finished.

> What I'm asking for is permission to go back in and present an idea, a way of tackling this that doesn't involve you writing any more music." I recall him being very open to it.

Sondheim's 'openness' becomes an important element of the show's production history, since there was some dispute about whether the piece was actually finished. The slightly sceptical tone of a *New York Times* article titled 'How Complete Was Stephen Sondheim's Final Musical?' is captured by its first sentence: 'Sondheim said days before his death in 2021 that he did not know when it would be finished, but the musical, now called "Here We Are," begins performances Tuesday.' However, like Mantello, others were eager to testify to the integrity of the approach: noting the development of a rationale for the characters not singing, actor Nathan Lane said, 'Hopefully it won't feel unfinished. It makes sense that these characters, once they're trapped, they can't sing any more.'[34] It is tempting to hear Mantello's account as an elaborate rationalization for forging ahead with a production when the piece's status was somewhat murky. But I would argue that Sondheim was surely open to it—not only because it resolved his artistic block, but because it is consistent with the entropic, silent view he had explored throughout his entire career. Indeed, only in *Here We Are* did he finally achieve his greatest formal experiment of all: a musical that resolves in lyrical silence.

And what are the show's 'theatrical demands,' to use Mantello's term? We might look again at the *New Yorker* review, in which Shaw writes that

> For the last forty-five minutes, Sondheim's musical presence is communicated mainly via underscoring, thanks to his gifted longtime arranger, Jonathan Tunick, and a vamp, one of his broken-in-the-middle arpeggios, that shocks the characters whenever they try to leave. This purgatorial situation is, of course, deliberately frustrating, and other perversities of 'Here We Are' occasionally serve that mood: for instance, the choice to have the non-singers, like O'Hare and Pierce, deliver solos in the first act, while the generational voices, like Gray and Pasquale, perform only small portions of ensemble numbers. (Hell is being at a Sondheim musical with so many great singers not singing.)

The audience's musically frustrating 'Hell' mirrors the psychological purgatory that the characters are enduring. Just as those characters, having lived luxuriously, were now dealt the cruellest of fates, we too

—after a lifetime of Sondheim songs—were now forced to suffer in musical penury. To be sure, the show *is* 'deliberately frustrating': it frustrates the desires of its audience, of its characters, and of its lyricist. Sondheim's interest in silence—which emerges out of his interest in mitigating, or frustrating, his own desire—invariably prevents the audience from identifying with the characters. Song and dance are the fundamental modes of characterization in musical theatre; a musical theatre character without a song is hardly a character at all. And dramatic engagement is invariably a function of who is given the most, and the most inviting, musical material. If song is what draws an audience into the musical, Sondheim is pioneering a musical theatre that thwarts our desire to be engaged. This is the show's 'theatrical demand.'

Significant as this dramaturgy of silence is, though, it is worth noting that Sondheim developed yet other strategies of insulation and deflection to camouflage the presence of his own desire. For example, despite his too-emphatic protests about Maria and her ilk, Sondheim is of course famous precisely for having written so many extraordinarily complex lyrics. In this context, his penchant for writing pastiche lyrics in the distinct styles of older writers—as he did in *Follies*—reveals yet another rhetorical justification for exercising his lyrical capacities while concealing himself. Discussing the writers who inspired the songs in *Follies*, Sondheim writes that 'what made these songwriters imitable was that most of them had a style independent of whatever show they were writing … Some of them tried to make the transition into the character-driven musicals that took over the theatre after *Oklahoma!*, but no matter how hard they tried, the flavour that emerged was always that of the writer.'[35] Note that Sondheim thus enjoys imitating writers whose voice was invariably *that of the lyricist*! And conversely, he relegates a number of songwriters—including Alan Jay Lerner, Howard Dietz and John La Touche—to being what he calls 'the lower deities in the Pantheon.' Why? They were 'lyricists who are skilled, sometimes spectacularly so, but have no discernible stamp of style or personality.'[36] Isn't this discernible stamp exactly what he's ostensibly railing against elsewhere? Crucially, *imitating* writers with this 'discernible stamp of style or personality' enables Sondheim to joyfully partake of that mode of writing, to indulge his own desire and to explore other modes of characterization—while insulating himself from any personal 'exposure' in exercising those desires.

Yet if the idea of a unified musical theatre 'character' stands alongside silence and pastiche as strategies of deflecting the lyricist's desire, there remains yet another, arguably even more ambitious mode of insulation: the act of criticism itself. Indeed, Sondheim inoculates himself

from the appearance of his desire precisely by writing his dramatic criticism, which invariably positions himself less as an artist and more as a craftsman for whom lyric writing is a series of choices weighed and decisions made. If we view songs as documents not just of our emotional lives but of our *irrational* lives, we can understand why this irrational bent would prompt a discourse seeking to make lyrics rational and cerebral, the subject of conscious, systematized thought. When Sondheim titles a section of his autobiography 'Rhyme and its Reasons,' it bestows upon rhyme a comforting sense of logic and order—but how many lyrics can truly sustain such scrutiny, beyond the camouflage of a few well-chosen and often-invoked examples? Sondheim's criticism cultivates the view that his exceptional attentiveness to the demands of 'character' renders lyric writing into a science. In turning musical lyrics into a science—into a body of knowledge—such criticism desperately denies the bodily, the irrational, the pleasurable. But no matter how much we may deny them, these qualities are always present in musical theatre.

Indeed, when Sondheim discussed how he favoured Shaw's *Pygmalion* to Lerner and Loewe's musical *My Fair Lady*, he added a most intriguing caveat: 'Higgins and Eliza are more layered and surprising in *Pygmalion* than they are in *My Fair Lady* (which, I hasten to add, is one of the most enjoyable musicals I ever saw).'[37] This caveat—that he deeply enjoyed *My Fair Lady*—makes explicit how rational critical insights are to some degree in conflict with the irrational joys that can be found the genre. And this is the most important lesson in all of Sondheim's criticism: the importance of letting go of our critical faculties and embracing pleasure. And so it is fortunate that Sondheim—like Leona—*was* forced to sing when he might have remained silent. Recalling his attempt to 'fix' the problem in *West Side Story*, Sondheim noted that 'in an advanced state of shock, I quickly rewrote the lyric to make it simpler and more in keeping with the way Maria and the girls expressed themselves in the rest of the score, but my collaborators would have none of it—they liked it the way it was. And is. And I have blushed ever since.'[38] Sondheim may have blushed, but audiences have applauded for decades. And applause, as it happens, is the ultimate act of criticism in the art of musical theatre.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Notes

1 Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981)* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 253.
2 *Finishing*, 376.
3 *Musicals…and Sondheim* (London: Royal National Theatre Publications Department, 1993), 31.
4 *Finishing*, 286.
5 Ibid., xxii.
6 Ibid., 28.
7 Ibid., 175.
8 Oscar Hammerstein II, *Lyrics* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1949), 19.
9 *Finishing*, 36.
10 Ibid., xix.
11 Ibid., 48.
12 Ibid., 17.
13 See Bradley Rogers, *The Song Is You: Musical Theatre and the Politics of Bursting into Song and Dance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020).
14 See Nathan G. Hale, Jr., *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
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