

**'FINISHING THE HAT, WHERE THERE NEVER WAS A HAT':
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WORDS AND MUSIC OF
STEPHEN SONDHEIM AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO
THE DEVELOPMENT OF MUSICAL THEATRE AS AN ART FORM**

by

JOSEPHINE GAY LAMBERT

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SUPERVISOR: PROFESSOR I. FERGUSON

JOINT-SUPERVISOR: MR G. SCOTT

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation develops the premise that, whilst conceding the difficulties inherent in the medium, musical theatre should be regarded as an art form, worthy of serious critical evaluation. This view is supported by a detailed examination of four works, chosen from different periods of Sondheim's career: *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962); *Sweeney Todd* (1979); *Into the Woods* (1988) and *Assassins* (1991). The argument develops through the application of accepted literary critical procedures and systematically examines the thematic and prosodic content of the lyrics, as well as their dramatic potentiality, growing in Sondheim's more mature works, which suggests a seriousness of intent manifest in other forms of the dramatic arts. The emotional and dramatic contribution of the music is examined, in the way it creates mood and atmosphere and modifies or comments on action and character, promoting a musical vocabulary that accommodates a dramatic function.

I should like to thank John Weidman for his generosity in calling me to discuss *Assassins*; Michelle Fine for her letter and information; Howard Morgan for producing the musical references; Lesley Robertson for typing the entire dissertation; my musical supervisor, Graham Scott; Professor Ian Ferguson, who has been my unstinting mentor and a continual source of encouragement and Stephen Sondheim for answering my questions and providing me and so many performers and theatre lovers with such glorious material.

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Dorothy Edna Lambert, a constant and loving presence in every minute of my life.

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen Joshua Sondheim, the only child of a successful New York dress manufacturer, Herbert Sondheim, and his wife Janet Fox, known as 'Foxy', was born on March 22 1930. His father was, as Sondheim describes, 'a terrific fellow' (Martin Gottfried 1993: 12) whose business did not preclude a natural talent for music and a love of musical theatre. He fostered Stephen Sondheim's early interest in music, sitting at the piano with him and picking out the melodies of hit songs from whichever musical was then popular. Sondheim's relationship with his mother was, however, problematic (see Craig Zadan: 1990; Gottfried: 1993; Meryle Secrest: 1998). She was, by all accounts, a neurotically inclined, selfish woman; emotionally abusive and unstable, she never came to terms with the fact that, when Stephen was ten, Herbert left her for another woman and it was at this same time she transferred her son to the New York Military Academy in Cornwall-on-Hudson.

With such an unsettled and dysfunctional background and a mother described as 'too dangerous a mother to even call "decent"' (Gottfried: 13), the young Sondheim was fortunate to meet a family who would not only provide him with emotional stability and love, but a household where the father would become his inspiration and mentor. This was Oscar Hammerstein II, the lyricist of the renowned musical *Show Boat* and whose later work included *Oklahoma!* and *Carousel*. Oscar, his wife, Dorothy, and their children became Sondheim's surrogate family. But more importantly, Sondheim's interest in music and theatre burgeoned in a desire to emulate the man he admired. 'I wrote for the theater (*sic*) in order to be like Oscar' (Gottfried: 13) and it was from him that Sondheim learned:

He taught me how to structure a song like a one-act play, how essential simplicity is, how much every word counts and the importance of content, of saying what you, not what other songwriters, feel, how to build songs, how to introduce character, how to tell a story, how not to tell a story, the inter-relationships between lyric and music (Zadan: 4).

Of all the influences in Sondheim's life, Hammerstein's was seminal. Indeed, Sondheim's career might never have existed had they never met. But, as a result, his formative years unfolded within a theatrical milieu that nurtured his aspirations to be part of musical theatre and, by the time he became involved in the professional world, he had served an apprenticeship unequalled by any young lyricist or composer.

It is against this background that Sondheim's career developed. It is a career spanning over four decades and one that still flourishes. In the course of it he has re-defined the nature of musical theatre in a way never before achieved, or even suspected and it is with a view to tracing, (through his career) the development of the musical towards a more meaningful form of expression, one that goes beyond mere entertainment, that this dissertation is directed. In examining his achievement through selected works, his seminal influence will be substantiated and his growing mastery and progressive exploration of the genre will be explored. The form and increasing complexity of his lyrics in terms of the thematic development and imagery, set to music which becomes a function of the dramatic impulse, will be discussed, to demonstrate his mastery of what is America's greatest contribution to theatre.

It was hearing Sondheim's music and lyrics for *Sunday in the Park with George* which inspired this dissertation, motivated further by the concerns which the musical addressed as to the nature of art and the overwhelming impulse which drives the creative artist:

Mapping out a sky,
 What you feel like, planning a sky,
 What you feel when the voices that come
 Through the window
 Go
 Until they distance and die,
 Until there's nothing but sky.
 (Act 1: 45)

The musical also captured the reality of the great divide between the artist and common humanity in the dramatic interplay between Dot, with her more mundane, yet perfectly acceptable, preoccupations and the artistic imperative that drives George. 'Colour and Light', with its graceful and fluent interplay between lyrics and the spoken word, perfectly articulates the tension created by their differences:

DOT (*Sings*):
 And he burns you with his eyes ...
 GEORGE:
 Look at her looking.
 DOT (*Sings*):
 And you're studied like the light.

GEORGE:

Forever with the mirror. What does she see? The round face, the tiny pout, the soft mouth, creamy skin ...

DOT (*Sings*):

And you look inside the eyes.

GEORGE:

The pink lips, the red cheeks ...

DOT (*Sings*):

And you catch him here and there.

GEORGE:

The wide eyes. Studying the round face, the tiny pout ...

DOT (*Sings*):

But he's never really there.

GEORGE:

Seeing all the parts and none of the whole.

DOT (*Sings*):

So you want him even more.

GEORGE (*Sings*):

But the way she catches the light ...

DOT (*Sings*):

And you drown inside his eyes ...

GEORGE (*Sings*):

And the colour of her hair ...

GEORGE (*Sings*):

I could look at her ...

DOT (*Sings*):

I could look at him ...

Forever

Forever

(Act 1: 22-23)

The idea of creating something new; of seeing the artistic process through the eyes of the artist and having our perceptions changed; the concept of art as work, '[Watching] the rest of the world/From a window/While you finish the hat', seemed to epitomize the struggle towards a more mature and meaningful application and usage of that theatrical form which Sondheim loves and to which he has committed his whole working life. 'Finishing the hat' symbolizes not only that application which Sondheim espouses, for, as will be discussed, he refers to lyric writing as a craft (see pp. 82, 192), but also creation and the passion and drive which fuel it.

By virtue of the scope and complexity of Sondheim's work, the parameters of this dissertation had to be limited. Since 1957 when *West Side Story*, for which he wrote the lyrics, first appeared on Broadway, Sondheim has had fifteen shows produced, up to and including, *Passion*, as well as a professional production of his early musical, *Saturday Night*, which premiered at The Bridewell

Theatre in London in 1998. There was also the Yale Repertory Theatre production of Burt Shevelove's adaptation of Aristophanes's *The Frogs* (1974), not to mention the various revues compiled from Sondheim's songs, including *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1976) and *Marry Me a Little* (1980). Sondheim also wrote additional lyrics for Bernstein's *Candide* (1974).

This dissertation, therefore, concentrates on certain specific works, though others will be referred to where they help to illuminate a point. They have been chosen to show, not only the eclecticism of Sondheim's choices with regard to his subject matter and different theatrical and musical forms, but also the qualities which give his work a singular authenticity which cannot be duplicated; qualities which derive from a craftsman's care and an artist's sensibilities.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum is included because, as the first musical for which Sondheim wrote both the music and the lyrics, it gives a basis for comparison. It indicates some of the musical and lyrical characteristics which appear in his more mature works, with a greater subtlety and depth of application. The idiosyncratic and singular choice of subject matter is also important as, by its nature, it offered no obvious sequel. Furthermore, the difficulties that were encountered in that production highlight the problematic circumstances which are inherent in the theatrical process – one which is subject to the collaborative procedure, with its attendant constraints of budget and time.

Sweeney Todd (1979) is not only a great musical; it is a great theatrical work. I had the pleasure of being involved in two productions of that monumental work and am drawn to it from a performer's point of view, as well as from the more academic and scholarly perspectives. It is noteworthy that The National Theatre has recently provoked controversy by excluding musicals from its project to list the one hundred most important plays of the twentieth century, whilst Sam Mendes, the director and inspiration of the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London, places *Sweeney Todd* twelfth on a similar list. This musical has also been chosen because of the conflict that has arisen between critics and commentators as to whether or not it should be regarded as an opera (see pp. 111-13).. This is pertinent with regard to Sondheim's use of different musical styles and the way he uses music to define and support the dramatic impulse of the characters and the situation. It is also, of course, symptomatic of the way people regard musical theatre and their

expectations of the genre.

Into the Woods (1988) is regarded as one of Sondheim's most accessible musicals. This is due to the fairy tale structure within which the action is set. However, it addresses serious issues, including one which, I believe, lies deeply in the hearts of many of us, but especially those who have been traumatized in their early years. The parent/child relationship is the issue which gives *Into the Woods* its warmth and humanity as the characters in it struggle to find forgiveness and reconciliation. Sondheim works within the framework of a seemingly simplistic lyrical and musical form based on fairy-tales, nursery rhymes and 'ditties' (Zadan 1990: 340), but as Jonathan Tunick states, 'The score for *Woods* was thought of structurally as one big song' (Mankin 1988: 62). Just as musically the fragments create one unity, so Sondheim weaves into the musical structure recurring words and phrases to connect the many stories and themes, producing an organic whole, embracing the serious issues which Sondheim and Lapine are addressing. Though not without its problems, as will be discussed in Chapter 3 (pp. 117-77), *Into the Woods* is a fascinating journey into the rites of passage we all face.

Assassins (1991), the last musical to be discussed in detail, also proposes a theme apparently unsuitable for a musical, and yet in this work it is the music itself which establishes more than a stylistic unity, as in *Into the Woods*, or one suggestive of a particular era, as in *Follies*. More dramatically, it provides the cultural and social ethos of the show and, moreover, it is used in such a way that ironic or satirical parallels may be drawn. *Assassins* is in some ways the least accessible of Sondheim's musicals in that it is a work dealing primarily with specifically American preoccupations. The themes are not as universal as those in other works such as *Sweeney Todd*, with its theme of revenge; *Follies*, which charts the disillusion of lost love and failed dreams or *Pacific Overtures*, where the subjugation of one culture by another is shown. However, in no other musical does the music function in such an all encompassing manner. As will be discussed, the premise on which *Assassins* is based may not be totally convincing, but there is no doubt of the seriousness of its intent and the imaginative framework which Sondheim and Weidman construct make it essential to this survey.

In some ways my interest in Sondheim is derived from my position as a practitioner in the

performing arts and my preoccupations as a teacher, involved with the needs of a performer who needs and wants to work with good material. As Michelle Fine says, 'He writes for actors. Lyrically and musically his songs are demanding and precise. As a performer you know that you can't busk it. You have to encompass all that he intends' (Fine to Lambert: 1997). What Sondheim intends is much more than is usually expected from a song. Indeed, as this dissertation will discuss, Sondheim's lyrics become the text, based not only on his methods of working closely with the author of the book and using their phrases and ideas (see p. 48 and p. 70), but of using all the elements of prosody to make thematic connections within each work. This use of thematic material in the lyrics is then set to music which reinforces the emotional situation of the character or works in ironic counterpoint to intensify the emotional resonances.

Sondheim has inspired musical theatre to break barriers without destroying the medium itself. The works which are to be discussed are representative of a body of work which demands that the medium be taken seriously. These musicals address issues which are meaningful in a way that is both intellectually probing and emotionally satisfying. They have developed from a long and glorious tradition; their roots are in musical theatre, but they are of a new and invigorating strain. As George, the artist, the worker, says:

Look, I made a hat ...
Where there never was a hat
(Act 1: 45)

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum is the first Broadway show for which Stephen Sondheim wrote both the lyrics and the music.¹ It is, perhaps, worth noting that this work, which initiated a new development and breakthrough in Sondheim's career, is one which he himself has called 'experimental' (Zadan, 1990: 68) and which may better be described as a farce with music rather than a musical. Indeed, as the lyrics and music which Sondheim writes are always dependent in form and function on the nature of the piece for which he is writing and, as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is different from any other work with which Sondheim has been associated, so his contribution to this work is also singular and specific, although many of the lyrics are indicative of his future development.

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum premièred at the Alvin Theatre in New York on May 8 1962 and in London at the Strand Theatre on October 3 1963. There was a major revival at the Lunt Fontanne Theatre in April of 1972 and another in London in November 1986. It is regarded as one of Sondheim's most popular successes, a popularity which is substantiated by the major revival in 1996 on Broadway which starred Nathan Lane. Subsequently, the adventurous casting of Whoopi Goldberg in the leading role when Nathan Lane left the show, provides us with further proof that the show's structural strength can accommodate, even now, what may be regarded as 'experimental' and innovative elements.

The show had its genesis when Sondheim asked Burt Shevelove, who was an old friend, mainly involved, at that time, in writing and directing for television, if he would like to collaborate on a show for which Sondheim would write both the lyrics and the music. Shevelove had had the idea of turning some of Plautus's plays into a musical and, when Sondheim showed his interest, finding the plays 'terribly funny' (Zadan 1990: 37) the collaboration began, with Shevelove bringing in Larry Gelbart² to help with the writing of the book.

The plays which Sondheim found so amusing were written by the Roman playwright Titus Maccius Plautus (c.254 - c.184 B.C.). He was a prolific author – twenty of his completed plays are extant – loosely basing his boisterous, farcical comedies on the plots and characters of earlier Greek plays. His language is colloquial and robust, filled with word-play and verbal jests, similar to those found in the *commedia dell'arte*. As George Duckworth says in his introduction to the

collected works, 'Most of his puns are untranslatable, many are indecent, but all are amusing.' (1942: xxxiii). His plays contain many stock characters adapted from the Greek repertory: the wily slave; the youthful lovers; the professional soldier, who is also a braggart; lost children on whose discovery the unravelling of the plot depends and plots based on situations of mistaken identity and incidents of trickery. In these plays is also found the substitution of a man for a maid, as in *Casina*. Plautus also kept the use of descriptive names. So we find the archetypal Miles Gloriosus and Pseudolus, as well as similar inventions by Shevelove and Gelbart: Senex (the old man); Hysterium (the hysterical retainer) and Domina (the dominating wife). It may be noted that, though our modern 'dominant' derives from the Latin 'domina', the word in Latin did not have the pejorative connotations it has in the musical play, it meant merely 'lady' or 'mistress of the house'. Given Domina's attributes in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* the semantic changes are amusingly depicted.

What Shevelove and Gelbart did was to incorporate the Plautan archetypes into a plot of their own devising, using some of the essential elements to be found in the Roman playwright's works. Their debt to Plautus is a large and acknowledged one. As Gelbart has said:

We began the task of extracting from Plautus a character here, a scene there, and created a considerable amount of new material as connective tissue. Lest it sound like a cut-and-paste project, remember the work took half a decade, which was all well and good for Plautus, who was that most helpful of collaborators, a dead one (even more helpful, so were his agents and lawyers), but for the living it was a big chunk of time (1989: 25).

Indeed, after the first draft was finished in early 1958, Gelbart and Shevelove proceeded to write ten more drafts before the show finally opened on Broadway on May 8 1962. The producer was Harold Prince; the director was the renowned George Abbott and star was the irrepressible Zero Mostel. This was no ordinary musical. Shevelove and Gelbart had written a brilliantly complex, farcical Plautan comedy that dictated not only the kind of lyrics and music which Sondheim was to write, but also their function in the piece. To understand the scope and nature of Sondheim's contribution, we must explore the Plautan concept, and the way it was developed and modified in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Pseudolus, the main character in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, is a direct

descendant of the character who gives his name to one of Plautus's plays, first performed in 191 BC. Indeed, he manifests many of the characteristics of the Plautan anti-hero, for he is wily, witty and resourceful. The modern Pseudolus is as ready to help his young master consummate his romantic yearnings as is the original Pseudolus, who is happy to help his young master Calidorus win the courtesan he loves by extracting money from Simo, the young man's father. As he blithely states:

But don't worry: I won't desert you in your love affair. I hope that in some honest way – or in my usual way – I can find you some aid – in cash. I don't know where it's coming from; I only know it will come: my eyebrow twitches so.

(Duckworth (ed.) 1942: vol. 1, 792-3)

Shevelove and Gelbart appropriate Simo's name in their explanation of how their Pseudolus has managed to find the money needed to buy the courtesan desired by his master:

My uncle Simo the noted Carthaginian elephant breeder came to an untimely end. He was crushed to death on the last day of the mating season.

(Act I: 16)

However, while the Plautan Pseudolus is motivated only by a desire to create a situation he can manipulate, 'Surely you know how things are and what nice commotions I can stir up once I start my act' (p. 793), the character in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is given a more meaningful motivation for his machinations. This Pseudolus is fired by the desire to be free. It is a preoccupation not given much weight in the plays of Plautus, as slaves in those days were often given their freedom, or bought it for themselves. However, it is this premise that motivates, not only a Sondheim number, but, indeed, the whole plot:

PSEUDOLUS:

I like the way you said that. Now, you cannot afford to buy this girl, but in spite of that, suppose someone, someone with tremendous cunning and guile, could arrange for her to be yours.

HERO:

Yes?

PSEUDOLUS:

If that someone could arrange it, what would you give me?

HERO:

Everything!

PSEUDOLUS:

Everything? What do you own? Twenty minae, a collection of sea shells and me.

HERO:

Right.

PSEUDOLUS:

You don't have to give me the twenty minae, or the sea shells. If I get you that girl, just give me me.

HERO:

Give you you?

PSEUDOLUS:

My freedom.

(Act I: 12)

The song that follows this interchange, 'Free', simply expands and elucidates what the concept of freedom will mean to Pseudolus. However, Sondheim, even within this simple exposition, chooses images and situations that reinforce Pseudolus's characteristic predilection for seizing the main chance:

PSEUDOLUS:

Can you see me as a voter fighting graft and vice?

(Sing it soft and nice ...)

HERO:

Free!

PSEUDOLUS:

Why, I'll be so conscientious that I may vote twice!

(Act I: 14)

He then propagates the existing status quo:

PSEUDOLUS:

It's the thing that every slave should have the right to be.

And I soon will have the right to buy a slave for me!

(Act I: 15)

Sondheim neatly turns Pseudolus's self-interest on its head, showing us another side to his character in the pithy couplet that follows, 'Can you see him?/Well, I'll free him!' Musically these two lines rise in full tones and are sung on whole notes, instrumental in suggesting a sincere emotional reversal to the previous premise that he will, having been freed himself, simply perpetuate the same master/slave situation he himself so detests:

(And I) soon will have the right to buy a slave for me! Can you

see him? Well, I'll free him.

(1964: 42)

But his instincts for self preservation are deeply engrained, as we see him battling the moral implications of freedom with which he cajoles Hero and the pragmatic practicalities:

Now, not so fast ...
 I didn't think ...
 The way I am,
 I have a roof,
 Three meals a day ...
 And I don't have to pay a thing
 I'm just a slave and everything's free.
 If I were free,
 Then nothing would be free
 And if I'm beaten now and then,
 What does it matter?
 (Act I: 14)

The song ends with Pseudolus's childlike glee as he gets Hero to spell out the word for him:

PSEUDOLUS (*Spoken*):
 Spell it!

HERO:

F-R- Double ...

PSEUDOLUS (*Spoken*):

No, the long way ...

HERO:

F-R-E-E-

BOTH:

Free!!!

(Act I: 16)

Sondheim's concern for and consideration of character are evident, even in this early example of his work. One can see his attempts to broaden the scope of the lyrics through Pseudolus's shifts in attitude, ending with his ingenuous delight, which is endearing, but also symptomatic of the chaos which his simple solutions to the short-term resolutions of the problems that confront him create.

Miles Gloriosus has as his roots Pyrgopolynices in Plautus's *The Braggart Warrior*. Pyrgopolynices's reaction to the sycophantic Artotrogus shows not only his vainglorious boasting, but also his miscalculation of his own worth:

PYRGOPOLYNICES:

Well what do you recall?

ARTOTROGUS (*Calculating*):

Let me see. I recall there were one hundred and fifty in Cilicia, a hundred in Scythobrigandia, thirty Sardians, sixty Macedonians – those are the men you slaughtered in one day.

PYRGOPOLYNICES:

What's the sum total of the men?

ARTOTROGUS:

Seven thousand.

PYRGOPOLYNICES:

Yes, that's what it ought to be. Your calculation is quite correct.

(vol. 1, 549-550)

Both of these aspects are captured in the character of Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Sondheim uses the warrior-like boasting of Miles in 'Bring Me My Bride', but places it in the context of a lover with little time to waste on wooing, as he regards his bloodthirsty activities as the normal preoccupations of a busy man who has to get back to work:

My bride!
 My bride!
 Come bring to me my bride!
 My lust for her no longer can be denied!
 Convey the news!
 I have no time to lose!
 There are towns to plunder,
 Temples to burn, and women to abuse!

.....
 I, Miles Gloriosus,
 I, slaughterer of thousands
 I, oppressor of the meek, subduer of the weak,
 Degrader of the Greek, destroyer of the Turk,
 Must hurry back to work!

(Act I: 58)

The use of parallel phrases and the repetition of the 'I' inflate, to ridiculous proportions, Miles Gloriosus's overweening pride; a pride which is punctured for the audience, who recognize the incongruity, by the no-nonsense conventionality expressed in the last line. The comedy is skilfully extended by the fact that Miles Gloriosus does not recognize that his own endorsement and estimation of his actions is undercut by the bathos inherent in his final summation. The song also includes what Gottfried refers to as, 'Sondheim's own favorite [*sic*] funny line: "I am a parade!"' (1993: 66). It is typical of Sondheim, perhaps, that the line is not one of his own, but a translation from Plautus.

Pseudolus and Miles Gloriosus are direct descendants of the Plautan originals, but Shevelove and Gelbart, as I have mentioned, introduced their own inventions, based on types found in the earlier plays. For example, Erotium, a courtesan, appears in *The Twin Menaechini* and Gymnasium in *The Casket*. In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* we discover the additional sexual delights of Vibrata, Panacea, Tintinabula and the Geminae. Each elicits, from Pseudolus or Lycus, the appropriate comic response. As Tintinabula appears and begins to dance, Pseudolus asks, 'Don't you have anybody in there a bit less ... noisy' (Act I: 17). Lycus, similarly, introduces the Geminae:

A matched pair.
 (*They dance*)

Either one a divinely assembled woman, together an infinite number of mathematical possibilities. They're flawless.

PSEUDOLUS:

I quite agree. But I am a man of limited means and I don't suppose you'd break up a set.

(Act I: 18)

Each character manifests a particular characteristic, much in the way of the medieval Morality plays. This simplicity of characterization influenced the kind of song Sondheim could write although, as I have suggested, a number such as 'Free' shows Sondheim writing for a particular character. Sheelove and Gelbart also identified with the style and tone of the Plautan comedies, vulgar and rumbustious as they are. They concocted a plot, farcical in nature, which demands a particular style of playing. This, also, effected Sondheim's contribution both with regard to style and content, showing even in this early work his ability to assume a chameleon-like empathy for the texture and tone of the original text.

Lest the phrase 'they concocted' imply a haphazard confection it should be stressed that the plot of the play is of a complex and intricate design. As in most farces the convoluted plot depends on much entering and exiting of characters who should not be there, or who are not what they appear to be. Thus, Pseudolus, slave of Hero, longs for his freedom and, discovering Hero's romantic yearnings for Philia,³ a courtesan (though still a virgin), in the house of the procurer, Marcus Lycus, promises to bring the two young lovers together, if as a reward Hero will grant him his freedom. Hero agrees but, unfortunately, Philia is already promised to the great soldier, Miles Gloriosus, who is due to return at any moment from a highly successful pillaging campaign. Pseudolus persuades Lycus, the procurer, that, having just arrived from Crete, which is, he insinuates, suffering from a disastrous plague, Philia may be infected. So Pseudolus kindly offers to place her in isolation within the house of Senex and Domina, Hero's parents, who opportunely have gone to visit Senex's mother-in-law in the country. In this way Philia and Hero may be alone together and pursue their romance. Unfortunately, Senex breaks the bust he is carrying as a gift for his mother-in-law and hurries home to repair it. When he sees Philia he, too, is smitten by her. To add to the complications Miles Gloriosus arrives to claim his bride and Pseudolus is forced to ask Hysterium, the slave of Senex and Domina, to dress up as Philia and, covered with a veil, pretend to have succumbed to the plague, thus giving Hero and Philia time

to escape to the harbour. At the same time Domina returns, suspecting her husband of an illicit liaison. To add to the confusion, Erronius, who has been searching the world for his two lost children, appears and has to be kept out of his house where Senex has taken refuge to prepare himself for his liaison with Philia. Concocting a far-fetched story that the house is haunted but that he can find Erronius's children, Pseudolus persuades Erronius to walk seven times round the hills of Rome. Erronius then appears from time to time throughout the action to complicate even further the events on the stage. To the surprise of no one, Philia and Miles Gloriosus are finally revealed as the missing brother and sister, thus allowing Hero and Philia to wed and Pseudolus to gain his freedom. If to this we add Proteans doubling as soldiers; passers-by and sundry citizens; a set consisting of three different houses, with doors, a balcony and access to the roof of one house; entrances within, without, upstage and downstage and all the comings and goings orchestrated with a superb sense of simple, logical, if manic, progression by Pseudolus, we are presented with a farce of classic proportions.

This, then, was the book for which Sondheim, for the first time, was to write both lyrics and music. One wonders if Sondheim was fully aware of the limitations and constrictions which the piece would impose upon his contribution. Perhaps it provides us with an indication of Sondheim's pioneering spirit, for part of the mystique that has grown up around Sondheim's work has much to do with his choice of subject matter. In any event, the difficulties inherent in trying to fashion a musical out of such a complex and farcical plot soon became apparent. Sondheim says that the function of the songs is 'to pinpoint moments of joy or delight or desire' (Wilson: 1962). This remark shows that Sondheim, even before the piece was produced, recognized the limitations that the form of the show imposed on the songs. But, Sondheim went further, 'The songs could be removed from the show and it wouldn't make any difference' (Zadan 1990: 68). Burt Shevelove, a little more sensitive to the seeming anomaly of having a musical that didn't, according to the composer, need music, comments that, 'In *Forum* the songs can be respites' (Zadan 1990: 68).⁴ Certainly, the songs do function as interludes to break up the relentless and unremitting progress of the plot. However, despite Sondheim's assertion, the loss of the songs from the show would make a great difference to the impact and, I believe, the long running success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

If the songs are to be regarded as functioning as respites, performed to give the audience a chance to catch its collective breath in the frenzy of activity that makes up the unravelling of the plot, this does not, per se, mean that they are any the less intrinsic or necessary. In fact it is worth quoting a salutary lesson learnt by Moss Hart whilst in conversation with the producer, Sam Harris, after the try-out of his play *Once in a Lifetime*:

'It's a noisy play, kid,' he reiterated without explanation. 'One of the noisiest plays I've ver been around.'

'But why, Mr Harris?' I persisted. 'It's no noisier than any other play.'

.....
 'Maybe *noisy* is the wrong word,' he said, 'But I've watched this play through maybe a hundred times, and I think one of the main things wrong with it is that it tires an audience out. It's a tiring play to sit through kid ... I can almost feel them begin to get tired all around me. That stage is so full of actors and scenery and costumes and props all the time they never get a chance to catch their breath and listen to the play Once this show gets under way nobody ever talks to each other. They just keep pounding away like hell and running in and out of that scenery. It's a noisy play, kid, you take my word for it' (Hart,1959: 390-391).⁵

This opinion applies equally to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which is a 'noisy' play in exactly the way that Sam Harris described *Once in a Lifetime*. If we accept that one of the functions of Sondheim's songs is to provide 'rest' periods amidst the 'noise' then we should not look for any great emotional depth in the music nor for lyrics which are integral to the development of the plot or explore to any degree the subtleties of character. Nevertheless we do find, as I have already noted, certain characteristics in Sondheim's work that were to be developed to a high degree of achievement in his later works.

In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, there are instances where a number is used merely as an excuse to showcase the singular personalities of the performers. Maurice Taubman, writing in the New York Times, characterized Sondheim's songs as:

Accessories to the premeditated offense. With the Messrs. Mostel, Gilford, Burns and Carradine as a coy foursome, 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' recalls the days when delirious farceurs like the Marx Brothers could devastate a number (1962: 49).

and in a review later that same month he called the song, 'burlesque, vaudeville, old-fashioned musical comedy rolled into one lively number' (1962: Section 2, p. 1).

The song is an early example of Sondheim's penchant for what are known as 'list' songs; songs that rely to a certain extent for their impact – comic or otherwise – on a series of parallel phrases, which heighten the cumulative effect. 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' joyously makes use of multi-syllabic rhyming which would not be suitable in lyrics of more depth and subtlety. So Sondheim playfully encourages such rhyming flights of fancy as Senex's:

Everybody ought to have a maid,
 Someone who, when fetching you your slipper, will
 Be winsome as a whippoorwill
 And graceful as a grouse.
 (Act I: 37)

The improbable simile 'graceful as a grouse' is repeated in the final chorus as the four characters sing:

Everybody ought to have a maid,
 Someone who'll be busy as a bumblebee
 And, even if you grumble, be
 As graceful as a grouse.
 (Act I: 39)

Sondheim also makes extensive use of internal rhyming, alliteration and assonance, all prosodic techniques whose judicious use helps create a schematic order and structural pattern for the writer, but here they are given free-rein to produce a richly comic, bawdy 'running gag' in the descriptions of the activities of a comely maid which insinuate other, less delicate, actions. The first chorus finds her:

Fluttering up the stairway,
 Shuttering up the windows,
 Cluttering up the bedroom,
 Buttering up the master,
 Puttering all around
 The house!
 (Act I: 37)

In subsequent verses she is found 'skittering', 'flittering', 'tittering' and 'littering' as well as 'pattering', 'chattering', 'clattering', and 'flattering'. However, the 'tt' alliteration of these choruses has eventually to give way to the 'gg' alliteration of the last chorus:

Wriggling in the anteroom,
 Jiggling in the living-room
 Giggling in the diningroom,
 Wiggling in the other rooms.
 (Act I: 39)

Whilst the style of the song is such that Sondheim has the freedom to run with its disarmingly riotous structure, there is a sense that the song does not quite pull off the extended 'gag'. There is an air of thankful dismissiveness in the last line, as if Sondheim's invention having been stretched to the limit, is now only too grateful to reach the old vaudevillian three-times tag ending.

Sondheim's facility for the apt rhyme is a skill developed and refined throughout his career as a lyricist to the degree that, in *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim is able to comment, tongue in cheek, on this aspect of his lyrical skill. However, it is so judiciously applied that it becomes most aptly the characters who deploy it, rather than being merely a lyrical joke. In this exchange Mrs. Lovett, with ghoulish glee, is offering Sweeney one of her imaginary pies:

MRS LOVETT:
 Now let's see
 We've got tinker
(Surveying an imaginary tray of pies on the counter)

TODD:
 Something pinker.

MRS LOVETT:
 Tailor?

TODD:
 Paler.

MRS LOVETT:
 Butler?

TODD:
 Something subtler.

MRS LOVETT:
 Potter?

TODD:
 Hotter.

MRS LOVETT:
 Locksmith?
(Todd shrugs, defeated.)
 (1979: 1-67)

Sondheim's rhyming skills meet their nemesis with far more aplomb than that found in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' lacks the dramatic economy and implications of 'Little Priest', and its impact depends to a large extent on the comic interpretation of the performer rather than its inherent dramatic possibilities. Both these numbers show us Sondheim's use of existing musical genres, 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' has its roots in the American vaudeville tradition as 'Little Priest' has its in the English equivalent, the music-hall. This use of established musical styles is intrinsic to Sondheim's development as a composer and his use of it becomes more complex and sophisticated to the point where the interaction of lyrics and a particular style of music sets up resonances and meanings of dramatic significance, far beyond the mere pastiche of 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' or the historical musical setting of the show numbers in *Follies*.

It is clear that the structure of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* had a direct influence on the type of songs that Sondheim wrote for the piece, but, as importantly, the characters themselves influenced Sondheim's contribution. Sondheim's songs are written to support and conform with the stylistic impositions and the limitations of the characters. The tone of the comedy may be discerned from the following exchange, one of the more sophisticated, between Domina, who wishes to impress Miles Gloriosus with her distinguished background, and Miles, who has mistaken her for a courtesan:

DOMINA:

You know, Captain, my father was General Magnus. On the last anniversary of his death I entertained over two hundred officers.

MILES:

Two hundred? By yourself?

DOMINA:

Of course not. Hysterium here was a big help.

(Act II: 69)

The sexual innuendo is consonant with the bawdy nature of the libretto whilst the use of puns and words spinning off to accommodate different meanings is redolent of schoolboy humour:

DOMINA:

Senex! Come away from that house of shame!

SENEX (*Crossing to her from house SR*):

I was just standing there saying, "Shame, shame, shame!"

(Act I: 7)

The degree to which Sondheim succeeds in striking the right tone for the songs has come under scrutiny and discussion (see Gordon, 1992: 20; Zadan, 1990: 70; Gottfried, 1991: 62). That Sondheim was aware of the problem is most aptly noted in the development of the opening of the show. The first number which Sondheim wrote was, as he himself calls it, a 'charming' (Zadan: 71) song entitled 'Love Is in the Air'. The music is lilting and lyrical and the words, although imbued with a sense of fun, have an underlying strong romantic impulse:

Love is in the air,
Quite clearly.
People everywhere,
Act queerly.
Some are hasty, some are halting,
Some are simply somersaulting.
Love is going around.

Anyone exposed can catch it.
Keep your window closed and latch it.
Leave your house and lose your reason,
This is the contagious season,
Love is going around.

It's spreading each minute
Throughout the whole vi-ci-nity.
Step out and you're in it,
With all the fun involved,
Who could stay uninvolved,
Who could stay uninvolved.
(1976: *Side by Side by Sondheim*)

There is a playfulness inherent in Sondheim's rhyming of 'some are halting' and 'somersaulting' and a capricious appeal in the way he ignores the usual pronunciation of vicinity [visinity] to set it musically on four equal crotchet notes to allow for the subtle rhyme of 'in it' in the following line. The whimsical character of the music underscores and supports the gentle charm of the words. It is a piece which may be described as 'capriccio'. But the style is reminiscent of musical comedy not of a rumbustious farce and even before rehearsals started this fact was recognized by Sondheim and the authors, so the composer produced another opening number for the show, 'Invocation and Instructions to the Audience'. However, this song did not find favour with the director, George Abbott, who 'wanted something he could hum, and he didn't think the new song was hummable and he said that you have to start a show with a hummable song' (Zadan

1992: 71).

But, though George Abbott's reasoning may have been rooted in his adherence to old fashioned theatrical practices, I believe he was correct, in the final analysis, to have reservations with regard to the suitability of 'Invocation' for the opening of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Abbott's instincts were right, even if his reasoning was not. Sondheim, however, has always been sensitive to suggestions that his work is not 'hummable', as I shall discuss later, and perhaps that is the reason for his rather bitter remark with regard to Abbott's refusal to substitute 'Invocation' for 'Love Is in the Air', 'This hummable song cost us \$100,000 out of town – that's how much we lost' (Zadan, 1990: 71).

It is the tone of 'Invocation' which is wrong for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. 'Invocation' is clever and witty in a way which the broad based Plautan farce is not. Its structure is that of a list of 'don'ts' suggesting to the audiences their appropriate response to the play they are about to see. The song begins with a plea to the deities:

Gods of the theatre, smile on us.
You who sit up there stern in judgement,
Smile on us.
You who look down on actors.
(Sondheim Songbook, vol. 1 1974: 2-3)

It may be noticed that the sly aside, 'And who doesn't?' which follows implies an intellectual superiority in all those who are not actors, especially the audience. Moreover the song's frame of reference pre-supposes a knowledge of the Greek theatre and so, although many of the requests are funny, they rely on an intellectual appreciation by the audience. 'Invocation' was eventually used, with some changes, to open Shevelove's production of Aristophanes's *The Frogs*, which was performed at Yale University in 1974, and which included in the chorus Sigourney Weaver and Meryl Streep who were then students. It is a song more suitable to the swimming pool in Yale's groves of Academe than the bustling Roman street of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. However, Sondheim could not resist a pointed reminder of the criticism that Abbott made of the song in the lyrics:

If we should get sa- tir- i- cal Don't take it

wrong. And if by a sud- den mir- a- cle A

tune should ap-pear that's lyr- i- cal, Don't hum-----

--- A- long.

As can be noted, the melody of 'Invocation' is not lyrical. It is, like the lyrics themselves, sophisticated and artful with skilful changes of rhythm. But it is with a shift in the tone that Sondheim eventually married his already polished word-play with a more melodic accompaniment that perfectly captured the brash and breezy ambience of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* with 'Comedy Tonight'.

It is significant that over the years, through the numerous productions, there have been quite radical re-assessments of Sondheim's contribution to the show. It is fair to say that the first Broadway production, as far as the notices were concerned, did little to suggest the advent of a major talent. Maurice Taubman's review, in the *New York Times*, was one of the more creditable, although it, too, was succinctly dismissive, 'Grant the cheerful aptness of some of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics' (1962, Section 2: 1).⁶ The English critics were as unenthusiastic when the show opened in London the following year at the Strand Theatre, starring Frankie Howerd:

Stephen Sondheim's oddly old-fashioned music and lyrics include only three numbers above the routine level. (From our dramatic critic, *The Times* Oct. 4, 1963: 16.)

However, in 1972 Clive Barnes, with what may be regarded as hindsight, produced this panegyric in the *New York Times*:

Few musicals have been so well crafted as this. Mr Sondheim's music is original and charming, with considerable musical subtlety but a regard for down-to-earth show-biz vigor [*sic*] that is precisely what is needed. And, as always, his lyrics are a joy to listen for. The American theater [*sic*] has not had a lyricist like this since Hart or Porter (1972: 13).

Perhaps it is worth noting that by the time Clive Barnes wrote this review Sondheim's *œuvre* had expanded to include *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964); *Do I Hear a Waltz*, with music by Richard Rodgers (1965); *Company* (1970); and *Follies* (1971) and he was now an established figure.

The opening number 'Comedy Tonight' was also, in later years, celebrated by Irving Wardle, for in it Sondheim captured the bright, brassy and bawdy tone of the show with a breezy, up-tempo melody line and lyrics that were both smart and funny. As Wardle observed, 'Where else in the American musical will you find such an opening number that sets the scene, introduces every

character and combines the main action with quantities of comic decoration?' (*The Times*, Nov. 15 1986: 16). Like 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' this song, too, is a 'list' song. But this technique, which Sondheim uses extensively in his works, can be used to create not only a comic effect as we see in *Comedy Tonight*, but one of blasé sophistication in a show such as *A Little Night Music* where the weekend away is described so economically and with such precision:

How enchanting
 On the manicured lawns.
 A weekend in the country,
 With the panting and the yawns.
 With the crickets and the pheasants
 And the orchards and the hay,
 With the servants and the peasants
 We'll be laying our plans
 While we're playing croquet
 For a weekend in the country
 So inactive
 That one has to lie down.
 (1991: 100)

This versatile form also accommodates bitter cynicism as in *Company's* 'The Little Things You Do Together' where the idea of togetherness ('The hobbies you pursue together,/Savings you accrue together,/Looks you misconstrue together' {Vocal Score: 27-8}) is perverted to encompass the ultimate 'togetherness' of 'getting a divorce together'.

Sondheim's ability to find the cutting edge of a comparison or contrast is a highly developed skill in his lyric writing repertoire. Moreover, there is often poetic sensitivity in his choice of words, that imbues them, by their juxtaposition, with deeper meaning. For example, the choice of the words 'the orchards' and 'the hay' are not, I believe, just random examples of words with rural connotations. They are carefully chosen, within the context of the song to contrast two very different states that have already been suggested by the coupling of 'panting' and 'yawns' – the milieu of sophisticated ennui enlivened by liaisons and dalliance. So 'the orchards' can be seen to represent order, cultivation, ripening fruit and restraint, whilst 'the hay', used here as a common noun with echoes of a phrase such as 'roll in the hay' coming easily to mind, can be seen as representing disarray and bucolic licence. Even more subtly, the word hay can also mean a

country dance, singularly appropriate for a show that takes the waltz form as its underlying motivating musical motif.⁷

This digression serves to show how techniques which Sondheim used in an early work such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* are developed and used with greater maturity and depth as his experience grows. The parallel phrases, used extensively in *Comedy Tonight*, do not require the resonances that we find in *A Little Night Music*. Instead, Sondheim is in expository mood, as the list serves to familiarize the audience with what and who they are about to see:

Something familiar,
 Something peculiar,
 Something for everyone – a comedy tonight!
 Something appealing,
 Something appalling,
 Something for everyone – a comedy tonight!
 Nothing with kings,
 Nothing with crowns,
 Bring on the lovers, liars and clowns.
 Old situations,
 New complications,
 Nothing portentous or polite:
 Tragedy tomorrow,
 Comedy tonight!
 (Act I-1)

It would be hard to imagine a pithier or more functionally apposite introduction to the show and, together with its seemingly effortless simplicity, there is a freshness in the language that avoids the banal. The unexpected linking of 'familiar' and 'peculiar' using an identity rather than a true rhyme may seem strange, considering that these are the opening lines of the first song in the show and also taking into account Sondheim's attitude to using identities:

It's not that identities are outlawed, it's just that they don't prick the ear the way rhymes do. They don't point up the words, so if you're going to use an identity you have to use it carefully. They can be monochromatic but very useful (Zadan, 1990: 232).

Here is an instance where Sondheim is particularly careful, for these lines do prick the ear by

their very unexpectedness. 'Peculiar' is not a word that one anticipates hearing in a song so its usage draws attention to it. The very first lines indicate that we are not about to experience a conventional musical comedy, which is the impression that 'Love Is in the Air' would have given. At the same time the comic overtones which can be attributed to the word 'peculiar' by an experienced farceur, followed by the simple declaration that we are going to see 'a comedy tonight' are a far cry from the intellectual pretensions of 'Invocation'. 'Comedy Tonight' surges forward, spinning the words into a glorious mosaic of what *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is all about. There are puns such as, 'Weighty affairs will just have to wait' (Act 1: 2) and the corny:

STAGE RIGHT:
 Something that's gaudy,
 STAGE LEFT:
 Something that's bawdy,
 PROLOGUS:
 Something for everybawdy –
 ALL:
 Comedy tonight!
 (Act I: 4)

The song culminates with the whole company throwing out phrase after parallel phrase, each tumbling out as fast as the characters themselves will soon be tripping across the stage, capturing every situation and each character with the requisite raciness and style:

FIRST HALF:
 Stunning surprises,
 SECOND HALF:
 Cunning disguises,
 ALL:
 Hundreds of actors out of sight!
 ERRONIUS:
 Pantaloons and tunics,
 SENEX:
 Courtesans and eunuchs,
 DOMINA:
 Funerals and chases,
 LYCUS:
 Baritones and basses,

PHILIA:
 Panderers,
 HERO:
 Philanderers,
 HYSTERIUM:
 Cupidity,
 MILES:
 Timidity,
 LYCUS:
 Mistakes,
 ERRONIUS:
 Fakes,
 PHILIA:
 Rhymes,
 DOMINA:
 Mimes,
 PROLOGUS:
 Tumblers, grumblers, fumblers, bumbler,
 ALL:
 No royal curse,
 No Trojan horse,
 And a happy ending, of course!
 Goodness and badness,
 Man in his madness,
 This time it all turns out all right!
 Tragedy tomorrow – comedy
 Tonight!
 (Act I: 5)

If, as Sondheim has said, the genesis of *Comedy Tonight* was 'all a matter of George Abbott not being able to hum' (Zadan, 1990: 72), then one must be grateful for the musical inadequacies which inspired this final version of the opening number, for it is so faithful to the ethos of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* as to seem almost inevitable.

As has been suggested the songs can be seen as providing 'breathing spaces' in the midst of all the comic action and, although they are not used to advance the plot they are still performed by particular characters and Sondheim uses different techniques to obviate the inherent limitations to be found when performed by people who, by virtue of the songs' function in the show, can only really sing about themselves or their current situation.

'Lovely', for example, is first sung by the beautiful, but vacuous Philia in a simple exposition of

her charms:

I'm lovely,
 All I am is lovely
 Lovely is the one thing I can do.
 Winsome,
 What I am is winsome,
 Radiant as in some dream come true.
 (Act I: 24)

It is set to a gentle 4/4, musical accompaniment and the humour derives from Philia's lack of awareness of her limitations, although to 'do lovely' has whimsical quirks which has been lost in the passing years when, now, to 'do lunch', for example, has become a chic and rather 'camp' expression. Sondheim, however, extends the scope of this charming song and turns it to greater comic effect when it is reprised by Hysterium and Pseudolus as the latter is persuading Hysterium to dress up as Philia. Sondheim uses the reprise to extend the song's usage by the incongruous situation. At its second appearance Pseudolus starts the song, reprising Hero's declaration to Philia, in order to persuade Hysterium that he will, indeed, be able to convince Miles that he is a beautiful, dead Philia:

You're lovely,
 Absolutely lovely.
(Hysterium looks from Pseudolus to audience and back to Pseudolus)
 Who'd believe the loveliness of you?
 HYSTERIUM *(Speaks)*:
 No!
 PSEUDOLUS *(Speaks)*:
 Come back!
(Sings)
 Perfect,
 Sweet and warm and winsome,
 Radiant as in some dream come true
 (Act II: 75)

The absurdity of the situation gives a different impetus to the song, especially when Hysterium, persuaded that he is indeed a vision of delight, recapitulates:

I'm lovely,

Absolutely lovely,
 Who'd believe the loveliness of me?
 Perfect,
 Sweet and warm and winsome,
 Radiant as in some dream come true
 (Act II: 76)

Finally, totally convinced that he is ravishing, he coquettishly asks, 'Shouldn't I have some jewellery?' and then tops the comic situation by asserting that he should have flowers as well. As Stephen Banfield says, it is 'one of the oldest and simplest tricks of all' (1993: 97), but, old or not, it works.

'I'm Calm', also works on the basis of an appraisal of a situation which is at odds with the reality of the circumstances. Hysterium, becoming more excitable, attempts to persuade himself and the audience that he is calm. His opening lines, however, are undercut by the short chords in the accompaniment which suggest the opposite. The leaping intervals between the notes create a 'jumpy', nervous quality.

The image shows a musical score for the song 'I'm Calm'. It consists of three staves: a vocal line in the top staff, a piano accompaniment in the middle staff, and a bass line in the bottom staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line: 'I'm calm I'm calm I'm perfectly (calm)'. The piano accompaniment features short, rhythmic chords that contrast with the calm lyrics. The bass line provides a steady, low-frequency accompaniment.

(1964: 86)

The anacrusis, starting the phrase before the bar line, also compounds the jerky, out-of-control effect as Sondheim follows the natural stress of the lyric in setting it to music. The lyric forces the anacrusis, but the anacrusis itself supports the lyric. The middle section, with Hysterium in somnolent mood, allows Sondheim to indulge himself with the clichés of, 'Butterfly wings/Emerald rings./Or a murmuring brook,' which lead to the archetypal antidote to sleeplessness, 'Think about sheep/Going to sleep./Stop and count up to ten.' But the clichés prove to be no defence against Hysterium's natural inclinations to panic, even when he is assuring himself that he is, 'Aloofer than any giraffe' and eventually his only defence is to scream. The

song's emotional journey is a circular one, for at the end of the song Hysterium is no closer to being calm than he was when he began. The original libretto includes only the first half of the song, but the comic potential is inventively developed in the longer version.⁸

In 'Pretty Little Picture' Pseudolus also takes us on a circular journey by telling a story of a pair of young lovers, by implication Philia and Hero, who discover happiness sailing off into the wide blue yonder, as Pseudolus is trying to persuade Philia and Hero to do, in his attempt to gain his own freedom. But the imagined destination which is reached at the end of the song is not attained in the text due to Philia's moral scruples:

PSEUDOLUS:

Come! We go!

HERO:

Yes!

PHILIA:

Wait!

(Pseudolus and Hero turn to her)

I cannot go.

PSEUDOLUS:

Why can you not?

PHILIA:

As long as the captain has a contract I must go with him. That is the way of a courtesan.

(Act I: 31)

Even a courtesan has standards, or is there a subtle irony in that only a courtesan has them? There is a calypso feel to the music, perhaps suggested by the ocean setting of the paradisaical island, but the tempo and the energy of the words is anything but languid. The dense alliteration drives the story along with a superabundance that is both comic and disarming:

The bong of the bell of the buoy in the bay,
And the boat and the boy
And the bride are away!

.....

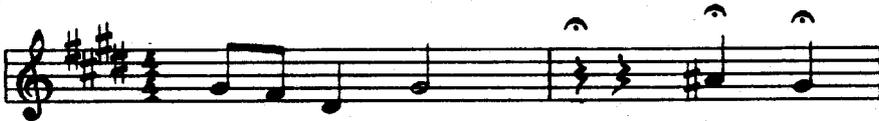
There's just the shore
Where the lovers lie,
And the sand and the sea and the stars and the sky,
And the sound of a soft little satisfied sigh.

(Act I: 30)

Musically, the song has a catchy chorus that repeats at the end of each verse and Sondheim makes use of a technique he was to use with great success, in more extended fashion, in later works. Each verse is lengthened slightly to add impact though, in this instance, it is used on a lighthearted level to parade Sondheim's shameless alliteration to comic effect. It also, perhaps, prevents the song from becoming too predictable. Thus the second half of each verse after the eight bar scene-setting varies in length from stanza to stanza, whilst in the last verse the chorus starts more slowly and with more resolution on a different point of the bar, prefiguring the end of the number:



boy and the bride. Its a (verse 1 bar 16)
bride are a- way. It's a (verse 2 bar 18)



sat- is- fled sigh (sigh) All your (verse 3 bar 19)

(1964: 61-70)

Perhaps the most interesting point to be made about 'Pretty Little Picture' is one suggested by Gottfried, in that it addresses an aspect of Sondheim's work which has become a contentious issue to his critics and yet is seen as an example of his artistry by his admirers:

The music for this song is cheerfully dissonant, but Sondheim has mixed feelings about that. He recalls that Leonard Bernstein thought it was self-conscious about its 'wrong note harmony [and thought] I was putting in dissonances just for the sake of dissonances. Lenny told me, "You get afraid of writing a C-major chord and so you add an F sharp to it just to make it literate. Don't do it just to be different"' (1993: 65).

To an untutored musical ear the accompaniment to 'Pretty Little Picture' has a piquant zaniness in its occasional unexpected deviations that are in tune with the breezy lyrics. Certainly the functional dissonances which are to be found in Sondheim's later work are an integral part of his harmonic vocabulary which add, as I will show, depth and musical context to the lyrical content. In 'Pretty Little Picture' they act as musical punctuation marks to accent the textual adjuncts.

Perhaps the best indication that there might be truth in Sondheim's remark that the songs could be removed and not make a difference to the show is the number of songs that were dropped, then sometimes re-instated, in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. As I discussed, 'Love is in the Air', and 'Invocation' were replaced by 'Comedy Tonight', though the reason for this was a desire to set exactly the right note at the beginning of the show. Two songs for the young lovers were discarded early in the process of producing the show. 'I Do Like You' was rejected in rehearsal and 'Your Eyes are Blue' was cut during the New Haven try-out. The 'Echo Song', a charming number in which Philia asks for guidance from the gods and is answered optimistically by Hero who picks up on the end of each line, 'Philia: Should I hold him? .../Hero: Hold him!/Philia: Or forget him?/Hero: Get him!' was also cut at this time, retaining the lyrically limited 'That'll Show Him', which is a short, one joke number describing how Philia will wreak her revenge by thinking about Hero while making love to Miles. 'The House of Marcus Lycus' was also cut on the out-of-town try-out, probably for reasons of time and prompted by the fact that the lyrics, by describing what is visual, retarded the momentum of the action. The number, however, is full of verbal delights, as this description of Gymnasia, a tall girl, demonstrates:

Expansive, explosive, exquisite and excruciating,
Exceeding, exciting, exhausting but exhilarating ...
Wait until the day she's fully grown.
She'll be useful on safari.
You could purchase her for shade alone
And never be sorry.
(1983: *A Stephen Sondheim Evening*)⁹

Sondheim again gives his alliterative talent free rein, but it is also interesting to note here how Sondheim reworks verbal ideas that have been discarded in one piece and turns them neatly to accommodate a different concept in another work for, in the same song, Lycus advises his buyers to:

Gorge on gorgeousness compounded.
Face the future side by side by side,
Completely surrounded.

He then describes the girls by number, 'One is ecstasy,/One is mystery,/One is six foot three,/Two is company' – the last referring to the Geminae. The phrase 'side by side by side' reappears as

a number in *Company*, and the sequential lines are worked in a deeper and more emotionally rich context in this later work:

Isn't it warm,
 Isn't it rosy,
 Side by side by side
 Ports in a storm,
 Comfy and cosy,
 Side by side by side

 One's impossible,
 Two is dreary,
 Three is company
 Safe and cheery
 (Vocal Score: 114)

During the artistic process of producing *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* changes continued to be made. 'That'll Show Him' was omitted from the New York production in 1972 as was 'Pretty Little Picture'. (The omission of the latter number was due solely to the fact that Phil Silvers, the star of that production, had difficulty singing the song.) 'Farewell' a new song written for Nancy Walker in the L.A. version was, however, retained for the 1972 New York production even though she had left the show; the 'Echo Song' was also reinstated.

Of the songs which remain in the show, Hero's charming 'Love I Hear' follows smoothly after the brassy razzmatazz of 'Comedy Tonight' and is interesting in that it is one of the first numbers where one sees Sondheim accommodating an idiosyncratic speech pattern, to such an extent that the song fades out on Hero's tongue-tied quandary of trying to communicate how it feels to be in love:

What's love, I hear.
 I feel, I fear,
 I know I am,
 I'm sure ... I mean ...
 I hope ... I trust ...
 I pray ... I must
 Be in!
 Forgive me if I shout ...
 Forgive me if I crow ...

I've only just found out
 And, well ... I thought you ought to know
 (Act I: 10)

Domina's sultry, blues-style 'That Dirty Old Man', with its alternating 'point number' laments, has found a permanent place in the show. The lyrics of this pseudo-torch-song veer from lust to anger, and the disparity between the two kinds of music used creates a singular comic effect. 'Impossible', the duet between father and son, Senex and Hero, where both consider the relationship between them, each suspecting the other of pursuing the same girl, presages a subject which Sondheim examines more deeply in *Into the Woods* (see pp. 124-7). In 'Impossible' the generation-gap is superficially examined in terms of the simplistic and condescending manner which the different generations adopt to each other:

SENEX:
 She's a lovely, blooming flower,
 He's just a sprout ... impossible!
 HERO:
 She's a lovely, blooming flower,
 He's all worn out ... impossible!
 (Act I: 46)

Nevertheless, the implication that each can learn from, and help the other, is mooted:

HERO:
 With a girl I'm ill-at-ease.
 SENEX:
 I don't feel well ...
 HERO:
 Sir, about those birds and bees ...
 SENEX:
 Son, a glass of water, please ...
 (Act I: 48)

Here, in a very simple way Sondheim is addressing the father/son, child/parent relationship, which is at the heart of his later work:

MYSTERIOUS MAN:
 We disappoint,
 We leave a mess,

We die but we don't ...

BAKER:

We disappoint

In turn, I guess.

Forget, though, we won't ...

BOTH:

Like father, like son.

(Act II, Sc.2: 123)

The 'impossible possibilities' which are addressed in comic fashion in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* are examined in a more complex and meaningful fashion in Sondheim's more mature work.

'Bring Me My Bride', which has been discussed (see pp. 12-13), appears to fulfill the function that 'There's Something About a War' also addressed before it was cut from the show. It has a catchy martial beat and the title becomes the leitmotiv of the song, being repeated nineteen times as Miles, with bloodthirsty relish recounts the many reasons why war is 'divine'. Indeed, many similar phrases are to be found in both 'Bring Me My Bride' and 'There's Something About a War' which suggests that the overlapping themes were found to be more aptly expounded in the former number, which also, in a more comic vein, reveals Miles's bombastic vainglory. The tone of 'There's Something About a War' is more amorally explicit in a way which seems too biting for the farcical nature of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Certainly, lines such as:

The rain may rust your armor [*sic*],
 Your straps may be too tight,
 But decapitate a farmer
 And your heart feels light!
 (1983: *A Stephen Sondheim Evening*)

have more in common with the black comedy of Mrs Lovett's 'Little Priest' in *Sweeney Todd*.

The songs that Sondheim wrote for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* have much to offer and yet we have the composer's own opinion that the songs could be removed from the show and it would not make any difference. Now it is sometimes misleading to regard as indisputable Sondheim's, or any author's, assessment of his or her own work. Such an attitude

may lead to misinterpretations or a superficial acceptance of what may be no more than general principles as dogma. That there are problems to address in discussing this show is a fact for, although *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* gave Sondheim his first opportunity to both compose the music and write the lyrics for a Broadway show, it was not the perfect vehicle for a musical. As Banfield so succinctly puts it, 'Farce is breathless: singing is the opposite' (1993: 92). Perhaps feeling constricted by the limitations which the form imposed on the function of the songs, Sondheim is inclined to downgrade his own contribution, although he speaks highly of the work itself:

I find it very experimental The book is vastly underrated. It's brilliantly constructed It's almost like a senior thesis on two thousand years of comedy with an intricate, Swiss watch-like farce plot It's almost a foolproof piece – it can be done by any high school class or a group of vaudevillians and the play holds up (Zadan, 1990: 69-70).

As Sondheim says, the work is experimental in that it is directly opposed to the school of Rodgers and Hammerstein who had been at the forefront of developing the integrated musical. As a farce it has a complex and well-structured plot, though no more so than, for example, the plot of *Charley's Aunt* and, I believe, it is only underrated in so far as farce itself is an underrated and frequently misunderstood genre. Sondheim's assertion that this piece can be performed by anyone, amateur or professional, and 'hold up', is not true. As any actor will tell you, farce, by its very nature, is one of the most technically difficult theatrical art forms to master. Any actor who has ever done farce knows that farce requires superb technique, brilliant comic timing and the ability to create 'reality' within the confines of, usually, bizarre situations. It is the one form of acting which cannot be done by any high school class except, almost always, excruciatingly badly. A good farceur is a good actor; a good actor does not inevitably make a good farceur. The theatrical breeding ground from which farceurs evolve no longer exists and, perhaps, it is the dearth of them which has led to a woman, Whoopie Goldberg, being cast in 1997 in the New York production of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* as Pseudolus. Moreover, reviewers, over the years, have endorsed the view that this is a performers' piece.:

Howerd has a stage personality which is the anatomy of lewdness and deceit. But his gift is to turn low brow smuttiness into something graceful and elegant. His deliberately retarded timing, those slow, wickedly knowing eyes, the high comedy of that outraged voice and those panic-stricken double-takes put him among our very few great comic

performers – those artists whose control and command of their audience is hypnotically complete (Rissik, 1986: 13).

Taubman, in the *New York Times*, wrote,

Nevertheless, the clowns and clowning make 'A Funny Thing'. As the chief zany, Mr Mostel has scope for his wonderful blend of knowingness and naivete. His delicacy of touch is so charming and vulnerable it calls to mind the little tramp of Charlie Chaplin (1962 sec. 2, p. 1),

while, in 1972, Barnes wrote:

Phil Silvers, a newly-restrained and histrionically elegant Phil Silvers, takes Pseudolus and makes the part his own Mr Silvers is a total delight. His timing could win a tennis championship, his innuendoes are as insinuating as a snake, and his comic resource and naturalness are absolutely winning (Barnes, 1972: 13).

Apart from the intrinsic difficulties of performing farce, my own observations, both as a performer and teacher, have led me to the belief that it is the songs, which Sondheim says may be removed without harming the musical that, in fact, make the piece a viable one for inexperienced performers and which lend to the piece an accessibility which has afforded it the popularity which it enjoys. It is the songs which make the show palatable to many people who do not enjoy farce to the extent that Sondheim himself does. By their very existence the songs lend an air of sophistication to the genre, but it is a sophistication in tune with the slick, cleverly-wrought script. The only songs which are not completely true to the spirit of the piece are those which involve the young lovers, for they are very much set in a romantic musical comedy mode and, like 'Love Is in the Air', have a relaxed, lyrical feel which is at odds with the brash vaudevillian humour of the book. 'Lovely' succeeds because of the lightly farcical silliness of Philia, and because Sondheim develops it into a farce situation when he reintroduces it with Hysterium and Pseudolus.

Sondheim underestimates the importance of his contribution to the show, perhaps because the end result was not the kind of musical he wanted to write. Yet certain of the qualities which Sondheim displays in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* are indicative of his future development. Firstly, the fact that the musical was so different from the established musical genre shows us that even early in his career Sondheim didn't flinch from taking risks

with regard to the subjects and projects with which he became involved. Given the experimental nature of the show Sondheim demonstrates a sensitive appreciation of the stylistic approach, with regard to the music and lyrics. It is an art which, as we will see, is put to the service of the many different books and authors with whom he has been involved. If, in his first Broadway show, his work is not an unqualified success, then we must remember that Sondheim when he wrote it, despite his rigorous apprenticeship, was a Broadway novice and this work had no precedents. In this musical, working within the limitations which the form imposes, we see already Sondheim's not inconsiderable talents for using and manipulating both verbal and musical language to comic effect. It is a particular talent that reaches unsurpassed heights in *Sweeney Todd*.

The songs in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* are catchy and tuneful. As interludes, they do not exhibit the same substance as we find in his later shows, although numbers such as 'Free' and 'Love, I hear' demonstrate that Sondheim's consideration for character was already a component in his lyric writing. What is already apparent in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is Sondheim's ability to utilize different styles of music and lyrical forms in a way that revitalizes the clichés with which they are associated. 'Pretty Little Picture's simple narrative structure is prevented from becoming predictable by subtle rhythmic changes in the music, and dextrous verbal flights of fancy which, as they are extended, give the impression that the action of the staged situation has moved forward in the same way as the story in the song. But it is, it might be called, a musical sleight of hand, dramatically acceptable, but lacking the complex and beautiful use that Sondheim makes of the narrative structure in 'Someone in a Tree' from *Pacific Overtures*. In the same way, the vaudevillian musical influence of 'Everybody Ought to Have a Maid' is exploited to fuller advantage in *Sweeney Todd*, where its dramatic implications go far beyond pastiche in 'A Little Priest', and character and musical ethos are combined in a way that is rich and meaningful. So, too, Sondheim's use of repetition and extended choruses are both found in this, the first musical for which he wrote both music and lyrics. That Sondheim always uses repetition in a way that is functional and never merely cosmetic, can be seen in his treatment of 'Lovely' and is a precursor of the more sophisticated and intrinsic extension of the same technique that is seen in *Sweeney Todd* in, for example, Sweeney's and Mrs Lovett's last duet or, with a different application, in the repeated motifs and song

fragments in *Into the Woods*. The extended chorus of 'Pretty Little Picture', which fulfills a simple comic function, is used with different, and more meaningful resonances in such distinct works as *A Little Night Music* and *Sunday in the Park with George*.

In one way *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* may be regarded as a 'dead end', serving as a singular vehicle for Sondheim's apprenticeship as a composer and lyricist of musical theatre. It set a precedent and created a pattern that influenced, more than has been realized, Sondheim's future development, for as an idea that could not be repeated, it meant that whatever Sondheim did next, as a lyricist or composer, would have to be different, as *West Side Story* (1957), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) and *Company* (1970) proved to be as, indeed, each and every Sondheim musical has been. Whatever limitations may be discerned in the songs in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, whether from the restrictions imposed by the book, or the youth and relative inexperience of the aspiring Sondheim, they show, in embryo, facets of Sondheim's talent which were to grow into the consummate artistry which heralds a 'Sondheim musical'. The enduring popularity of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is due, in no little measure, to the contribution made by the young composer and lyricist.

Endnotes

1. Sondheim's early work includes a show written while he was at George School called *By George!*, for which he wrote the score and collaborated on the script; *Phinney's Rainbow*, which he wrote whilst studying at Williams College and, under the watchful eye of Oscar Hammerstein II, a series of musicals that would teach him his craft. The first, a musical based on a good play; one based on a flawed script; one derived from a story not based on a stage play and, finally, an original musical. The end result was a musical titled *Climb High*, which was never produced, but which Sondheim used as an audition piece for various producers. One such producer was Lemuel Ayres, who was impressed enough to commission Sondheim to write three songs for a new show that he intended to produce. The show was called *Saturday Night*. Unfortunately, Ayres died in 1955, and plans for the show fell through. (Forty-two years later, a production of *Saturday Night* opened for a limited season at the Bridewell Theatre in London.) Leonard Bernstein, however, was so impressed by the youthful Sondheim's lyrics that he asked Sondheim to join him on the show with which he was currently involved. In 1957 *West Side Story*, with music by Bernstein, book by Arthur Laurents and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim opened on Broadway. In 1959 *Gypsy* opened with music by Jule Styne, book by Arthur Laurents and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

2. Larry Gelbart had worked with Burt Shevelove in television. He later created the *M*A*S*H* television series. More recently he wrote the libretto for the musical *City of Angels*.
3. The name Philia deriving from the Latin 'filia', a young girl.
4. It is interesting to note that whereas in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* it is the songs which act as respites there is the opposite situation in the Roman theatre. Most scenes were designed with musical accompaniment and there are only four scenes in Plautus's *Pseudolus* designed to be spoken. David Wiles suggests that, 'Such scenes offer a pause for breath in the manic rush of the play ...' (1996: 54).
5. Moss Hart took heed of Sam Harris's words and completely rewrote the last scene of *Once in a Lifetime*, dispensing with an exceptionally expensive set and several subsidiary characters to close with his two main protagonists sitting alone in a railway carriage. The show provided Moss Hart with his first great success on Broadway.
6. Richard Watts, Jr., writing in the *New York Post* was even more scathing, 'The new musical comedy which opened last night at the Alvin Theatre makes no pretence of subtlety, delicacy or lavishness, and it can lay no claim to distinction of story, song or choreography But the fact remains that, in its shameless fashion, it is downright hilarious (1962: 76).
7. Sondheim's creative meticulousness with regard to his musical contributions is clearly shown by the description, quoted in the Introduction to *A Little Night Music* by Jonathan Tunnik:

Sondheim provided his typically complete piano accompaniment for each song, meticulously notated as to melody, harmony, and rhythm – much like an art form accompaniment – and most effective when performed in its original medium – the piano. [They] suggest the dramatic implications of the songs and their appropriate instrumentation through the use of rhythmic, contrapuntal and coloristic [*sic*] devices such as repeated notes, arpeggios, broken chords and the use of extreme registers (1991: 4).

8. The complete lyrics of 'I'm Calm' are as follows:

I'm calm, I'm calm,
I'm perfectly calm,
I'm utterly under control.
I haven't a worry - -
Where others would hurry, I stroll.

I'm calm, I'm cool,
A gibbering fool
Is something I never become.
When thunder is rumbling
And others are crumbling, I hum

I must think calm, comforting things:
 Butterfly wings,
 Emerald rings.
 Or a murmuring brook - -
 Murmuring, murmuring, murmuring - -
 Look:
 I'm calm I'm calm,
 I haven't a qualm.
 I'm utterly under control.
 Let nothing confuse me, or faze me - -
 Excuse me - -
 I'm calm, oh, so calm,
 Oh, so - -

I'm calm, I'm calm,
 I'm perfectly calm,
 Indifferent to tensions and shocks.
 Unruffled and ready,
 My nerves are as steady as rocks.

I'm calm, I'm cool,
 So cool that I'm cold.
 Aloofer than any giraffe.
 When something's the matter,
 Where others would shatter, I laugh.

I must breathe deep, ever so deep -
 Think about sleep, going to sleep
 Stop and count up to ten:
 One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten,
 When
 You need aplomb,
 Want to be calm,
 'Cos life is a horrible dream,
 Just count up to ten very slowly
 And then -
 Scream!

9. The full lyrics are to be found on Record. They were sung by George Hearn, Bob Gunton and the Women of the company at a Gala performance of Sondheim's work, sponsored by the Whitney Museum's Composers' Showcase Series which took place on March 3 1983. The double album set was released by RCA on CBL2-4745. 'Invocation and Instructions to the Audience', sung by Bob Gunton and the Company as well as 'There's Something about a War,' performed by Chris Groenendaal, and 'Echo Song' from Liz Calloway and Steven Jacob, are also included in this double album.

SWEENEY TODD

Sweeney Todd, Sondheim's 'horror movie' (Zadan 1990: 246), that would keep the audience in a state of suspenseful anticipation throughout its duration, opened in New York at the Uris Theatre, to mixed reviews, on March 1 1979. It was directed by Harold Prince and starred Len Cariou as Sweeney and Angela Lansbury as Mrs Lovett. The subsequent London production, starring Denis Quilley and Sheila Hancock, opened in 1980 at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. In 1984 the musical was produced by The New York City Opera, thus substantiating the view of those who regard the piece as an operatic work rather than musical theatre. In 1989 *Sweeney Todd* was performed in South Africa under the auspices of the Natal Performing Arts Council and directed by Geoffrey Sutherland.¹ Proof of *Sweeney Todd*'s lasting theatrical substance may be gauged by the numerous productions there have been in the nineteen years since it was first performed. Most notable amongst them have been the National Theatre's production at the Cottesloe and Lyttelton Theatres in London in 1993; a production directed by Christopher Bond at the Half Moon Theatre in London's Mile End in 1985 and a subsequent production by the same director, who is also responsible for writing the version of *Sweeney Todd* on which Sondheim's and Wheeler's work is largely based, at the Holland Park Theatre in 1993.

The story on which Christopher Bond based his play is, of course, not a new one. Its origins have been traced back as far as the thirteenth century to the trial of one Sawney Bean in Scotland and a similar story may be found in fourteenth century France in certain murderous events which occurred in *La Rue de Marmouzets*. A periodical of 1884 recalls that, '*Le temps n'effacera pas le souvenir de Patissier homicide qui sert encore d'épouvantail aux petits enfants de la Rue de Marmouzets*' (Turner 1975: 41). However, it is generally accepted that the popular version of the murderous barber of Fleet Street is derived from the story by Thomas Peckett Prest, published by Edward Lloyd in *The People's Periodical* 1840 of *Sawney Bean, the Man-Eater of Midlothian*, which was used in a serial named *The String of Pearls (A Romance)*. In 1842, George Dibdin Pitt, who came from a theatrical family, seized on the story to create the devilish barber of Fleet Street in a play which was performed at the Britannia Saloon in Hoxton. Since then the story has been re-written and adapted several times,² until the version by Christopher Bond stimulated Sondheim's interest and the combined talents of the composer, Hal Prince and Hugh Wheeler produced what Sheridan Morley has described as, 'The most exciting and innovative attempt to drag the stage musical into the second half of the twentieth century since

West Side Story' (1983: 230).

As Sondheim himself describes in a discussion on musicals, later published in *Platform Papers*, at the Lyttelton Theatre:

What happened is that Christopher Bond was an actor in a troupe and, as I understand it [the troupe] decided their Christmas play would be *Sweeney Todd*. They sent for the 1957 version, or whatever was around then, and he said, 'This is dreadful, I'll write my own' (1993: 32).

It was this play that Sondheim saw and which sparked his interest. It was a version he described, in this same discussion, as 'this charming melodrama' and was a form of theatre which, with farce, Sondheim most enjoyed.³ As Sondheim has been quoted as saying, it is one show that he actively instigated, 'The show was the first time I sort of dragged Hal into sharing my vision' (Zadan 1993: 245).

The tale of Sweeney Todd is that of a barber who, for various reasons or none (depending on the version) slits the throats of his customers, who are then minced up by Todd's amoral accomplice, Mrs Lovett, to be used as the filling for her pies. Although Christopher Bond's play is the main source of the final version of *Sweeney Todd* there is a published version of an earlier adaptation, written by Austin Rosser, which was produced by the Dundee Repertory Company in 1969.⁴ Having instigated the project, Sondheim started work on the libretto himself. He soon found that, at a rough estimate, his version would run over nine hours, so Hugh Wheeler, who had worked with both Hal Prince and Sondheim previously, was brought in to collaborate. What distinguishes Sondheim's and Wheeler's version from any other previous rendering is the tone of the work. Sondheim, at the time, did have a particular musical style in mind. He says, in the same discussion at the Lyttelton Theatre with Jeremy Sams, 'I had lunch with John Dexter, who was a friend of mine, and asked him would *Sweeney Todd* be the basis of a good operatic piece' (1993: 32). Hugh Wheeler also had definite ideas about their intentions, 'We wanted to make it as nearly as we could into a sort of tragedy. I wrote it as a play, but I encouraged Steve to cannibalize it and make it nearly all music' (Zadan 1993: 246). Thus, both lyricist and librettist had in mind a work of serious intent. However, the element which influences the tonal colour and alters the temper of the piece is the development of motive to facilitate an understanding of

Sweeney's actions and take the piece to a level which transcends the cruder and simpler melodramas on which it is based.

An examination of the different versions mentioned shows how that development occurs. For example, in Rosser's play Sweeney Todd's motivation is simple and base:

When a boy, the thrust of avarice was first awakened in me by the fair gift of a farthing. That farthing soon became a pound – the pound a hundred, and so to a thousand, till I said to myself I will possess a hundred thousand (1971: 6).

Furthermore, he enjoys killing just for the sake of it. In the next scene, as Joanna leaves his shop, he salivates, saying, 'Oooh, I'd like to cut her throat – more than I could do to keep my hands off it' (1971: 8). In Rosser's version there is no attempt to provide any mitigating factors. On the contrary, Rosser's Sweeney revels in his destructive impulses, 'Oh, oh, I wish the whole world were a throat' (1971: 22). Bond's play, on the other hand, does provide us with a motivation for Sweeney's actions and it is this motivation which is adopted by Wheeler and Sondheim. It is the rape and subsequent 'death' of Sweeney's wife which forms the basis of, and exacerbates, his pervading anger at his conviction on a trumped up charge and subsequent transportation to Australia. But in Bond's version there is no underlying justification for his later indiscriminate slaughter, as this repartee between Mrs Lovett and Sweeney reveals:

MRS LOVETT:

This revenge business don't half blow hot and cold, it don't.

TODD:

Revenge? Oh no! The work's its own reward. For now I find I have the taste for blood, and all the world's my meat.

(1974: 21)

Ultimately, Bond's Sweeney reacts in the same way as Rosser's and, in so doing, uses similar savage imagery to describe his behaviour. However, Rosser's imagery is more expansive and apocalyptic in its all-embracing impersonality, whereas Bond's reduces humanity to a mere bloody carcass. Sondheim draws something from both concepts, but extends and intensifies the dramatic context to justify the leap that Sweeney Todd makes from a specific revenge to all embracing carnage by tracing it through the disintegration of a man's mind as he contemplates the annihilation of a world that disgusts him: a cesspool inhabited by vermin. This process

reaches its culmination in Sondheim's 'Epiphany' (Act I, 61-2), where Sondheim charts Sweeney's human breakdown and figuratively presents us with his rebirth, a manifestation of almost epic proportions. It is both powerful and pathetic, a monstrous diatribe where the mood switches abruptly from violent denunciation to heartrending lyricism.

We are drawn into this transformation by a recapitulation of Sweeney's words from the opening scene, where Todd angrily tells Anthony and the audience:

There's a hole in the world
 Like a great big pit
 And it's filled with people
 Who are filled with shit
 And the vermin of the world
 Inhabit it
 (I: 6)

His words almost die out, as if on an uncompleted phrase, as he leaves. But one anticipates and silently hears again 'and it goes by the name of London' as in the first verse. When Sweeney repeats these words at the beginning of 'Epiphany' he finishes the outburst in a very different fashion:

There's a hole in the world
 Like a great big pit
 And it's filled with people
 Who are filled with shit
 And the vermin of the world
 Inhabit it - -
 But not for long!
 (I: 61)

The vehemence of the last line plunges us into Sweeney's madness as London is forgotten and we see Sweeney damning the whole world. At the same time, by using this repetition, Sondheim reminds us of the valid cause for anger which led Sweeney to this point. It is a madness which Sondheim in his lyrics makes more understandable and, therefore, less unutterable, in consequence, to an audience. For, as we see, Sondheim returns in 'Epiphany' to the personal tragedy in Sweeney's life more than once as the rationale for his breakdown to the point where

he can cry that, 'They all deserve to die' (I: 61). The word 'deserve' serves to remind us that just desserts can take the form of punishment or reward, depending on our actions and motivation. The mood of the lyrics swings from the brusquely conversational,

All right! You, Sir,
How about a shave?

to the ironic,

Come and visit
Your good friend Sweeney - - !

and from the vicious word play of,

I want you bleeders!

which contrasts with the lyrical keening of a man whose wife is dead,

And my Lucy lies in ashes,
And I'll never see my girl again.

His subjective grief, subtly articulated in his repetition of the word 'my', is overwhelmed by the enormity of the task that now faces him, but which he embraces in one mad triumphal explosion:

But the work waits,
I'm alive at last
(Exalted)
And I'm full of joy!
(I: 62)

The word 'work' implies the seriousness of the task, which is not just an indulgent and subjective desire: it is fuelled by some higher purpose, implied by the use of words such as 'vengeance' and 'assuage', that have an almost biblical ring. His resurrection, however, is a dark victory over sanity.

Musically, 'Epiphany' is powerful and relentless with huge chords thundering in support of the anger and bitterness that Sweeney spews out in the lyrics. The relentless drive is unremitting until he thinks of his wife and daughter when the music takes on a more lyrical and reflective tone. Sondheim's use of the Dies Irae as an underlying musical theme has been mentioned by several sources (see Banfield 1993: 297-300; Gordon 1990: 213-214). Sondheim has also been quoted on the subject in Zadan's *Sondheim & Co*:

He used the Dies Irae, the Mass of the Dead of the Roman Catholic Church, as the basis for the music of a man in love with death. 'I always found the Dies Irae moving and scary at the same time' (1990: 248).

'Epiphany' is, indeed, both moving and scaring. Sweeney tells Mrs Lovett:

Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs Lovett,
There are two kinds of men and only two.
There's the one staying put
In his proper place
And the one with his foot
In the other one's face.
(I: 61)

Both musically and lyrically Sondheim validates that premise, for Sweeney swings between outpourings of unbridled rage and bloodlust and the heartbroken utterances of a man who has been prevented from 'staying put' and found himself at the mercy of another's infamy. The changes of mood in the lyrics are reinforced and echoed by the score. When Sweeney reaches the climax of his final ululating, 'And I'm full of joy' with its unexpected and discordant musical closure, the end result triumphantly validates what Betty Comden, herself a lyricist of note, said, 'The composer is as much a dramatist in the theatre as the people who write the words' (Guernsey 1989: 236).

This is always true of Sondheim whose music always supports the dramatic thrust of the lyric and which is used to intensify mood or as an ironic counterpoint. Just as surely, Sondheim's lyrics express as much depth and meaning as any playwright's. Moreover, he always uses music to underline and reinforce the lyrics as they express character. It is, to a large extent, this attribute of Sondheim's – a lyric writer for whom every single word is of paramount importance and a

composer who melds his musical expression to complement and become an emotional reflection of the language that he uses – that propels his work beyond the level of pure entertainment:

Entertainment [is regarded] as something to be passively absorbed rather than actively participated in, dedicated to the discouragement of awareness. Art [is] potentially subversive and disturbing because it demands active concentration (Roth 1981: 63).

Sweeney Todd demands just such commitment from the audience. In this musical piece the words and music, without losing the structure of songs complete in themselves, become, to a large extent, the libretto. They advance the plot; illuminate character and echo and reinforce the dramatic themes. Certain words and images are used within songs to build up a framework of recurring metaphors. Songs become metaphors for a character's situation as, for example, 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird'. The music, in its underscoring and use of repeated musical motifs, adds emotional density and provides an overall unifying effect. Sondheim demands a more complex response than merely asking whether he has written good songs, although this, of course, is still a criterion, given that what we are considering is musical theatre. But he goes beyond the popular requirements that attend the genre in the sense that one of the expectations of a musical has been the production of a 'hit' song.

With regard to Sondheim's method of writing lyrics, it is easier to see his artistic process in action when examining how he draws on existing material. We can observe how he re-works dialogue to emphasize subtleties and enrich character: how, within the framework of music, he creates a dramatic song, not only complete in itself but subordinate to the context and development of the piece as a whole. In the introductory scene between Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd we can see how he restructures Bond's dialogue to create 'The Worst Pies in London'. In Bond's play Sweeney Todd is accosted with the following words:

MRS LOVETT:

Are you a ghost? Hey don't go running out the minute you get in. I took you for a ghost 'cos you're the first customer I've seen for a fortnight. Sit you down. You'd think we had the plague the way people avoid this shop. A pie was it?

TODD:

A pie – yes. And some ale.

MRS LOVETT:

Mind you, you can't hardly blame them. There's no denying these are the most

tasteless pies in London. I should know, I make 'em. Ugh! What's that? But can you wonder, with meat the price it is? I mean, I never thought I'd see the day when grown men and good cooks, too, would dribble over a dead dog like it was a round of beef.

(1974: 3).

Sondheim's borrowings from this text are unmistakable. But his opening lines are more direct and declamatory:

MRS LOVETT:

Wait! What's yer rush? What's yer hurry?
(She sticks the knife into the counter.)

You gave me such a - -
(She wipes her hands on her apron.)

Fright. I thought you was a ghost.

Half a minute, can'tcher?

Sit! Sit ye down!
(Forcefully)

Sit!

All I meant is that I

Haven't seen a customer for weeks.

(I: 7)

True to the spirit of the original she speaks with the colloquial ease of conversation, which is underlined by the absence of rhyme in this section (though a very strong rhythmic beat impels the song along) and the use of spoken interjections. The situation is stated in the most simple and pungent way. Mrs Lovett speaks in short, monosyllabic phrases, asking rhetorical questions, which she then answers herself, that serve the purpose of involving Sweeney without his interrupting the flow of lyrics and, at the same time, establish Mrs Lovett as a garrulous individual. By keeping the phrases short and simple the clarity of the words is never lost – a most necessary consideration in a song that is sung *allegretto agitato*. Simultaneously, Sondheim uses the device of intercutting the short spoken phrases with action as Mrs Lovett alternately tries to annihilate the bugs that infest her kitchen whilst continuing with her vigorous baking activities. The bangs and stamps that punctate her thoughts are echoed in the music which punctuates her movements using short staccato chords.

As Mrs Lovett becomes reflective the tempo of the music changes, becoming more lyrical and

relaxed. Here Sondheim makes use of minimal internal rhyming to subtle comic effect:

MRS LOVETT:

Mind you, I can't hardly blame them --

(Pouring a tankard of ale)

These are probably the worst pies in London.

I know why nobody cares to take them --

I should know,

I make them.

But good? No,

The worst pies in London.

(I: 8)

The 'blame them' in the opening line is echoed in the repetition of the 'ay' vowel and the repeated 'them' of 'take them', which then consolidates with the rhyming of 'make them'. The rhyming of 'I should know' and 'But good? No', is obvious but unobtrusive in performance due to the difference in meaning of the two rhyming words and the construction of the sentences. The approximation to natural speech is never subordinated to versification, though the rhyming facilitates ease of listening and is subliminally reassuring to an audience used to the standard thirty-two bar song with the AABA structure that forms the basis for popular songs of the established musical theatre genre.

Sondheim contracts and simplifies much of Bond's dialogue, reminding us of his premise that lyrics have to be underwritten because the relentless drive of the music allows only a specific amount of time to put across an idea and lyrics are only part of the total stimuli that confront an audience watching a theatrical piece. Thus Bond's,

The other day, Tuesday it was, I was walking down Cheapside and I saw a crowd of people looking in a pieshop window,

(1974: 3)

is contracted to the concrete image of 'Mrs Mooney has a pie shop'. Similarly, Bond's description of the roasted cat in the window is replaced by:

What I calls
Enterprise.

Popping pussies into pies.
(I: 8)

These lines combine a crisp distaste with a meretricious cosiness in the use of the plosive 'p' consonant and the naïve 'pussies'. Whatever Sondheim's reservations about alliteration, 'The refuge of the destitute. That's my attitude toward alliteration in a line. Get suspicious' (Zadan 1990: 232), it certainly does not hold true here. The phrase is small in length; funny in terms of the image it conjures up so pithily and fine as it effortlessly introduces the very concept and situation that Mrs Lovett herself is going to pervert and manipulate later in the show. It also, as Sondheim later notes, speeds the line along. In addition, we see Sondheim setting up a verbal reference and its attendant musical phrase with regard to Mrs Mooney (A), which will be repeated later when Mrs Lovett mentions her (B), comparing her economical inferiority of that lady's products to her own grand design in 'A Little Priest':

(A) 'The Worst Pies in London'

Musical notation for 'The Worst Pies in London'. The first line of music starts at measure 42 and ends with a fermata. The lyrics are: 'Not are dy- ing in the street, Miss- us Moo- ney has a'. The second line of music starts at measure 43 and ends with a fermata. The lyrics are: 'pie shop'.

(Vocal Book: 14-15)

(B) 'A Little Priest'

Musical notation for 'A Little Priest'. The first line of music starts at measure 28 and ends with a fermata. The lyrics are: 'Mrs' - Moo- ney and her'. The second line of music starts at measure 29 and ends with a fermata. The lyrics are: 'pie shop'.

(Vocal Book: 79)

Apart from the dramatic use which Sondheim makes of these recurring motifs, they have the effect of creating a feeling of familiarity for the audience, much as reprises did in earlier

musicals. But for Sondheim they are an organic component of the show and not included only because the composer wishes the audience to hear a particular refrain again. In doing so Sondheim is also drawing on the Wagnerian principle of the 'leitmotiv' which binds a piece stylistically and dramatically. The music and lyric content reinforce each other to create a cohesive pattern.

Having established the pragmatic, garrulous, rather overpowering character of Mrs Lovett in the choppy rhythms of the verse, Sondheim leads us into the lyrical chorus, which is musically so at odds with the bathos of the words. The music works as an ironic counter-point to the banality of the thought as the words, 'These are probably the worst pies in London./I know why nobody cares to take them', are sung on a rising melodic scale that reeks of sentimentality. But it is the sentimentality of a woman who is incapable of any real emotion and who is prepared to achieve her aims without any understanding or cognisance of the horrors that attend them. The inappropriateness of the music reflects the inappropriateness of her response. This inappropriateness, is a form of disassociation which occurs frequently in *Sweeney Todd*.⁵ It does, however, also reflect a behavioural pattern which I have discerned as typical of certain people from this particular East End background and social environment and it seems to be characteristic of people not unfamiliar with poverty and the vicissitudes of life.⁶ Mrs Lovett displays the same characteristics as she views Pirelli's body, 'Ooh! All that blood! Enough to make you come over all gooseflesh, ain't it. Poor bugger. Oh well!' (I: 54).

In 'The Worst Pies in London' Sondheim makes use of the waltz tempo to which he is particularly partial, and whose predictability of metre he constantly turns to comic effect:

Is that just revolting?
 All greasy and gritty,
 It looks like it's molting [sic],
 And tastes like --
 Well, pity
 A woman alone
 (I: 8)

The audience's anticipation of the expected rhyme with 'gritty' is neatly deflected as Mrs Lovett's maudlin streak is again expressed in a new, unexpected thought and given sharpness and surprise by the musical phrasing and timing to which it is set.

'The Worst Pies in London' runs through many time signatures, from 5/4, 4/4 to 6/8 and 3/4 and back again to 6/8, as it mimics the speech patterns and broken thoughts of Mrs Lovett. These changes are subservient to the context of the song and the character of the person who is singing and shows a sensitivity and focus of purpose quite removed from the work of a composer such as Andrew Lloyd Webber who, on the subject of time signatures in particular, has been quoted as follows:

Early on, someone said I didn't have enough tunes with unusual time signatures. Since then, I've always had at least one song per show with a very unusual time signature (Watson 1990: 10).

Sondheim's work is always conceived to serve the piece for which he is writing. His songs are written for the characters, which is why he believes that it is almost impossible for a song sung by a character in the first act to be repeated in the second, because the character will have developed to such an extent that the original lyrics would be superannuated. This does not preclude Sondheim writing a *tour de force* for his performer and 'The Worst Pies in London' is surely that. But the form is determined by the context and the content. It illuminates and informs the character in a way that is emotionally and dramatically satisfying. It is an extension of what Sondheim learned from earlier works that, without character, nothing endures:

What lasts in theatre is character, and there are no characters in West Side, nor can there be It's more about techniques, not about people (Zadan 1990: 28).

Sondheim writes in words and images which are specific to a particular character and he often has specific ideas about how a character should be played, depending on the performer taking the role. For example, he spoke of Angela Lansbury's performance of Mrs Lovett as being, 'Juicy – you want to squeeze her and that's important to the show' (Hirsch 1989: 124).

The implication is that the audience should find her lovable. It is a viewpoint with which I disagree, for that implication led to the playing of the part in broad comic strokes with an 'Aunt Sally' make-up and hair-do: a musical comedy grotesque pandering to the expectations of a Broadway audience with preconceived ideas about what constitutes a musical. Such considerations are not confined only to audiences or critics. Even amongst composers and

lyricists writing for Broadway's musical theatre there is contention about whether or not certain subjects are suitable for musical treatment. Moreover, whether certain kinds of music are suitable for what is regarded as a 'popular' musical form, in that they may not be accessible and will not have the audience departing with entertaining plots and easy on the ear melodies singing out, 'Come back and see me', which is what Alan Jay Lerner once said is the most important message a musical can deliver to an audience:

In 1960, in an obvious reference to *West Side Story*, Lerner had told an interviewer, 'Fritz [Loewe] and I don't believe in musical plays with messages – particularly if the message deals with teen-age rumbles and switch-blade knives. To us the best message a musical play can convey is: "Come back and see me, often"' (Peyser 1987: 394).

If we consider that the original score of *West Side Story* was criticized because some numbers were considered 'unsingable', we see how engrained this kind of division can be. It is an 'either/or' situation – musical theatre or drama or opera – with no acceptance of anything in between. As Bernstein found when he and Sondheim played the score for the Columbia Recording Studios:

We both slaved. We sang sextet, played four hands. It didn't work. 'Too many words in the lyrics ... Too many tritones in the music' (Peyser 1987: 237-8).

It was the tritones which the executives at Columbia thought audiences would not be able to sing. Also known as an augmented fourth, the interval is made up of three whole tones, as for example, the interval between C and F#. One wonders if there really is anybody who cannot sing the first two notes of 'Maria' now?

However, Bernstein himself was aware of a dichotomy between his work on Broadway and what he felt were the more worthy heights to be scaled in serious music. As Peyser states:

Throughout his life Bernstein downplayed his music-theatre achievements. The subject came up even on a fishing trip to Florida in 1949: 'Lenny and I discussed opera versus musical comedy,' Harvey Propper says, 'and I took the position that musical comedy was the opera of our time. Opera, in my mind, was in the category of the museum. But Lenny never saw it that way. With Broadway he thought he had done nothing of importance and used to say all the time that to achieve immortality he would have to compose serious music that would last' (1987: 336).

What is interesting is not only that we see again an 'either/or' situation, but that this conversation took place nearly fifty years ago. The debate still continues, exacerbated by the explosion of different popular styles of music which dominate our society, propagated by a youth that has never been inside a theatre, but whose tastes determine, to a large extent, what our culture finds palatable and accessible. Form dominates content, which is why a composer such as Lloyd Webber can dominate our musical sensibilities, in terms of popularity, for:

Sondheim is one of a kind. He cannot be imitated except by cloning. Webber, on the other hand, speaks in the popular musical language of the day, more literate but, nevertheless, contemporary through and through; and form, in these particular times, is apt to cast a longer shadow than content (Lerner 1986: 234).

I think that in wanting Mrs Lovett to appeal to the audience Sondheim, uncharacteristically, promotes a concept of musical theatre which the work mitigates against. For, as has been observed:

The work's uncompromising drama, which deals with the less attractive aspects of the human psyche – deceit, lust, violence, murder, etc. – places it unequivocally in the same area as the Brecht/Weill collaborations like *Mahagonny* and *The Seven Deadly Sins* (Blyton 1984: 20).

If one recalls that the 'etc.' includes cannibalism and that Mrs Lovett embodies all the above mentioned characteristics, it is difficult to reconcile them with a Mrs Lovett whom you want an audience 'to squeeze'. Even Angela Lansbury felt uncomfortable and had difficulty in 'placing' her character. As she has said, 'I am not sure that Hal may not have felt that my tendency to go for the comedic at times was ill thought out' (Zadan 1990: 255).

I do not believe that 'going for the comedic' was the problem. The character of Mrs Lovett is, musically and lyrically, outrageously, anarchically funny. It is that by seeing the character as lovable, the strength of the character's roots in reality were dissipated and the relationship between the two protagonists was unbalanced. In being presented in such a way, the production also gave credibility to, and reinforced, Miss Lansbury's persona as a musical star, thus facilitating the audience's perception of the piece as subscribing, in some areas, to traditional and well-defined parameters of musical theatre: that to some extent the medium pays homage to and

amplifies the personality of the performer. In *Sweeney Todd* this perception served to camouflage Mrs Lovett's awfulness by Miss Lansbury's perceived persona as an enchanting leading lady of the musical theatre.

More importantly, this perception was reinforced stylistically in that most of Mrs Lovett's featured numbers were set within the framework of the English working class music-hall tradition. As Lindsay Anderson is quoted as saying, with reference to Joan Littlewood, whose indigenous and mostly workshopped productions created the legend of Stratford East:

The chief problem was a kind of intellectual limitation: while most of what was provided at Stratford was subversive, because of the knees-up quality of the style, it could just be seen as a nostalgic variety show (Morley 1987: 144).

His remarks could as easily be applied to the character of Mrs Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* especially if one subscribes to the point raised by Anderson, as regards the musical style. Quite apart from my reservations of the characterization of Mrs Lovett in this particular production, it can be seen that the musical style itself may impinge negatively on a performer's interpretation of the part. There is always the possibility that a performer could fall into the trap of being unable to resist 'the temptation to allow the brutality to be smothered in a froth of featured numbers' (Burke 1989: 37).

Mrs Lovett is, as written, a strongly delineated personality. Her character is rooted in her environment and is based on an idiosyncratic class, the characteristics of which the lyrics promulgate. There is, traditionally, a strong English trait in which, as I have mentioned, emotion is diffused and dissipated by a careless, unpremeditated, humorous response. In theatrical terms it can be seen as a residual of those same music-hall traditions that combine vulgarity and sentimentality in almost the same breath. Mrs Lovett is funny; we can admire her resourcefulness, even if it is exhibited in such a distasteful context; laugh at her delusions of bourgeois marital bliss and appreciate her witty humour. But even as she distances herself from the enormity of her actions by brushing them aside, distancing herself emotionally, so the audience too is alienated. We can enjoy her – from a distance; but, 'Lovable she ain't!' In addition this technique which is used to make her outrageous actions palatable, is further

emphasized by the genre of the music in which Mrs Lovett articulates her thoughts and feelings.

This distancing effect is most clearly seen in 'A Little Priest'. The subject matter of this song is horrific and yet it is developed to devastating comic effect with mordant black humour. The repetitious and hackneyed vamp of the music, with its 'umm-cha-cha' seemingly unstoppable waltz tempo, is only too familiar to an audience knowing the old fashioned music-hall traditions, reminiscent of bad jokes and the corny 'crossover' ad-libs of the old time comedians. It directs the audience's response to an anticipation of a comedy number and away from any deep emotional insight, while the words allow the audience to respond with intellectual enjoyment to the wit and wordplay. Everything, from Mrs Lovett's singular character, to the music and the lyrics, places an emotional restraint on the audience which lulls it into an intellectual acceptance, to the point where, not only does the audience not rebel at the gruesome concepts, it feels free to revel in them:

MRS LOVETT:

It's priest.
Have a little priest.

TODD:

Is it really good?

MRS LOVETT:

Sir, it's too good,
At least.
Then again, they don't commit sins of the flesh,
So it's pretty fresh.

TODD:

Awful lot of fat.

MRS LOVETT:

Only where it sat.
(I: 65)

The strict waltz time, which contains the outrageous puns and double entendres, drives the lyrics, which pile up one after the other until even the real seems surreal:

MRS LOVETT:

Or we have some shepherd's pie peppered
With actual shepherd
On top.
(I: 69)

Mrs Lovett's rejoinders to each of Todd's reservations are absolutely typical of a market trader cajoling a customer to buy. As we shall see, the same technique is used later by Tobias in 'God That's Good!' It is as if there is no end to the verbal dexterity that Sondheim is capable of until the moment when Mrs Lovett, in a feat of one-upmanship, leaves Todd verbally torpedoed as he tries to find an adjective to rhyme with 'locksmith'. Expeditiously, Mrs Lovett embarks on another set of culinary delights that includes clerk, sweep and fop. Although one feels that she could go on ad infinitum, to the whirligig accompaniment and to the enjoyment of the audience, the song is not merely a comic number. It serves a dramatic function. The song's progression defines Sweeney's growing complicity as he responds to the devious machinations of Mrs Lovett, who is leading him to the point of no return. Her numerous varieties of filling, each of which is always referred to as a genus as in, 'it's grocer' or 'it's piccolo player' which, being 'it' and not 'he', is more palatable than having to consider an actual human being, eases Sweeney to the point where he is actively engaged in suggesting refinements to her suggestions:

MRS LOVETT:

Here's the politician -- so oily

It's served with a doily --

(Todd makes a face)

Have one.

SWEENEY:

Put it on a bun

(As she looks at him quizzically)

Well, you never know if it's going to run.

(I: 69)

His own two obsessions, the Beadle and the Judge, are, of course, in the forefront of his mind and he suggests both as suitable for inclusion. However his frustrated and furious outburst, 'I'll come again when you/Have Judge on the menu' (I: 69), finds an immediate and chilling response from his companion. Mrs Lovett instantaneously drops her cannibalistic frivolities with prosaic, yet deadly, intent:

Wait! True, we don't have Judge -- yet -- but would you settle for the next best thing?

TODD:

What's that?

MRS LOVETT (*Handing him a butcher's cleaver*):

Executioner.

(I: 69)

As she hands him the cleaver, Mrs Lovett takes Sweeney one step further than merely contemplating revenge on an individual. By the end of 'A Little Priest', Sweeney has become an instrument of destruction rather than the mere recipient of imaginary pies. In terms of the piece as a whole, he is transformed from a man seeking revenge on an individual into an avenging protagonist destroying all mankind:

TODD:

We'll not discriminate great from small

No, we'll serve anyone - -

Meaning anyone - -

BOTH:

And to anyone

At all!

(I: 70)

Sweeney's transformation is complete. Irving Wardle, however, writing in *The Times of London*, found this turning point problematic:

This is the soft spot in the narrative: there is no reason for the transition, and characteristically the production pulls out all its stops out to batter you into accepting it (1980: 13).

It is not a view to which I subscribe and one I do not feel is substantiated in the lyrics or the music. From Sweeney's first entrance his introspective and brooding nature is firmly established. He feels 'the chill of ghostly shadows everywhere' (I: 5) and his anger is hardly contained as he contemplates the filth and greed which surround him in London:

I too

Have sailed the world and seen its wonders,

For the cruelty of men

Is as wondrous as Peru,

But there's no place like London!

(I: 5)

The re-telling by Mrs Lovett of Lucy's rape and the graphic pantomime that accompanies it further inflames Sweeney, culminating in his heart-rending, 'Would no one have mercy on her?' (I: 11). In addition, he discovers that his innocent daughter is now in the Judge's care and power. The brooding intensity of 'My Friends', which will be discussed in further detail, shows Sweeney's compulsive and compelling passion reach almost unnatural proportions and the unpremeditated murder of Pirelli and Sweeney's failure to kill the Judge fuel his emotions to the point where it is comprehensible that the whole world is against him. Even Anthony in his innocence conspires to frustrate Sweeney by his precipitous entrance as Sweeney prepares to kill Judge Turpin.

Whilst not agreeing with Wardle's sentiment, I do feel that Sweeney's transformation, in which the inherent religious fervour of his commitment and the epic proportion of his passion have been clearly rooted, takes on a different interpretation once Mrs Lovett enters into Sweeney's calculations. Dramatically, the moment occurs just after Sweeney's apocalyptic 'Epiphany' and his triumphant, yet ironic, sweeping feelings of joy. There is a long pause; the audience is not quite sure, due to the intensity of the moment, whether to applaud or not; Mrs Lovett, silenced for once by Sweeney's monumental passion, sits. Then she speaks, 'That's all very well ...'. The line as written actually continues, but it is after that first phrase that the audience suddenly laughs, because it recognizes the reality of Mrs Lovett's world which, as I have suggested, is derived from the East End milieu where incongruities are a natural result of evading, or not responding to, deep emotion. But, by her very prosaic dismissal of Sweeney's passion, Mrs Lovett dilutes the intensity of his emotions so the grandeur of the moment and of Sweeney's epic drive are lost, whilst the initiative switches to her preoccupation of finding a way to cover up the murder of Pirelli.

Mrs Lovett's character is pivotal and her development crucial to the structure of the piece. Sondheim's subtle lyrics are admirably adjusted to incorporate the changes that her character undergoes. Already characterized by the Beggar Woman as having 'fancy airs' (I: 38), Mrs Lovett's pretensions to middle class gentility are shown in her appearance and her vocabulary in Act II of *Sweeney Todd*. 'God, That's Good' establishes her in all her ostentatious and gaudy finery, relishing her newfound wealth and status. Tobias has become her 'Toby', but her ingratiating and gentrified manner is undermined in the (common) pitching of her summons to Toby over an octave screech:



To- by!

similarly



Quick now!

(Vocal Book: 92)

It is confirmed by the twee references to 'birdies' and 'dearie' and adjectives such as 'gorgeous', reeking of middle class niceties. Her familiarity with Sweeney, as well as her newly established position, is swiftly characterized as she addresses him for the first time:

Yes, what, *love?* (my italics)
 Quick, though, the trade is brisk.
 (2. 3)

Her patronizing and genteel delusions of some middle class utopia surface in such lines as:

What's my secret?
 Frankly, dear - - (*To a woman*) forgive my candor [*sic*] - -
 Family secret,
 All to do with herbs.
 Things like being
 Careful with your coriander,
 That's what makes the gravy grander - - !
 (II: 4)

Her rising impatience with Sweeney's interruptions is finely balanced with her lip-smacking delight in her pies:

The crust all velvety and wavy,
 That glaze, those crimps ...
 And then the succulent gravy ...
 So thick
 It makes you sick.
 (II: 7)

Her pretensions and Sondheim's deliberate and precise way of articulating a situation in one appropriate word can be enjoyed in Mrs Lovett's plea to Sweeney:

Have a beaker of beer
 And stop worrying, dear.
 (II: 4)

'Beaker' seems a curious choice in so far as its modern usage is associated with a plastic container. In fact the word is derived from the Old Norse word 'bikaar' and the word was in common usage in 19th century England, although more usually found in the vocabulary of the upper classes to describe a claret cup. So Sondheim uses not only language appropriate to the time, but a word which has connotations of a superior class, befitting Mrs Lovett's desire for upward mobility.

Hal Prince observed of 'God, That's Good!' that:

Steve wrote it as a dazzling tour de force. He had plotted out the song very carefully, noting who Mrs Lovett talks to at each point, which customers are drunk and so on. The customers were at various tables and each customer had his own play going, singing individual dramas. 'This is so complex the audience will go crazy', I told him, and I really had no idea at first how to stage the number. Steve said the customers should be hanging all over the set, but I said they should be at one long table so the audience has a single concise image: an octopus of hungry insatiable people (Hirsch 1989: 124).

It is clear from Prince's remarks that there are problems inherent in the dramatic staging of a scene in which, musically, certain operatic principles prevail, in that several distinct and different situations happen simultaneously. The opening scene of Act 2 is musically homogeneous and rhythmically simple and straightforward and, as in opera, phrases are repeated more than once to help familiarize the audience with the action. Although the overall dramatic context is clear within the complex jigsaw puzzle structure of the scene, it is difficult for an audience to assimilate all the subtleties and nuances of the dramatic action at one viewing. Just as Prince had a problem finding a dramatic focus amid so much activity, so some of the scalpel-like lyrical felicities which are so much a characteristic of Sondheim's work, are blunted, not only by the inexorable drive of the lyrics which is dictated by the music, but by the fact that many of the lyrics of different characters are delivered in simultaneous or overlapping phrases. (This will be further elucidated in my discussion of Tobias.) The scene is reminiscent of a Bruegel painting, such as *Peasant Dance*, showing us a large slice of robust low class life, where each indulges his gluttony in uproarious bawdiness. A kaleidoscope that needs to be examined in detail, if one is to extract all its hidden ironies and detail. However, as Sondheim has noted, lyrics exist in time and an

audience has just as long as the song lasts to absorb all the many stimuli that are present in a theatrical performance – from the visual and aural response to the intellectual and emotional. 'God, That's Good' demands that attention be paid. Perhaps that is no bad thing in an era numbed by the microsecond images of the video generation.

* * * * *

Mrs Lovett's pretensions eventually find their clearest expression in 'By the Sea'. Her language, set to a jaunty, tricky tune, includes phrases such as, 'wouldn't it be smashing'; 'gay young blades'; 'chums'; 'sunny suite' and 'sweater'. (The last, a word that seems deceptively modern with its connotations of forties pin-ups and, more recently, sophomoric teenagers, but which was in common use in the late 19th century). All of these phrases are redolent of the class to which Mrs Lovett aspires. As in 'A Little Priest' Sondheim tickles the intellectual funny bone with his witty use of rhyme and puns:

With the sea at our gate,
 We'll have kippered herring
 Wot have swum to us straight
 From the straits of Bering.
 Every night in the kip
 When we're through our kippers,
 I'll be there slippin' off your slippers.
 (II: 18)

Lyrics are, of course, written for performance and when Sondheim first played it for Angela Lansbury to gauge his star's reaction he is quoted as saying, 'I wrote a song for you so crowded there is no place to breathe' (Gottfried 1993: 141). Gottfried adds, describing Lansbury's reaction to the song, 'The galloping lyrics probably bothered her as much as anything else. Beyond all that, she probably disliked the song because it didn't land with the audience'.

Technically, this song requires enormous energy to sustain the underlying passion that motivates Mrs Lovett's seemingly banal desires for respectability. It also demands prodigious breath control so that the audience is carried along on lyrics that do seem seamless and effortless in execution. The kind of obsessive energy and drive that is required mitigates against a characterization that tends to display qualities of loveliness. All the adjectives that subscribe to that interpretation, 'snug' and 'cozy' and the idyllic haven that Mrs Lovett conjures up, are funny precisely because they are so far removed from the kind of person that she actually is. The woman who sings,

By the sea
 Married nice and proper,
 By the sea - -
 Bring along your chopper
 (II: 19)

is the real Mrs Lovett, pretentious and brutal – a woman driven by her own obsessions, fuelled by a prodigious energy and single-mindedness that finds its expression in continual physical movement and the fragmented thoughts of a restless and frustrated personality. The tension which this sense of dislocation between what is real and what is only fantasy creates, driven by a performance which does not strive to make the character lovable, enables the song to 'land' with the audience.

Mrs Lovett's amorality is finally seen in all its dreadful clarity in the scene with Tobias. As he sings the lyrically and musically heartwarming and lovely 'Not While I'm Around' to a woman he trusts and in his simple way cares for, Mrs Lovett is, in her self-serving mind, already plotting his downfall and demise. In this scene Sondheim uses the technique of playing the underlying development of the plot against the emotional content of the lyrics and the music. So while Mrs Lovett feigns sympathy for Tobias, we witness her growing lack of ease and her fumbling for the bon-bons, in order to distract Tobias, which leads to the disclosure of Pirelli's purse. This, in turn, makes inevitable her decision to do away with the boy and is a dramatic counterpoint to the flowing and melodic line of the song.

The simple lyrics and the romantic melody line combine to create a haunting and touching number that not only stands by itself as a delicate song of love, but which is dramatically satisfying within the framework of the plot:

Not to worry, not to worry,
 I may not be smart, but I ain't dumb.
 I can do it,
 Put me to it,
 Show me something I can overcome.
 Not to worry, Mum.

Being close and being clever
 Ain't like being true.

I don't need to, I won't never
 Hide a thing from you,
 Like some.
 (II: 26)

The language is direct and almost monosyllabic. The rhyme scheme is simple and the repetition of parallel and similarly constructed phrases serves to suggest a person whose vocabulary is inadequate and so the repetition becomes the means by which to emphasize the depth of his feelings. Without using a specifically old-fashioned vocabulary the song subtly establishes a sense of a past era by the judicious use of words that suggest a Victorian milieu: words such as 'demons', 'charm you', 'being close' and phrases like 'whistle I'll be there'. The simplicity of Tobias's language disguises an obliqueness of thought which is both disarming and knowing. Thus his first warning is couched in the unspecific, 'Nothin's gonna harm you' which translates later in the song to the more explicit, 'No one's gonna hurt you'. Likewise, the repetition of the first line, 'Nothing's gonna harm you' with its added, 'No, sir', has a throwaway quality that directs us away from his specific worries to a generalized display of youthful bravado. Tobias's plea, 'Not to worry, Mum', later in the song, draws us back to the specific threat which he perceives to Mrs Lovett. It is these evasions in Tobias's lyrics which arouse Mrs Lovett's suspicions and allow the audience to observe the growing unease in her remarks which punctuate the lyrics of the song, 'What do you mean, "a man?"' and 'What is this foolishness? What are you talking about?' (II: 25). The dramatic structure of the song, that moves into underscored dialogue and then back into a final reiteration of Tobias's resolute and romantic impulse to protect his benefactress, is brilliantly conceived and executed. There is certainly no lyric in the song which sounds, as Gottfried suggests, 'too sophisticated for poor Tobias' (1993: 143). There is not one word that is out of place or ill-chosen in 'Not While I'm Around'. The sophistication lies in the dramatic structure of the song and the interlinked dialogue. It works because it is a first class example of art concealing art to create theatrical alchemy, where words and music sustain the action of the dramatic context and are in turn given substance by it.

Toby's simplicity, however, has been called into question with regard to the lyrics he sings in 'Pirelli's Miracle Elixir'. One precept that Sondheim has always had regard for is that, 'Rhyme always implies education and mind working, and the more rhymes the sharper the mind' (Guernsey {ed.} 1974: 84-5). If this is so, then there would seem to be a contradiction in the

apparent facility that Tobias displays both in the vocabulary of the song, and the rhyming itself which is intensive and relentless:

Does Pirelli's
 Stimulate the growth, Sir?
 You can have my oath, Sir,
 'Tis unique.
 Rub a minute
 Stimulatin', i'n' it?
 Soon you'll have to thin it
 Once a week!
 (I: 22)

Both the rhyming and the vocabulary, at first glance, seem at odds with the character, as Tobias uses words obviously alien to an uneducated street urchin. Phrases such as, 'May I have your attention'; 'finest physicians'; 'activate your roots' and words such as 'illustrious' are inappropriate for a simple character such as Tobias. However, there are convincing reasons for accepting the apparent incompatibility of the language with the character who utters it. The first is a purely functional one, for when Tobias performs the number the audience has no preconceived ideas about the kind of person he is and so however he presents himself he is accepted and acceptable. Secondly, the tone of the introductory musical accompaniment is one reminiscent of the hurly-burly of a fair-ground ambience and accommodates the delivery typical of a fair-ground barker who is trying to gain the attention and interest of a crowd of people, using hyperbole and magniloquence in his sales pitch:

Ladies and Gentlemen!
 May I have your attention, perlease?
 Do you wake every morning in shame and despair
 To discover your pillow is covered with hair
 Wot ought not to be there?

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen,
 From now you can waken at [*sic*] ease⁷
 You need never again have a worry or care,
 I will show you a miracle marvelous [*sic*] rare.
 Gentlemen, you are about to see something wot rose
 From the dead!

(A Woman gasps - - He smiles and wiggles his finger 'no')

On the top of my head.
(I: 21)

The skilfully constructed introduction, leading into the overstated, but vivid, description of the unpleasant fact of balding, followed by the promise of a miraculous cure and topped by the attention grabbing gimmick of actually seeing 'something wot rose/From the dead' has all the characteristics of a recital learnt by heart. The reference to 'dermatologic disease' has an almost Dickensian quirkiness, as of one delivering a line without really knowing what it means and, in fact, 'dermatologic' itself is a misconstruction not found in the dictionary. Thus, we have the quite logical and believable situation of Tobias repeating as best he can, what he has been taught by his master. Thirdly, with regard to the rhyming, although the song is heavily rhymed there is no internal rhyming. The rhymes are in essence monosyllabic, as it is only the ubiquitous 'sir' which is used consistently that allows the words to rhyme with elixir. Also the words are underscored by a very pedestrian musical rhythm which holds the words in check. The continued repetition of the 'ick' rhyming words which pile up through the song: trick; tick; slick; pick; wick; thick; sick; nick and kick, have a cumulative effect and suggest a gradual loss of control rather than the witty word play of a more intelligent person. It is noticeable that towards the end of the song Tobias is reduced to repeating rhyming words that he has used before. The phrases themselves start to lose meaning. For example, 'Fix it in the nick, sir' is, I assume, used as a contraction of 'nick of time', but such a contraction is certainly not common English usage. 'In the nick' would more commonly be taken to mean 'in jail' by an English audience. I would also suggest that, 'If you've got a kick, sir', only makes sense if we assume that Tobias has gradually become totally incoherent in the face of the progressively louder and more aggressive comments of the crowd who have been egged on and encouraged by Mrs Lovett and Sweeney Todd and by the fact that Tobias now delivers the lines '*frenetically fast*', which is the very specific stage direction (I: 24) given in the libretto.

Though I do not find Tobias's language problematic, there is one phrase that, to me, seems to strike a dissonant note:

See that chap with
Hair like Shelley's?
You can tell'e's

Used Pirelli's!
(I: 22)

Certainly, within the context of the reasons given to justify Tobias using a vocabulary beyond his station, one could include a reference to Shelley. However, it is the musical context and not the literary allusion which, to my mind draws attention to it. The words are written on a lyrical, sophisticated, almost poetic line, each word sung on a series of rising notes that end on a high operatic G:

The image shows two staves of musical notation in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first staff contains the lyrics: "See that chap with hair like Shel- ley's". The second staff contains the lyrics: "You can tell 'e's used Pi-rel- li's!". The melody is characterized by a series of rising notes for each word, culminating in a high G note.

(Vocal Book: 35)

It is the change in the construction of the musical line which carries the joke, not the character. Form in this case dictates our response to the character. Tobias suddenly appears more confident, more knowing and grander in a way that is not appropriate to his character, but which is entirely appropriate to the kind of vocal virtuosity and quality that the music demands. Form dictates content but, as we have seen, it is content that allows Sondheim to match 'the dramatic needs of the characters' (Gordon 1992: 14) and which makes his lyrics so satisfying to a performer and so rich and, sometimes, difficult for an audience.

Certainly, in 'Pirelli's Miracle Elixir' the dramatic needs of the character are given expression as Tobias retreats, overwhelmed before the frenetic crowd, uttering a desperate, 'Talk to him', as he pulls back the curtain to reveal his master, Pirelli. Pirelli it is who then initiates the bombastic spiel which leads into the contest with Todd. In this section Sondheim takes the mock-heroic operatic form and parodies the fractured Italian to its furthest extreme to create a high comedy interlude, which is entirely appropriate to the character, however exaggerated it may at first appear, when Pirelli is finally revealed as a mountebank Irishman:

To shave-a da face,
 To pull-a da toot',
 Require da grace
 And not-a da brute,
 For if-a you slip,
 You nick da skin,
 You clip-a da chin,
 You rip-a da lip a bit
 And dat's-a da trut'!

To shave-a da face
 Or even a part
 Widout it-a smart
 Require da heart.
 It take-a da art --
 I show you a chart --

I study-a starting in my yout'!

(I: 29)

At this point in the number form is used to create a comic moment as Sweeney Todd completes his shave while Pirelli is preoccupied with holding a long and fulsome operatic high C on the word 'grace'. But here form is consistent with the musical style which has been used specifically to substantiate a particular character, and so the musical joke is both apt and complements what we know of Pirelli in the dramatic sense.

Tobias's second musical appearance prefaces 'God That's Good' at the beginning of Act 2. The scene opens with Tobias repeating the initial tune and words of 'Pirelli's Miracle Elixir', but it is no mere reprise. It serves a structural function establishing how Tobias having been, as he thinks, abandoned by his master, assumes the same position and role in the service of Mrs Lovett. Once again Tobias is seen exhorting the crowd to buy, but on this occasion it is Mrs Lovett's succulent meat pies whose virtues he is extolling:

Ladies and Gentlemen,
 May I have your attention, perlease?
 Are your nostrils aquiver and tingling as well
 At that delicate luscious ambrosial smell?
 Yes they are, I can tell.
 Well, Ladies and Gentlemen,

That aroma enriching the breeze
 Is like nothing compared to its succulent source,
 As the gourmets among you will tell you, of course.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
 You can't imagine the rapture in store - -
 Just inside of this door.

(II: 1)

Sondheim's borrowings from Bond's play are evident in the description of the pies.⁸ He uses words such as 'tender', 'succulent', 'rich', 'aroma' – all of which appear in Bond's script. 'Lovingly crimped' becomes the more direct and exulting 'those crimps'. But Sondheim also adds words such as 'luscious', 'ambrosial', 'delectable' and 'gourmets' which are imbued with the pseudo-refined and pretentious aspirations of Mrs Lovett, so that again we have the impression that Tobias is parroting the persuasive oratory of someone else. It is also relevant that Sondheim avoids the lascivious tone that concludes Tobias's speech in the Bond play and which may have been inspired by Prest's use of the word 'provocative', to retain Tobias's essential innocence:

The lean so soft that you may tease the tendrils of its flesh apart merely by revolving the tip of your tongue. (*He demonstrates*) Oh ... (*He appears overcome*) Oh, gentlemen, I speak from experience. I know, for I have teased those tendrils. Oh, ladies – gentlemen, can you deny yourselves such bliss?

(Act II: 23)

Mrs Lovett's participation in the scene is also Sondheim's invention and owes nothing to Bond's play. Her distracted remarks to her customers; her peremptory commands to Tobias; her mollification of Todd and her affected gentility become part of the kaleidoscope of actions that fill the stage and thrust the action of the piece forward, until the three main protagonists of the scene come together musically to extol their interests, backed by the crowd's indulgent and appreciative singing of, 'Yum! Yum!' As Sweeney Todd praises the superiority of his new chair, 'This best of barber's chairs' (II: 7), so Tobias is extolling the sublimity of the pies:

And then the thick succulent gravy ...
 One whiff, one glimpse.
 So tender
 That you surrender.

As he does so, Mrs Lovett reveals her true feelings in one glorious throwaway line:

And then the succulent gravy
 So thick
 It makes you sick.
 (II: 7)

This is, however, an instance of verbal precision, dexterity and subtle reinforcement of character lost to the audience due to the complexity of the musical form in which it occurs. (The discussion of form and content is addressed more fully later in this chapter, see pp. 94-100). These lyrics, notwithstanding, do display the consistency with which Sondheim consolidates the development of character in his work and the seeming dichotomy in the character of Tobias is seen as dramatically valid and expedient.

The simplicity and directness of Tobias's feelings as they are revealed in 'Not While I'm Around' contrast vividly, both in the words and in the music, with the tumultuous outpouring of emotion of Mrs Lovett when she finally has to justify her actions to Sweeney Todd. Her desperate protestations of love in the last scene (II: 47) and the crass reasons for hiding the fact that Sweeney's wife still lived, insane and pathetic, as the Beggar Woman, are spat out to an accelerated and abbreviated version of 'Poor Thing', an ironic evocation of the song in Act 1 where Mrs Lovett tells Todd her version of the events that took place after he had been deported; actions which led to the rape of his wife by the Judge, aided and abetted by the Beadle:

MRS LOVETT:

No, No, not lied at all.

No, I never lied.

TODD (*To the Beggar woman*):

Lucy ...

MRS LOVETT:

Said she took the poison - - she did - -

Never said that she dies [*sic*] - -

Poor thing,

She lived - -

TODD:

I've come home again ...

MRS LOVETT:

But it left her weak in the head,

All she did for months was just lie there in bed - -
TODD:

Lucy ...

MRS LOVETT:

Should've been in hospital,
Wound up in bedlam instead,
Poor thing!
(II: 45-6)

Her febrile nature is mirrored in the feverish words spewing out from her mouth; broken phrases of arrogant protestations denying she lied, followed by self-righteous justification of her lying by omission in the name of love and then, finally, viciously showing her true colours in one ugly outburst, 'Could that thing have cared for you/Like me?'

The 'pretty little thing' of 'Poor Thing', which is how Mrs Lovett refers to Lucy, Todd's wife at the beginning of the musical with all its implicit patronizing and perjorative connotations, is snuffed out and reduced in Mrs Lovett's amoral idioverse to a mere 'thing'. In that one word her inhumanity is embodied and her lack of emotional response to the demise of anybody who comes within her orbit or threatens her, exposed once again. Mrs Lovett's lack of response is mirrored in the audience's lack of emotional response to her death. As she compulsively reiterates the unreal fantasies of 'By The Sea', her pitiful self-delusions are seen for what they are:

By the sea, Mr Todd,
We'll be comfy-cozy
By the sea, Mr Todd,
Where there's no one nosy ...
(II: 47)

There is an almost Tobias-like childishness in her 'comfy-cozy', reminiscent of his repeated parallel phrases in 'Not While I'm Around' such as 'close' and 'clever', and this subtle verbal reference seems to be confirmed by the reference to escaping those who would pry into their business, as Tobias, in his innocence, actually did.

The musical and verbal references that Sondheim uses from earlier songs: 'Poor Thing', 'By the Sea' and 'Not While I'm Around' consolidate everything that we have learnt about Mrs Lovett and it is meet and right that she should be whirled into the oven to the strains of 'A Little Priest'.

Sondheim draws all the threads together and when the oven door slams on her it comes as a fitting end, experienced with a Brechtian sense of alienation, rather than feelings of pity and loss.

If the playing of Mrs Lovett is real rather than presentational, with the comedy springing from character rather than from convention, as epitomized in the music, then Mrs Lovett can be realized as a personality born out of the environment in which all the other characters are rooted. This gives a cohesion and compatibility to the work which is lacking if the development of the character is seen to be primarily dependent on its realization within a particular stylistic musical genre such as music-hall. If Mrs Lovett is played realistically we then have the situation where the idiosyncratic musical context, rather than defining her character, is used to define the audience's reaction to her. It is fitting that she dies and in the manner of her death we are again made aware that what we have been watching is, as endorsed by the Chorus, a moral tale.

* * * * *

Sweeney Todd is a moral tale from the very beginning. In fact, from the first word in 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd', this point is made clear:

Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd.
 His skin was pale and his eye was odd.
 He shaved the faces of gentlemen
 Who never thereafter were heard of again.
 He trod a path that few have trod,
 Did Sweeney Todd,
 The Demon Barber of Fleet Street,
 (PRO-1)

'Attend', with its admonishing and sermonizing inferences, alerts us to the fact. The description of Sweeney reeks of Victorian melodrama and Dickensian caricature and there is a Biblical ring to, 'He trod a path that few have trod'. Here we are exposed to the hypocrisy of those 'who moralize' living in a city where 'morals aren't worth what a pig could spit'. We are in a world that produces Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* or a *Bleak House*.

The Dickensian view of the social and economic life that existed in nineteenth century London

and the moral values that informed it is used as the background for *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim's London is the same place as that which is evoked in *Bleak House*. It is a place where people just like Judge Turpin make 'a pretense of equity' (Dickens 1963: 16). It is the London of Anthony's church bells:

Maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous Melancholy streets in a penitential garb of soot Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up (Dickens 1992: 28).

But for Anthony, in his innocence, the bells lack the ironic implications of *Little Dorrit's* indictment of the horrors that London embraces. It is, however, a place that can support the brooding mind of a *Sweeney Todd*. These preoccupations are similar in nature to those of the poet, William Blake (1757-1827) who saw in the physical pollution of industrial London a metaphor for the 'spiritual tyranny' (Bateson {ed.} 1963: XI) which the City of London exercised:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackening church appals;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.
(Blake, *London*, ll. 9-12)

Some critics have found the role of the chorus problematic in its function of arbiter:

Those who believe, as I do, that the theatre is a place to which the spectator brings his independent emotion and judgement will strongly resist this kind of aesthetic bullying. (Wardle, 1980: 13)

James Fenton, in *The Sunday Times*, wrote:

At the climax of the evening, the chorus points wildly at the audience and accuses it of adopting, only rather less successfully, the same methods as *Sweeney Todd*. This accusation is, like a great deal else in the musical, pretentious and fatuous (1980: 40).

The chorus in *Sweeney Todd* is one constituent that is the creation of Sondheim and owes nothing to the Bond version, but its role is more complex and more dramatically crucial than that noted

by the critics. Apart from providing a moral framework for the piece, the chorus also fulfills other functions. The members of the chorus act as narrators driving the story forward. They perform as Londoners populating that city so derided by Todd. They transform themselves into madhouse inmates and a group of them articulate Todd's thoughts as he writes the letter to the Judge. They perform as the debauched guests in the mime that illustrates Mrs Lovett's lyrics in 'Poor Thing'; provide victims for Sweeney's insatiable razor and realize, by turn, the Birdseller; the man who wants a shave; the young convict; Mr Fogg and officers of the Guard. In their various roles they provide a framework within which the main action develops, as if they foment the ground out of which the story grows. This is a more subtle method of suggesting the social and economic environment of *Sweeney Todd* than a huge iron foundry of a set. Despite Fenton's assertion, within the framework of a moral tale, it is with an inevitability that is dramatically acceptable that the Chorus brings to a close the story whose telling it instigated.

The opening lines of the final address of the Chorus to the audience are a repetition of the opening lines of the play and once again the audience is exhorted to, 'Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd'.

However, they are now sung by the different characters that have been established: Tobias; Johanna and Anthony; the Beggar Woman; the Beadle; the Judge; Pirelli and the Policemen. The words are the same, but the effect is different. We see the characters out of character, as it were, re-telling the story we have just watched and so we are aware of them as actors who have been playing parts. We are distanced from the events which have happened on stage and reminded that we are watching a play. At this point not only do the words change but we move from past to present as the tense also changes:

His needs are few, his room is bare
 He hardly uses his fancy chair.
 The more he bleeds, the more he lives.
 He never forgets and he never forgives.
 (EPI: 49)

Now in the present the audience is addressed for the first time directly:

Perhaps today you gave a nod

To Sweeney Todd,
The demon barber of Fleet Street.

Apart from the tense, words such as 'today' and phrases such as 'Sweeney's weeping for yesterday', reinforce the present time, as do lines such as:

Sweeney waits in the parlor [*sic*] hall
Sweeney leans on the office wall.
(EPI-50)

'Parlor hall' evokes a 19th century environment as 'office wall', by contrast, strikes a modern note. But, by placing both phrases in the present tense, the past and present are not only juxtaposed, but merge, suggesting that what was, still is. This idea has been seized on by certain critics who insinuate that Sondheim was suggesting that we are all murderers surrounded by cannibalistic cooks. It has led to facetious remarks such as that attributed to T.E. Kalen, 'Sweeney Todd is one giant step for vegetarianism' (Zadan 1990: 258). But the lyrics are very specific: it is revenge that motivates Sweeney and which is the prime source of the actions that ensue. Sondheim is reminding us that the obsessive impulse which drives Sweeney Todd, which cannot fail to produce anything but a kind of wild justice, still exists.

Musically, as Joseph P. Swain points out, the last 'Ballad of Sweeney Todd' is written in the key of G, whereas the first version is organized 'around the tonal centre of F-sharp' (1990: 325). Swain suggests that this is because the kind of harmonic resolutions which occur when returning to the same key are not of such importance to Sondheim. The reason for this being that Sondheim is influenced by non-functional progressions rather than the functional harmony which has dominated European music, and on which popular styles of music are based. However, a more practical reason underlined the change of key. Sondheim says:

No, it wasn't a dramatic choice to put the last chorus of 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' in a different key than the opening. It was necessitated by the voices for the solo lines (Sondheim to Lambert: 1996).

Such a remark serves to remind us that we are discussing the end result of a theatrical work in progress, a discipline that is, by its very nature, sometimes characterized by pragmatism and

compromise in order to 'get it on the road'.

It must be noted, however, that Sondheim's music is tonally based although he stretches the form and pulls it apart. His use of tonal clusters always reinforces the dramatic idea to serve the piece and he is eclectic in his use of different musical influences. Sondheim does not avoid dissonances if they serve the underlying dramatic purposes of the moment and it is these dissonances which make his music unpredictable as they veer away from the anticipated harmonic cadences with which a listener, attuned to established harmonic progressions, is familiar and expects. It is, I believe, this aspect of Sondheim's music, together with the rhythmic variations, that has made certain critics say that his work is unmelodic and unhumable, (even if taking into account Sondheim's own equation that hummable really only means familiar).⁹ If one accepts, however, that the lack of harmonic resolution that one expects may be found to be problematic by some people, then it must also be noted that Sondheim uses other ways of conferring a sense of familiarity (in particular his use of musical motifs which re-occur throughout the musical). As in the case of 'The Ballad of Sweeney Todd' we hear again the ominous ostinato accompaniment which opens the piece.

It is Mrs Lovett, at the end of this final 'Ballad of Sweeney Todd', who, ever the eternal pragmatist, articulates the cynical reality that, 'Everyone does it, and seldom as well' (EPI-50). But it is her amorality that cannot perceive of any goodness, not Sondheim's. Her remark also points up the fact that it is her manipulation of Sweeney that sets the mayhem in action, showing how the obsession that blinds the protagonist can afford an opportunity to amoral people to manipulate that obsession to their own ends. It is the motivation – revenge – that Sondheim suggests still exists, not the manner in which it is achieved. Given the structure of the musical, it is no anomaly that the Chorus should take a moral stance and remind us that the instrument of such devastation still exists, more subtle, less flamboyant and lacking the grand guignol stage effects, but as insidious and dangerous as ever. 'Perhaps today you gave a nod to Sweeney Todd' (EPI-49) – there is no 'perhaps' about it. In a world that is capable of producing a Bosnia or a Rwanda, can we even doubt it.

* * * * *

The notices for the original productions in both New York and London were mixed (see Kerr (1979: Section C: 6); Fenton (1979: 40); Wardle (1980: 13)). One aspect, however, was remarked upon and not only by the critics. Hal Prince, in an article before the opening, is quoted as saying to Mel Gussow in the *New York Times*, 'It is the most melodic and romantic score that Steve has ever written. The music is soaring with a rich melodic line' (1979: Section C: 15). It is a significant comment, and one which was to be reiterated by more than one commentator. Thomas S. Hirschak refers to *Sweeney Todd* as 'rhapsodic' (1991: 127) and the score and lyrics were described by South African critic, Michael Burke, as, 'An emotional and intellectual journey, full of signposts and surprises; his lyrics are both mind-tickling and soul-resonating' (1989: 36). Whilst, Alan Jay Lerner states that in *Sweeney Todd*, 'The passion that Stephen Sondheim had so assiduously sidestepped in all his previous musicals finally emerged' (1986: 230).

This is an important and significant consensus of opinion. 'Melodic', 'rhapsodic', 'emotional' and 'soul-resonating' are not adjectives one would usually find being used by critics to characterize Sondheim's work. On the contrary, he has been accused of being unemotional and subordinating passion to intellectualism, as Arthur Laurents is quoted as saying in Swain's book:

I can only point to the shows that Steve and Hal have done together and say they are cold, which may be their aim. But I've never liked the theory of alienation (1990: 321).

While James Kirkwood, author (together with Nicolas Dante) of *A Chorus Line*, speaking specifically of *Company*, remarked, 'One of my favourite musicals is *Company*. I love the score and everything but I think it is a very cold musical' (Guernsey {ed.} 1989: 387).

If this is true I believe it stems, obviously, from the subject matter and how it is treated, but more specifically and more subtly from the personality of Sondheim himself. It is the considered response of a man of sophistication and emotional reticence who recognizes all too clearly the anomalies and contradictions inherent in life and the paradoxes and parallels by which they can be expressed. Though Sondheim's world is focused more on the inconsistencies and mutability of human relationships rather than examining the wider implications of a world where, 'The new philosophy calls all in doubt', he is, like John Donne, more aware of disintegration than of

comprehensive harmony. Even if in a work such as *Sunday in the Park With George* the fulfilment of George's artistic vision is characterized by 'harmony' (not only in the words but also in the magical musical moments which underscore, in major chords, the consummation of his artistry), it is not a harmony born of a personal relationship or finding expression in passion and involvement. Indeed, even the creation of an artistic masterpiece is characterized not by an explosion of natural talent but in the careful and masterly application of:

Order.
Design.
Composition.
Tone.
Form.
Symmetry.
Balance.
(Act I: 16)

The criticism that Dryden levelled against Donne that even in 'the softnesses of love' he 'affects the metaphysics'¹⁰ is not far removed from the criticism that has suggested that Sondheim subordinates emotion to wit and cleverness. Critics look, as Dot suggests in the moving and elliptical 'Children and Art', for 'a little less thinking,/A little more feeling' (Act II: 99).

But Sondheim, like Donne, uses words, syntax, parallels, contrasts, paradoxes and syllogisms to try and express the complexities and, perhaps, the terrors of commitment and love. They both balance and weigh up the emotional context in order to define the feeling. They anatomize and dissect in order to reach a conclusion. Donne in *Lovers Infiniteness* writes:

If yet I have not all thy love,
Deare, I shall never have it all,
I cannot breathe one other sigh, to move,
Nor can entreat one other teare to fall,
And all my treasure, which should purchase thee,
Sighes, teares, and oathes, and letters I have spent,
Yet no more can be due to mee,
Than at the bargain made was ment,
If then the gift of love were partiall
That some to mee, some should to others fall,
Deare, I shall never have thee all.

(II. 1-11)

Similarly, Sondheim responds to the complexities inherent in human nature. In *Into the Woods* he writes:

Oh, if life were made of moments,
 Even now and then a bad one – !
 But if life were only moments,
 Then you'd never know you had one.

.....
 Let the moment go ...
 Don't forget it for a moment, though.
 Just remembering you've had an 'and,'
 When you're back to 'or,'
 Makes the 'or' mean more
 Than it did before.
 (Act II: 112-113)

Both authors use comparative and modifying words: 'if', 'yet', 'but' and 'then' before resolving the situation. Of course, Donne's language is syntactically more complex and his style more expansive and leisurely, he is writing a poem whereas Sondheim is writing a lyric, with all the restrictions that lyric writing imposes on language. It is their love of, and manipulation of language in a direct and colloquial way and their similarity of intellect and reasoning which suggest that Sondheim is closer to the passionate ratiocination of Donne than the true classical wit of Alexander Pope, for example.

The similarities I find in some aspects of both Sondheim and Donne are not an attempt to suggest that lyrics are poetry, although there are occasions when the language of a lyric or its metaphoric content aspires to it or may be poetic in intent. Philip Furia (1990) has noted the affinity between lyrics and Society Verse. He comments on the 'playful spontaneity'; language that is 'crisp and conversational'; rhymes that are frequent and the emotions which are restrained. Sondheim's lyrics contain all these qualities, but as Mark Steyn points out in his review of Furia's book, 'A century ago lyrics were closer to poetry, if only because in most songs the words were written first in a fixed metrical pattern and then set to music' (1991: vol. 266: 8499).

I believe that the words 'closer to poetry' are to be equated with lyrical verse. It is impossible for lyrics to approach the density and concentrated imaginative powers of great poetry without

compromising the other element which makes words into lyrics – music. It is ultimately impossible to separate the lyric from the music to which it is not only set, but in the finest symbiosis, unable to exist without. However, when lyrics are rooted in the dramatic potential of the characters their function is extended as, supported and enriched by the music, they become the causal means of the drama, as is the case in *Sweeney Todd*. Thus it often seems more productive to concentrate on the dramatic potential of Sondheim's work, without ignoring the poetic intensity it may embrace, rather than be trapped in a lyrical cul-de-sac somewhere behind Tin Pan Alley.

Sometimes, however, the balance that Sondheim's syntax seems to be proposing tends towards something stronger in the vocabulary he uses, as in 'Marry Me a Little' a song dropped from *Company*, but revived in a 1980 production, *Marry Me a Little*, which was a musical revue using songs dropped from Sondheim shows:

Marry me a little,
 Body heart and soul,
 Passionate as hell,
 But always in control.
 (Original cast recording: RCA/AGLI-7142)

Or, for example, in these lyrics from 'Perpetual Anticipation' which were written for *A Little Night Music*,

Playing a role,
 Aching to start,
 Keeping control
 While falling apart.
 (Vocal Score: 193-4)

There is a sense of consciously not wanting to succumb to unbridled passion, but this is not to say that the passion is not there epitomized in words like 'aching'; 'passionate' and 'falling apart'. But always there is the control. Of course, the subject matter influences the treatment of love and romance: brittle Manhattan couplings in *Company* and sophisticated upper class flirtations in *A Little Night Music*. Indeed, Bobby's song at the end of *Company* – a painful affirmation of need – was written to replace another closing number which Hal Prince asked Sondheim to change

because, 'As the producer he felt "it was too dark and I wanted the show to run"' (Gottfried 1993: 88).

However, 'Being alive', the song written to replace the unambiguous 'Happily Ever After', is, I believe, even darker for if one examines the words and phrases which, supposedly, express the criteria for being alive, committed and, one assumes, happy, they formulate a disturbing scenario. Phrases such as 'hurt me', 'hold me too close', 'put me through hell', 'make me confused', 'mock me', 'let me be used', 'crowd me', 'force me', and 'make me', display the masochistic need of a neurotic, impassioned persona. His perceptions of love are warped; the passions the words evoke spring rather from the era and environment that could produce a Fosca (the leading character in *Passion*); a manic Johanna; an impetuously obsessed Anthony or a Sweeney Todd caressing his new found 'friends'. In the twentieth-century Manhattan environment that Bobby inhabits his concept of commitment would lead to psychotherapy. It is surely not the 'falsely optimistic' (1993: 88) ending that Gottfried would have us believe it to be.

In the environs of a *Sweeney Todd* or a *Passion* such emotions are acceptable and appropriate. Sondheim, characteristically, is dismissive, yet somehow defensive, when asked about his own persona influencing or motivating any of his characters. For example, at the suggestion that Bobby might in any way resemble himself, he said in an interview in *The Observer Review*, 'Bobby is 35, and I was 40 when I wrote the piece. So there's no particularly personal feeling in it' (Long 1995: 7).

It seems a somewhat arbitrary reason. But his customary reticence increases the difficulty of interpreting his lyrics because of the deprecating and somewhat perfunctory manner he talks about his own work. In the same interview Sondheim says, 'I love treating words as if they were just counters on a table, to be moved around.' He always refers to lyric writing as a craft and never promotes his words as art or discusses possible underlying meanings. He dismisses his own mutating and transforming efforts on source material at every turn, as Tim Long notes:

When hoping to investigate the connection between beauty and cruelty, I mentioned *Sweeney Todd's* enraptured description of the blood streaming from his razor as rubies. Sondheim attributed the image to writer-director Christopher Bond, whose original

melodrama he adapted. Later I remarked on a favourite Sondheim rhyme: the ogre from *Into The Woods* cackles, 'I'm the witch, I'm the hitch,' circumventing the obvious 'bitch' and defining herself as the existential hazard which trips up human fates. 'Oh, that's James Lapine', (his frequent collaborator), shrugged Sondheim, even though he wrote the lyrics himself. 'He's a poet, he thinks like that.' (1995: 7).

He is self-deprecating of his achievements to a degree that is disconcerting. It is therefore salutary to examine in detail how Sondheim uses and changes source material to transform them into 'Sondheim lyrics': lyrics that go beyond craft, imbued with both poetic and dramatic meaning. An examination of the song 'My Friends', in which the image of the rubies streaming like blood occurs, will serve as an example of how Sondheim transforms words into powerful images that inform the dramatic potential of a moment. The following is the text, from which the dialogue and the song are derived, as it appears in Bond's play:

TODD:

Some way. Any way. I will have blood. But you are right, the plan I have in mind requires money. If only I had my razors I know where I might find some.

MRS LOVETT:

Oh, Mr ...

TODD:

Sweeney Todd. The other man is dead.

MRS LOVETT:

Oh, all right, 'Mr Todd.' Here's a crumb of comfort for you. (*She goes and gets the razors in a box and brings them back to him.*) I found your razors upstairs when I was clearing out – to pay for the funeral, like. But I thought I'd hang on to them. (*She makes up to him.*) I remembered how you treasured them you see, and I always had a fondness for you and hoped you might come back one day and ... Well, never mind that for the present. But here they are, shining like they was new. I was offered a hundred pounds for them, I was, and in my position, well – (*She examines them lovingly*) – I was tempted, but I didn't fall.

TODD (*Taking a razor from the box*):

My right hand is complete again.

MRS LOVETT:

Their handles is chased silver, ain't they?

TODD:

Silver – yes!

MRS LOVETT:

See how they shine.

TODD:

Aye, but before too long this blade will make its handle seem as dull as common lead. For from its edge shall drip inestimable rubies.

(Act I: 5-6)

The most complete and obvious lifting of verbatim phrases appears, not surprisingly, in Sondheim's dialogue. 'Them handles is chased silver, ain't they?' and 'Silver, yes,' remain unchanged but for the subtle and ingratiating addition of Mrs Lovett's 'my' (with its long diphthongal vowel) at the beginning of the sentence. 'My right hand is complete again' is transformed into the more powerful, 'My right arm is complete again' and is, in Sondheim's version, which was written before Hugh Wheeler became involved in the show,¹¹ the culmination of the powerful emotions by which Sweeney Todd is gripped as he is re-united with his razors, rather than his first reaction at seeing them as in the Bond version. In the song the vivid image of the rubies is assimilated into Sondheim's lyrics, but the multi-syllabled 'inestimable' is replaced by the more euphonious 'precious', which also carries the stronger emotional resonance of something that is loved as well as valued.

It is also critical to the complex and emotionally charged Sondheim version to note that in Bond's play it is Sweeney himself who mentions the razors. In *Sweeney Todd* it is Mrs Lovett who brings them out, unsolicited, in her inimitable sycophantic manner for Sweeney, who is at that moment overwhelmed by his justifiable feelings of impotent rage at the dreadful fate which has befallen his wife and daughter at the hands of the Judge and the Beadle. She conspicuously omits any reference to an actual death or funeral of Sweeney's wife, Lucy. In the Bond version Mrs Lovett implies that she was just looking for something to sell 'to pay for the funeral, like', before deciding to keep the razors because Sweeney had 'treasured' them. The omission makes possible Mrs Lovett's outraged and blustering, 'No, no, not lied at all' at the denouement of *Sweeney Todd* when Sweeney accuses her of lying, because the sin of omission to Mrs Lovett is no sin at all. The balance in this scene is changed from Sweeney being in control and plotting in a cold and calculating manner as in the Bond version, to that of a man overcome and whose grief and anger are focused by the actions of Mrs Lovett's revealing of the razors. The role of Mrs Lovett as instigator and conspirator is established, to be reinforced, as we have seen by 'A Little Priest'.

Sweeney slowly opens the box containing the razors to the slow, sonorous underscoring. They are presented with a reverence that suggests a mystical significance, almost as if they are a relic, reinforced by the long, drawn out vowel of Mrs Lovett's awe-filled 'my' which sits musically and rhythmically on the opening phrases of the music. There is an almost religious significance in

the reunion of Todd with his razors and the opening line of the song transports us into the enraptured and concentrated world of Sweeney as his anger and grief merge with the means by which he can transform his impotence into power:

These are my friends.
 See how they glisten.
 (Picks up a small razor)
 See this one shine,
 How he smiles in the light.
 My friend, my faithful friend.
 (Holds it up to his ear, feeling the edge with his thumb)
 Speak to me, friend.
 Whisper, I'll listen.
 (Listening)
 I know, I know . .
 You've been locked out of sight
 All these years ...
 Like me, my friend.

Well, I've come home
 To find you waiting.
 Home,
 And we're together,
 And we'll do wonders,
 Won't we?
 (I: 13)

The first line immediately personifies the inanimate objects in a way that is both tender and delusional and is imbued with all the connotations that the word 'friends' invokes. There is an ironic counterpoint in that Sweeney is addressing what will become instruments of death. Bond's original, 'See how they shine' is translated into Sondheim's seductive, 'See how they glisten'. The almost hypnotic hiss of the 's' consonant suggests a visceral quality that is reiterated by the altered version of what, in Bond's play is Mrs Lovett's line, which now becomes more focused and intense, coming as it does from Sweeney's mouth as he gazes on one of his razors. The personification is extended as Sweeney addresses the razor as 'he' and cajoles it to 'speak' and 'whisper' to him. The razors become co-conspirators with a life and danger of their own rather than mere objects to be used. The recurring 's' consonant in 'smiles', 'speak', 'whisper' and 'listen', reinforces the strange insistence that is Sweeney's at this moment and the simile by which Sweeney parallels their respective incarceration strengthens their supramundane union. The

repetition of, 'I know, I know', lends a brooding tenderness to their newly established intimacy. Like the young sailor, Anthony, Sweeney Todd has come home and together he and the razors will produce 'wonders'. Sondheim's Sweeney has gone far beyond the calculating bloodlust that is Bond's creation. This verse alone is enough to convince us of Sondheim's mastery of language and, indeed, of a strong poetic impulse in the imagery, enhanced by the mysterious, almost liturgical, cadences of the music, which give 'My Friends' a density and significance that lift *Sweeney Todd* beyond the melodrama of Bond's version into something richer and more meaningful.

But Sondheim's dramatic impulse is not to be stunted, for, as Sweeney begins to luxuriate in his empathy with his razors:

You there, my friend
 Come, let me hold you.
 Now, with a sigh
 You grow warm
 In my hand,
 My friend,
 My clever friend,
 (I: 13)

Mrs Lovett (using short quaver notes against Todd's more sonorous crotchets) intercuts into his soliloquy, picking up on Todd's images, but using them in a totally different context; echoing musically the melodic shape which we have heard in 'The Worst Pies in London' and which recur, in 'A Little Priest':

37 38 39

I'm your friend too, Mis-ter Todd.

You there, my friend. Come, let me

40 41 87 42

If you on- ly knew, Mister Todd. Ooh, Mister Todd, you, re

hold you. — now, with a sigh, You grow

43 44

narn In my hand.

narn In my hand, my — (friend).
(Vocal Book: 21)

While Sweeney's focus is on his razors, Mrs Lovett is already starting to ingratiate herself with the almost petulant assertion of, 'I'm your friend, too, Mr Todd'. There is a childish insistence in her repeated use of the formal, 'Mr Todd' with its short sharp vowels and the trace of the cockney 'glottal stop' in her accent. She hears his words, but does not hear the significance of what Sweeney is saying, so his mesmerizing, 'Till now your shine was merely silver' elicits Mrs Lovett's cloyingly venal, 'Silver's good enough for me.' For the first time, significantly, Mrs Lovett drops the formal appearance of neighbourly helpfulness and addresses him familiarly as 'Mister T'. The verbal cross-overs; the disparity of their emotional capacities that is captured in the same phrases; and their totally different agendas are proposed with an elegant simplicity that is completely within character and which fulfills the dramatic context of the scene. Mrs Lovett reveals her romantic aspirations; her plan for Sweeney to reside above her pie shop; her single-minded ability to hear and to act in only those ways which will fulfill her purpose, without realising just how far down the path towards the breakdown of normality Sweeney has gone. For Sweeney, his desire for revenge begins to acquire an almost limitless immensity of purpose. His imagination leaps to encompass Bond's striking image of the razor's dripping rubies, for now his 'right arm is complete again'. Bond's image, admirable as it is, is only one element in a brilliantly contrived and sustained dramatic scene within a song, the exposition of which resonates with subtleties and depths that are Sondheim's alone.

If, as I have noted, the twentieth-century environment of *Company* made a song such as 'Being Alive' seem almost incongruous, then it is also true that the setting of *Sweeney Todd* in its nineteenth-century world allows Sondheim a greater freedom to explore and articulate emotions in a past where, to a large extent, the sophisticated uncertainties of modern day relationships do not exist. Feelings and passions are explored with single-minded intensity. When Sweeney Todd tells Mrs Lovett that, 'They all deserve to die' (I: 61), he means it; there is no ambiguity in his words. His motivation generates energy in a way that would seem simplistic, in terms of what we have come to expect from Sondheim, were it not for the irony implicit in the fact that the audience recognizes Sweeney as a man in the process of moral and mental disintegration. But the passion with which he imbues his actions is, of itself, all embracing and clear. Sondheim himself, in his interview with Mel Gussow, described *Sweeney Todd* as 'passionately funny and passionately intense' (1979: C15).

Because the work lends itself to a more direct form of emotional expression we do not find the same intricate and complex syntactical wordplay that occurs in other Sondheim lyrics. In, for example, the lyrics of the young sailor, Anthony, are some of the most emotionally direct and romantic expressions of love:

I feel you,
 Johanna,
 I feel you.
 I was half convinced I'd waken,
 Satisfied enough to dream you.
 Happily I was mistaken,
 Johanna!

 I'll steal you,
 Johanna,
 I'll steal you!
 Do they think that walls can hide you?
 Even now I'm at your window.
 I am in the dark beside you,
 Buried sweetly in your yellow hair.
 (I: 18-19)

The intensity of Anthony's emotion, rooted strongly in the immediacy of the present, is established by the repetition of the words, 'I feel you'. The impetuosity of young love is similarly

emphasized by the reiteration of the phrase, 'I'll steal you' and its ability to transcend separation and opposition is quickly established. The concrete immediacy and physicality of his romantic aspirations culminate in the romantic image of, 'Buried sweetly in your yellow hair'. Anthony's 'yellow' has the simplicity and innocence of a fairy-tale, that is modified by the use of the word 'buried'. It lends an ominous undercurrent that the image of Johanna being in the dark reinforces. It is lightened by the adverb 'sweetly', but here there is the foreshadowing of the Judge's, 'How sweet you look in that light muslin gown' (I: 36). It is significant that Sweeney, too, refers to his daughter as, 'My sweet' in 'Johanna' and also speaks of her as, 'My little dove' (II: 11), which reinforces Johanna's own identification of herself with the caged birds in Act I. These examples demonstrate Sondheim's method of using recurring images in his lyrics, in the same way as he uses recurring motifs in his music to consolidate themes in his work.

In Anthony's song 'Johanna', this undercurrent finds its parallel in the music where the romantic full tones of the soaring melody are darkened twice by a flattened A, adding a melancholic air to the emotional impact of the melodic line that seems to echo Anthony's frustration:

I feel you Johanna—

—na, I feel you I was half convinced I, d wa—

—ken, Sat- is fled e- nough to dream— you

(Vocal Book: 29)

It is, though, a subtle modulation within the framework of a gloriously romantic ballad and hardly seems to warrant a reaction such as Kurt Ganzl's:

Even in its apparently lighter and brighter moments and even in its gentle and romantic songs for the young lovers it is never free of a foggy pall of foulness and gloom.

(1990: 399)

The conscious effort of the composer towards consistency of character and the concentration of verbal imagery within the lyric form can be seen in the way that original material is altered and condensed. For example, Anthony's words as he first appears in Bond's play:

I have sailed the world, beheld its fairest cities, seen the pyramids, the wonders of the East. Yet it is true, there is no place like home.

(Act I: 1)

becomes in Sondheim's hands:

I have sailed the world, beheld its wonders
From the Dardanelles
To the mountains of Peru,
But there's no place like London!
I feel home again.

(PRO-3)

The generalized description of the first example becomes the 'Dardanelles' and the 'mountains of Peru'; the phrase 'beheld its fairest cities' is condensed to the more evocative 'beheld its wonders'. The well worn cliché, 'There is no place like home' is extended to mention London by name, followed by the emotionally direct, 'I feel home again'. Anthony's character is, in fact, defined by the use of the verb 'feel', used in its most simple and direct grammatical form, and it is the phrase which sets the emotional tone of 'Johanna'.

Johanna, the romantic heroine of *Sweeney Todd*, is introduced in the lovely ballad 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird', the song she sings to the caged birds that are being sold by the Birdseller and, in so doing, reveals much of her character and status, as the parallels between the imprisoned birds and herself, are revealed. I have suggested (pp. 74-75) that the moral and physical world of *Sweeney Todd* is one similar to that evoked by Dickens or Blake. There are strong parallels in 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird' to the philosophy and imagery used by Blake. His poem *The Schoolboy* describes the child's diminishing joy as he is forced to leave the freedom of the summer's day, where the skylark sings, and go to school to be browbeaten by a cruel master. Blake contrasts the light and loveliness of the day with the 'dreary shower' of the school room. He compares the child to a caged bird as he asks:

How can the bird that is born for joy

Sit in a cage and sing?
(ll. 16-17)

If Sondheim's debt is not specifically to Blake, it does show a discriminating awareness of the kind of imagery rooted in nineteenth century lyrical tradition and its attendant symbolism.

'Green Finch and Linnet Bird' is a delicate ballad, backed by gentle strings and woodwind with a piccolo imitating the song of the birds to whom she addresses her words, and whom in the course of the song she also imitates vocally as the similarities between them are revealed.:



(Vocal Book: 26)

It is, however, a deceptively simple piece. No verse is of exactly the same length which means that the melody is modified to accommodate the lyrics. Also, as Banfield notes, it is 'couched in terms of recapitulation rather than refrain' (1993: 292). Yet the verses sound familiar and are euphonious to the ear, despite their differences in form. Musically Sondheim achieves this by repeating certain musical phrases from each verse in the following ones, albeit in subtly changed sequences. For example:

Three musical examples are shown, each on a single staff in treble clef, 4/4 time. The first example is labeled (45) and has the lyrics 'My cage has man- y rooms'. The second example is labeled (1) and has the lyrics 'Green finch and lin- net bird'. The third example is labeled (28) and has the lyrics 'Here- ly hal- lo- ing'. Below these, a fourth example is shown, labeled (47) and (48), with the lyrics 'Noth- ing there sings, Not ev- en my lark'. An arrow points from the note 'a' in 'hal-' of the third example to the note 'a' in 'Not' of the fourth example. Another arrow points from the note 'g' in 'lo-' of the third example to the note 'g' in 'lark' of the fourth example. A vertical line with a downward arrow connects the note 'a' in 'dark' of the second example to the note 'a' in 'Not' of the fourth example. The text 'same notes different timing' is written next to this vertical line.

(45) My cage has man- y rooms *similarly*

(1) Green finch and lin- net bird

(46) Da- nask and dark *similarly with added f sharp*

(28) Here- ly hal- lo- ing

(47) Noth- ing there sings, Not (48) ev- en my lark

same notes different timing

(47)
Noth- ing there sings, Not ev- en my lark

same notes, different bar lines

this bar repeats the first bar of the phrase (45)

(49)
Larks ne- ver will you know

(50) (51) (52)
When they're cap- tive Teach me to be More a- dap- tive

(Vocal Book: 26)

The repetition of the last three phrases lends a sense of resignation which the plaintive trill reinforces. Although these repetitions give a sense of familiarity and of 'melody constantly flowing' (I: 15), it also means that the song never quite settles into any predictable pattern. It leaves the listener with the impression of the 'shifting' quality of birds who are constantly moving in no fixed pattern and never settling. It also mirrors the febrile tension in the character of Johanna with lyrics that reinforce the sense of the sterile and constrained environment in which she is trapped. The song not only articulates her simplicity and innocence in its gentleness, but her inherent neurotic response to her situation. For when she asks, rhetorically, of the birds,

How can you remain
Staring at the rain
Maddened by the stars?
(I: 15)

she is asking the same question of herself. The word 'maddened' resonates with the same underlying dark implications suggested by the use of the words 'buried' and 'steal' in Anthony's rendering of 'Johanna'. There is a mysterious, almost cosmic dimension in the reference to the stars implicit in which is both the darkness and the space in which they appear. Against this

background Johanna's skittishness in 'Kiss Me' is not only understandable and comic, but also disturbing. It is not surprising that when Anthony finds himself unable to kill Fogg, it is Johanna who is able to seize the moment and, on impulse, fire the gun. It is in the lyrics and music of 'Green Finch and Linnet Bird' that her character is established and her idiosyncrasies displayed in a way that is both subtle and expedient.

The neurotic impulse, which fuels Johanna's character, is seen in a lighter vein in 'Kiss Me'. This is one of Sondheim's most complex and beautiful achievements in *Sweeney Todd*. Once again Sondheim makes use of the operatic principle of combining and overlapping two parallel situations. We see Johanna and Anthony planning to run away together at the same time as the Judge and the Beadle converse on their way home from the court. Johanna's flighty nervousness manifests itself in her scattered thoughts which seem continually to run away from her into fantastic delusions and imaginings:

I feared you'd never come,
That you'd been called away.
That you'd been killed,
Had the plague,
Were in debtor's jail,
Trampled by a horse,
Gone to sea again,
Arrested by the

(I: 48)

Anthony tries to tell her of his plans while her agitated fancies see the Judge arriving home unexpectedly; herself taking poison to prevent the marriage arranged for Monday; confusion as to what to pack and finally joy at the idea of marrying Anthony on Sunday. Meanwhile the Judge tells the Beadle of his plan to marry Johanna on Monday and mentions her, to him, somewhat surprising reluctance. The Beadle suggests in 'Ladies in Their Sensitivities' that it may be the Judge's lack of attention to personal hygiene that has provoked Johanna's negative response and, at the Judge's request, agrees to accompany him to the premises of a newly arrived Barber – Sweeney Todd – whose reputation has been quickly established among the local populace. These two parallel actions come together in the second half of 'Kiss Me' as all four characters sing in counterpoint. The different conversations are sung against each other until in a truly felicitous moment the lyrics overlap as Anthony reveals his name and the Judge repeats the name of the

recommended barber. This repetition of the names comes at the culmination of one of the most musically romantic and soaring moments of the score:

1. I loved you e-ven as I saw you E-ven as it does not mat-ter that I

A. I loved you e-ven as I saw you E-ven as it does not mat-ter that I

B. I loved you e-ven as I saw you E-ven as it does not mat-ter that I

Tu. Todd

Ju. Todd

1. still don't know your name sir, E-ven as I saw you e-ven as it

A. still don't know your name Jo- han- na! Jo-

B. Sween- ey Todd Todd

Tu. Sween- ey Todd Todd

Ju. Sween- ey Todd Todd

1. does not mat-ter that I still don't know your name

A. han- na! Jo- han- na! Ant-on- y

B. Todd

Tu. Todd

Ju. Todd

38

S. Ant- on' y

A.

T. Todd,

B. Todd, Todd eh?

(Vocal Book: 63)

The melody line is exquisitely romantic and simple, yet the whole, by virtue of the musical form, has a satisfying weight and complexity. The names, suddenly spoken after this rich musical harmony, gives impetus to the dramatic momentum of the scene which has been unfolding within the musical content. Johanna's ecstatic, 'Anthony' and the Judge's satisfied, 'Todd, eh?' draw together the different actions that have been developing. Their words still fall within the musical timing and do not break the underlying tempo of the piece, whilst the lyrics support the natural speech rhythms, leading into the last chorus of the quartet where the separate actions have their resolution. This resolution is echoed in the music where the different themes of the characters are combined. Johanna's 'Kiss Me' is underwritten by Anthony's quotation from 'Ah, Miss', the song he sang when he first saw her. The Beadle reprises the opening lines of 'Ladies In Their Sensitivities' and the Judge, in a subtle transposition echoes Anthony's, 'We fly tonight' in his, 'Pray lead the way'.

It must be noted that, as in 'God, That's Good', where operatic principles also underlie the structure, certain verbal felicities are lost in 'Kiss Me' due to the speed with which they are articulated or by being sung in counterpoint. Johanna's delicious reference to herself as a 'silly little ninny noddle' is almost impossible to hear, which is a pity, as that moment of self-awareness is endearing. So, too, are her lines,

I'll take my reticule.
 I need my reticule.
 You mustn't think
 Me a fool
 But my reticule
 Never leaves my side,
 It's the only thing
 My mother gave me . . .
 Kiss me!
 (I: 51)

which are touching in their reference to her mother. It is the only time that she mentions her. They serve to add just a little more substance to her character and it is to be regretted that, coming as they do so 'trippingly on the tongue', they are forfeited to the exigencies of the music.

I do not find the loss of an occasional word to the music as problematic in 'Kiss Me' as in 'God That's Good'. The reason for this is that the latter is in essence a comedic 'point number' and as such one knows that the words are of paramount importance and expects to hear every one. 'Kiss Me', on the other hand is carried on a melodic line which is so convincing and evocative of the romantic impulse underlying Johanna's and Anthony's attachment that the brief loss of a lyric is not enough to detract from our perceptions of Johanna's state of mind and understanding of her character nor to leave us with any doubt as to Anthony's intentions. They are supported by the emotional weight of the music which carries the scene along without feeling that we have missed something of significance.

It may be that there will always have to be some degree of compromise when operatic principles are used in the context of musical theatre, but Sondheim's sophistication in marrying the dramatic and musical aspects of his work are indisputable. It is a sophistication and artistry that cannot be matched by any other composer or lyricist writing for musical theatre at this time. Lloyd Webber, the composer of such block-buster musicals as *Evita* and *Sunset Boulevard* amongst others, seems simplistic by comparison. If one examines a number such as 'Let's Have Lunch' from *Sunset Boulevard* some comparisons may be made as to the differences in approach between the two writers. Firstly, however, it must be admitted that the kind of fusion that Sondheim, as both composer and lyricist, achieves is very difficult for a composer writing with other lyricists to attain, however closely they work together or how unified their vision. But there still seems to

be a fundamental difference between what each composer is striving to produce.

'Let's Have Lunch' involves several different characters who connect with the leading man, a Hollywood writer, as he meets up with friends; business acquaintances; finance men trying to repossess his car; his Agent, who is already involved with another *protégé* and sundry Hollywood hopefuls. In the same way as 'God That's Good' sets up a complicated scene of continuous action involving many people in order to establish an evolving situation, so too, does 'Let's Have Lunch'. The phrases, 'God, That's Good' and 'Let's Have Lunch' both serve to characterize the emotional ambience within which the action takes place. The lyrics of both represent conversational exchanges between a number of people and they are both supported by a strong rhythmical pulse that creates continuity. Lloyd Webber's music develops on a continuously repeated big band-style, jazzy-blues riff which in no way acknowledges any differentiation in style or phrasing to accommodate the different characters who are singing. Words sometimes strain against the syncopated beat and, although it is not obtrusive in the choruses, it does strike a false note in the sections which are really conversation set to music. 'I'm going to *an* audition' or the oddly inflected 'He *has* an important client down in Palm Springs' (my italics) seem contorted when compared with the easy integration of the words and music in 'God, That's Good', where the music is adapted to support the dialogue:

MRS LOVETT:

Excuse me ...

TODD:

Psst!

MRS LOVETT (*To Tobias*):

Dear, see to the customers

TODD:

Psst!

MRS LOVETT:

Yes, what, love?

Quick, though, the trade is brisk.

TODD:

But, it's here!

MRS LOVETT:

It's where?

TODD:

Coming up the stair!

MRS LOVETT (*Holding up tray*):

I'll get rid of this lot
As they're still pretty hot
And then I'll be there!

(II: 5)

When the different characters' comments overlap in the last two choruses of 'Let's Have Lunch' the fact that many of the comments are hard to hear is acceptable, simply because what has been established is not individual character but a general impression which is generic and not specific. The people singing are types rather than individuals. Obviously, the customers in 'God, That's Good' also fulfil a function similar to the passers by in 'Let's Have Lunch'. However Sondheim's invention is such that he transforms a motley crowd of 'types' into a voracious, homogenous monster, whose only purpose is to devour Mrs Lovett's pies. By dividing their different lyrics and putting the words back together in fragmented groups to create a single chorus Sondheim creates a completely idiosyncratic entity, unified musically and lyrically, in a way that is dramatically expedient and fitting:

God that's good that is de have you
Licious ever tasted smell such
Oh my god what perfect more that's
Pies such flavour
God that's good!!!

(II: 10)

Locked, as the lyrics of 'Let's Have Lunch' are, into a rather pedestrian, though pleasant, musical accompaniment, that speaks of a genre rather than of an occasion, they never achieve the specificity and singularity of interest that Sondheim's lyrics do and they are always subservient to the music's tune. Lloyd Webber's music is far less complex than Sondheim's, where rhythms and melodies are modified to accommodate the different characters, whilst all the time riding on an unchanging musical pulse which unites all the elements. Sondheim's lyrics are so perfectly attuned to the dramatic potential of a situation that there is a sense of loss, however fleeting, when a lyric is missed. With Sondheim it matters; with Lloyd Webber it often does not.

* * * * *

If the loss of a single line in a Sondheim work can be seen to be significant, then the exclusion of a whole song would seem to be critical. It is true that in every musical there are numbers that for one reason or another are dropped completely or replaced by another, as we have noted with regard to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (see pp. 33,35). It is an accepted and often necessary practice. In *Sweeney Todd* the Judge's solo number in Act I was cut during previews for reasons of time. Moreover:

'The judge's song is a number that I didn't like,' Prince says. 'I thought the song was dangerous. Steve thinks the reason we took it out was that there were so many other things to do that we couldn't take the time to address it, but I think there's more to it than that. Steve wrote the song for the judge to whip himself ... while's he's presumably watching Johanna, his charge through a keyhole. I didn't know how to stage it because it was so explicit: at the end of the number he has an orgasm. I thought it was pretty gruesome (Zadan 1990: 256).

Carol Ilson, in her book on Harold Prince, has another perspective to offer. She suggests that:

They found they could learn enough about the judge with a couple of lines in dialogue interspersed throughout the rest of the act and that the song wasn't needed (1989: 293).

I disagree with this premise for several reasons. Firstly, the Judge is *Sweeney Todd*'s main protagonist and is the person who fuels his desire for revenge. Without the concentrated focus which the song provides, the character of the Judge is relegated to a few short and unsatisfying exchanges in which to establish his individuality. It is true that we first see the Judge as he re-enacts the rape of Sweeney's wife, Lucy, in the dream sequence while Mrs Lovett tells her version of what happened in 'There Was a Barber and His Wife'. Although it is shocking, the audience is distanced from the action by its stylized presentation. The fact that it is an event that has happened in the past also removes an audience from the immediacy of the situation and Sweeney's own reference to the events of the past which he gives in answer to Anthony's enquiry is elliptical:

There was another man who saw
That she was beautiful,
A pious vulture of the law
Who with a gesture of his claw
Removed the barber from his plate.

Then there was nothing but to wait
 And she would fall.
 (I: 6)

Even his agonized, 'Would no one have mercy on her?' (I: 11) draws our attention to Sweeney's reaction rather than the Judge's action.

In the first scene in which the Judge actually appears, his outraged reaction to Anthony's meeting with Johanna could merely be that of a stern and overprotective parent. The fatal obsession with his ward, which defines his character in *Sweeney Todd* and which is fully articulated in his song, is summarily expressed in one line in the first scene, 'How sweet you look in that light muslin gown'. Although the stage direction states that he is gazing at her 'lustfully' I do not consider that even a fine actor could characterize the Judge sufficiently to sustain the enormity of the evil impulse which fuels his subsequent action. Even the repetition of the same line in his next encounter with Johanna is not enough to balance the intensity of the deeply drawn obsession that drives Sweeney. When we see the Judge offer Johanna his proposal of marriage, his desire for a young wife may be distasteful; his jealousy of a younger man pathetic and his picture of his own prowess delusional, however, these responses do not reveal the depth and intensity of his obsession. The dramatic viability of the work is severely prejudiced if the Judge's obsession is not given equal weight to that of Sweeney's. If the evil intent of the Judge is not strongly delineated then Sweeney's great and monumental drive seems out of proportion and melodramatic in a way that downgrades the serious intent of *Sweeney Todd*.¹² The energy that Sweeney creates through his desire for revenge needs to be balanced by, though it may sound like a contradiction in terms, a worthy opponent. The only time that the Judge shows such energy is in the Judge's song, also entitled 'Johanna', in which the intensity of his passion is strongly drawn and in which other distasteful aspects of his character are given expression. Because of this song his character is seen as more substantial; his evil greater and Sweeney's desire for revenge more understandable. If the Judge's song is omitted it is plausible that more emphasis is then placed on the social and economic ills of the time as a rationale for Sweeney's actions, for the Judge himself then becomes more a symbol of a corrupt order than an individual of immoral and malevolent nature, perfidious and perverted.

'Johanna', the fanatical song of the Judge, articulates the sado-masochistic impulses that motivate him. The song enables the audience to acquire an emotional and intellectual understanding of the Judge and this colours their reaction, not only to him but also, for example, to Johanna's exaggerated hysteria, which becomes more comprehensible, even if Johanna herself, by virtue of her innocence and naivety, has only an instinctive awareness of the Judge's intent. The audience is conscious of the real basis for Johanna's intuitive recognition that the Judge's actions are more than inappropriate. So her skittishness in 'Ah Miss', for example, is not only charmingly humorous but contains elements of justifiable nervousness and apprehension.

At first, Sweeney's desire for revenge is directed against an individual, not a society. It is 'another man' who desired his wife and had Sweeney himself transported and it is against that man and his crony, the Beadle, that Sweeney focuses his anger and his energy:

Let them quake in their boots – Judge Turpin and the Beadle – for their hour has come
(I: 12).

However, the malaise of the society to which he has returned and its inequities are implicitly stated. But Sweeney's disgust is not restricted to the oppressive overlords of the rich and powerful for he sees London as the cesspit that draws all the dregs of humanity to its environs:

There's a hole in the world
Like a great big pit
And the vermin of the world
Inhabit it
And its morals aren't worth
What a pig could spit
And it goes by the name of London.

At the top of the hole
Sit the privileged few,
Making mock of the vermin
In the lower zoo,
Turning beauty into filth and greed.

(I: 5)

Sweeney, literally, spits these words out as he describes his disgust, for Sondheim uses words that demand strongly articulated and precisely delivered sounds. There are many words with short

vowels, such as 'black pit'; 'pig could spit' and 'inhabit it', using hard, plosive and voiced consonants such as 'b'; 't' and 'g'. The words themselves evoke ugliness and squalor: 'black', 'vermin', 'pig', 'spit', 'mock', 'filth' and 'greed'. This evocation of Blake's 'chartered streets' is far more satisfying and successful than some of the more blatant and simplistic references that pertain to the industrialization of English society,

Sweeney pondered and Sweeney planned
Like a perfect machine 'e planned,
(I: 34)

or,

Sweeney was sharp, Sweeney was burning,
Sweeney began the engines turning.
(II: 22)

Even more explicit are lines such as:

The engine roared, the motor hissed,
And who could see that the road would twist?
In Sweeney's ledger the entires [*sic*] matched:
A beadle arrived, and a Beadle dispatched.
(II: 34)

The image of Sweeney, a man fanatically human, as a machine seems forced and, 'Sweeney began the engines turning', syntactically strained. The combination of the motor hissing and the image of the twisting road evokes nothing so much as a Model T Ford overheating. It is only in the last couplet, with its Dickensian flavour of office workers rhythmically occupied and the sly humour of the last two parallel phrases, that the era and ethos are truly characterized.

These overt references to the factory environment of the nineteenth century are less convincing than the more elliptical and dramatically satisfying images that are evoked by the inmates of the asylum in 'City on Fire', which are again reminiscent, in imagery and vocabulary, of some of Blake's works. Phrases from such as, 'Folded in black clouds, hovering on the side of the rock: with corroding fires' (*A Memorable Fancy*); 'The fire, the fire is falling! Down rushed beating

his wings in vain' (*A Song of Liberty*); 'The crow wished everything was black' (*Proverbs of Hell*), all find resonances in Sondheim's 'City on Fire':

Stirrings in the ground
 And the whirring of giant wings!
 Watch out!
 Look!
 Blotting out the moonlight,
 Thick black rain falling on the
 City of fire!
 (II: 2-36)

.....
 Stirrings in the grave
 And the screaming of giant winds!
 Watch out! Look!
 Crawling on the chimneys,
 Great black crows screeching
 (II: 37)

All these images evoke the industrialized city of Blake's London where, 'Every blackening church appals' (*London*, l.10) or Dickens's city of, 'Smoke lowering down from the chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun Fog everywhere' (*Bleak House* 1963: 15). The image in *Sweeney Todd* of the 'great black crows' reflects not only an image of apocalyptic doom, but is also a reminder of the chimney sweeps, those abused young boys, whose image symbolizes more than any other the inhumanity which characterized the Industrial Revolution. I find the implied references in these images more powerful and more evocative of *Sweeney Todd*'s ethos than comparisons with machines.

As has been stated, Prince found the Judge's song to be 'gruesome'. I think, though, that the degree of explicitness which Prince found inherent in the scene depends to a great extent on the staging of the number and the positioning of the Judge in relation to Johanna. The Judge's song was included in the South African version of the show and though it was powerful and shocking it was not offensive even to an audience in a country of strong Calvinistic tendencies.¹³ It was also included in the New York revival in 1989.

What is gruesome and yet dramatically acceptable in the song is the way in which the Judge

addresses the Deity, then Johanna, in words which seem to involve both in his sado-masochistic impulses. The words which the Judge uses to evoke the Deity have strong sexual connotations, 'God deliver me! Release me!/Forgive me! Restrain me! Pervade me! (I: 34). The phrase, 'Release Me' implies not so much a plea to be freed from the manifestation of his lust, but rather a desire to be sated and thus spent: God saves him by indulging him. 'Pervade me' has implications of fulfilment and surfeit that is exploited in the triumphant cadences of the music, with its rising octave intervals:

The image shows two lines of musical notation in a single system. The first line contains three phrases: 'God de-liv- er ne!', 'Re- lease me !', and 'For- give ne!'. The second line contains two phrases: 'Re- strain ne!' and 'Per- vade ne!'. The music is written on a treble clef staff with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The first line has three measures, each starting with a fermata and a triplet or similar rhythmic figure. The second line has two measures, each starting with a fermata and a rising octave interval. The lyrics are written below the notes.

(Vocal Book: 46)

The serious religious practice of the discipline is distorted and the implications of his aberrant impulses are extended as he first attempts to lay the blame on Johanna:

You mock me, Johanna,
 You tempt me with your innocence,
 You tempt me with those quivering - - .
 (I: 35)

Then, perversely, the Judge sees her, rather than God, as the means of deliverance:

You'll
 Deliver me
 Johanna,
 From this
 Hot
 Red
 Devil
 With your
 Soft

White
Cool
Virgin
Palms
(I: 36)

The Judge sees salvation through indulgence; temptation in innocence and deliverance out of despoilment.

These shifts and contradictions in the lyrics create a tension which the music sustains and reinforces with its relentless arpeggios. And it is through these contrasts that the Judge's profligate character is revealed. It is interesting that Sondheim develops the image of Johanna in her light muslin gown through images of darkness and light to articulate the Judge's perverse sexual desires and the extended imagery culminates in a vision of the sun, 'The sun - - I see the sun through your - -'. There are echoes of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which shocked audiences with its veiled references to sexual promiscuity:

OSWALD:

Mother, we are going to have a talk ...

MRS ALVING:

Yes, of course.

(She pushes an armchair over to the sofa and sits close to him.)

OSWALD:

And meanwhile the sun will be rising. And then you'll know. And then I'll no longer have this feeling of dread.

OSWALD:

Mother, give me the sun.

MRS ALVING *(by the table, looks at him startled)*:

What do you say?

OSWALD *(repeats dully and tonelessly)*:

The sun. The sun.

(Ibsen 1961: 73)

In Ibsen's play it is the sun, which Oswald longs for and cannot see, which is the enduring symbol of the results of the father's debauchery, whilst in *Sweeney Todd* it is a symbol of the Judge's lasciviousness.

The lyrics of the Judge's song reinforce his character in that they repeat incessantly certain words

and phrases that particularize his obsession. We hear the relentless reiteration of her name and the image of Johanna sitting in, 'The light behind your window' (I: 34) which is extended to the image of, 'You sigh behind your window' and the perception of the world approaching, as Anthony does, in, 'The world is at your window' (I: 36). The image culminates in the Judge's threatening, 'You'll keep away from windows' as he plans to 'hold' Johanna there forever. The imagery in the Judge's song reinforces Johanna's own perceptions of her situation of living in captivity behind walls 'damask and dark' (I: 15) whilst the world beckons to her. And this thematic unity is further developed by Anthony's pleas in 'Ah, Miss':

Promise
 Not to return to the darkness
 Back of your window
 Not till you not till you look down here.
 (I: 16)

The same imagery permeates the beautiful duet 'Pretty Women', which Sweeney and the Judge sing as Sweeney prepares the Judge for his shave. The irony implicit in the dramatic context of the song and the tension it provokes, in that this most lyrical love song in praise of female beauty is sung in the moments leading up to what should be the most horrifying of confrontations, is intensified by being set to the most mellifluous of melodies and heightened by the poignancy inherent in the use of words that echo and reinforce images already established. In this way the scene generates a subtext that is both painful and ugly, underscored by means of the imagery: that 'invisible worm' of the Judge's obsession. The echoes of Blake's work which I find in *Sweeney Todd* are not, I believe merely coincidental. The Judge's, 'As pretty as a rosebud!' (I: 58), even if taken in the context of polite conversation, seems curiously innocuous in the light of his obsession, but it acquires more relevant and sinister connotations if we are aware of Blake's use of the rose as a sexual symbol:

O Rose! thou art sick!
 The invisible worm,
 That flies in the night,
 In the howling storm,

 Has found out thy bed
 Of crimson joy;

And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.
(*The Sick Rose*, ll. 1-8)

The Sick Rose uses language and imagery that meticulously profiles the character of the Judge and his 'dark secret love' as portrayed by Sondheim. Similar language and imagery can be found in *Sweeney Todd* in phrases such as 'damask and dark' (I: 15); 'hot red devil' (II: 36); 'pale and ivory skinned' (I: 16); 'another bright red day' (II: 14); 'buried sweetly in your yellow hair' (I: 19); 'stirrings in the graves' (II: 37) and 'in the darkness when I'm blind/ With what I can't forget' (II: 12). All are redolent of nineteenth-century sensibilities and retain, I feel, some echoes of Blake's symbolism. They are all indicative of Sondheim's ability to evoke and establish a particular period in a way that is dramatically relevant and artistically appropriate.

In 'Pretty Women' Sweeney, by implication thinking of his lost wife, sings:

Sitting in the window or
Standing on the stair,
Something in them
Cheers the air.
Pretty women
(I: 58)

The Judge follows on, singing one word, 'Silhouetted'. In that word are implications that can only be experienced by the audience in the context of what we have learned of the Judge in his song:

Johanna, Johanna,
So suddenly a woman
The light behind your window - -
It penetrates your gown
(I: 34)

Without the Judge's song as reference the subtext implicit in his words is lost and, also, the irony of the Judge's pseudo-romantic images of pretty women 'in their gardens' or 'flower picking' (I: 59), when we have heard him determining to keep Johanna locked away,

Johanna, Johanna,

I'll keep you here forever,
 I'll wed you on the morrow.
 Johanna, Johanna,
 The world will never touch you,
 (I: 36)

is diminished. Without the Judge's song to provide a frame of reference the phrases become merely pretty images and not the obscene hypocrisy they portray. Both the obsession of Sweeney Todd and that of the Judge are harmonically and lyrically paralleled in 'Pretty Women'. They are, however, emotions of equal weight and intensity only if both characters have been established to the same degree. With the omission of the Judge's song that balance is not kept, neither is the context of the song fully realized.

Musically, the melody of 'Pretty Women' establishes semitone intervals which evoke a delicately elegiac quality. They balance the phrases at the beginning of the song which establish the fullness of whole tones, giving a richly romantic sound, emphasized by the lilting waltz tempo. Conflict is subtly suggested as the harmony changes from thirds to the dissonant major second interval:

69 70 71

nan sing Proof of heav- en As you're liv- ing,

nan sing Proof of heav- en As you're liv- ing,

(Vocal Book: 70)

Anthony's precipitous entrance, which forestalls Sweeney's despatch of his adversary, provides the ultimate irony: he enters, singing to the tune of Johanna's lines in 'Kiss Me' and the words he uses are a variation of hers,

He means to marry me Monday,
 What shall I do? I'd rather die,
 (I: 46)

become Anthony's,

She says she'll marry me Sunday,
Everything's set, we leave tonight - - !
(I: 60)

So it happens that it is Johanna's motif which prevents Sweeney from performing the one act that would save Johanna herself, sung merrily by the person who most desires to remove her from the Judge's power.

These subtle lyrical and musical repetitions and variations add depth and texture to *Sweeney Todd*. The complexity and richness of Sondheim's lyrics are dislocated by the exclusion of the Judge's 'Johanna' as it narrows the audience's frame of reference and diminishes the cumulative effect of the powerful imagery. It is these lyrical images which balance Sondheim's use of the extended musical motif to add dramatic undertones in *Sweeney Todd* and alert the audience to unvoiced possibilities in the plot. In this way, with regard to the character of the Beggar Woman, Sondheim explained:

The beggar woman is in disguise and the audience is supposed to be surprised in the end when they find out who she is. A few, very alert people caught on right away though, and knew that the beggar woman was Sweeney's wife, because when the young wife appears and is raped the minuet they're playing is the beggar woman's theme in a different guise. The justification for this is that the lady's gone crazy because of the rape and the symbol of that rape is the music which is always playing in her mind (Zadan 1990: 251-252).

It can also be argued that the ribald and bald sexual innuendoes of the Beggar Woman's lyrics are the verbal equivalent of the symbolism of the music:

'Ow would you like a little squiff, dear
A little Jig jig,
A little bounce around the bush?
Wouldn't you like to push me crumpet?
Looks to me, dear,
Like you got plenty there to push.
(I: 4)

The lyrics may be seen as symptomatic of a woman who has lost her mind after sexual abuse, and

for whom the sex act can only be described in terms of ugliness and grossness and it is the same tune of the minuet which the Beggar woman uses in her mad intonation, just before Sweeney returns to his parlour to await the Judge:

Beadle deedle deedle deedle deedle dumpling
 Beadle dumpling bedeedle deedle deedle
 Deedle Deedle Deedle Deedle Deedle Deedle
 Deedle Deedle Deed.

(II: 40)

The pathetic reiteration of her words, 'Hey, don't I know you, Mister', echoes her first confrontation with Sweeney Todd and brings to a bitter and irremediable end the Beggar Woman's life. It is Sweeney's desire to have his revenge on the Judge which precipitates the final irony: in seeking retribution for his wife's degradation and (presumed) death Sweeney himself kills his Lucy.

It is revenge that motivates Sweeney, and his revenge is directed against the person of the Judge, and to a lesser extent, his accomplice the Beadle. If the Judge's song is omitted his role becomes that of a representative of society, as in the scene where the Judge condemns the young boy:

This is the fourth time, sir, that you have been brought before this bench. Though it is my earnest wish ever to temper justice with mercy, your persistent dedication to a life of crime is such an abomination before God and man that I have no alternative but to sentence you to hang by the neck until you are dead.

(I: 45)

Once the Judge is seen as a symbol of the anomalies and inequities of the period, rather than an individual, it is easier to see why Prince's conception of the set, which starkly and realistically evoked the realistic factory environment of the time,

Prince conceived the urban setting of a foundry for *Sweeney Todd* and hired designer Eugene Lee to transform his concept into the show's settings. Lee purchased \$7,000 worth of parts from old foundries in Rhode Island and spent \$100,000 to have them shipped to New York (Ilson 1989: 291),

should have provoked the reaction that it did. These responses were based on the belief,

engendered by the implications of the set, that the Industrial Revolution was more than just the setting – it served to provide the rationale for the action.¹⁴ Thus the opening of the show was described in sociological terms:

Its sonorous chords evoke the period's ponderous system of government, suffocating religiosity and false gentility ... The hard shrill sound of the factory whistle suggests unambiguously the unremitting oppression of economic power (Gordon 1990: 212).

These quotations place fulsome over-emphasis on what are primarily dramatic devices to scare the audience, which the sudden blast of the factory whistle does, indeed, succeed in doing.

It is relevant and well documented that Prince and Sondheim differed in their ideas of what the piece was about. Sondheim said:

For me, what the show is really about is obsession. I was using the show as a metaphor for any kind of obsession. Todd is a tragic hero in the classical sense Oedipus is. He dies in the end because of a certain kind of fatal knowledge: he realizes what he has been doing. I find it terribly satisfying – much more so than any kind of accidental death which often occurs in flimsy forms of melodrama (Zadan 1990: 245).

Prince, as Zadan states, saw the piece as a study in impotence, and impotence is a condition more easily transcribable to a certain economic and social background than the intimate obsessions of individual characters. He said, 'The reason that the ensemble is used the way it is, the unifying emotion for the entire company, is shared impotence' (1990: 245). Here is the reason why Prince did not see dropping the Judge's song as problematic, whereas Sondheim, I believe, most probably did. It is noteworthy that in the libretto the Judge's song is included, although a footnote explains that it was deleted from the Broadway show, because, 'The authors feel it helps particularize Judge Turpin' (I: 34). This is a considerable understatement.

It is the complexity of the musical structure, also the fact that much of it is sung, which has led some critics and commentators to argue the case for *Sweeney Todd* to be regarded as an opera. Carey Blyton, for example, states categorically:

Because it is an opera, and a very powerful and difficult one at that, it needs to be

presented by an opera company like the English National Opera or the Welsh National Opera (1984: 19-26).

Joseph P. Swain refers to the work throughout his musical critique as 'the opera', as when he says, 'The comedy of the opera is of many kinds and has many sources' (1990: 338).¹⁵ It is true that many of the principles of opera are used by Sondheim in *Sweeney Todd*. There is the Wagnerian use of musical motifs; the use of music to contain diverse and overlapping action; the fact that the musical is, to a large extent, 'through-composed' and the operatic complexity of the chord structure, especially with regard to the choral voice parts as can be seen from the following bars of the opening chorus:

The musical score consists of two systems of staves, each with five parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), Bass (B.), and Bass Solo (Bs.). The key signature is two sharps (F# and C#) and the time signature is 6/8. Measure numbers 122, 123, 124, 125, 126, and 127 are indicated above the staves.

System 1 (Measures 122-124):

- S.:** Swee-ney was swooth
- A.:** Swee-ney was swooth Swee-ney was sub-tle Swee-ney would blink and
- T.:** chine' e was ma-s Swee-ney! Clean 'e was ma-s
- B.:** In-con-spi-cu-ous Swee-ney was Quick and qu-let and
- Bs.:** Swee-ney! Clean 'e was ma-s Swee-ney!

System 2 (Measures 125-127):

- S.:** Swee-ney was sub-tle Swee-ney would blink and rats would scut-tle
- A.:** rats would scut-tle Swee-ney! Swee-ney!
- T.:** Swee-ney! Swee-ney! Swee-ney!
- B.:** like a pe-fect na-chine 'e was ma-s Swee-ney!
- Bs.:** Keen 'e was ma-s Swee-ney! Swee-ney!

The image shows a musical score for five vocal parts: Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), Bass (B.), and Bass (B.). The score is in 6/8 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are "Sweeney!" and "Sweeney!". The score includes measure numbers 128, 129, 130, and 131. A long melisma "Sweeney-----" spans across measures 130 and 131. The vocal lines are arranged in a descending order of pitch from top to bottom.

(Vocal Book: 5)

But the fact that *Sweeney Todd* is compellingly 'through-composed' in places owes more to the influence of another genre: that of the cinema. 'What I wanted to write,' Sondheim is quoted as saying, 'was a horror movie' (Zadan 1990: 246). Sondheim's interest in, and debt to, the film composer, Bernard Herrman, is clearly seen in *Sweeney Todd*.

The composer, Bernard Herrman, scored the music for such films as *Psycho*, *The Birds* and *North by North West* – all of which were directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Herrman also worked with Truffaut on *The Bride Wore Black* and *Fahrenheit 451*. His best-known score, and his most innovative, was for Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*. Herrman said this about the use of music in film:

I feel that music on the screen can seek out and intensify the inner thoughts of the characters. It can invest the scene with terror, grandeur, gaiety or misery. It can propel narrative swiftly forward or slow it down, it often lifts mere dialogue into the realm of poetry. Finally, it is the communicating link between the screen and the audience, reaching out and enveloping all into one single experience (Palmer 1990: 121).

This is exactly how Sondheim uses music in *Sweeney Todd*. His affinity for, and devotion to, Herrman's work is further illustrated by the use he makes of the leitmotiv which Herrman

favoured in *Citizen Kane* and his use of the 'Dies Irae' as an underlying theme in *Sweeney Todd*, replicates Herrman's use of the same piece in his portrayal of Xanadu.

For Sondheim, as for Herrman, music is used as a unifying element which can provide a subconsciously experienced commentary to the audience. It can reinforce a character's feelings and actions as in 'The Worst Pies in London' or subtly undermine the action by establishing an ironic or chilling subtext as in 'Not While I'm Around'. It can, certainly, be used, as it is in opera, to contain two or more sets of parallel action, but I think that it is an extension of cinematic techniques where time can be contracted that underlies Sondheim's use of it in *Sweeney Todd* and, it just so happens, that an operatic principle is the means of achieving this on stage. Though Sondheim has quoted himself in conversation with John Dexter as asking if *Sweeney Todd* would make a good operatic piece (see page 43), in the final analysis *Sweeney Todd* is an opera. For me it remains a compelling piece of musical theatre. A musical theatre not restricted by outmoded definitions, but which aspires to create a theatrical experience rich and entertaining; meaningful and accessible.

The depth and strength of the lyrics are such that they become the means by which the action is developed and the characters evolved. Where the words are of such importance the music is always dramatically supportive and emotionally reinforces the interpretation imposed by the words. Similarly, with regard to the vocal quality of the production, the singing quality of the performers serves the character that is being portrayed and is not simply a celebration of beauty and quality of range and tone as is expected and of paramount importance within the conventions of opera.

For Sondheim, the dramatic context is what compels the music. It is the music which sustains, augments and adds emotional weight to the sentiment of the lyrics. The lyrics create dramatic characters who happen to express much of themselves in song. That what they say can be conveyed musically with such synergic grace and such dramatic validity is Sondheim's art. It is an art which Sondheim does not compromise, a premise which my discussion of *Assassins* will develop. The music which Sondheim uses in *Sweeney Todd* with its sometimes atonal, complex harmonies indicates a move towards the establishment of the use of a more meaningful musical

vocabulary that extends the range and the contribution that musical theatre can make to our collective experience.

The suggestion that to consider *Sweeney Todd* an opera bestows upon it a greater significance, or validates its complexity, does nothing except diminish the singular achievement that Sondheim has wrought in *Sweeney Todd*. As Sheridan Morley says:

It might be better to end up with a slit throat from Sweeney than a broken neck caused by looking too far back over one's shoulder at Rodgers and Hart (1987: 221).

Endnotes

1. In a production that was referred to as *The Trilogy*, twenty-four actors performed *Sweeney Todd* in repertory with *Candide* and *Sweet Charity*. The season ended with productions of all three shows on the same day. The following year *Sweeney Todd* and *Candide* were performed in a season at the Nico Malan Theatre in Cape Town. The reviews were favourable, but not supported by the theatre-going public, until an impassioned correspondence in the local press saw *Sweeney Todd* finish its run to packed houses.
2. Lloyd republished the story in 1846; in 1926 a British film, *The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* appeared; a stage version starring Todd Slaughter toured the British zone in Germany in 1947; in 1959 the Royal Ballet Company premièred John Cranko's ballet, with music by Malcolm Arnold.
3. 'Hal is not the fan of melodrama and farce that I am ... I think they are my favorite [sic] forms of theater' [sic] (Zadan 1993: 245).
4. It is, I believe, the version which Bond first read and, dreadful though Bond may have found it, there are some slight elements that occur in Rosser's version to be found in the final musical version of Sondheim and Wheeler.
5. I do not think it is a coincidence that Sondheim uses the word 'appropriate' in Sweeney's ironic rejoinder to Mrs Lovett, 'Mrs Lovett, /What a charming notion, /Eminently practical and yet /Appropriate as always' (I: 61). It may also be noted that the 'charming notion' of the first act becomes, 'Mrs Lovett, /You're a bloody wonder' (II: 46), where the literal meaning of the word 'bloody' pervades the casual expletive use, in the light of what has transpired during the action.
6. From my own personal experience, having been born and lived in the East End of London, this kind of behaviour, which seems somewhat bizarre, is not unusual. For, example, lunching with an old-age pensioner who had witnessed an accident the previous day she described it as follows, 'The poor geezer was lying there on the pavement and

day she described it as follows, 'The poor geezer was lying there on the pavement and there wasn't half a lot of blood. Do you want tomato sauce on yer eggs, luv?' On another occasion, whilst teaching in Limehouse, during a discussion about jobs, a child told me that her mother laid people out, 'And there was this little dead baby, Miss, so I picked it up and gave it a cuddle, it was so little – and a bit green.'

7. This appears as 'with ease' in the Vocal Book.
8. The similarity, in tone and vocabulary, to Prest's original story, which was reprinted in 1846, may be seen in this extract quoted in Turner's book, *Boys Will be Boys*, 'And well did they deserve their reputation, those delicious pies! There was about them a flavour never surpassed and rarely equalled; the paste was of the most *delicate* construction and impregnated with the *aroma* of *delicious* gravy that defied description. Then the small portions of meat which they contained were so *tender* (my italics) and the fat and lean so artistically mixed up that to eat one of Lovett's pies was such a provocative to eat another that many persons who came to lunch stayed to dine' (1975: 41).
9. I think it is interesting to note that, at the time when *Sweeney Todd* was first performed in South Africa, I listened to two young girls sing, with no apparent sense of doing anything out of the ordinary, both the opening sequence and most of 'The Worst Pies in London'. They did so, unaccompanied, reading the words from a script, having heard the music at intervals over a period of a few days. Perhaps their musical background – Orff instruments, choral music in a school choir, African music and rhythms and no preconceived ideas about what was to be expected – suggests that the problem lies more in the ears of the beholder, trapped in an old fashioned stereotypes, than in the musicality of the composer.
10. 'He affects the metaphysics not only in his satires, but in his amorous verses, where nature only should reign; and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy, when he should engage their hearts, and entertain them with the softnesses of love' (John Dryden *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays* (Watson {ed.} 1962: 76).
11. In a letter dated August 8, 1996, Sondheim writes, 'The early drafts of 'My Friends' are in a box in a warehouse in the Bronx, where they've been stored subsequent to a fire at my house, and won't be available for a number of months. And I did indeed write the song before Hugh Wheeler became involved in the show.'
12. Christopher Bond, in his introduction to *Sweeney Todd*, notes that the exclusion of the Judge's song reduces the character to what he calls an 'all-purpose baddie' (1991: 8).
13. In the South African production, the Judge and Johanna appeared on opposite sides of a raised walkway that went around the stage. Johanna was seen, dimly, brushing her hair and though it could be supposed that the Judge could see her, the distance which separated them made it possible to suggest that the Judge saw her only in his imagination. The Judge was also flogged by the Beadle at the beginning of the song, which not only made more explicit the perverse bond between them, but had the effect of making the flogging more ritualistic and less intimate than if the Judge had flogged

himself. Given the Judge's passion, his orgasmic release came as the logical and expected climax of the song.

14. As a point of contrast the South African set for *Sweeney Todd*, conceived by Andrew Botha, one of the country's leading designers, displayed an implicit understanding of the era without setting it explicitly in 'factory' confines. The huge blackened brick walls which towered into the flies so that no sky or sunlight could be seen were Dickensian in their dark immensity; the narrow entrances which disappeared into dark alleys all evoked an environment which was 'cabin'd, cribbed, confined', but without imposing on the audience a specificity which dictated that from such an environment – that of the Industrial Revolution – characters emerged who would therefore behave in a particular way, or whose actions could be defined and judged by the social and economic parameters within which they were set. While the impact of Botha's set was considerable and awe-inspiring, it did not pre-empt the audience's reaction to the characters by suggesting a social ambience that would support preconceived ideas as to the characters' behaviour.
15. See, also, George Martin's article, 'On the Verge of Opera', to be found in *The Opera Quarterly*. 1987. Spring vol. 6: 76-85.

INTO THE WOODS

Stephen Sondheim had worked with James Lapine¹ in the years between 1982 and 1984 to produce the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Sunday in the Park with George*. Soon after they talked of collaborating on another work, something that Lapine envisaged as being, 'Fun and nonintellectual, yet pack[ing] a punch' (Zadan 1990: 337). The result of this proposed collaboration was *Into the Woods*. The piece was workshopped at Playwrights Horizons² in New York City and its progress is succinctly described by Nina Mankin writing in *The Performing Arts Journal*:

In November of 1985 the first informal presentation was given of the first draft and dominant musical themes. In June of the following year, there was a second reading of the completed draft and all the songs from Act One. In the fall of 1986 *Into the Woods* was given another workshop at Playwrights Horizons before being taken for an out-of-town run at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego Another workshop followed the San Diego run, prior to rehearsals for Broadway (1988: 51-52).

Into the Woods opened on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theatre on November 5 1987. It starred Joanna Gleason and Chip Zien as the Baker's Wife and the Baker with Bernadette Peters in the pivotal role of the Witch.

Lapine was familiar with the works of Bruno Bettelheim (see Gottfried: 168; Mankin: 51; Zadan: 338), and particularly with his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, which explores the significance of Freudian psychology in the interpretation of fairy-tales. It may be suggested that the fairy-tales themselves provide the basis for something light and simple, whilst the deeper resonances of a symbolic and psychological interpretation would prevent the work from becoming simplistic or banal. Although Sondheim was intrigued by the idea of a 'quest' (see Zadan 1990: 337) musical, it was Lapine who was the driving force behind the concept. As Lapine admits, 'It was a difficult show for us to write With *Sunday*, Stephen and I were essentially writing something we both knew about: creating art. This show was harder because I think it was difficult for Stephen to get hooked' (Zadan, 1990: 338).

This may have been, in part, because Lapine was more familiar with the fairy-tale genre than was Sondheim, or because the emphasis on the child in fairy-tales was of interest to Lapine who, at the time of writing, had himself become a father.³ But it may also signify Sondheim's need to

be involved with a project that is 'about' something that gives substance to his lyrics through context and character. Although it may have appeared that the emblematic stereotypes of fairy-tales lacked depth and weight, as the work progressed it seemed to Sondheim that, 'Eventually, the show is about community responsibility' (Zadan 1990: 338). Indeed, this does surface as one of the themes in a show which also addressed the parent/child relationship; innocence/experience; moral imperatives on a personal as well as a community level and the question of whether or not a desired end justifies dubious means.

Perhaps this complexity and plethora of themes is one of the reasons why Sondheim found himself writing more material for *Into the Woods* than for any show since *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, over and above Lapine's penchant for experimenting with and changing material (see Mankin 1988: 64). The themes in *Into the Woods* are complex and meaningful, yet Sondheim articulates them within the musical and lyrical vocabulary imposed by the framework of the fairy-tale genre. It is a genre which utilizes to the simple, the naive and the simplistic, not words which one would ordinarily use to describe the complex and subtle art of Sondheim. Yet Sondheim himself uses an unexpected word to describe what he felt the tone of show should be, 'I wanted it to be jaunty' (Gottfried 1993: 168). The word does articulate an appositeness that is consistent with Lapine's 'nonintellectual' approach.

The words 'jaunty' and 'nonintellectual' sum up precisely the tone of both the lyrics and music in the extended opening sequence. This opening comprises the first scene and is over thirteen minutes long. It is a complex blending of lyrics set to fragments of songs or, as Sondheim refers to them, 'ditties' (see Zadan 1990: 340; Mankin 1988: 64), linked by a Narrator, which introduce the audience to the main protagonists. The opening music is light and staccato; the introductory words, spoken over music, are the perennial fairy-tale beginning, 'Once upon a time ...' and the first lyrics, interpolated by Cinderella, are those which resonate with the magic formula inherent in every such tale, 'I wish'. Each of the characters is introduced and placed in context as each articulates a particular wish. The words and music are simple, set in rhythms that are reminiscent of many nursery rhymes, particularly, 'Here we go Round the Mulberry Bush'.⁴

However, the disarming simplicity of the lyrics and music is belied by the complexity of the plot

which Lapine initiates. The story of the musical is the tale of a Baker and his Wife, whose great desire to have a child sends them on a quest, initiated by the Witch, to bring back the four items that will, when made into a potion and drunk by the Witch, lift the curse of barrenness placed by her on their family. It will also, coincidentally, restore the Witch's beauty, of which she was deprived by her mother, as her punishment when the Baker's father was able to steal the special beans from the Witch's garden. The four items which she demands are:

- One: The cow as white as milk,
 - Two: The cape as red as blood,
 - Three: The hair as yellow as corn,
 - Four: The slipper as pure as gold.
- (Act I, Sc. 1: 16)

In order to fulfil the Witch's demands the Baker and his Wife find themselves involved with fairy-tale characters in whose stories the sought for items can be found. So we are introduced to *Jack and the Beanstalk* (the cow); *Little Red Ridinghood* (the cape); *Cinderella* (the slipper) and *Rapunzel* (the hair). As Zadan writes, Lapine thought, 'It would be interesting to see how people react to stories they already know – but told from a different angle' (1990: 337-338). Lapine's interest, as director and writer, was tending more to the dramatic issues which would be explored, whilst Sondheim, as I have noted, saw deeper resonances which would give emotional weight to the machinations of the characters in *Into the Woods*:

Eventually the show is about community responsibility ... you just can't go and chop down trees and tease princes and pretend that beans are worth more than they are. Everybody has to pay for that. So they all have to get together and get rid of the giantess (1990: 338).

This difference in focus plays an important part in the development of the piece. It is intrinsic to the way Sondheim gives substance to a subject and what makes his lyrical style, even within the limitations that a musical form imposes, complex and meaningful. It is the impulse which, at his best, informs the seemingly effortless simplicity of his elliptical and paradoxical phrases with resonances that suggest that important things may be said in a medium that has been characterized over the years as light-weight and nothing more than entertainment. In this genre, the step to be taken is, without doubt, a giant one. It is one, however, from which there is, as

shown by Sondheim's pioneering work, no turning back. *Assassins*, as we will see, continues Sondheim commitment to such a development.

In this first scene we are not only introduced to the main characters, but also given an insight into what it is each of them wishes for. Cinderella wishes to go to the festival; Jack wishes his cow would give some milk to prevent her being sold; the Baker wishes for a child; Red Ridinghood wishes first for bread, then a sticky bun, or even four; Jack's Mother wishes her son were not a fool. Sondheim uses the technique of vocally overlapping the different voices:

The musical score consists of two systems of four staves each, all in G major and 12/8 time. The first system covers measures 12-14, and the second system covers measures 15-17. The lyrics are vocally overlapping across the staves.

System 1 (Measures 12-14):

- Staff 1: More than the noon The King is giving a Fes- ti- val. I
- Staff 2: More than the noon I wish
- Staff 3: *mf* I wish More than life
- Staff 4: More than the noon More than life

System 2 (Measures 15-17):

- Staff 1: wish to go to the Fes- ti- val- -and the ball More than
- Staff 2: I wish my cow would give us some milk
- Staff 3: More than rich- es More than
- Staff 4: More than rich- es

an- y-thing

mp

Please pal Squeeze pal

an- y-thing

mp

I want a child-----

I wish we had a child

(Vocal Score: 7)

It is a technique which Sondheim employs very successfully, as we have seen, in *Sweeney Todd*. Here, the overlapping allows Sondheim to reiterate the different motives of the characters more than once without stretching the patience of the audience by too much repetition. He also slows the pace by concentrating on one particular situation, which is then amplified and expanded, giving the audience time to absorb the material.

So we are presented with Cinderella, taunted by her stepsisters, as they are preparing to go to the ball, leaving her behind. As Cinderella fusses with Florinda's hair, Cinderella articulates thoughts which become one of the underlying preoccupations of the piece:

Mother said be good,
 Father said be nice,
 That was always their advice.
 So be nice, Cinderella,
 Good, Cinderella,
 Nice good good nice –

.....
 What's the good of being good
 If everyone is blind
 Always leaving you behind?
 Never mind, Cinderella,
 Kind Cinderella –

(Accenting each word with a twist of a strand of hair)

Nice good nice kind good nice –

(Sc. 1: 11)

The words 'good' and 'nice' become almost interchangeable within the context of Cinderella's words, but here is articulated, in almost trifling manner, one of the basic ideas that the musical examines: the difference between being nice and being good in its deepest moral sense. It is the Witch who, ironically, scathingly articulates the distinction later in the work:

You're so nice,
 You're not good,
 You're not bad,
 You're just nice.
 I'm not good,
 I'm not nice,
 I'm just right.
 I'm the witch.
 You're the world.
 (Act II, Sc.2: 121)

For her point of view, as the outcast, the one who stands alone, the comparison is given an added ironic twist. It is a chillingly frank appraisal of the situation, and one that can be seen as a counterpoint to the Prince's rather comically pathetic rejoinder later as he admits to Cinderella:

I was raised to be charming, not sincere. I didn't ask to be born a King, and I am not perfect. I am only human.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 127)

For the witch it is the great apathetic majority, who substitute pleasantness for morality, that is the world. It will also be seen that it is these people who, in order to survive, bolster their lack of individual moral fibre by banding together. The situation suggests that, what Sondheim has stated as a major theme of *Into the Woods*, namely community responsibility, is not inspired by strength, but by weakness and it is still individual moral virtue that inspires the best in human beings. So, as I will discuss in more detail later, the rationale for the characters' salvation is not based on something that generates admiration or conviction.

It is also important to note that Cinderella's words introduce what is to be another major theme of *Into the Woods*, and one which, in my opinion, is crucial to our response to, and empathy with,

both the characters and the work itself. For Cinderella's character, as she reveals it and her response to the situation, is moulded by attitudes held by her parents and the values they have imposed upon her. There may be a hint of rebellion as Cinderella tugs at Florinda's hair, still it is her parents' values with which Cinderella is struggling. It is the parent/child relationship which is developed through the work which gives *Into the Woods* its strongest emotional underpinning. It is a theme that is articulated by all the characters in one way or another. So, just as Cinderella admits that, 'I've been good and I've been kind, Mother, /Doing only what I learned from you' (Act I, Sc. 2: 22), Jack also uses his Mother as his frame of reference. When asked by the Mysterious Man why he is selling Milky-White for the specific sum of five pounds, Jack's answer is simply, 'My mother told me' (Act I, Sc. 2: 23). In the relationship between Jack and his Mother we see the understandable irritation that exists between a rational and pragmatic woman and a child whose simplicity is both a source of bewilderment and worry. At the same time Jack's Mother articulates a parent's desire to protect a child at all costs, even when it may be inappropriate:

JACK'S MOTHER:

Enough! Promise me, son, you won't leave your surroundings.

JACK:

But, Mother, I'm a man now.

JACK'S MOTHER:

You're still a little boy in your mother's eyes. I want you to promise. *(Pause; she smacks him)*

Promise!

JACK *(Humiliated)*:

I promise.

(Act II, Sc. 1: 92)

Jack asserts his independence by ignoring his Mother's words and going off to seek the giant. Similarly, Little Red Ridinghood's journey into the woods is also circumscribed by parental discipline:

Mother said,
 'Straight ahead,'
 Not to delay
 Or be misled.
 I should have heeded
 Her advice ...

But he seemed so nice.
(Act I, Sc. 2: 34)

Once more the word 'nice' is used to describe Red Ridinghood's initial response to the Wolf. It is a childish and unconditional acceptance of a person at face value, but it is also one which will be modified by what happens between Red Ridinghood and the Wolf, so that she will be able to make the very significant distinction that, 'Nice is different than good' (Sc. 2: 35).

The parent/child relationship is also examined in the Witch's behaviour towards Rapunzel. It is ironic that one of the aphorisms, spoken by the Stepmother should be, 'You can never love somebody else's child', for that is exactly what the Witch does with regard to Rapunzel, the child taken from the Baker's parents after the Baker's father makes his sortie into the Witch's garden and steals her greens and the magic beans. The Witch's love for Rapunzel is overpowering and obsessive, yet there is no denying its essential and unreserved potency. It is misdirected by her inability to recognize Rapunzel's maturity and desire to see the world. It denies the essential truth which the poet Cecil Day Lewis expressed with such feeling that, 'Selfhood begins with a walking away,/And love is proved in the letting go' (*Walking Away*, ll. 19-20).

It is ironic that the Witch, after articulating feelings of such deep human moment, should revert immediately to inhuman behaviour and not only cut off Rapunzel's hair but, as Rapunzel accuses her later:

You just locked me in a tower without company for fourteen years, then blinded my Prince and banished me to a desert where I had little to eat, and again no company, and then bore twins! Because of the way you treated me, I'll never, never be happy! (*She cries.*)

(Act II, Sc. 2: 95)

The Witch's reply, funny because of its incongruity and inappropriateness, is the sincerely delivered retort, 'I was just trying to be a good mother'. The Witch's maternal instincts are not as strong as her witch-like nature.

The parent/child relationships which are examined in the first Act of *Into the Woods* are further developed through the character of the Baker and his child. The Baker who believes that his

father was killed in a baking accident until the Mysterious Man is revealed as his parent, is determined to stay in the house that was his father's, so that a sense of tradition and continuity is maintained. The script, however, suggests a certain inability to relate to the child. The Baker is only too glad to hand the baby back to his wife. He seems uncomfortable with it, although he is willing to take action when the baby's safety is at risk. After the death of his wife, the Baker hands the baby over to Cinderella, saying only that, 'My child will be happier in the arms of a Princess' (Act II, Sc. 2: 123). It is only with the reappearance of the Mysterious Man that Sondheim addresses the complexities of the parent/child relationship. It is a subject that, as I have noted, he had comically addressed in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, but here the confrontation between the two characters ushers in some of Sondheim's most poignant and emotionally charged lyrics set to a simple yet moving melody. In language which is simple and direct, Sondheim probes a deep and meaningful connection, for the lyrics suggest that what our parents give us does to a large extent define us, and there is a psychic link that, if not acknowledged (even if diverged from), diminishes and separates us from the sense of being part of a larger reality. As the Mysterious Man says:

We disappoint,
We disappear,
We die but we don't ...

BAKER:

What?

MYSTERIOUS MAN:

They disappoint
In turn, I fear.
Forgive, though, they won't.
(Act II, Sc. 2: 123)

Sondheim suggests that even death does not destroy a person if that person is a parent, for the child carries, and always will, part of the parent in their very being. But Sondheim also touches on another aspect of this complex relationship and that is the inability of the child to forgive a parent for sometimes imagined, but sometimes very valid wrongs that a parent can commit, even if the parent, by his or her own lights, is doing the best that he or she can do. It may be that the child must grow up and become a parent himself before the process can begin, but that it is a possibility is suggested in the lyrics. As the Mysterious Man's appearance draws to an end he reiterates the first line of the same musical phrase again:

We disappoint,
 We leave a mess,
 We die but we don't
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 124)

But in the second line he admits his responsibility and culpability for the 'mess' he leaves behind and affirms the indissoluble bond between a parent and a child in the last line. Likewise the Baker recognises the connection:

We disappoint
 In turn, I guess.
 Forget, though, we won't.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 124)

Here, the Baker, speaking as the child in the relationship admits that children, too, may be responsible in some degree for the failure of a parent and child to relate to one and other. In the opening lines the Mysterious Man suggests that it is the fact that children cannot forgive that perpetuates the situation, however the Baker's lines substitute 'forget', and by speaking the words from the perspective of the child, suggests that it is possible to move on, so that ultimately reconciliation is feasible and to forgive, yet not forget, may enable the child to become a better parent in his turn. With the utmost simplicity, using subtle parallels and connecting rhymes in each section, Sondheim articulates both a complex and meaningful paradox and paradoxically, a way forward. Musically the three repeated phrases, ending on an upward unresolved scale, conclude in an harmonic finality in the last line, 'Like father, like son.'

It is only after this meeting with his father that the Baker is able to take his child into his arms and, when the child cries, comfort him. It is through the relationship between the Baker and the Mysterious Man that the father/child relationship is examined in *Into the Woods*, for the emphasis up to this point has been on the mother/child connection. Indeed, the father of Cinderella has been nothing more than a cypher, though it may be significant that the only words he speaks in the entire piece are, 'I've always wanted a son!' (Act I, Sc. 6: 72), at the moment that Cinderella's foot fits the shoe and she becomes betrothed to the Prince. It is also worth noting that the two most ego-oriented characters, Rapunzel's Prince and Cinderella's Prince, have no maternal influence in their lives, and only mention a father in passing. Indeed, by their very designation

they seem to have no identity of their own, drifting through life with a hedonistic self-indulgence. For the other characters the woods become a testing ground of their capabilities, both moral and physical: a strengthening and learning process. For the Princes, as Cinderella's Prince declares, 'Right and wrongs don't matter in the woods' (Act II, Sc. 2: 109).

The entrance of the Witch provides the dramatic mainspring which motivates the quest which the Baker and his wife have to undertake. Borrowing from the musical pop idiom, Sondheim's lyric, introducing us to the Witch, is set to a 'Rap' beat. The Witch tells them how the Baker's father, to alleviate his pregnant wife's desire for green vegetables, had climbed into the Witch's garden:

Robbing me,
Raping me,
Rooting through my rutabaga,
Raiding my arugula and
Ripping up the rampion
My champion! My favorite [*sic*]!
(Act I, Sc. 1: 12-13)

Sondheim's witty verbal dexterity is obvious here. The use of verbs such as 'raping', 'rooting' and 'raiding' all intensify the invasive nature of the father's actions, amounting to what seems like a personal assault on the Witch herself rather than the eclectic and exotic leaves of her vegetable patch. The combined alliteration and assonance of such phrases as, 'Rooting through my rutabaga' and 'Ripping up the rampion' add to the comic effect of inflated exaggeration, as well as suggesting the animalistic and rustic image of a pig vandalising the garden.

Though the musical form is a modern one, the use of words such as 'raiding' and 'champion' carries echoes of a past era. The driving beat of the music and the anguished intensity of the Witch's delivery of words, resonant with comic emotional overload, almost have us believe that the barrenness with which the Baker's family is cursed is, indeed, not too severe a punishment for what it is, stripped of hyperbole, the theft of a few lettuce leaves. Its absurdity is very funny. Lest anyone should think her revenge disproportionate, the Witch adds that it was the theft of the special beans which led her not only to lay a spell that would make the Baker's family tree a barren one, but also led her to take the baby who, we learn, was the Baker's baby sister, Rapunzel.

sweeping statement to make of a man who is sensitive to the spoken word and whose commitment to using all the various categories of prosody with an aesthetic sensibility and a discriminating intellect is of paramount importance. Sondheim speaks of rhyming with authority and with a genuine enjoyment of its power and its function:

You try to make your rhyming seem fresh but inevitable, and you try for surprise but not so wrenchingly that the listener loses the sense of the line The true function of the rhyme is to point up the word that rhymes – if you don't want that word to be the most important in the line, don't rhyme it. Also, rhyme helps shape the music, it helps the listener hear what the shape of the music is. Inner rhymes, which are fun to work out if you have a puzzle mind, have one function, which is to speed the line along (Zadan: 1990: 232).⁵

Given his singular discernment, it is, perhaps, precipitate to dismiss any lines of Sondheim as 'silly', without considering the intention and the effect that Sondheim obviously had in mind. There is a nursery rhyme flavour in the simplicity and graphic plebian matter of factness of these lines which is entirely apposite both with regard to character and to the intended style of the piece. In contrast with Jack and his dreamy ingenuousness, Jack's Mother shows us her unvarnished and pragmatic nature. She calls a spade a spade; her basic, one-syllable words are, indeed, inevitable, and yet unexpected and, moreover, they are funny in themselves and in the element of surprise which draws laughter from the audience. There is a 'playful self-mockery' inherent in the triple punning of the line, 'While her withers wither with her', although there is another instance when Sondheim's choice of word does seem to have been selected for its arbitrary rhyming. Jack's Mother sings:

Jack Jack Jack,
Head in a sack,
The house is getting colder,
This is not a time for dreaming.

Chimney-stack
Starting to crack,
The mice are getting bolder,
The floor's gone slack.
(Act I, Sc. 1: 15)

It appears that in order to continue the list of 'ack' rhymes Sondheim uses a transitive verb as an

intransitive one, instead of the verb 'to slacken' which can be used as either. And although 'to slack' may be used intransitively as in 'our enthusiasm slacked off', it is used in the sense of being or becoming and not going. Moreover, a floor would more naturally sag rather than slack. It is a minor point, but having seen *Into the Woods* in performance several times, the line persists in catching my ear, if only like the 'sting of a gnat in June'!

Meanwhile, the Witch, having explained exactly what it is that the Baker and his Wife must bring back to her in order to have a perfect child, leaves as the Baker prepares to go into the woods to search for the items. As he does so, his Wife asks to accompany him, but the Baker's reply introduces what is to become another major theme of *Into the Woods*. He tells his Wife that he will go alone because:

The spell is on my house.
 Only I can lift the spell,
 The spell is on my house.
 (Act I, Sc. 1: 18)

However, his Wife immediately overlaps his words and tells him that they must work together for the spell is on, not his, but 'our house'. Thus the idea of shared responsibility is introduced, although at this point it is the intimate responsibility that is shared by a married couple. The Wife recognizes their interconnectedness, but it is worth noting that later it is she who betrays the marital trust and sleeps with the Prince in the woods. Now, in quick succession, the four items that have to be found are repeated three times, as the Baker has trouble remembering them. It is also a strategic method of fixing them in the minds of the audience, without seeming to labour the point. The Baker and his Wife are joined by Cinderella, who is en route to her mother's grave. Gradually the other characters gather: Red Ridinghood, off to visit her Granny; Jack and Jack's Mother, to sell the cow and the opening scene comes to an end as all the characters sing of the various reasons for their journey:

BAKER, WIFE:
 Into the woods to lift the spell –
 CINDERELLA:
 Into the woods to visit Mother –

WIFE:

Into the woods to fetch the things –

BAKER:

To make the potion –

CINDERELLA:

To go to the Festival –

.....
JACK'S MOTHER:

Into the woods to sell the cow –

JACK:

Into the woods to get the money –

(Act I, Sc. 1: 19-20)

Their reasons are clear and unambiguous, and although there may be a slight trepidation felt at venturing into the woods, there really is nothing to fear, for as a neat pun suggests, 'The woods are just trees,/The trees are just wood' (Act I, Sc. 1: 20).

The full company articulates, in even simpler language, their motives and we watch them blithely set forth into the woods:

ALL:

To see –

To sell –

To get –

To bring –

To make –

To lift –

To go to the Festival –!

Into the woods!

Into the woods!

Into the woods,

Then out of the woods,

And home before dark!

(Act I, Sc. 1: 21)

The first scene, then, is a masterly interweaving of the different plots and characters. The lyrics are simple, both with regard to vocabulary and structure, yet they have enunciated thematic material, to be developed further, that has deeper implications, so that though they appear to be straightforward they are not entirely unambiguous. So, too, the music, although the short themes

and unsophisticated rhythms are easily accessible, demands to be taken at more than face value. As Johnathan Tunick, the orchestrator of the show, has said:

The melodic material consists of fragmentary, rhythmic and very catchy phrases that weave in and out. I think this confuses some people. They hear what appear to be independent melodic fragments weaving in and out, when in reality they are all part of the development of a much larger musical composition. Steve is quite accurate in calling these phrases "ditties," and the term isn't meant derogatorily. A good symphonic theme is actually a ditty: a short, rhythmic phrase which is repeated and developed, and sequenced into a larger more complex structure. Any theme in a Beethoven symphony is a ditty. This is a far more sophisticated technique than is usually used in popular songwriting, and puts the material in league with serious composers (Mankin, 1988: 62).

It is this apparent simplicity which is responsible, I believe, for encouraging the view that the characterizations of the protagonists are also simple and one dimensional. Hirschak (1991: 130) describes the characters as being 'made of crepe paper'. But it is important to remember that the tales on which *Into the Woods* is based have been honed to simplicity by years of telling. However, as will be seen, the situations in which the characters find themselves demand changes and become a growing experience for all of them. Lapine appreciated the fact that fairy-tales can be interpreted and understood on deeper and more meaningful levels. However, as Gottfried states:

Lapine took what he called 'an anti-Bettelheim approach'. Inclined towards the theories of Carl Jung, he felt that fairy-tales too often offer false hope, the promise of a happy ending or better (worse), a happily *ever after* (Gottfried, 1993: 168).

Lapine wanted to move away from the Freudian implications of Bettelheim's work and yet some of Bettelheim's preoccupations are to be found in *Into the Woods*, particularly with reference to the characters of Jack and Little Red Ridinghood. For one of Bettelheim's contentions is that, 'Fairytale suggest that there comes a time when we learn what we have not known before – or, to put it psychoanalytically, to undo the repression of sex' (Bettelheim, 1995: 10).

That 'knowing what we have not known before' is a major concept in the treatment of both Jack and Little Red Ridinghood and Sondheim articulates their different reactions in 'Hello Little Girl' and 'I Know Things Now' sung by Wolf and Little Red Ridinghood and 'Giants in the Sky', which

Jack sings. The Wolf's motive, heard in the context of a sultry, blues-style of music, is blatantly sexual, couched in words which articulate the sensual relish of anticipating a meal:

Look at that flesh,
Pink and plump.
(To himself)
Hello, little girl ...

Tender and fresh,
Not one lump.
Hullo, little girl ...

This one's especially lush,
Delicious ...
Mmmmh.
(Act I, Sc. 2: 24)

However, when the Wolf addresses Little Red Ridinghood, the musical tone changes and takes on a light, melodic swing rhythm that is almost disarming. The language, too, shifts into a vocabulary that is innocent and redolent of a natural and sunny environment. It is obvious from Sondheim's words in the song that Bettelheim's book was a source reference for this episode. It is clear when we compare Bettelheim's quotation in the telling of the story, 'See how pretty the flowers are which are all around you. Why don't you look about. I believe you don't even hear how beautifully the little birds are singing' (Bettelheim, 1975: 175) with Sondheim's lines:

Hello, little girl,
What's your rush?
You're missing all the flowers.
The sun won't set for hours,
Take your time.
.....
But, slow, little girl,
Hark! and hush –
The birds are singing sweetly.
You'll miss the birds completely,
You're travelling so fleetly.
(Act I, Sc. 2: 25)

The Wolf's insouciant charm is balanced by the shameless relish with which he anticipates the contrast between the Granny and Red Ridinghood:

Think of those crisp,
 Aging bones,
 Then something fresh on the palate.
 Think of that scrumptious carnality
 Twice in one day –!
 There's no possible way
 To describe what you feel
 When you're talking to your meal!
 (Act 1, Sc. 2: 26)

The sexual subtext is present, yet never becomes distasteful. The use of the word 'carnality', with its fleshy and sexual connotations is modified by its juxtaposition to the word 'scrumptious', with its connotations of a passé, upperclass schoolboy appetite, reminiscent of the fictional English Billy Bunter character. There is also the near rhyming of 'palate' with 'carnality', which leaves the last syllable – tee – hanging over almost as a separate entity, which trips alliteratively off the tongue, to join the next word, so that what we hear is something approximating, 'Tee (tea) twice in one day'. The argument shifts with the Wolf next regarding Little Red Ridinghood as food and himself as someone merely following his natural instincts, which are to hunt. This disassociation from the carnal is successfully achieved by the Wolf's last gleeful declaration that he is talking to his 'meal'. We may compare it with the disassociation from cannibalism that Sondheim achieves in 'A Little Priest' in *Sweeney Todd*.

'I Know Things Now', which Red Ridinghood sings after her encounter with the Wolf, elucidates Bettelheim's statement that, 'Her fate tells us that trusting everybody's good intentions, *which seems so nice* (my italics), is really leaving oneself open to pitfalls' (1975: 172). This is true, but Sondheim goes further, for his Red Ridinghood learns from her experience, despite her inability, as a child, to articulate exactly what the encounter represents:

And he showed me things,
 Many beautiful things,
 That I hadn't thought to explore.
 They were off my path,
 So I never had dared.
 I had been so careful
 I never had cared.
 And he made me feel exited –
 Well, excited and scared.
 (Act I, Sc. 2: 35)

The 'dare' which children use, especially with each other, as a spur to experiment, is balanced by the word 'careful' – the adult admonition to all children. It creates a tension between the emotional responses of 'excited' and 'scared'. An experience, which may be beautiful, has a darker side when encountered in the context of burgeoning adolescence, innocent and inexperienced. So, Red Ridinghood uses metaphors with which she is familiar. The images of digestion which Red Ridinghood uses, without understanding their deeper implications, are the same as those of the Wolf, who is knowing and experienced:

But he drew me close
 And he swallowed me down,
 Down a dark slimy path
 Where lie secrets that I never want to know.
 (Act I, Sc. 2: 35)

The lines point up the predatory nature of sexual appetite, as well as reinforcing the physical journey of food down the alimentary canal. Sondheim allows the child to articulate what she has discovered in a line which artfully sums up Red Ridinghood's artlessness. She tells us, 'Nice is different than good' (Sc. 2: 35). The use of the word 'than', where in English 'from' would be clearer, is a telling example of Sondheim's ability to place exactly the right word in order to tell us something, and to tell us, also, about someone, for the phrase has an unsophisticated, unschooled simplicity. Her song ends as Red Ridinghood tries to come to terms with all that she has learned, attempting to balance her new knowledge with what is, after all, a loss, 'Isn't it nice to know a lot!... and a little bit not' (Sc. 2: 35). It is her new found knowledge, part of the growing-up process, which allows her to give the cape to the Baker, with a generosity of spirit that demonstrates her new maturity without rationalizing or recognizing it.

Cinderella, meanwhile, is following the precepts laid down by her parents and still unable to understand why they provide no satisfaction:

I've been good and I've been kind, Mother
 Doing only what I learned from you.
 Why then am I left behind, Mother,
 Is there something more that I should do?
 What is wrong with me, Mother?
 Something must be wrong.
 (Act I, Sc. 2: 22)

Even her Mother's warning, as she appears as a spirit in the tree, does not deflect Cinderella from her one simple desire, which is the main focus of her aspirations: the desire to go to the Festival. Although her Mother tries to lead Cinderella into an examination of the issues and to question her motives, Cinderella's desire is basic and not open to any searching insights, which would lead to a greater maturity, were she to consider the question which her Mother asks, 'Are you certain what you wish/Is what you want?' Cinderella's wish is answered in an arbitrary way by the unexpected appearance from above of a beautiful ball gown, equivalent to waving the magic wand.

When Cinderella eventually meets her Prince and is asked about him by the Baker's Wife, her response to him is immature and simplistic. He is 'a very nice Prince' and 'it's a very nice ball'. (Sc. 2: 37-8). Unlike Red Ridinghood, Cinderella has not yet discovered that nice is not the same as good. Her experiences at this time do not allow for any personal growth. They are really only moments that she does not know she is having, which is why, after meeting the Prince at the Ball, she does not know what to do:

Better run along home
And avoid a collision.
Even though they don't care,
You'll be better off there
Where there's nothing to choose,
So there's nothing to lose.

So you pry up your shoes.

Then from out of the blue,
And without any guide,
You know what your decision is,
Which is not to decide.

(Act I, Sc. 5: 63)

It is the ultimate irony that Cinderella's first decision, is not to decide anything at all. She just leaves her shoe on the steps and then stands back to see what will happen. She lacks the maturity of Dot in *Sunday in the Park with George* who understands the nature of choice:

I chose and my world was shaken –

So what?
 The choice may have been mistaken,
 The choosing was not.
 You have to move on.
 (Act II: 106)

Sondheim's lyrics throughout *Into the Woods* reinforce and reiterate themes which are initiated in the first Act. The Baker's Wife in 'Moments in the Woods' recapitulates, in a different way the themes that Cinderella has begun to address in her lyric. It is an additional irony that the speculations of the Baker's Wife are precipitated by her relationship with Cinderella's Prince. She, however, recognizes the difference between wishing and wanting:

First a witch, then a child.
 Then a Prince, then a moment –
 Who can live in the woods?
 And to get what you wish,
 Only just for a moment –
 These are dangerous woods ...

 Now I understand –
 (*Sigh, starts walking faster*)
 And it's time to leave the woods.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 113)

Lyrically and musically, Sondheim finds ways of linking the thematic material and the fragmentary 'ditties' and he does so in such a way that the dramatic potential is exploited and intensified. An example of this is seen in 'Agony', sung by the two Princes as a paean to their singular ability to suffer the pangs of unrequited love due to the inability of their respective ladies to recognize their unique attributes. Cinderella's Prince sings:

Am I not sensitive, clever.
 Well-mannered, considerate,
 Passionate, charming.
 As kind as I'm handsome.
 And heir to a throne?
 (Act I, Sc. 3: 48)

A little later, in 'It Takes Two' the Baker's Wife expresses her joy at seeing her husband blossom in the woods into a man who she can truly admire:

You've changed.
 You're thriving.
 There's something about the woods.
 Not just
 Surviving,
 You're blossoming in the woods.

At home I'd fear
 We'd stay the same forever.
 And then out here
 You're passionate, charming, considerate, clever –
 (Act I, Sc. 3: 55)

There is a subtle irony in that the Baker's Wife recognizes in her husband the real qualities which the Prince, in his hubris, ascribes to himself and which lead to the tryst between the Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince in the second Act. Musically, too, the phrases mirror each other in a rising scale:

BAKER'S WIFE:

You're pas-sion-ate, charm-ing, con-sid-er-ate, clev-er

(Vocal Score: 127)

CINDERELLA'S PRINCE:

Am I not sen-si-tive clev-er Well
 man-nered, con-sid-er-ate, Pas-sion-ate, charm-ing, As

(Vocal Score: 114)

With regard to the Baker and his Wife there is a double irony in that it is only when the Baker begins to compromise his moral position that his wife sees him as admirable. For the Baker's Wife the end, 'justifies/The beans' (Act I, Sc. 2: 31). It is a playful equivocation that, through laughter, dissipates any disapproving reaction to her moral stance, even so, at this point, the Baker is strongly against her reasoning:

WIFE:

If the thing you do
Is pure in intent,
If it's meant,
And it's just a little bent,
Does it matter?

BAKER:

Yes.

WIFE:

No, what matters is that
Everyone tells tiny lies –
What's important really is the size.

(Pause; no response)

Only three more tries
And we'll have our prize.
(Act I, Sc. 2: 30)

For a moment the Baker's Wife sounds almost like the disgruntled protagonists in *Assassins* ('Where's my prize? Sc. 15: 80), for whom, also, the ends justify the means. But, in *Into the Woods*, we are talking about degree: a question of size. As we have seen, the theft of the greens from the Witch's garden seems, on the surface, a trivial matter, but in fact the determinants and the subsequent consequences are great, as Sondheim addresses in 'Your Fault', where everyone tries to apportion blame to someone else. The fact of the matter is that, however insignificant an action, or however an action may be justified by quantifying its size as a determining factor, wrong is wrong. Perhaps the ultimate paradox is that when the Baker finally capitulates, it is almost possible to admire his unvarnished and unambiguous outburst. When his Wife patronizingly informs him that nobody would exchange a cow for a bean, the Baker snaps, 'Then steal it' (Act I, Sc. 5: 58). At the same time it is ironic that the Baker is only able to share with his Wife the responsibilities of the quest when he yields his moral superiority and recognizes that together they form a community. Thus the idea of a shared purpose, which the second Act of the piece holds up as an admirable and desirable eventuality, is here shown as advantageous even

when the motivation is suspect. As will be seen, the complexity of the thematic considerations are intricately developed in the music and the lyrics, while at the same time, they are propelled by a plot of ever increasing labyrinthine entanglements.

Reading the play we discover that the complexities of the plot are many and various. The Narrator does act as a way to keep the framework coherent and to impart information, so that, for example, when we first meet Rapunzel the Narrator has already explained the circumstances that have led to her being imprisoned in the tower. But there are other complications, besides the inherent complexity of the interwoven stories. The random appearances of the Mysterious Man are a case in point. Apart from the fact that the audience does not know who he really is until near the end of the play, his sudden entrances and apparently spontaneous riddles make his appearances seem arbitrary, at least at first. It is true that riddles are a tried and tested component of folk stories and fairy-tales. Many African stories use the device of a riddle to initiate a story and tales from Europe, of which *Rumpelstiltskin* is probably the best known, have riddles as the basis of the plot. So, for those familiar with the fairy-tale genre, these sporadic interludes with the Mysterious Man may not be problematic in terms of the dramatic structure. Likewise, the three occasions when the different characters in turn make seemingly cryptic-like statements can be seen as interpolatory intervals which reinforce the Mysterious Man's epigrammatic appearances, recalling the fairy-tale genre which is the inspiration for *Into the Woods*. It is also an opportunity for each character to remind the audience of each one's preoccupation, for every epigrammatic saying, couched in the form of a riddle, somehow addresses, in microcosm, a concern relevant to each. Thus the Princes' unrequited love is conjured up in their shared line, 'The harder to get, the better to have' (Act I, Sc. 2: 41), cryptic, at this point, as it is delivered before the song which particularizes their characters, while Jack's Mother and Little Red Ridinghood both enunciate thoughts which their actions have made clear, 'Slotted spoons don't hold much soup' and 'The prettier the flower, the farther from the path' (Act I, Sc. 2: 41).

Within the fairy-tale concept, one can accept the seemingly arbitrary appearances of the Mysterious Man, but he also fulfils another function which is to manipulate and advance the plot, in order to achieve his own ends, that of making amends for wrongs that he has done. So he suggests to Jack that his mother is asking too much for the cow and would be lucky to get a bag

of beans for her. In this way he paves the way for the apparent ease with which Jack relinquishes Milky-White. He takes the five gold pieces from the Baker when it seems that the money will distract the Baker from his quest and returns Milky-White to him after the animal has run off. He is active in persuading the Steward to return the golden slipper to the Baker's Wife and it is he who suggests the substitution of the ear of corn for the hair when the latter is deemed useless because the Witch has touched it. The Mysterious Man acts as a catalyst and impetus to the plot; most importantly, he becomes a central character in the development of the parent/child theme when it is revealed that he is the Baker's father. However, it is at that critical moment that the Mysterious Man collapses and dies and, as the Narrator tells us, 'The Mysterious Man died, having helped end the curse on his house. For the Baker there would be no reunion with his father, and he and his Wife, bewildered, returned home' (Act I, Sc. 6: 70). From a dramatic perspective his death precludes any further discussion of the parent/child theme as the storyline moves swiftly towards the end of Act I and we reach the point where, 'All that seemed wrong was now right, the kingdoms were filled with joy, and those who deserved to were certain to live a long and happy life' (Act I, Sc. 6: 74). The resolution of the parent/child theme is deferred till later in the play when the arbitrary reappearance of the Mysterious Man, surprising even the Baker, brings closure to their relationship:

BAKER:

I thought you were dead.

MYSTERIOUS MAN (*bright*):

Not completely. Are we ever
(Act II, Sc. 2: 123)

The twist in the plot that allows the deceased father to confront his son adds another dimension to the poignancy of Sondheim's lyrics in 'No More' and, as I have discussed (see pages 126-27), brings together all the different aspects of the child/parent relationship. Sondheim gives expression to their two different standpoints as the Baker and his father explore their hereditary bond. The simplicity and economy of the words and the evocative and haunting melody line combine to create a memorable and meaningful interlude.

It is true, however, that the Narrator's use of the word 'bewildered' is not without certain ironic implications with regard to the unfolding of the intricate plot. As I have noted, the use of the

fairy-tale genre allows for arbitrary events to be accepted with a willing suspension of disbelief. The 'waving of the magic wand' is a time-honoured device. It can, however, lead to a disjointed and ultimately wearing experience for an audience trying to keep up with the rapidly changing, and fragmented scenes. It is in this regard that Sondheim's contribution is of immeasurable import. Firstly, some of the songs in *Into the Woods* function in a similar way to the songs in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*: they act as respites giving the audience time to breathe before being swept up by the relentless machinations of the plot. Secondly, and more importantly, the songs reiterate and consolidate thematic considerations. Musical phrases and key words are repeated and expanded to create a unity and, what actors call, a 'through line'. Sometimes the plot progresses at such a pace that important information is conveyed to the audience with such dispatch that it becomes merely another 'happening'. As for example, when Jack's Mother appears to announce the event that will precipitate the action in the second half, 'There's a dead giant in my backyard' (Act I, Sc. 5: 66). Her news comes as an interpolation into a scene already filled with action and, given that the characters on stage are themselves not very interested in her news, it loses significance for the audience.

Banfield's scholarly work has drawn attention to many of the musical means by which Sondheim has found ways of guiding an audience. For example, he not only describes the use of the five note 'beans' motif and the chord which is used for the spell sequences, both of which are evident, even to non-musicologists, for they work on a dramatic level, but he dissects their musical structure to show how Sondheim uses particular structural archetypes to develop different thematic concerns. He describes the Witch's chord sequence thus:

Their basic formula is a five-pitch collection (the pentachord 0 1 3 4 7), perhaps most simply envisaged as a diminished triad erected above a tonic or pivot note (initially A) plus a first inversion major triad hanging below it, with the doubling of the upper E-flat and octave lower to produce the cluster of seconds at the bottom of the chord (1993: 395).

Banfield also admits that the first two 'spell' chords in the score do not conform to this very strict definition, but suggests that the data does support the, 'Intervallic properties from which Sondheim selects the chromatic sonorities that he particularly wishes to stress' (1993: 397). For the non-musicologist this technical description describes a chord which is somewhat atonal, ominous and menacing, and one which is recognizable to the audience, so that its frame of

reference can be identified and the emotional resonances reinforced. In the same way Banfield addresses the fact that the themes of light/dark, which occur in the piece, are distinguished musically by two very different styles of waltz. He describes 'The Last Midnight', for example, as a 'particular type of waltz, French and Ravelin in [its] *gymnopédie* rhythm and rich chordal texture' (1993: 400), which has dark overtones and contrasts with the romantic waltz style of 'Any Moment'.

Sondheim uses the music to reinforce the emotional and dramatic requirements of the lyrics. It is this complex interweaving of musical language and the spoken word which gives such depth and texture to his work. His technical skills are all employed to extend and intensify the artistic requirements of the dramatic context. Musical motifs are used as signposts, recognisable to the audience, establishing an emotional context and confirming or commenting on what has gone before, in the same way as lyrical references establish thematic connections through the piece. The use that Sondheim makes of the fragments and 'ditties' in *Into the Woods* to this effect may be clearly seen in an examination of 'Children Will Listen'.

The music and lyric first appears as an introductory fragment which leads into 'Stay With Me', sung by the Witch to her daughter, Rapunzel, after the Witch, discovering the young girl's affections for the Prince, fears that her daughter will leave her. The opening lines of the song, accompanied by sharp, stabbing chords, are an angry attack on Rapunzel for disobeying her mother:

What did I clear-ly say? Children must lis-ten. No, no, please!

(Vocal Score: 135)

The tone is aggressive and abrupt and the disciplinary power of the parent is firmly established, brooking no argument. At the same time, we can note how Sondheim inserts a simile which succinctly sums up the Witch's heartfelt chagrin over her own situation, thus confirming for the audience both her attitude and the underlying motive which drives her:

What have I been to you?
 What would you have me be?
 Handsome like a prince?
 (Act I, Sc. 5: 59)

It also refers back to Cinderella's Prince's words that he is 'kind as [he's] handsome' (Act I, Sc. 3:48). This aggressive and angry confrontation leads into a second, lyrical and elegiac section, the gist of 'Stay With Me', where the Witch, with a tenderness which is at the same time egotistical and self-centred, tries to keep Rapunzel in her power:

Don't you know what's out there in the world?
 Someone has to shield you from the world.
 Stay with me.

Princes wait there in the world, it's true.
 Princes, yes, but wolves and humans, too.
 Stay at home.

I am home.

Who out there could love you more than I?
 What out there that I could not supply?
 Stay with me.
 (Act I, Sc. 5: 60)

It is interesting that Sondheim subtly slips in the Witch's acknowledgements that as well as 'wolves' there are 'humans' to beware of, showing her awareness of the fact that she is not part of their world. By the time the Witch reiterates the same theme in the second scene of Act 2 her perspective has been modified by the events that have taken place. Now she has realised that children have minds of their own and are capable of rejecting a parent's advice regardless of the consequences. She laments:

24 25 26 3

No mat- ter what you say Chil- dren mon't lis- ten

27 28 29 3

No mat- ter what you know Chil- dren re-

30 31 32 33

fuse to learn

(Vocal Score: 212)

The beautiful and elegiac melody line provides an ironic counterpoint to the bitter tone of the Witch's words:

Guide them along the way,

Still they won't listen.
 Children can only grow
 From something you love

To something you lose
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 106)

At this point the fragment of song breaks off,⁶ and the audience is left with the Witch's response to this new realisation unexplained and, thus, unresolved. Instead, Sondheim ends with the heartbreaking word 'lose', suggesting not only that the Witch's emotion prevents her from continuing but, also, that there is nothing else that she can articulate at this moment as the Steward and Cinderella's Father return to the scene. It is only when the fragments of 'Children Will Listen' reappear in the last moments of *Into the Woods* that it becomes clear that both the Witch and the Baker have advanced along the path of learning and have discovered that the realities of the parent/child relationship are complicated and fraught with inherent misunderstandings. For it is not only that children do not listen, as they often do not, but that they do and the lessons that the parent would teach are often the wrong ones, fostered by the parent's own misconceptions, learnt from his own mother and father and life experience, that may have warped or distorted the parent's judgement. Likewise, if you want your children to stay, you must let them go and this process is often complicated not only by the intransigence of the parent but by the perversity of the child. These are the ideas which Sondheim articulates in the final moments of the play:

Children will listen,
 Careful the things you do,
 Children will see.
 And learn.

Children may not obey,
 But children will listen.
 Children will look to you
 For which way to turn,
 To learn what to be.

Careful⁷ before you say,
 'Listen to me.'
 Children will listen
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 136)

In the final analysis it is care that is needed on both sides as Sondheim with an admonitory insistence repeats the word in the Witch's last statement:

Careful the tale you tell.
That is the spell.
 Children will listen
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 136)

The spell which Sondheim writes of represents not only the magical fairy-tale world that has been the setting of *Into the Woods*, where the 'spell' cast by the Witch's mother precipitates all the action that follows, but also encompasses the other, old-world meaning of the word, pertinent to the theme, that of having to do with expressing words, written or spoken, and of explaining something in simple terms, the way in which parents address their children. So Sondheim fuses in one word the two central concepts, setting up an almost subliminal response, but one which is, I believe, a conscious choice on the part of the composer, indicative of a talent which goes beyond craft and becomes art.

Jack's song, 'Giants in the Sky', encompasses some of the same themes which preoccupy the writers of *Into the Woods*, exploring from a child's perspective the innocence of youth; the place of the child in the world of the parent and the acquirement of sexual awareness, though the lyric approaches the last with more subtlety than Little Red Ridinghood's slimy rite of passage. It begins as a light, patter song and develops into a ballad of soaring melody and pristine, unhackneyed imagery. The song begins with two stabbing chords and Jack's pronouncement that, 'There are giants in the sky!' (Act I, Sc. 3: 42). The lyrics and music then modulate into the style of a patter song as Jack, in words that epitomize his candour and simplicity, describes the sensation of feeling small when you are out in the tall world of adults. The giant that Jack confronts is:

A big tall terrible giant at the door,
 A big tall terrible lady giant sweeping the floor.

And she gives you food
 And she gives you rest
 And she draws you close
 To her giant breast,

And you know things now that you never knew before
 Not till the sky.
 (Act I, Sc. 3: 43)

The delicate nicety in the use of the word 'lady' to describe Jack's tall and terrible giant contains a multitude of associations that demonstrate Sondheim's ability to make each word as meaningful as is possible. It shows us Jack's naïvety and innocence, for the word 'lady' suggests refinement and superior social position, carrying with it no connotations of a sexual nature either in her appearance or in Jack's initial response to her. There is humour, too, in the image of a tall, terrible giant who is a lady and of a lady who, in a demonstration of unexpected domesticity, sweeps the floor. Moreover, Jack's simplicity endears him to the audience, so that we do not laugh at him, but smile at our recognition of the nature of childhood.

Unlike the threatening and invasive experience of Little Red Ridinghood, there is an element of nurturing in Jack's meeting with the giant, characterized by the use of phrases such as, 'And she gives you food/And she gives you rest'. It is only when the phrase, 'And she draws you close/To her giant breast' is reached that the sexual element that is an intrinsic part of Jack's experience is expressed. Again Sondheim takes a word 'giant' that he has just used in one context and extends its meaning by its juxtaposition to the word 'breast'. The similarity of Jack's experience to that of Little Red Ridinghood's is made explicit as Jack echoes the young girl's words:

And I know things now,
 Many valuable things,
 That I hadn't known before
 (Act I, Sc. 2: 34)

However, Jack's experience takes place not in the dark of the woods, but in the sky. It is the behaviour and motivation of the adult which influences the nature of the experience that both Jack and Little Red Ridinghood undergo.

If one contrasts an early version of 'Giants in the Sky' with the finished product, one can see Sondheim's creative and sensitive approach to expressing the character of the artist as truthfully as possible:

And I asked for food
 And I asked for rest
 And she saw me fed
 And she made me guest
 And she made a bed of her big soft giant breast
 Up in the sky
 (Banfield, 1993: 384)

The clumsy phrase, 'She made me guest' has been summarily dispensed with; the more precocious lines, where Jack takes the initiative, are transformed into the colloquial and statement-like pronouncements in the present tense, which have the effect of making the actions seem part of a normal situation: a statement of fact rather than of motivation. The giant gives to 'you', not only to Jack. The sexual subtext is made less explicit with the excision of the additional adjectives describing the giant's breast and the use of the present tense makes Jack's experience more immediate. Finally, there is the change in the last line and the grammatical leap as 'Up in the sky' becomes 'Not till the sky'. Here Sondheim brilliantly changes the situation from a place to a condition, so that we see not an isolated incident in one boy's life, but are made aware that what is being described is a rite of passage that everyone experiences. So, too, the Witch's line, 'I am home' (Act I, Sc. 5: 60) suggests that the essence of 'home' is embodied in the mother figure and is the condition rather than the person. It is the kind of poetic transference that works best in the context of a lyric and sounds unpretentious and honest.

Bettelheim speaks of the male giant figure in the fairy-tale as representing, on the oral level, the jealous ogre who wants to devour the child (1976: 192). It is an interesting inversion that Jack's giant in *Into the Woods* should be perceived as a female, who is able to initiate Jack into an experience which is seen as positive, yet still retains elements of the primary response to ogres. So, Jack's ultimate reaction is not only to see giants as 'terrible' and 'scary', but also as 'awesome' and 'wonderful'. It may be fortuitous that the word 'awesome' has become a popular epithet among the younger generation and so is perfectly natural coming from the mouth of the youthful Jack. Still, its original sense of inspiring reverence can be deduced from the tone and style of the song, reinforcing our perception of Jack's experience as being meaningful and positive.

Like Cinderella, Jack's reaction to what he has experienced is coloured by the fact that what is learnt in the process can make one aware of the virtue of the mundane. Cinderella eventually

admits to her Prince, 'My father's house was a nightmare. Your house was a dream. Now I want something in-between' (Act II, Sc. 2: 128). Jack, also, has reservations:

The roof, the house, and your mother at the door.
 The roof, the house, and the world you never thought to explore.
 And you think of all the things you've seen,
 And you wish that you could live in between,
 And you're back again,
 Only different than before
 After the sky.
 (Act I, Sc. 3: 44)

Jack can see both the security of the parent, represented by his mother standing at the door, and the outside world of exploration and growth. It is the ambivalent state, in between the desire for freedom and the desire for security, that seems most desirable, yet unattainable. For every new experience brings change, and there can be no going back, there is only the hope that we will all, 'Live happily every after'.

* * * * *

So it is, in the manner of fairy-tales, that by the end of the first Act all the protagonists have achieved their aims and each gets his or her just desserts, even if, as Sondheim says, they have had to, 'Cheat a little, or lie a little, or huckster a little' (Zadan, 1990: 388). The Baker and his Wife have had the curse reversed; Cinderella has found her Prince; Rapunzel chooses her independence and her tears restore her Prince's sight; Jack has Milky-White returned to him; the Witch has been restored to beauty, (though in the way of fairy-tales she has sacrificed her power and, witch-like, departs in a huff); the Mysterious Man has expired, but not before feeling that he has fulfilled his desire to repair the relationship with his son and the wicked Step-sisters are blinded by pigeons as a just reward for their cruelty to Cinderella. The characters celebrate their good fortune and their success in their endeavours, blithely and unthinkingly accepting their happy circumstances:

Though it's fearful,
 Though it's deep, though it's dark,
 And though you may lose the path,

Though you may encounter wolves,
 You mustn't stop,
 You mustn't swerve,
 You mustn't ponder,
 You have to act!
 When you know your wish,
 If you want your wish,
 You can have your wish,
 But you can't just wish –
 No, to get your wish
 You go into the woods,
 (Act I, Sc. 6: 77)

and, hopefully, you live happily ever after.

Certainly, the euphoria of the characters on stage does present the audience with a feeling of watching the fulfilment of the protagonists' dreams, despite the unresolved issues that exist: the presence of a dead giant in the backyard; the fact that the Baker and his Wife have, as yet, only the promise of the consummation of their dream, pregnant though she may be; the appearance of a giant beanstalk as the curtain descends and the categorical statement of the Narrator that the show is to be continued. What are a few loose ends in what is, after all, a fairy-tale? It does seem as if the journey is over and for the audience, this suggestion that all is ended can be confusing. The reaction is not that of, 'What is going to happen next?' but rather, 'What can happen next?'. At a performance of *Into the Woods* I overheard the following, 'Do they do more stories – different ones on the next act?'⁸

There is another problem, also involving audience perception, of which the authors were not aware until after they started working on the production. As Zadan writes:

Lapine admits his biggest surprise was that the audience was not as familiar with the actual fairy-tales as he had originally imagined they would be, so a lot of time had to be spent telling the details of those stories in a prologue (1990: 340).

It is not surprising, considering the Eurocentric nature of the source material, that an American or African audience would not find it as easy to follow the intricate interweaving of the various stories as an audience with a background of growing up with these old and familiar tales as part of their heritage. Certainly, in performance, an ingrained knowledge of the stories makes it much

easier for the audience to respond. The appearance of the two Princes is a case in point. Their unrequited love for Cinderella and Rapunzel respectively is established in their first rendition of 'Agony' (Act 1, Sc. 3: 47-48). The quasi-operatic, pseudo-romantic style of the music, gives to the song a tone of false heroics which reinforces the bathos of some of the lines whilst inflating the Princes' overweening pride and egotism:

RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE:

Agony!
Far more painful than yours,
When you know she would go with you,
If there only were doors.

BOTH:

Agony!
Oh the torture they teach.

CINDERELLA'S PRINCE:

What's as intriguing –

RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE:

Or half so fatiguing –

BOTH:

As what's out of reach?
(Act I, Sc. 3: 48)

Rapunzel's Prince has begun the lyric with a first line that situates his love as 'high in a tower' and it is with these same words that Cinderella's Prince opens the version of the song that occurs in the second Act of *Into the Woods*. By now the Princes have become disillusioned by their first loves and have become enamoured of two other fairy-tale heroines. When asked what exactly he is doing in the woods again, Cinderella's Prince tells his brother:

High in a tower –
Like yours was, but higher
A beauty asleep.
All round the tower
A thicket of briar
A hundred feet deep.
(Act II, Sc. 2: 96)

For an audience with a knowledge of fairy-tales, the implication of the Prince's words needs no explanation and the intrinsic humour is extended, for those to whom the references are clear, as Rapunzel's Prince describes his new found fancy:

I've found a casket
 Entirely of glass –
(As Cinderella's Prince starts to protest)
 No, it's unbreakable.
 Inside – don't ask it –
 A maiden, alas,
 Just as unwakeable –
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 96)

The objects of the Princes' desire are only obvious though to those familiar with the fairy-tales, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. What is interesting in 'Agony', however, is how Sondheim utilizes broken rhythms and anticipated beats to carry through the conversational thought processes of the two Princes, which lead into the extended melody of the romantic chorus. Moreover, Sondheim, perhaps aware of the fact that an audience might not be so familiar with the initial fairy-tale references, adds extra information within the lyrics: Rapunzel's Prince's new love has 'skin white as snow' and, moreover, there is a dwarf guarding the maiden.

It is an example of Sondheim's confident mastery of his art that he is able to include a witty, and seeming non-sequitur, into the lyrics. Cinderella's Prince is held in contempt for being scared by the sight of blood and in retaliation taunts Rapunzel's Prince for being intimidated by a dwarf:

CINDERELLA'S PRINCE:
 Yes, but even one prick –
 It's my thing about blood.
 RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE:
 Well, it's sick!
 CINDERELLA'S PRINCE:
 It's no sicker
 Than your thing with dwarves.
 RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE:
 Dwarfs.
 CINDERELLA'S PRINCE:
 Dwarfs ...
 RAPUNZEL'S PRINCE:
 Dwarfs are very upsetting.
 (Act II, Sc. 3: 97-98)

It may appear banal that two Princes should be afraid of such things, yet it shows how we can be prevented from action by our phobias and fears and illustrates the converse of what we have seen

in the other characters who act, even when their actions are the result of suspect moral standards. The inability of the Princes to pursue their dreams is summed up neatly by the last line, 'Ah, well, back to my wife'. It is an ironic echo of the last line of the first version of 'Agony', where their desires did lead to an active response, both deciding that, 'I must have her to wife' (Act I, Sc. 3: 49).

As can be seen, the plot of *Into the Woods* is both complex and, to some degree problematic, both by virtue of its intertwined stories and the nature of the genre from which they are developed. Frank Rich, writing in the New York Times describes the audience as being 'jolted' back into the second Act of the show:

This time not to cope with pubescent traumas symbolized by bean stalks and carnivorous wolves but with such adult catastrophes as unrequited passion, moral cowardice, smashed marriages and the death of loved ones (1987: 17).

I would suggest that the events which are instrumental in developing some of these very themes have, in fact, been stated in the first Act. However, it is true that what Sondheim has spoken of as the main theme of the piece has not as yet been introduced. It is only with the introduction of the Giant's vengeful wife that the theme of community responsibility is introduced.

Initially, however, the second Act begins in exactly the same way as does the first. It follows the same musical and lyrical structure and single words define the changed situation. They are small, but critical changes as, in the most economical way, Sondheim reintroduces us to the characters:

ACT I

NARRATOR:

Once upon a time –

Once upon a time –

(Music, sharp and steady. Light on Cinderella.)

CINDERELLA:

I wish ...

NARRATOR:

– in a far-off kingdom –

ACT II

Once upon a time –

(Music)

– later –

I wish ...

In the same far-off kingdom –

CINDERELLA:

More than anything ...

More than anything ...

NARRATOR:

lived a young maiden –

– lived a young Princess –

CINDERELLA:

More than life

More than life ...

NARRATOR:

– a sad young lad –

– the lad Jack –

*(Light on Jack and the cow)**(Light on Jack)*

CINDERELLA:

More than jewels ...

More than footmen ...

JACK:

I wish ...

I wish ...

NARRATOR:

– and a childless baker –

– and the baker and his family –

*(Act I, Sc. 1: 3)**(Act II, Sc. 1: 83-4)*

The Narrator informs us that, 'Despite minor inconveniences, they were all content' (Act II, Sc. 1: 85). Indeed, their happiness seems banal, as even the hapless Stepsisters and the Stepmother, carol their joy in harmony, together with Cinderella, Cinderella's Prince, Jack and Jack's Mother also proclaiming their delight, joined by the Baker and his Wife. The music, too, with its repetitive phrases echoes the routine triteness of the words, though there is an edge to the music with the use of the semi-tone intervals in the harmonies:

14 15

He're so hap- py you're so hap- py

He're so hap- py you're so hap- py

16 17

Just as long as you stay hap- py

Just as long as you stay hap- py

(Vocal Score: 181)

Their desire to be perfect in whatever role they aspire to is reminiscent of the mythical world which Dr Pangloss and his pupils inhabit in *Candide*, and one which is just as unsustainable.

The euphoric community which is shown at the beginning of the second Act of *Into the Woods* is summarily cut short by the destruction wreaked by the Giant's Wife approaching to take her revenge. There is a very precise stage direction in the text which instructs us that, 'We should be momentarily uncertain as to whether there has truly been an accident on stage' (Act II, Sc. 1: 88). If this is more than just a theatrical trick to shock the audience, the most logical explanation is that it is an attempt by the authors to involve the audience in the emotional trauma of the characters on stage. In so doing, the audience then shares in the experience, making us all part of the action and reminding us that no man is an island, everything is shared. If this is so, then it would appear to be a deliberate device to postulate the concept of community involvement and its natural consequence, community responsibility. However, this is a theme which, up to this point, has not been articulated beyond the mutual mobilization of the Baker and the Baker's Wife. It is, ironically, the Witch who first suggests this particular theme when she reminds the Baker and his Wife that, 'With a giant, we'll all have to go to battle' (Act II, Sc. 1: 89-90). Sondheim parallels the musical style of the 'Rap' with which he first introduced the Witch in the first Act as she complains, once more, about this new destruction of her garden and tells both the Baker and his Wife, and the audience, that there is only one kind of creature which could produce such damage. Using this parallel structure and setting a sense of familiarity is achieved. It is here, though, that Sondheim and Lapine radically alter the original fairytale of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in order to create a protagonist whose intervention in the story will allow them to develop the theme which interested Sondheim – that of community responsibility.

Now it would seem that there is no reason why a story cannot or should not be altered for dramatic purposes. For example, the leaving of the slipper by Cinderella differs from the original story where the slipper is lost in the panic of flight. However, this involves a change in motivation and does not alter the ongoing plot. It does, however, allow Sondheim to explore the subconscious reasoning behind Cinderella's action and use it to illuminate her character and her fear of reaching out beyond the familiar to some new experience. It is an exploration which complements Bettelheim's own examination of fairy-tales as addressing the rites of passage of

a child to adulthood. However, the plot of 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in *Into the Woods* goes beyond any of the original versions that exist⁹ as the Giant's wife, who in earlier versions is either not mentioned, or plays a very secondary role, is brought to the forefront of the story. She appears to avenge her husband's death, and in so doing unite all the protagonists in opposing her. It goes far beyond the Tabard version of 1804 regarded as the primary source for later versions. In this story, Jack obtains the beans from a crafty butcher.¹⁰ When the beans grow, Jack climbs to the top of beanstalk where he meets a fairy who tells him that the Giant who lives there is the person who has killed Jack's father and stolen all his possessions. Jack then takes the hen, the gold and the golden harp and eventually avenges his father by killing the Giant. So the story ends. It may also be noted that the original version gives Jack a moral basis for killing the Giant, which does not exist in *Into the Woods*. Indeed, Jack's motives are anything but acceptable. As he himself admits, 'The fun is done/You steal what you can and run' (Act I, Sc. 3: 43). He is quite naïvely brazen about the fact that he has stolen the hen and it is childish bravado that makes him go back to steal the harp to prove to Red Ridinghood that he hasn't lied about his exploits. As a result, ironically, it is the Giant's Wife who occupies the high moral ground as she now assumes the position, held by Jack in the original version, of having a motive for revenge. The Giant's Wife articulates her point of view clearly and succinctly:

And who destroyed my house? That boy asked for shelter and then he stole our gold, our hen, and our harp. Then he killed my husband. I must avenge the wrongdoings.

(Act II: Sc. 2: 100-101)

The introduction of the Giant's Wife, then, is a radical departure from the traditional tale. Even for those who do not know the intricacies of Jack's escapades, everyone knows that Jack kills the Giant and that is the end of the story. Bettelheim states that, 'The true meaning and impact of a fairy-tale can be appreciated, its enchantment can be experienced, only from the story in its original form' (1975: 19).

It is a fact, however, that fairy-tales may be used as a basis to explore another perspective and with a different purpose. Such an example are the *Revolt Rhymes* of Roald Dahl.¹¹ Written and published in the early Eighties, this well-known author of the macabre takes some popular fairy-tales and in robust rhyming couplets provides us with an alternative reading that is laced

with cynicism and black humour. I found some similarities of characterization in the work of both Dahl and the Sondheim and Lapine collaboration, though neither Sondheim nor Lapine were familiar with Dahl's work at the time of writing *Into the Woods*.¹² Indeed, anyone with an anarchic sense of humour could very well approach the same contrary oppositions of character that are to be found in both works.

As I have discussed, Sondheim and Lapine both had ideas about what they wanted to achieve in using the fairy-tales. However, if Bettelheim's statement is accepted, then it follows that any radical departure from the original material will weaken the overall impact of the stories and dissipate the underlying meaning which gives the tales their strength. So another means must be found to give the piece a unity of purpose and an integrity of spirit. In *Into the Woods* these are evinced in the music and the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim. The musical motifs bind the kaleidoscopic areas of the action into a homogeneous entity and the lyrics, with their use of repeated verbal references and Sondheim's ability to suggest deeper meaning in the simplest of language, consolidate the emotional connections that link the characters. Nevertheless, because the theme of community responsibility is developed by the means of an invented plot, it is, I believe, the least successfully articulated of all the themes that *Into the Woods* addresses.

The theme of community responsibility, within the framework of the fairy-tale genre, seems a very modern preoccupation. It lends itself to a modern vocabulary, which is why a phrase such as, 'Join the group', sung by the Baker's Wife in one of the most personal, intimate and, at the same time, most philosophical of songs, 'Moments in the Woods', jars. We need only compare her heartfelt:

Back to life, back to sense,
 Back to child, back to husband
 No one lives in the woods.
 There are vows, there are ties,
 There are needs ...

with

Face the facts, find the boy,
 Join the group, stop the giant –
 Just get out of these woods.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 112)

The euphonious balance in the first two lines, with the triple repetition of the word 'back' is sacrificed in the second quotation, where the repetition of 'face' and 'find' is suspended to accommodate a phrase which evokes nothing more than the notion of group therapy, more plausible in a work such as *Company* or *Merrily We Roll Along* than *Into the Woods*. Even the linking of 'join' with 'just' in the next line, does not balance the simple rightness of the preceding lines. Lapine, whose writing includes such delicate exchanges as,

BAKER:

We'll just have to find Granny's house without the path.

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD(*Crying*):

But Mother warned me never to stray from the path!

BAKER:

The path has strayed from you,
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 99)

avails himself of current idiom to express the theme of community responsibility when the Narrator explains that, 'There was no *consensus* (my italics) among them as to what course of action to take' (Act II, Sc. 2: 101).

It is not that the themes already articulated in the first Act are neglected, rather that, with the introduction of a new plot, a new thematic consideration is also added. Even though the topical theme of community responsibility would seem to engage our sensibilities, it is those established in the first Act which demonstrate the complex humanity of the characters and draw us to them. We respond to the Baker's happiness at having achieved his desire to have a son and are sympathetic as his joy is tempered by his nervousness on holding his child:

BAKER (*Edgy*):

Why does he always cry when I hold him.

WIFE:

Babies cry. He's fine. You needn't hold him as if he were so fragile.

BAKER:

He wants his mother. Here.

Baker carefully passes baby back to his Wife; baby stops crying.

WIFE:

I can't take care of him all the time!

BAKER:

I will take care of him ... when he's older.

(Act II, Sc. 1: 87)

It is the perfectly understandable reaction of one not used to holding a child, yet it underlines the difficulties inherent in the parent/child relationship. So Jack's declaration that he is now a man; his Mother's inability to recognize his growth (Act II, Sc.1: 91) and the Witch's insensitive response to Rapunzel's trials and tribulations (Act II, Sc. 2: 95) also reiterate the theme of growth and the journey towards maturity. It is with a sense of release that we respond to the re-appearance of the two Princes returning us to the musical familiarity of 'Agony'. It is, as noted, no mere reprise, for Sondheim develops the lyrical references he has established in the first Act which brings back the fairy-tale ethos. This interlude with the Princes is followed by a scene which, to a large extent justifies Frank Rich's criticism that, 'The characters are at such frantic mercy of the plot that they never gather the substance required to make us care as we must, about their Act II dilemmas of conscience, connectedness and loss' (1989: 17). In this scene, all the characters articulate their own response to the situation. Each one attacking another's point of view or justifying his or her own action. So the Narrator absolves himself of responsibility by declaring, 'Sorry, I tell the story, I'm not part of it' (Act II, Sc. 2: 102). Yet this is a misnomer, for in this Act the Narrator's role is extended from that of a simple story-teller to one who comments on the actions of the characters. As they start to quarrel he remarks, 'You must understand, these were not people familiar with making choices – their past experiences in the woods had in no way prepared them to deal with a force *this* great' (Act II, Sc. 2: 101). He clarifies the actions of the characters, now involved in articulating various aspects of the theme of community responsibility. So the Steward justifies the attack on Jack's Mother, which causes her death, saying, 'If it was up to you, a decision would never be made' (Act II, Sc. 2: 103); in this scene, too, the Baker states, 'We have to stay here and find our way out of this together' and the Giant, referring to Jack stealing her possessions and causing the death of her husband, tells them, 'He was your responsibility'.

It is only after Rapunzel's death, when the Witch reiterates the concept of parental guidance, that the emotional engagement, of the earlier themes returns and the established thematic issues re-emerge. The thematic considerations of 'Children Will Listen' have been addressed (see pages 146-48) but it may also be noted that the music is as deceptively simple as the lyric. It consists of one musical phrase, with subtle variations in the rhythmic structure and various changes in pitch at the end of each phrase, to create a haunting melody that seems to mirror the endless repetition of the human phenomenon that Sondheim is describing:

24 No mat- ter what you say, 25 26 Chil- dren won't lis- ten.

27 28 29 No mat- ter what you know, 30 Chil- dren re-

31 32 fuse to learn.

33 34 35 Guide them a- long the way.

36 37 38 Still they won't lis- ten. Chil- dren can on- ly grow.

39 40 41 From some- thing you love To

42 43 some- thing you lose.

It is in the early themes of *Into the Woods* that the ideas of conscience, connectedness and loss which Rich describes are to be found, and in their continued dissemination that the work finds its strength. So in this second Act, despite the confusion and chaos which the introduction of the Giant's wife has created, it is the scenes which carry through the original themes which engage the audience and, in my opinion, keep the musical on course. The scene between the Baker's Wife and Cinderella's Prince is more than the amusing number that Gottfried would have us believe it to be:

Amusing as this number is, it is incidental to the action and it does not carry much force. In fact the second act has already begun to loosen, if not unravel entirely.

(1993: 180)

Rather than being incidental to the action, this scene (which opens with the Prince's attempted seduction of the Baker's Wife and is then interrupted by a short dialogue section where Cinderella is helped by the Baker – a dramatic irony in the context of what is happening to his Wife – leading into the Prince's cavalier exit) is a continuation of the action in the first Act, and shows us the Baker's Wife growing and maturing in her perceptions of herself and the world as she recognizes what is moral and real.

'Moments in the Woods' is musically and lyrically an inspired, sage and acute examination of the multiplicity of moments that make up the experience of a lifetime. As the Baker's Wife attempts to articulate the ever subtly-shifting points of reality which constitute a life, there is a real understanding of the minutiae of experience and the seemingly small changes and choices that, taken together, foster growth and are themselves the growing experience. The Prince facetiously proclaims that, 'Every moment is of moment/When you're in the woods' (Act II, Sc. 2: 106) and it is something that the Baker's Wife comes to realize is true of all life.

The song begins with the Baker's Wife expressing naïve, yet delighted, amazement that she should be the recipient of a Prince's attention. The lyrics are set to a light and charming waltz that reinforces her giddy happiness:

Was that me?
Was that him?

Did a Prince really kiss me?
 And kiss me?
 And kiss me?
 And did I kiss him back?
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 111)

Her guilelessness the tone is reminiscent of her girlish interest in Cinderella's experiences at the Ball:

CINDERELLA:

Oh, it's still a nice Ball

WIFE:

Yes -? And -?

CINDERELLA:

And -

They have far too much food.

WIFE:

No the Prince -

CINDERELLA:

Oh, the Prince ...

WIFE:

Yes, the Prince!

.....
 CINDERELLA:

Now I'm being pursued.

WIFE:

Yes? And -

CINDERELLA:

And I'm not in the mood

I have no experience with Princes and castles and gowns.

WIFE:

Nonsense, every girl dreams.

(Act I, Sc. 3: 52)

The Baker's Wife's progression towards a more mature point of view is made through a series of parallel phrases that are direct and simple; their contrapuntal nature, even while seeming to balance each other, creates a tension in the lyrics that suggests a complexity belied by the simplicity of the vocabulary, which is almost monosyllabic:

Was it wrong?
 Am I mad?
 Is that all?

Does he miss me?
 Was he suddenly
 Getting bored with me?
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 111)

Words such as 'beseeming', 'plain' and 'grand' give the song a folksy simplicity and an underlying sense of old fashioned precepts and modes of behaviour, which the Baker's Wife herself holds up as the prescription for behaviour which is not only acceptable, but moral:

Back to life, back to sense,
 Back to child, back to husband,
 No one lives in the woods.
 There are vows, there are ties,
 There are needs, there are standards,
 There are shouldn'ts and shoulds.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 112)

As the Baker's Wife enumerates the things that must be, so the music becomes more determined and less romantic in flavour. However, the ambivalence which she feels is expressed by her recognition that life is made up of small choices, each in itself separate yet, in the choosing, setting in motion events which make up a life. Her plaintive question, 'Is it always "or"?'/Is it never "and"?' crystallizes the dilemma in which she finds herself. Finally, the tryst becomes a learning experience for the Baker's Wife, a moment when she recognizes what is right:

Just remembering you've had an 'and',
 When you're back to 'or',
 Makes the 'or' mean more
 Than it did before.
 Now I understand –
(Sighs, starts walking faster)
 And it's time to leave the woods.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 113)

Eventually, the Baker's Wife is able to see the Prince for what he really is. In the same way Cinderella, having experienced the life she had, and the life she wished for, is able to recognize the choice which is right for her, 'My father's house was a nightmare. Your house was a dream. Now I want something in-between. Please go' (Act II, Sc. 2: 128). As well as linking thematic material, 'Moments in the Woods' is an intensely personal number and its allusions and references

are examined through the unique personality of the Baker's Wife. Perhaps, for this reason, the lyrical references to the theme of community action seem intrusive and out of place.

It is just after she reaches a personal resolution that the Baker's Wife becomes one of the Lady Giant's victims. Gordon in her book *Art Isn't Easy, The Theatre of Stephen Sondheim* notes, in negating it, that it has been suggested that the Baker's Wife's death is a just retribution for infidelity, 'Despite certain accusations to the contrary, I do not think that this death is intended to be a retribution for her adultery' (1992: 312). It is not a view suggested by anything in the text, and certainly not one which is supported by the fairy-tale genre through which the story of *Into the Woods* is developed. At the very least, her death is the casual illustration of just one more unexpected moment such as one does find in that genre, 'and' she returns home, 'or' she dies and, at most, a dramatically inspired decision which affords the Baker the opportunity to assume the full parental role, having lacked a father in his own life. In this way the Baker, too, grows and matures, as does his Wife and Cinderella.

If, as I believe, the theme of community responsibility and action diffuses the more meaningful themes set up in the first Act, and does to a certain extent create confusion as Gottfried has suggested, then as a corollary, that confusion is nowhere more cleverly articulated than in the mutual castigation which makes up the song 'Your Fault'. It is a brilliantly conceived number where the relentless pace dramatically elucidates the frantic attempts to abrogate responsibility and ends in a climactic cacophony of overlapping recriminations, as each of the characters accuses the others:

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD:

Wait a minute—!

CINDERELLA:

If you hadn't dared him to—

BAKER (*To Jack*):

And you had left the harp alone,

We wouldn't be in trouble

In the first place!

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD (*To Cinderella, overlapping*):

Well, if you hadn't thrown away the bean

In the first place—!

It was your fault!

CINDERELLA (*Looking at Witch*):

Well, if she hadn't raised them in the first place—!

JACK (*Overlapping, to Witch*):

Well, if you hadn't raised them in the first place—!

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD, BAKER (*To Witch*):

Right! It's you who raised them in the first place—!

CINDERELLA (*Simultaneously*):

You raised the beans in the first place!

JACK:

It's *your* fault!

CINDERELLA, JACK, LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD, BAKER:

You're responsible!

You're the one to blame!

It's your fault!

(Act II, Sc. 2: 119-20)

The Witch's entrance, which cuts short this exchange, effectively introduces the last section of the piece, where Sondheim and Lapine are faced with the task of resolving the themes which have been addressed in *Into the Woods*. It is a demanding and delicate exercise, and one which Sondheim undertakes with unshrinking bravura in 'Last Midnight'. Zadan quotes Rocco Landesman, one of the show's producers, as saying:

But it was really the Witch's last song that frustrated us the most. We kept hoping that it would be a brand new, incredible number that would bring the evening together. I don't think Steve was ever all that happy with it either. The new song, 'Last Midnight', never landed. And Jim was anguished by it, too (1990: 350).

'Last Midnight' was derived from an earlier number, 'Boom Squish', which, it was felt, did not show enough range in either emotion or colour (see Zadan: 349). To a certain extent the re-worked number does succeed in elucidating and bringing together some of the preoccupations of *Into the Woods*. However, it is not entirely successful.

The song starts with the Witch reminding us that time is running out: it is now the third and final midnight. She bitterly refers to the misdemeanours, so seemingly unimportant, which have led them to the present situation. The Baker's Wife's 'little bent' and the Baker's 'just a little cloak' are ironically replayed in the Witch's:

Told a little lie,
 Stole a little gold,
 Broke a little vow,
 Did you?
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 120)

There is a cynical disillusionment in her reference to 'little vow', with its contradiction of degree, recalling the Baker's Wife's defining experience in the woods. The Witch continues to reiterate all the things that have been done in order to achieve their ends:

Had to get your Prince,
 Had to get your cow,
 Had to get your wish,
 Doesn't matter how.

It is a direct and uncompromising confrontation and, in contrast to the other characters, the Witch, although not part of their world, is the only one prepared to take responsibility and act to save the situation. It makes her in some ways a more admirable character, even though the solution, as she sees it, is to hand Jack over to the Giant's vengeful wife. When Cinderella protests, the Witch's response is even more damning; her words echoing and distorting the preoccupations which Cinderella addressed in the opening scene of the piece (see pp. 122-23).

It is singularly ironic, and not a little disconcerting, that her individual stand should contrast radically with the idea of community action, which the other characters have been espousing as an admirable alternative. Within the fairy-tale genre, the Witch's solution is perfectly acceptable. Furthermore, her next words effectively address the negative aspects of the parent/child relationship as being a depressingly repetitive situation that cannot be changed:

You're all liars and thieves,
 Like his father,
 Like his son will be, too –
 Oh, why bother?
 You'll just do what you do.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 121)

Her attitude is a direct antithesis of the plea for justice that Portia, for example, makes in *The Merchant of Venice* as she pursues the concept of retribution in the legal sense.

In a frenzy of anger and frustration the Witch starts throwing the beans which have caused all the problems at the feet of the other characters and her final curse is that they should all be 'separate and alone'. Then, in the final lines, we learn, at last, that the Witch's punishment for losing the beans in the first place had been her metamorphosis into the archetypal ugliness of a Witch.

There is no denying that the sweeping drive of the music, which, as we have noted, Banfield describes as a particular blend of waltzes, dark and light, sustains the neurotic energy of the song. The 'bean' motif is used to punctuate her frenzied and broken phrases and a similarity to her first 'rap' song can be heard in the words and rhythm of 'Doesn't matter how -/Anyway, it doesn't matter now' (p. 120). There is a disturbing pathos as the Witch, now a grown woman, anticipates being punished again by her Mother.

Yet, for all this, the parts are greater than the sum of the whole song. It may be that the driving energy of the song distracts us from the exact nature and importance of what the Witch is actually saying. The resolution of the mystery of the Witch's punishment, for example, is of great import in terms of the plot. Delivered, as it is, on the rising crescendo leading to the climax of the number, an audience does not have time to absorb it. Also, for a performer, the final lines are problematic. The sophistication of the music seems at odds with the almost slang colloquialism of a line such as, 'Just away from this bunch' and the rhyming of the final three lines, in a song designed to explore more deeply the Witch's character and psyche seems simplistic:

172 173 174 175

bunch, And the gloom----- And the doom-----

176 177 178 179

And the Boom-----

180 181 182

Cruuuuunch!-----

(Vocal Score: 250)

It is important to note that the word 'Cruuunch', which ends the song in the published text is almost unintelligible in both the Broadway and the London original cast recordings, where the word, which in the score is not written to be sung, disintegrates into a blood curdling scream. Thus, the Witch's 'Boom-/Squish' and 'Boom-/Splat' which feature in the song, and are themselves variations of the Witch's 'Boom Crunch' when she steps on a bug, do not find their natural resolution (or, as it would be described in song-writing terms, the 'hook') at the end of the number with 'Boom-/Crunch'. Instead, as I have noted, the word is lost in the extended scream before the final chord – a not entirely satisfactory finale, as the line, 'And the boom' seems to

hang suspended, whilst the connotations of destruction, implied in the whole phrase, are lost.

The departure of the Witch, with her impotent curse ringing in our ears, leaves the other characters, not separate and alone, but beginning to admit culpability and responsibility for their actions. The unexpected, and arbitrary appearance of the Mysterious Man opens the way for Sondheim to explore, and attempt to resolve, one of the main themes of *Into the Woods*, the parent/child relationship:

BAKER:

I thought you were dead.

MYSTERIOUS MAN (*Bright*):

Not completely. Are we ever?

BAKER (*Cold*):

As far as I'm concerned, you are.

MYSTERIOUS MAN:

Is that true?

BAKER:

It's because of you all of this happened.

MYSTERIOUS MAN:

I strayed into the garden to give your mother a gift. And I foolishly took some of those beans for myself. How was I to know? How are we ever to know? And when she died, I ran from my guilt. And now, aren't you making the same mistake?

(Act II, Sc. 2: 123)

The implications of 'No More' have been discussed previously (see pp. 126-27) and, suffice to say, the number has the same emotional honesty and integrity as are to be experienced when listening to Walter Houston sing 'September Song', where the sense of loss is balanced by the feeling of fulfilment.

In the gradual realization which follows, the characters begin to plan, together, how to destroy the Giant's Wife. In 'No One is Alone' Sondheim addresses both the theme of the continual presence of the parental figure, even after death, and the idea of community responsibility and sharing. But dealing with these two themes leads to the number developing on two quite distinct emotional levels. It starts with Cinderella epitomizing the second thematic idea by caring for Little Red Ridinghood, who is literally on her own, having been separated from her mother during the catastrophic rampage of the Giant, yet implying that, despite the mother's physical absence, Little

Red Ridinghood has not been deserted. But the number moves lyrically from the idea of personal connection to the more general suggestion that:

CINDERELLA/BAKER:

Someone is on your side.

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD/JACK:

Our side.

CINDERELLA/BAKER:

Our side –

Someone else is not.

While we're seeing our side –

LITTLE RED RIDINGHOOD/JACK:

Our side –

ALL:

Maybe we forgot:

They are not alone.

No one is alone.

(Act II, Sc. 2: 131-2)

The rather jaunty repetition of 'our side' with its simple cadences, lacks the emotional profundity demonstrated when the concept that no one is alone is advocated on the personal level. When in 'Children Will Listen' the Baker's Wife reprises the melody of 'No One is Alone' as, returning from the grave, her voice is heard comforting and giving courage to her husband, the thematic considerations merge with the personal experience to concentrate the meaning and our response to it. By using almost the same words as those spoken by Cinderella Sondheim links the two characters thematically, showing the growth which has occurred in each during their sojourn in the woods:

CINDERELLA

Sometimes people leave you

Halfway through the wood.

Others may deceive you.

You decide what's good.

You decide alone.

But no one is alone.

(Act II, Sc. 2: 128-9)

THE BAKER'S WIFE

Sometimes people leave you

Halfway through the wood.

Do not let it grieve you.

No one leaves for good.

You are not alone.

No one is alone.

(Act II, Sc. 2: 135)

Perhaps it is because these themes have been established through the entire work that they carry more weight, and the musical references and the lyrical connections are more developed and

more mature. When the Witch reappears and an extended version of 'Children Will Listen' is sung not only by the Witch, but also by the Baker, we can recognize how both have learned something about the parental role, something which they did not know before their journey into the woods. Sondheim is able to borrow from all the previous situations and text to write lyrics which resonate with the extended meanings which the development of the piece has provided. So we find such words as:

Careful the wish you make,
 Wishes are children.
 Careful the path they take –
 Wishes come true,
 Not free.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 136)

Every word can be referred back both literally, and metaphorically, to specific characters or themes whilst, in the context of the developing situation, Sondheim, in the succinct, 'Wishes are children', succeeds in bringing together the word which embodies the inspiration which drives the plot 'wishes' and the theme, which, for me, is at the heart of *Into the Woods*, the guidance and development of children in relation to the parent. The same undertones, as I have noted, found in the word 'spell'.

As all the characters gather together, they return once again to the 'jaunty' melody of *Into the Woods*, and articulate the lessons which have been learned by all of them:

Into the woods, but not too fast
 Or what you wish you lose at last.
 Into the woods, but mind the past.
 Into the woods, but mind the future.
 Into the woods, but not to stray,
 Or tempt the wolf or steal from the giant.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 137)

But this awareness of the lessons which have been learned is followed by four lines where bathos creeps in as, once again, the theme of community action is expressed in the trite:

The way is dark,

The light is dim,
 But now there's you,
 Me, her and him.
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 137)

Despite my contention that *Into the Woods* is not intrinsically about community responsibility and the references to that theme seem awkward in the lyrics, the deeply personal ideas which constitute the main thrust of the piece are satisfying and lovingly developed. It is a deeply human work, despite being based on a genre which usually deals in archetypes: characters, which as Bettelheim says, are 'typical' rather than 'unique' (see 1975: 8). Sondheim's music, although developed in fragments, is his most accessible; simple and melodic, yet capable of a strong romantic, even elegiac, quality in such numbers as 'Children Will Listen' and 'No More'. His lyrics in these songs are elliptical, yet simple; uncomplicated, yet complex. To a very large degree the plot is given coherence and continuity by the use of the repetition of musical motifs, and lyrical references. *Into the Woods* is as intricately plotted as a farce, but unlike *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, the musical numbers, fragments and entire songs, do not act solely as respites to the action, but are rather the connecting medium that links all the pieces of the multiple story lines.

As is the way of all fairy-tales, *Into the Woods* end seems to be heading for the anticipated 'happy ever after'. But their confident assertion is qualified by the very last chorus:

Into the woods,
 Into the woods,
 Into the woods,
 Then out of the woods –
 And happy ever after!
 (Act II, Sc. 2: 1⁵38)

In these words sung, characteristically, by Cinderella the certainty and the simplicity are undone, 'I wish ...', she plaintively, yet hopefully, carols.

This is, after all, a Sondheim musical.

Endnotes:

1. James Lapine is a director and author whose first New York production was *Photograph*, a collage of Gertrude Stein. In 1980 he directed his own script *Table Settings*. He came to prominence with his direction of *March of the Falsettos*, written by William Finn. He wrote and directed *Twelve Dreams* for the New York Shakespeare Festival which Stephen Sondheim saw and which impressed him. A fortuitous phone call, some months later, in 1982 from producer Lewis Allen led to the first collaboration between Sondheim and Lapine in *Sunday in the Park with George*.
2. Andre Bishop, artistic director of Playwrights Horizons, facilitated the development of *Into the Woods* as he had done for *Sunday in the Park with George*. Playwrights Horizons also saw the genesis of *Assassins*.
3. It has been noted by Richard Bruno, in a Study Guide for the *Into the Woods* Company, that Lapine has used the presence of a child in everyone of his productions, whether as director or author or both.
4. Martin Gottfried (1993: 168) also notes a similarity, though he believes that a more conscious reference is 'Heigh-Ho, Heigh-Ho (It's Off to Work We Go)' from Walt Disney's *Snow White*. This is, of course, not a traditional nursery rhyme, to which I think Sondheim would be more naturally drawn as a frame of reference.
5. It is one of the reasons why Sondheim, although respecting his talent, has reservations about the work of Lorenz Hart. His criticism shows very clearly Sondheim's own approach to his work as we see from this extract quoted in *Platform Papers*:

My objection to Larry Hart is that he's sloppy, that the words do not sit on the music and that he changes syntax to make the rhyme I don't think he worked very hard That doesn't mean he wasn't immensely talented, but as somebody who really sweats over lyrics, I resent that. Obviously, the quality of his lyrics, that kind of world-weary, heart-on-sleeve and yet urban-tough flavour is something that has influenced lyric writers ever since, certainly all conversational lyricists. I just wish he were neater (1993: 5).

6. An extra verse, paralleling the verse in 'Stay With Me' is inserted in the Broadway cast recording, extending the length of the song. I personally prefer the shorter version found in the published text and in the London recording. The additional verse seems extraneous as everything that needs to be said by the Witch is expressed in the plaintive reworking of 'Children Will Listen'. The additional lines are as follows:

Now you know what's out there in the world,
 No one can prepare you for the world,
 Even I.
 How could I, who loved you as you were?
 How could I have shielded you from her
 (*Looks up where the Giant retreated*)

Or them ...

(Looks at Baker's Wife, Little Red Ridinghood, Stepmother and stepsisters).

7. The words 'careful' is one which Sondheim introduces earlier in *Into the Woods*, but is used in the context of a child's perspective. Little Red Ridinghood's 'I know Things Now' suggests that risk-taking is a necessary part of a child's development and that being careful, or too careful, can stunt the child's growth towards maturity (see p. 18).
8. The remark was overheard at Northview School in Johannesburg. In Southern Africa the opportunities to see stage performances of Sondheim's work are very limited. There have been two productions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Candide*, and a production several years ago of *Side By Side By Sondheim*. Though there are various videos available, they do not have the same immediacy and do not afford one the undiluted pleasure of experiencing a live theatre production. However, in June of 1994 a High School in the Northern Suburbs of Johannesburg mounted a production of *Into the Woods*. It was the first such production, either amateur or professional in the country. And it provided some very valuable insights into the show. In 1995 a splendid production of *Into the Woods* was performed by students of Musical Theatre at the Technikon in Pretoria, which encouraged a professional mounting of the show in Cape Town in 1997. The adventurous Technikon students also produced a sparkling *Candide* in October of 1997. Until recent years most published literature available for children in South Africa has been Eurocentric in origin, though now ethnic children's stories relevant to Africa's cultural heritage are available. But fairy-tales of European origin are well known in South Africa.
9. Since the first half of the 18th Century a version called *Jack Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean* was in circulation. This version told the story of a boy named Jack who climbed a magic beanstalk and met an ancient Fairy. The Fairy is transformed into a beautiful Princess whom Jack marries. Eventually he kills a Giant and becomes Emperor of the world. Another version of the tale by Joseph Jacobs tells almost the same story without the inclusion of the fairy. It has been suggested that the fairy's inclusion was in fact a later addition to the story in order to give the story a moral basis that was not apparent in earlier versions and that, therefore, Jacob's version predates both *Jack Spriggins and the Enchanted Bean* and the Tabard version. However, Jacobs was born in 1854 and the Tabard versions, with its attendant moral basis is the most likely source, published as it was as early as 1804.
10. Lapine's script makes a 'jokey' reference to a butcher, which suggests that he was, indeed, familiar with the original version. It raises the question of why the original idea of Jack's motivation was omitted and, also, why the character of the Butcher was changed to that of the Baker. So in Act I, Sc. 1:90:

NARRATOR:

And so, the baker proceeded to the castle, but not before visiting Jack and his mother.

(Music continues; knock on Jack's door; Baker enters)

JACK:

Look, Milky White. Its the butcher.

BAKER:

The baker.

JACK:

The baker ...

11. Cinderella for example is portrayed as a spoilt young girl, who shrieks, 'I want a dress! I want a coach!//And earrings and a diamond brooch!' (p. 5) but ends up disillusioned, after watching her Prince chop off the heads of her ugly sisters, and wishes for an 'in-between' finale, 'This time I shall be more wary./No more Princes, no more money. I have had my taste of honey./I'm wishing for a decent man' (p. 10). Little Red Ridinghood is compared with her Granny by the Wolf who states, 'Compared with her old Grand-mamma/She's going to taste like caviar' (p. 32). The little girl displays the same monstrously forthright and quite unnerving self-possession as *Into the Woods's* young protagonist, for as the Wolf prepares to eat her, 'One eyelid flickers./She whips a pistol from her knickers./She aims it at the creature's head/And *bang bang*, she shoots him dead' (p. 32). Later she is seen by the Narrator, who expresses surprise at the change, for, 'No cloak of red,/No silly hood upon her head./She said, 'Hello, and do please not/My lovely furry wolfskin coat' (p. 32). *Jack and the Beanstalk* propagates the virtue of bathing as it is only when Jack is clean that the Giant cannot smell him and in order to prove this Dahl has Jack's Mother die at the Giant's hands because she isn't clean enough. (Roald Dahl's *Revoltng Rhymes*, 1982. Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y.).
12. Letter from Stephen Sondheim (August 8 1996), 'No, Jim and I were not familiar with Dahl's book.'

ASSASSINS

The project which was to evolve into *Assassins* was first performed at a private reading for authors at Playwrights Horizons on June 19 1989. The author of the book was John Weidman,¹ with whom Sondheim had worked on *Pacific Overtures* from its inception in 1974 until it opened on Broadway in 1976. Nearly five years later, Weidman came to Sondheim with another project, a musical about Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations. Sondheim's imagination was not captured by this somewhat arcane subject but he remembered a play he had once read by Charles Gilbert which had dealt with the assassination of an American president. There had been aspects of that work which had appealed to Sondheim and he approached Gilbert, asking his permission to use this idea. Gilbert acquiesced and the musical *Assassins* evolved from there.

By the time of the first reading at Playwrights Horizons there was no more than a 'first draft script and two of its ten anticipated songs completed' (Zadan 1990: 382). Six months later, on December 18 1990, the show previewed at Playwrights Horizons and on January 27 1991 it officially opened at the same venue. The director was Jerry Zaks and the musical direction was undertaken by Paul Gemignani, who has worked on many Sondheim shows, including *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into The Woods*.

Assassins continued a new direction in the development of Sondheim's work as both his previous pieces, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into The Woods*, both written in collaboration with James Lapine,² had their genesis at Playwrights Horizons. Under the auspices of this off-Broadway non-profit organization both musicals had been developed through a series of workshopped readings and performances. It was a new departure for Sondheim who had, up until then, worked within the confines and constraints of the Broadway milieu. It offered more freedom, at least in the early stages, to experiment with and develop an original work. As Sondheim said of *Sunday in the Park with George* at the time of its development, 'This is not a way station to Broadway.... It is a work in progress' (Zadan 1990: 300).

The subject of *Assassins* is the assassinations and attempted assassinations of Presidents of the United States of America. It begins with the assassination of Abraham Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth and includes the assassination of James Garfield by Charles Guiteau; the assassination of John F. Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald; that of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz and the

attempted assassinations of Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan by Samuel Byck, Lynette Fromme (whose attempt to kill Ford was followed by a second attempt by Sara Jane Moore) and John Hinckley respectively. The writers also include the attempted assassination of one President-elect, Franklin D. Roosevelt, by Giuseppe Zangara. However, *Assassins* does not set out to be a straightforward historical depiction, but is an imaginative re-creation to place the perpetrators within the context of American consciousness and culture.

The subject matter alone would be an eccentric and difficult one on which to base a dramatic work. Given its closeness to the darker side of the American psyche, it is a dangerous, even perverse, subject for a musical. Sondheim, quoted in the *New York Times*, was aware that, 'There are always people who think that certain subjects are not right for musicals I remember that there was a letter of protest when Rodgers and Hammerstein's *South Pacific* opened that said, "How dare they write a musical about miscegenation?"' (Rothstein 1991: 5). Throughout his career Sondheim has never avoided tackling subjects considered unsuitable for musical theatre: cultural and colonial domination in *Pacific Overtures*; the nature of the artist in *Sunday in the Park With George*; cannibalism in *Sweeney Todd*, (though this was not, as I have shown, the motivating theme of the piece). Given Sondheim's well known penchant for puzzles and games, it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility to surmise an arcane, intellectual caprice underlies his choice of subject. Ned Sherrin has observed, 'I think he has a perverse determination not to conform, or an inclination that sometimes seems perverse' (Jones 1990: 24). However, I believe that Sondheim's well documented integrity, substantiated by the overwhelming respect for and desire to emulate Oscar Hammerstein II who, in Sondheim's youth, stood *in loco parentis*, mitigate against such a suggestion. As Gottfried states, 'Stephen Sondheim once described Oscar Hammerstein II as "a moral man", a brief and awesome description' (1993: 186).³ The integrity and honesty which Sondheim admired in Hammerstein's work, apart from his admiration of his personal qualities, are two of the characteristics which inform his own lyrics. They are qualities which give his work strength and profundity, without losing the subtleties and anomalies which he articulates through, and are inherent in, his use of words.

The assumption that Sondheim was truly interested in the subject itself is borne out by his own

reaction to Gilbert's play *Assassins*, 'I looked at the title and I thought, "What a great idea for a musical"' (Rothstein 1991: 5). However, what is most pertinent within the context of Sondheim's approach to lyric writing, is that it was some of Gilbert's source material which sparked Sondheim's interest, 'There was a poem that Charles Guiteau wrote on the day of his execution, which began, "I am going to the Lordy." In fact I quote two lines of it in one of my songs. That poem and the letters and diaries, was what was most interesting about it' (Rothstein 1991: 5). In discussing *Assassins* with Rothstein, Sondheim unequivocally reiterated another of the underlying tenets that enforce and give texture to his lyrics. He was determined, as he says in the same interview, that *Assassins* would be 'built around character, around people who had something in common'.

However, it is very clear that even if Sondheim was motivated by interest in the subject, as well as a genuine belief that it provided a substantial basis for a musical, the subject matter was, by its very nature, a sensitive one. It was also one which suggested a controversial view of the American dream and Weidman is quoted as saying:

While these individuals are, to say the least, peculiar – taken as a group they are peculiarly American. And behind the variety of motives which they articulated for their murderous outbursts, they share a common purpose: a desperate desire to reconcile intolerable feelings of impotence with an inflamed and malignant sense of entitlement (Bishop 1991: X).

Assassins, which raises questions about the accessibility and righteousness of the American dream, strikes a nerve that *Sweeney Todd* and *Pacific Overtures*, separated by time and oceans, do not. The American dream, as embodied in the constitution and disseminated to the point that the very words 'American dream' conjure up the ideals of opportunity and success, characterizes a continent where anything is possible. A country described in *The Great Gatsby* as one that 'had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of human dreams, for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath ... face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder' (Fitzgerald 1950: 171).

The idea of the American dream has filtered through the collective American subconscious to the point where to be believed it does not even need to be consciously articulated. It is as Fitzgerald

wrote, an 'elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost worlds' that pervades the American psyche and culture. It is also a subject which has been addressed by popular novelists such as Scott Turow,⁴ as well as playwrights such as Edward Albee.

However, the dream's righteousness, as an idea to be pursued, is one thing, its accessibility is another thing entirely. For the latter is dependent on opportunity, character, luck, ability, as well as being limited, in some cases, by restrictions imposed by certain sectors of society. It is a fact that Kennedy's elevation to the Presidency was characterized by his being the first Roman Catholic President and, moreover, one of Irish extraction. It is also true that his death is deeply buried in the collective subconscious of millions of people, for his death defined an era in the sense that his assassination brought to an end the 'Camelot' years. The flowerpower age of innocence ended on November 22 1963 – the day that Kennedy died.

One interprets or re-defines an historical event of such magnitude – an event still shrouded in mystery and conjecture – with more than customary discretion. Of course, what Weidman and Sondheim were creating was not history. As Gottfried describes, it is, 'A dark vaudeville about the nature of our country and the American spirit. *Assassins* is an examination of the richness of our myths and the dangers in depending on them for personal fulfilment' (1993: 183).

Apart from the particular sensitivity of the subject of Kennedy's assassination, I believe it is the inheritance implied by the American dream and subscribed to in *Assassins*, that arouses resistance to the work. There is a suggestion that the collective feeling of disempowerment, manifested by the protagonists in *Assassins*, is a result of the failure of the American culture and society to provide them with the environment which permits them to realize their aspirations. Moreover, they believe that beyond the ability to aspire to all the benefits of the American dream, they are guaranteed them as their inalienable right. Furthermore, these premises are presented as being deeply ingrained in the American philosophy and culture and insinuate a collective responsibility for the failure of the society to support them and, as such, the assassins are, 'As much a product of our culture as the famous leaders they attempted to kill' (Gordon 1992: 318). Their actions derive from feelings of impotency, inadequacy and anger that the culture, within which they live, fails to deliver that to which they feel they are entitled and, more importantly, feel they have been

led to expect. They all want to know, 'Where's my prize?' (Sc. 15: 82). In discussing *Assassins* these implications must be addressed in the ways that they affect our response to the musical.

If we are convinced of the work's dramatic integrity and its coherent presentation of the authors' intentions, can we say that the musical succeeds regardless of the validity of the premise on which it is based? Is the validity of the premise, *per se*, an important factor to take into consideration when examining the play in that, if one disagrees, it may create a resistance in the receptivity of an audience? Could the authors' own commitment to the premise create a tension in the piece itself which undermines the cohesive exposition of a single viewpoint?

What is very clear from one's first introduction to the piece, is that Weidman and Sondheim have created a work that is quintessentially American. This is not only because of the nature of the subject matter. It is the result of the particular way Sondheim uses language, reinforced by musical connotations, to create a specific cultural vocabulary, which is, I believe, one of the great achievements of *Assassins*. The language complements the styles of music that are unmistakably American. The vocabulary evokes the authentic cadences and tone of the period in which each incident takes place.

To take one example, the music of 'The Ballad of Booth' (Act I, Sc. 2) begins in a relaxed style, appropriate to a contemporary performer. It then changes to an old-fashioned folk tune, reminiscent of the American West of the nineteenth century, an era which has itself become mythologized in its presentation. As he begins to tell the story of John Wilkes Booth and his assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Sondheim's lyrics are also couched in an old fashioned vernacular:

Johnny Booth was a handsome devil,
Got up in his rings and fancy silks.
Had him a temper, but kept it level.
Everybody called him Wilkes.

(Sc. 2: 16)

The use of the diminutive, 'Johnny' rather than the more formal 'John' evokes memories of similar songs, such as, 'When Johnnie Comes Marching Home' or the Irish ballad, 'Danny Boy'. The

audience relaxes as it hears the familiar idiom and the traditional musical form. However, the Balladeer's attitude to Wilkes is not without its ambiguities for his use of the familiar 'Johnny' can be seen both as patronizing as well as affectionate. So, too, the phrase 'handsome devil' supports connotations of admiration as well as of a certain contempt, suggested by the disdainful phrase 'got up', which characterizes Wilkes as a vain showman. The quaintly old-fashioned associations of 'rings and fancy silks' place Wilkes firmly in the past, as does the inversion of 'had him' which is used instead of the more prosaic and modern 'he had'. It is interesting to note that, although the twentieth-century Balladeer calls him 'Johnny', everybody else (so he says) refers to him as 'Wilkes'. Again the words suggest an ambiguity for, referring to Booth by his second name suggests a certain formality – distinct from the Balladeer's 'Johnny' – which could imply either respect or dismissive contempt. The ambiguities of Wilkes's character are suggested, as well as the implication that the Balladeer's modern perspective may be different from that of Booth's contemporaries. The apparent simplicity of these four lines disguises a complexity which is both specific and subtle whilst the music, which is hummable and almost a cliché of the happy-go-lucky folk song genre, masks that complexity.

John- ny Booth was a hand- some dev- il,

Got up in his rings and fan- cy

silks, Had him a ten- per but kept it lev- el

Ev'-ry-bod-y called him Wilkes

(Vocal Score 25-26)

Every word is relevant, yet redolent of connotations as allusive as they can be elusive. It must not be forgotten that Sondheim is a dramatic lyricist: not only does each word add to the final picture, but the dramatic context of each song adds depth and subtext to the words and makes our responses to the musical more complex and meaningful. The apparent banality of the lyrics of the love song 'Unworthy of Your Love', sung by Hinckley and Squeaky Fromme demonstrates this. Hinckley sings:

I would swim oceans
 I would move mountains,
 I would do anything for you.
 What do you want me to do?
 (Sc. 10: 59)

Fromme responds:

I am unworthy of your love,
 Charlie darlin',
 I have done nothing for your love,
 Let me be worthy of your love,
 Set you free.
 (Sc. 10: 59)

There appears to be hardly any more substance in these lyrics than in any teenage pop song from

the fifties onward, for example:

I don't care just what they say
 'Cos forever I will pray,
 You and I will be as free
 As the birds up in the trees,
 Oh please stay by me, Diana.
 (Anka: 1957)⁵

But whereas the words quoted here mean only what they say, Sondheim uses the context of his words within the musical to create dramatic irony, tension and complexity. It is 'who' is singing the words that defines our response and gives meaning and subtext to the scene. In *Assassins* it is the dichotomy between what we know of the characters and our emotional response to the medium in which the character is presented that creates a dramatic tension and a feeling of distortion. Sondheim takes the dramatic moment and uses his own artistic imagination to overlay a scene with resonances and ambiguities. It is the same technique that Sondheim uses in *Sweeney Todd* when Tobias sings the romantic and lyrical 'Not While I'm Around' to Mrs Lovett. In *Assassins*, Hinckley's object of desire is Jodie Foster, an unattainable star whom Hinckley terrorized by telling her that his attempt to kill Reagan was performed in order to impress her. But his lyrics are set in a style of music which is not only familiar, but is almost a signature evoking specific images. In this case it recalls the lightweight, emotionally simple pop song which promotes uncomplicated, youthful puppy-love and romance, imbued with no dark passions or deep thoughts, reminiscent of a past and simpler era. In *Assassins* Fromme's seemingly innocent and simple yearnings are addressed to Charlie Manson. Manson, the depraved cult leader, was a former 'flower child' who had, at one time, written lyrics for the Beach Boys.⁶

By setting their romantic aspirations in the banal pop ballad idiom, Sondheim effectively comments on the characters themselves. Fromme's words are her truth, implying an unquestioning acceptance of the form and ethos they represent. They are couched in the adolescent vocabulary of a popular song, but darker resonances may be deduced by virtue of the character of the person to whom they are addressed. Their immaturity is shown by the childishness that the two characters exhibit in their bickering 'no, you can't, yes I can' exchange at the beginning of the scene:

FROMME:

That's a picture of a movie star.

HINCKLEY:

So?

FROMME:

You don't know any movie star. You wrote that yourself.

HINCKLEY:

What if I did?! I've been to her dorm! I call her up! I've seen her movie sixteen times!

(Fromme takes out a tattered newspaper clipping)

FROMME:

See this guy? I'm his girlfriend. I kiss him. I fuck him. I do stuff for him you wouldn't even understand. Does she do that for you? Does she kiss you? And fuck you? And –

HINCKLEY:

Get out of here!

FROMME:

You don't have a girlfriend!

HINCKLEY:

GET OUT!

FROMME:

Fruit ...

(Sc. 10: 58)

Their childish repartee is reiterated in the closing lyrics where Hinckley and Fromme express their emotions in words which are far removed from the stereotypical language usually associated with the musical idiom in which they are couched. It is a gross distortion of the trite daydream transformed into a nightmare; but at the same time their deepest emotions are presented as an ongoing attempt to outdo each other:

HINCKLEY:

I would come take you from your life ...

FROMME:

I would come take you from your cell ...

HINCKLEY:

You would be queen to me, not wife ...

FROMME:

I would crawl belly-deep through hell ...

HINCKLEY:

Baby, I'd die for you.

FROMME:

Baby, I'd die for you.

(Sc. 10-60)

Their emotion is fuelled not only by passion but by immaturity, yet the images are powerful. Fromme asks her lover to 'take my blood and my body', words which echo those spoken at the most powerful and meaningful moments in the rite of Holy Communion. This is followed by the phrase, 'Let me drink poison', reminiscent of a youthful, passionate Juliet. They introduce a jarring dissonance indicative of the insane impulse that motivates them both, but the weight and gravity of the situation is both trivialized and exacerbated by the childish impulses which their characters display.

Sondheim has used musical styles of a bygone era to evoke a sense of period before, most extensively in *Follies*, but in *Assassins* he goes beyond musical pastiche. It is a complex interweaving of music and lyrics which challenges our unconditional acceptance of the familiar and makes us re-evaluate our response to what, at first, seems to be no more than a clichéd use of a particular style. Sondheim does so without distorting the musical frame of reference. It is to his use of lyrics that we are directed as he creates a tension between our deeply rooted emotional response to certain styles of music and what the intention behind the lyrics suggests. Moreover, the tone of the lyrics is derived from the character of the protagonist, supporting and developing Weidman's *dramatis personae*, as demonstrated in the scene between Hinckley and Fromme.

In the same way, a song in the style of a barber-shop quartet, redolent with images of harmonious, small-town warmth and friendship, is the vehicle for describing the making and the power of a gun:

And all you have to do
 Is
 Squeeze your little finger.
 Ease your little finger back –
 (They click the triggers)
 You can change the world.
 (Sc. 7: 47)

Sondheim's penchant for suggesting that a small action can precipitate major repercussions surfaces again, using here the same imagery as is employed in *Into The Woods*:

You move just a finger,
 Say the slightest word,
 Something's bound to linger,
 Be heard.
 (Act II: 130)

Weidman's book introduces characters in a way that disavows historical reality and in so doing produces a phantasmagoric world that exists beyond recognizable and accepted parameters. Sondheim's music supports and reinforces Weidman's milieu by the way he challenges our clichéd response to something which seems familiar but is used in a way that redefines our perceptions and leaves us with an uneasy sense of being out of tune and out of time, as is evident in the Fromme and Hinckley scene. So, too, Sondheim's lyrics suggest conflicting or contradictory points of view presenting us with a world which is not as simple or straightforward as it seems. In this world the disaffected and disenchanting protagonists, introduced in a way that transcends the historical reality of time and place, come together, becoming more than a collection of singular misfits, but as those who may be described as, 'Confused and tragic people who are profoundly convinced that they are abused heroes, patriots who have been wrongly and unfairly denied the American rewards' (Gottfried 1993: 184-85). This is the world of *Assassins*: a world which is placed, significantly, in a shooting gallery in a fair-ground – long cherished as a venue demonstrating the American population's craving for entertainment. It is the one entertainment, however, which focuses on the American predilection for guns.

The show is episodic in structure as each protagonist is introduced in song or revue-type sketches. The manipulation of historical events, which allows characters from different eras to interact, reaches a climax in the last confrontation as all the characters urge Lee Harvey Oswald to give them credibility and stature by killing Kennedy. The dramatic device of having the other assassins translate Zangara's impassioned plea is a brilliant theatrical contrivance:

GUITEAU:

(Translating) But through you and your act, we dare to hope ...

MOORE:

(Translating) Through you and your act we are revived and given meaning ...

CZOLGOSZ:

(Translating) Our lives, our acts are given meaning ...

HINCKLEY:

(Translating) Our frustrations fall away ...

BYCK:

(Translating) Our fondest dreams come true ...

FROMME:

(Translating) Today we are reborn, through you ...
(Sc. 16: 100)

The cumulative effect is that of a Greek chorus and in this scene the assassins are transformed from a rag-bag collection of individuals into a unified collective which suggests a whole way of thinking. These people become a coherent group that is 'peculiarly American'.

The frustrations and dreams of these characters, which lead to the final confrontation, are addressed by the proprietor of the Shooting Gallery in the first scene of the play. He is insistent that:

Everybody's
Got the right
To be happy.
(Sc. 1: 7)

Yet, almost simultaneously, the right of the individual is also promoted:

Everybody's
Got the right
To be different,
Even though
At times they go
To extremes.
(Sc. 1: 9)

This seems to be propagating two mutually exclusive ideas. The right of everyone to be happy implies a common goal, a basis for collective action which is undermined by a corresponding right to be different, to be able to assert the, 'I am what I am'⁷ insistence on individuality. This would seem contradiction enough, but there are more antithetic statements within the dramatic context of the scene. For the Proprietor's words that everyone is allowed to be different take on a cynical and mocking tone when seen in context, for he sings these words as Byck enters

wearing a Santa Claus suit and carrying a sign that reads, 'All I want for Christmas is my constitutional right'. The mockery is reinforced by the lyrical reference to a childish, comic, Christmas ditty whose first line is, 'All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth'. There is also the implication of double standards – that the establishment discriminates against foreigners and therefore they have a just grudge against society – at the same time there is the suggestion that such people are themselves ridiculous and immature. These shifts in values are repeated throughout *Assassins*, as are the ways in which the characters are presented to the audience from different standpoints either in the way they appear to others, how others perceive them and how they see themselves. As I have noted, in Sondheim's subtle use of lyrics in the Balladeer's narrative folk-song, words are used to suggest more than one meaning in a way that supports an 'Alice in Wonderland' logic. Indeed, when examining Sondheim's lyrics it often appears that he has taken the words of Carroll's Duchess to heart, and used them to define his treatment of the characters in *Assassins*:

Be what you would seem to be – or if you'd like to put it more simply – Never imagine yourself not to be otherwise than what it might appear to others that what you were or might have been was not otherwise than what you had been would have appeared to them to be otherwise (Carroll 1991: 89).

As I will demonstrate, the internal logic which Weidman's book imposes is reinforced by Sondheim's music. It is the music more than anything else which defines the pervasive American milieu. Even when the lyrics force us to re-evaluate our initial emotional response to the musical frame of reference, those musical forms entrench the American cultural background to which they belong. It is the lyrics which tease and redirect our response by their ambivalence or two-edged appositeness. It is the lyrics whose understated irony and complexity suggest that trying to categorize these very disparate individuals as a homogenous group may be an oversimplification. Yet at the same time, the ever-shifting view point in the lyrics, the way in which they modify our response to the emotional weight of the music, serves to endorse Weidman's world where nothing is as it seems.

The Proprietor's opening words to the passers-by set the tone for *Assassins*. He draws people into his world much as the wedding guest in Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* is drawn into the world of the old sailor. As the show opens, with the fair-ground music that is a variation on 'Hail to the

Chief, the Proprietor addresses each would-be assassin as he or she approaches. The firing range is a dramatically expedient metaphor for what we are about to see in the show. Yet the setting in a fair-ground with its connotations of fun and parochial enjoyment serves to disarm the audience as the insouciant beat of the easy blues rhythm, to which the Proprietor's words are set, lulls us into a feeling that this is all familiar and safe. His words are direct and couched in inviting and amiable language, with no sense of urgency or drama:

Hey, pal – feelin' blue?
 Don't know what to do?
 Hey, pal –
 (Czolgosz looks up)
 I mean you –
 Yeah,
 (Sc. 1: 6)

But at this point, in a sudden and unexpected musical and lyric shift, the next line is disconcerting, 'C'mere and kill a President'. The words are supported by a corresponding musical change as the accompaniment shifts from the gently insinuating rhythms which have been established to hard staccato chords that evoke a raunchy amorality:

Hey, pal, I mean you -yeah! C-

here & kill a pres- i- dent.

(Vocal Score: 6)

But here, too, the ambivalence is reinforced in a stage direction which states that, as the Proprietor sings these words, a sign reading, 'Hit the Prez' [*sic*] lights up on stage. So the menacing effect of the words and the music's sudden seriousness is dissipated by irreverence of the visual cue on stage. In the space of four lines the audience is taken from comfortable acceptance, to horror and then to laughter by a highly manipulative and artful combination of words, music and stagecraft. These abrupt shifts in mood jolt the audience from complacency to the realization that something more complex than the setting and the musical references lead them to expect is unfolding. The vulgarity of 'Hit the Prez' cannot help but impact on an audience – even one not American – for while one laughs at its unexpectedness and irreverent implications. Sondheim's, 'C'mere and kill a President' crystallizes the nightmarish incongruity of the setting and complement the dramatic context of the world that Weidman envisages.

Sondheim says that he 'sweats' over lyrics (*Platform Papers* 1990: 5) and refers to lyric writing as a craft (see Zadan 1990: 231) yet his ability to modify or intensify what would be our seemingly anticipated reaction to a character or situation goes beyond the simple craft of finding a felicitous expression, especially when this is achieved through the use of one word. An example of his skilful artistry can be seen in the Proprietor's invitation to John Hinckley:

You can get the prize
 With the big blue eyes ...
 (*Indicates sexy doll*)
 Skinny little thighs
 And those big blue eyes.
 (Sc. 1: 7)

'Skinny' seems an inappropriate word to describe an icon of sexual wish-fulfilment. It suggests, perhaps, that the ideal on which Hinckley is fixated is not perfect and, therefore, his idea of perfection is tainted, or that his perception of perfection is warped. The couplet calls into question his discrimination and balance. 'Skinny' also carries with it connotations of childishness, a trait Hinckley shows in the way he articulates his love for Jodie Foster in 'Unworthy of Your Love'. It is also possible that we are being offered the Proprietor's evaluation of the Jodie Foster of 1981, influenced by the suggestion of paedophilic passion that was prompted in the way the young girl was presented in her earlier films: *Bugsy Malone* and *Taxi Driver*. The positioning of the word 'skinny' at the beginning of the musical phrase focuses our attention on it, suggesting

that the different levels of response which this word evokes is a calculated and serious exercise on the part of the composer to affect our perceptions in a subtle and creative manner. It is specific in a way that a song such as 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning' is not. The word 'skinny' makes us think, whereas 'beautiful' evokes a feeling. This is not in any way to belittle Hammerstein's achievement, only to suggest the different kind of intention found in Sondheim's lyrics.

In his opening lines the Proprietor greets each of the assassins, characterizing each and giving the audience an insight into what motivates each one of them. He addresses Guiteau:

Hey, fella,
 Feel like you're a failure?
 Bailiff on your tail? Your
 Wife run off for good?
 (Sc. 1: 8)

The alliteration of the letter 'f': fella, feel, failure, for, wife, off and bailiff, combined with the rhyming of 'failure' with 'tail? Your' creates a whimsical levity that is reinforced by the happy-go-lucky jauntiness of the melody. It is a characterization which is developed later (see pp. 234-35) in 'The Ballad of Guiteau'. However, the shifting perspectives which characterize *Assassins* are more strongly articulated in Sondheim's treatment of Zangara. Using a mocking stage-Italian the Proprietor addresses Zangara as 'boy':

What's-a wrong, boy?
 Bossa-a treat you crummy?
 Trouble with you [*sic*] tummy?
 This-a bring you some relief.
 (*Holds out gun*)
 Here, give some
 Hail-a to da Chief.
 (Sc. 1: 8)

The Proprietor's use of the childish word 'tummy' contrasts with Zangara's own use of the word 'stomach' when he expands on his motivation later in the play as he sings, 'I have the sickness in the stomach' (Sc. 4: 31). Zangara's words imply a serious condition, whereas the Proprietor insinuates a superficial infantile ailment. It is interesting to note that in Scene 15 when the

assassins articulate their reasons for killing, Zangara's growing anger is expressed in the words, 'I did it 'cause my belly was on fire' (Sc. 15: 79). The word 'belly' has a hardness and crudeness that is lacking in the use of the word 'stomach'. It is as if Zangara's rage has become more assertive through his association with the other assassins and at the same time less focused. It is the Balladeer in his role as the voice of reason, who uses the word 'stomach' once again:

And it didn't mean a nickel,
 You just shed a little blood,
 And a lot of people shed a lot of tears.
 Yes, you made a little moment
 And you stirred a little mud –

But it didn't fix the stomach
 And you've drunk your final Bud.
 (Sc. 15: 81)

In this way the emotional and social implications of words are taken into account to extend the meaning of the lyrics. In the first scene Zangara is regarded as a child whose actions at the proprietor's counter imply no serious or malevolent intent. The use of the word 'boy' reinforces this reading for, addressed to an adult, it is a term used to a person believed to be inferior. Perhaps because of its South African parallel where even an elderly servant could be referred to as 'boy' or 'girl', it also holds deeper connotations for this writer. Certainly the Proprietor articulates the response of many people to someone of a different culture, who by being different, is assumed to be inferior.

The use of the mock-Italian in *Assassins* is completely different in tone and function from that used by Sondheim in *Sweeney Todd*. In the character of Pirelli the mock-Italian is turned to comic effect by the use of extending rhyming:

To pull-a da toot'
 Widout-a da grace,
 You leave-a da space
 All over da place.
 You try to erase
 Widout-a da trace.
 (I: 31)

In *Assassins* four lines create a mocking and derogatory summation of Zangara:

What's-a wrong, boy?
 Boss-a treat you crummy?
 Trouble with your tummy?
 This-a bring you some relief.
 (Holds out gun)
 (Sc. 1: 8)

The word 'crummy' has a colloquial ring to it, but used as an adverb instead of an adjective it reinforces the Proprietor's sardonic misuse of language, as a foreigner might. Yet almost immediately the Proprietor is advocating a totally different standpoint:

Everybody's
 Got the right
 To be different,
 Even though
 At times they go
 To extremes
 Aim for what you
 Want a lot –
 Everybody
 Gets a shot.
 (Sc. 1: 9)

This chorus, which is repeated, with lyric variations, several times in this extended song, seems achingly familiar. I think this is not so much because of any melodic similarities to a specific piece, but because the form and rhythm of the 'soft shoe shuffle', of which this is an example, is so well-known. It is so much part of the show business world of variety and musical comedy and so seductive that lines such as, 'Even though/At times they go to extremes' can be passed over with little recognition of the irony implicit in them. It is only in retrospect that the Proprietor's complaisant indulgence strikes one. As it is, it does seem as if the Proprietor is endorsing:

'The basic tenet of the American System. Each individual can and should aspire to happiness and success. It is this incontestable truism that lies at the heart of the great American musicals of the 1940's and 1950's. It is consequently fitting that Sondheim, who has redefined the form and scope of the musical theatre, once again uses the musical theatre as his touchstone to examine and assess American society' (Gordon 1992: 323).

Sondheim, however, goes further than Gordon suggests. For it is not only the musical theatre genre that he draws on. His scope embraces a wide selection of American music from many different eras, styles and sources. He uses famous military marches such as 'Hail to the Chief' and Souza's 'El Capitan'. He plunders American popular music: the Negro spiritual; barber-shop quartets; folk songs of the American West and the hippie generation and film music, as well as the familiar 'show-biz' influences. His touchstone in *Assassins* is America not simply Broadway, embracing the music of Aaron Copland as well as the 'razzmatazz' of the Great White Way. The 'popular' music that Sondheim uses, its historical connotations and emotional resonances is accessible, familiar and deeply ingrained in the collective awareness of those who listen to it. The emotional weight suggested by the musical styles allows Sondheim to pare his lyrics down to an almost Spartan simplicity, where every word counts. He also uses the particular style of the music to comment, sometimes ironically, on a character or to deepen our emotional response or modify our attitude to what the character is saying. For example Booth's words as he sings of the horrors of the bloodshed of the Civil War are made more resonant and meaningful by the melancholy and solemn lament that forms the melody line under such lines as:

(Now the) coun-try is not what it was — where there's

blood in the cle-ver, — Now the

nat- lon can nev- er a- gain _____ Be the _____

cresc ten

hope that it was _____

(Vocal Score: 33-4)

The simplicity of the lyrics can produce a felicitous image such as the plangent 'blood on the clover'.⁸ The gentle idyllic images evoked by the word 'clover' with its old fashioned connotations of good luck, as in 'I'm looking over a four-leafed clover', and rural tranquillity are superimposed by the images of the 'blood' of dying soldiers. An entire historical picture is created in those few words that is both poetic and real.

Sondheim's lyrics are powerful and apt. His use of phrases that reinforce the subject matter at the heart of *Assassins* is colloquial and unforced. Maxims such as 'aim for what you want'; 'everybody gets a shot'; 'if you keep your goal in sight' focus adeptly on the powerful image of the gun which is the means by which nearly all the assassins attempt to kill their respective quarries. The phrases are also reminiscent of the vocabulary one finds in self-help books or courses that are designed to encourage people towards self-improvement and better self-image.

such as Dale Carnegie or the works of Norman Vincent Peale. These authors propagated ideas that were once particularly American, though now disseminated throughout the world. The irony implicit in this central image of a gun is developed in the quartet's rendition of 'Gun Song', which describes the work which goes into the making of a gun and evidences the other 'right' firmly entrenched in the American culture, since the pioneering days of the Wild West, the right to be armed and carry a gun.

Sondheim's economy can be remarkable. The Proprietor's attitude to the two would-be women assassins is established succinctly as he encapsulates their respective characters in his greeting to each. 'Yo, baby' (Sc. 1: 10) is how he addresses the sullen, rather aggressive Fromme; 'Jeez, lady' is his dismayed response as the older woman, Sara Jane Moore, drops the contents of her purse. The use of the word 'baby' designates Fromme as young and, perhaps, from the Proprietor's point of view, immature, as well as carrying with it the sexual connotations implicit in its everyday usage. 'Yo' is a hip, juvenile word, used in the patronizing manner of adults when they want to suggest their ability to identify with the younger generation. The appellation 'lady' to Sara Jane Moore might suggest a more respectful attitude in deference to her age, but it is coupled with the slangy and irreligious 'jeez' which is derogatory and dismissive. It is significant that once again the Proprietor's condescending attitude surfaces, though whether this is because he is anti-feminist or because he treats most of the protagonists with the same lack of respect, is ambiguous. I believe that this ambiguity is consciously inspired and is a result of Sondheim's very specific use of language, suggesting that he uses words in *Assassins* in the same way as he uses music. Words with a familiar social, emotional context and resonance create a particular response which then, by juxtaposition or by reference to the character who uses them, take on an extended or contradictory meaning so that the audience response also undergoes a shift in perspective.

In this manner, he informs Fromme, as he hesitates before handing her a gun, 'This requires skill', and, though he may be justified in cautioning Moore when she swings the gun at his stomach, the words he uses are once more couched in the rather patronizing tones of a weary parent, 'Don't forget that guns can go boom'.⁹ The word 'boom' is not only onomatopoeic, suggesting a loud noise, but carries with it a suggestion of overstatement which makes it sound innocuous, diverting

the audience's attention away from the seriousness of a gun's function. The Proprietor's condescension is established, but his attitude and his perspective shift as John Wilkes Booth appears and he introduces him with the words, 'There's our/Pioneer' (Sc. 1: 11). So, unlike the narrator of *Into The Woods* who declares, 'Sorry, I tell the story, I'm not part of it You need an objective observer to pass the story along' (Act II: 102), the Proprietor becomes, if only for a moment, one of the group of assassins. Indeed, the Proprietor hails Booth with the words, 'Hey, chief', as he and Booth join forces to propagate the idea of America as a 'free country':

PROPRIETOR:

– Means your dreams can come true:

BOOTH:

Be a scholar –

PROPRIETOR:

Make a dollar –

BOTH:

Free country –!

BOOTH:

– Means they listen to you:

PROPRIETOR:

Scream and holler –

BOOTH:

Grab 'em by the collar!

BOTH:

Free country –!

(Sc. 1: 12)

It is as if the Proprietor is leading the audience into the trap of believing that he is endorsing what is being propounded and it becomes acceptable, in that it is validated by someone apart from the assassins. This shift in attitude is one that is repeated throughout *Assassins*, adding depth and complexity, as alternating view points and perspectives are expounded. Even Booth suggests that the freedom they feel they are entitled to encompasses another interpretation:

Don't be scared
 You won't prevail,
 Everybody's
 Free to fail,
 No one can be put in jail
 For his dreams.

(Sc. 1: 12)

The view is proposed that success may not be the inevitable outcome of one's endeavours. What is offered is the unalienable right to try; the corollary being that failure should not be seen as an unsurmountable barrier, but a learning experience from which one grows. Success, too, can be reviewed in different ways, depending on your frame of reference, so what seems to Booth's compatriot, Herold, a failure, is seen as success to Booth:

HEROLD:

We must have been mad to think we could kill the President and get away with it.

BOOTH:

We did get away with it! He was a bloody tyrant and we brought him down.
(Sc. 2: 17)

For Booth the actual fact of the assassination makes the venture a success. Neither the personal consequences to himself, nor the wider ranging possible consequences of his action for posterity detract from his exploit, as the Balladeer accuses him:

Damn you, Johnny!
You paved the way
For other madmen
To make us pay.
(Sc. 2: 22)

Like the Proprietor, the Balladeer's attitudes and opinions become ambiguous, shifting from the objective perspective of a narrator to that of a co-conspirator or, at least, one who gives encouragement, as will be shown, in examining the Balladeer's role in 'The Ballad of Guiteau', as well as in the scene between Booth and the Balladeer.

This scene which features the two characters (Sc. 2: 15-23) is remarkable in its synthesis of dialogue, music and lyrics. The dialogue slips unselfconsciously and with an admirable, almost poetic, fluency into the lyrics. As in the following passage where the formality of Booth's spoken accusations against Lincoln balances the direct, almost conversational, tone of the lyrics of the Balladeer:

BALLADEER:

(Sings) They say your ship was sinkin', John ...

BOOTH:

(Glances at Balladeer briefly: back to Herold) One: that you did ruthlessly provoke a war between the States which cost some six hundred thousand of my countrymen their lives. Two –

BALLADEER:

You started missing cues ...

BOOTH:

(Glances back to Herold) Two: That you did silence your critics in the North by hurling them into prison without benefit of charge or trial. Three –

BALLADEER:

They say it wasn't Lincoln, John.

BOOTH:

(To Balladeer): Shut up! Three –

BALLADEER:

You'd merely had
A slew of bad
Reviews –

BOOTH:

I said SHUT UP!
(Sc. 2: 18)

The words articulate with unambiguous passion Booth's rage and antipathy towards the man he holds responsible. But what is fascinating is that this anger and bitterness are then expressed by the Balladeer quoting from Booth's diary:¹⁹

BALLADEER:

He said,
'Damn you, Lincoln.
And damn the day
You threw the 'U' out
Of U.S.A.!'

BALLADEER:

(front) He said,
'Damn you, Lincoln.
You had your way –

BOOTH:

Tell them, boy!

BALLADEER:

With blood you drew out
Of Blue and Grey!

BOOTH:

Tell it all!
Tell them till they listen!
(Sc. 2: 19)

In this last extract, ironically, it is Booth who acts as the goad and spur to the Balladeer's words, so the audience experiences a reverse image of their respective roles. Once more the displacement accentuates the shifting moral ground and the ambiguities of the situation. The stage direction that instigates these quotations is interesting in that it seems to suggest a conspiratorial bond between the two men, *'Booth tosses the diary to the Balladeer. He glances at it without opening it, as if he knows the contents'* (Sc. 2: 19). From a performance point of view this is significant, for it means that the Balladeer can appropriate the same emotional fervour in his delivery of the words as Booth would, rather than give the words a sense of objective or second-hand reportage. For the duration of these lines the Balladeer, in stagecraft, if not in fact, is Booth; while Booth acts as his own advocate, encouraging the Balladeer to, 'Tell them till they listen!' The diary itself by virtue of its purported reality may be seen as a symbol of another level of truth: one which invests the scene with a real and immediate quality; one that vies with the imaginative and distorted recreation of events.

When eventually they sing together it serves to remind us that the opinions that Booth proclaimed were not held by himself alone, but by thousands of other loyal Americans, who despised and hated Lincoln:

BALLADEER, BOOTH:

(Front) Damn you, Lincoln,
You righteous whore.

BOOTH:

Tell 'em!
Tell 'em what he did!

BALLADEER, BOOTH:

(Front) You turned your spite into civil war!

(Sc. 2: 20)

The confrontational and direct nature of their accusations is made more explicit in the stage directions. Both actors face front, confronting the audience, hiding nothing. As has been noted, the interweaving of the lyrics between the characters is a subtle and ingenious device by which Sondheim, shifting perspectives and changing the focus, prevents us from accommodating one point of view. This is interesting in that it contradicts the 'all-American' admiration of Lincoln and brings in the historical perspective of contemporary opinion. The differing perspectives seem to mirror the alternate responses of some Americans to Lincoln's actions, who was censured

regarding his own indecisiveness in his handling of the Civil war and his ambivalence towards the issue of slavery. For as the Balladeer reminds us later, 'Lincoln, who got mixed reviews/Because of you, John, now gets only raves' (Sc. 2: 22).

From a twentieth-century perspective of a world that has seen Hitler vanquished and Apartheid written off the statute books, the issue of slavery may seem clear-cut and unequivocal. Seen from the perspective of nineteenth-century America, the situation is not so simple. That the Civil War aroused a passionate situation where brother fought brother and families were divided by conscience suggests a scenario where the actions of Booth were not those of a single deranged psychopath, but rather the terrible and singular response to a situation that enjoyed widespread consensus. Lincoln was hated not only by Southerners who saw their way of life and their economy threatened by the Northern states, but also by rabidly single-minded abolitionists who abhorred his prevarications and seeming weakness in dealing with the issue of slavery. As Oates points out Lincoln did not approve of the tactics of the abolitionists (1978: 37-38) and, moreover, his attitude to the issue of slavery was not without its inconsistencies. In an open letter, written in Charleston, Lincoln is quoted as saying that he, 'Never had been in favor [*sic*] of making Negroes socially and politically equal with Whites (p. 158). Lincoln, likewise, was reviled in that section of the press that objected to any concessions being made to abolish slavery with such names as: 'sooty'; 'scoundrelly' and 'bloodthirsty tyrant' (p. 187). He was, indeed, seemingly inconsistent in the way he voted on slavery and this elicited opprobrium from all sides. There was, however, a fundamental rationale in his attitude:

My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and it is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the coloured race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union' (Oates 1978: 313).¹¹

If, as he himself stated in the same letter, this was his official line and, personally, he wished to see all people free, it is still a fact that his personal views were subordinate to his unswerving loyalty and belief in the constitution and the ideals of the Declaration. It was not simply a moral issue of right or wrong. Slavery was unacceptable because one of the conditions of slavery prevented a person from working for whosoever he or she chose, thereby improving his or her

lifestyle and conditions, which was a right entrenched in the Declaration. To deny the slaves this freedom denied them their constitutional right, and the safety of the Union was dependent on all supporting and adhering to the tenets of the Declaration.

Given the passions which the Civil War spawned, Booth's contention that he could be compared with Brutus cannot be seen merely as the grandiose fantasies of a deranged man, nor can Lincoln be regarded with the uncritical naïvety of some twentieth-century perceptions. However, it is just such a judgement that the Balladeer makes as he sets the scene. In his lyrics, Booth is characterized as a 'madman' (Sc. 2: 15) who is asked rhetorically:

Why did you do it, Johnny,
 Throw it all away?
 Why did you do it, boy,
 Not just destroy
 The pride and joy
 Of Illinois,
 But all the U.S.A.?
 (Sc. 2: 16)

Lincoln, in these lines, is simplistically eulogized as the universally admired icon of the whole country, which was not the case. Moreover, the Balladeer suggests that Booth's motives stem from personal misfortunes and individual resentments: Booth drank too much; he lost his voice; he was jealous of his brother and he had had that actor's nightmare, 'A slew of bad reviews' (Sc. 2: 16). Frank Rich writing in *The New York Times* dismisses the references to the reviews, attesting that Sondheim 'repeats a lame gag about the assassin's bad reviews as an actor three times' (1991: Section 3: 19). However, apart from the fact that this supposed motive is historically valid, the Balladeer's tone is one of ironic mockery and his repeated references to Booth's reviews can be seen as jibes from a twentieth-century representative, judging Booth from a modern perspective. A perspective which shifts as the song progresses. A technique that is, as has been suggested, an important dramatic device in *Assassins*.

Furthermore, the repeated references to Booth's reviews affords Sondheim the means to comment succinctly, in a thematically apposite transference, on that aspect of Lincoln's reputation which the Balladeer, at the beginning of the scene, ignores:

But traitors just get jeers and boos,
 Not visits to their graves,
 While Lincoln, who got mixed reviews,
 Because of you, John, now gets only raves.

(Sc. 2: 22)

In these lines the Balladeer's words place Booth's reputation in a twentieth-century context, but suggests that time changes perceptions in a way that contradicts or ignores historical fact. He also establishes, using the same imagery, the nineteenth-century controversy that surrounded Lincoln's actions, albeit in a manner that tends to dismiss the real seriousness of the contemporary conflicts. Finally, extending the theatrical imagery he articulates the ultimate irony, that Booth's actions have had the effect, not of pointing up Lincoln's inadequacies and failures, but of obliterating them from popular sentiment, leaving a mythologized Lincoln fêted with raves. This contained and controlled use of language and imagery is far from being a 'lame gag'.

The Balladeer's sentiments, as has been noted, switch from those of a modern onlooker to those in which he seems to endorse and encourage Booth's actions. Booth's own rationale for his behaviour is as impassioned and emotional:

Hunt me down, smear my name
 Say I did it for the fame
 What I did is kill the man who killed my country.
 Now the Southland will mend,
 Now this bloody war can end,
 Because someone slew the tyrant
 Just as Brutus slew the tyrant.

(Sc. 19-20)

As I have shown, the use of the word tyrant was only one of the negative epithets used by Lincoln's enemies, so it is not merely grandiose posturing on Booth's part and his motives, as he describes them, are far removed from the petty ones ascribed to him by the Balladeer. Even Sumner, one of Lincoln's own generals, complained that Lincoln was, 'Now a dictator' (Oates 1978: 328) after Lincoln prevented Fremont from carrying out the edict to free the slaves in Missouri. Even in the heat of the moment, witnesses to the assassination, 'Heard [Booth] shout something in defiance – either, "sic semper tyrannis," (Thus be it ever to tyrants) or "The South shall be free"' (1978: 431).

What is interesting with regard to Sondheim's shifts in historical perspective is how the vocabulary that the Balladeer and Booth use, as they come together to confront the audience with their passionate denunciation of Lincoln, becomes crude and malicious:

BALLADEER, BOOTH (*Front*):
 Damn you Lincoln,
 You righteous whore!
 BOOTH (*To BALLADEER*):
 Tell 'em!
 Tell 'em what he did!
 BALLADEER, BOOTH (*Front*):
 You turned your spite into Civil War!
 (Sc. 2: 20)

The word 'spite' with its connotations of mean behaviour and shabby, insidious morals, underlined by the use of the word 'whore',¹² seems an aberrant choice, especially as the juxtaposition of the word 'righteous' seems to imply some degree of hypocrisy and charlatanism. Many derogatory adjectives have been used to describe Lincoln, but even his enemies never accused him of spite. Though Lincoln's actions may have appeared inconsistent, and one views with no little caution how a person describes his own character, I do not find anything that contradicts Lincoln's own words, quoted in the Foreword of Oates's work, 'I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealings'. Given Sondheim's interest in the source material of *Assassins* and the way he integrates many, little known, historical facts, it seems an arbitrary decision to have both Booth and the Balladeer attacking Lincoln on grounds that are a distortion of all that is known of him.

By way of contrast, the words that Booth sings to validate his actions are both moving and meaningful. The lyrics are underpinned with haunting and sonorous music, slow-moving and dignified (see p. 19), that invests Booth's words with truth and true emotion:

How the country is not what it was,
 Where there's blood on the clover,
 How the nation can never again
 Be the hope that it was.
 How the bruises may never be healed,

How the wounds are forever.
(Sc. 2: 20-21)

The words are simple and the collective nouns create a sense of all-encompassing, patriotic fervour that is hymn-like in quality. The rhyming, appropriately, is unobtrusive in this section of the song cycle. Yet, even as we are being seduced into sympathy for Booth's deeply felt anguish, Sondheim's lyrics once again change direction and we are stopped short by another facet of Booth's personality:

How the nation can never recover
From that vulgar,
High and mighty,
Niggerlover,
Never-!
(Sc. 2: 21)

We are confronted by a situation where the patriotic and laudable Booth is revealed as a crude racist. Almost immediately the mood switches once more, and Sondheim leaves us with Booth, the patriot:

Damn my soul if you must,
Let my body turn to dust,
Let it mingle with the ashes of the country.

Let them curse me to hell,
Leave it to history to tell:
What I did, I did well,
And I did it for my country.
(Sc. 2: 21)

Yet even in the final lines, another perspective is mooted, as Booth himself realizes that others may regard him in a very different light, 'Let them cry, "Dirty traitor!" / They will understand it later'. The ultimate irony is that, whereas Booth leaves it to future assessments to validate his actions, the twentieth century condemns him.

Throughout this scene one is aware of switches in tone and oscillating points of view. We see both Booth the patriot and Booth the racist; the Balladeer is depicted as being of the same opinion

as Booth, but he also denigrates him and calls him a madman; he refers to Lincoln as 'the pride and joy' of the country, yet joins with Booth in railing against him; Booth's motives are called into question even as we see his own deep anguish, at what he believes has been caused by Lincoln's actions, contrasted with the Balladeer's taunting remarks that it was his own personal failings and inadequacy which drove him to assassinate the President; the Balladeer appears to articulate both a twentieth-century¹³ interpretation of the event as well as presenting us with a contemporary nineteenth-century overview. Booth's assertive, 'Leave it to history to tell' (Sc. 2: 21), has an attendant plaintive quality.

These switches in tone and viewpoint combined with the emotional integrity of some of the passages which contrast with the cynicism of others create a disturbing, and sometimes confusing, synthesis of all the premises. Sondheim has stated:

The piece should speak for itself. We don't want to tell people how or what they should think about it. We don't want to preach or promulgate (Rothstein 1991, Section 2: 34).

Weidman also felt the same desire not to advance one specific viewpoint:

The play is meant to require the audience to participate. Neither one of us was interested in writing a piece that said people who shoot the President are bad – that's taken for granted. What we thought was interesting was to let the assassins speak for themselves ... obviously our interpretation [The play] is meant to be ambiguous in the sense that the audience is meant, to some extent, to be seduced by these characters; to discover as they watch the show that, in some appalling way, they are not that much different from the rest of us Because if they are simply freaks – aliens from another planet – there is nothing to be learned by examining them. These people created extraordinary pain, but if they are only freaks, there is nothing to learn from them. The play requires the audience to participate and arrive at their own conclusions (1997: Weidman to Lambert).

The danger inherent in taking an ambivalent position is that the piece loses the intensity of focus which a consistent viewpoint lends a work. It must also be admitted that, though Weidman ascribes an active participation by the audience, there still exists a preconceived attitude towards musical theatre, and the audience may not expect to be confronted by ambiguities or subtleties. Indeed, not even critics are immune, as we have seen in Rich's dismissal of Sondheim's thrice repeated 'gag' line in a show which he characterizes, in the same review, as having 'intellectual

ambitions'; implicitly intimating that such aspirations are not only uncommon in the musical theatre, but should not be there in the first place.

I have considered whether or not these shifts in perspective created by the different viewpoints in the lyrics and the use, too, of various musical forms, which preclude us settling on any one intellectual or emotional standpoint, may not have been a conscious decision, in this instance, to mirror the small shifts and indecisions which characterized Lincoln's own handling of the Civil War and the issue of slavery. However, it seems more probable that the scene's apparent lack of a particular viewpoint is due more to anomalies that can be historically validated, together with a conscious decision not to advance any single opinion. What cannot be underestimated, however, is the consistent emotional content and weight of the music and its constant ironic undertones. Music is, as Elkin describes it:

The sequenced condition of things – as much as the generic centre of a particular mode as broken, cheated hearts are in country music, or spit-in-your-eye feistiness in some sassy Broadway showstopper. Hey, look me over! Or try to conceive of a score for a movie Western that doesn't use the same sort of epic, archetypal chords as, oh say, *The Magnificent Seven*, or of a musical code for suspense dissimilar to the sinister, accumulative paradiddles of *Jaws* (1995: 27-28).

So, for example, the haunting music reinforces the emotionally loaded rhetoric of Booth's most fervent lyrics to create a profound and powerful synthesis of his feelings in a way that speaks to us as being genuine and committed. In this context, by contrast, the Balladeer's words at the end of the scene sounds flippant and shallow:

Johnny Booth was a headstrong fellow,
Even he believed the things he said.
Some called him noble, some said yellow.
What he was was off his head!

(Sc. 2: 22)

The word 'even' suggests an infirmity of purpose and a supposition of madness not borne out by Booth's emotional validation of his actions. 'What he was was off his head', with its slangy tone of a parting shot is flippant and offers an easy way out from seriously evaluating Booth's actions. The Balladeer's final angry and tormented words are more in tune with the emotional tenor of the

scene as established in Booth's moving anthem. The folksy ballad fades away, and in the key of A Flat, slow phrases, employing the semi-tone intervals of the 'sigh' motif, which Sondheim had used to great effect, in the 'Alms, alms' of the Beggar Woman in *Sweeney Todd* to create a sense of melancholy and eeriness, are employed to create a similar plaintive quality in *Assassins*.

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature is A-flat major (three flats), and the time signature is 4/4. The piano accompaniment features a slow, moving bass line and a more active treble line.

System 1:
 Vocal: List-en to the stor-ies. Hear it in the songs.
 Piano: *mf*

System 2:
 Vocal: Ang-ry men don't write the rules, and guns don't right the wrongs.
 Piano:

System 3:
 Vocal: Hurts a-while, but soon the count-ry's back where it be-ongs, And that's the
 Piano:

truth. Still and all... Damn you Booth.

(Vocal Score: 40-41)

The internal rhyming (write-right) and the symmetry of the phrases together with the repetition of the 'R' consonant, support what may be considered a truism, but which is presented as a balanced and considered judgement, touched by a feeling of sadness that the melancholy of the music elicits. On the other hand the Balladeer's, 'Damn you, Booth!', although a categorical denunciation of Booth's actions, comes across as a personal reaction of the Balladeer, fuelled by an emotional response to a man who, whatever his motives, perpetrated a terrible wrong. It is a reaction more dramatically satisfying and emotionally grounded than the flippant, off-hand assertions that Booth was 'off his head'. By these words a tension is created between the promotion of the actions of the Assassins as being linked by a common justifiable purpose and the reduction of their actions to those of a group united only by their singular aberrant psyches. The Balladeer's words place Booth's actions within the context of the majority of the assassins (the other exception is Czolgosz) who are, in varying degrees, presented as deranged. The lyrics of the Balladeer's last song are set once more to the jaunty folk-tune which introduces the scene and serve to distance the audience from the deep emotions which Booth has, with the Balladeer, expressed in the body of the scene. Here, the ambiguities in Sondheim's lyrics and music are pronounced and unsettling in a way that the other episodes are not. This is due in part to the historical ambiguities which exist and which set Booth apart from the other protagonists as well as from what is a conscious and carefully crafted manipulation of the facts and the emotional engagement of the protagonists to create a chimera of illusion and truth which epitomizes the bizarre world of *Assassins*.

* * * * *

Sondheim's seemingly effortless command of idiomatic vocabulary and his use of conversational dialogue set to music is well illustrated in Scene 4, which follows the short, dramatic interlude in the saloon (Scene 3). In the scene the Bystanders describe in turn how they saved Roosevelt from being assassinated by Guisepppe Zangara. The contrast between Scene 3 and Scene 4 is striking and dramatically balanced. Weidman's dialogue in Scene 3 creates the almost fantastic, delusional psyches of the would-be assassins: the maniacally optimistic Guiteau, who wants to buy everyone a drink; the clumsy and morose Hinckley; the militantly left wing Czolgosz; the deluded Byck, who opens the scene with the hallucinatory question, 'Has Dick Nixon been in today?' (Sc. 3: 24); Zangara, whose resentments manifest themselves in his persistent stomach aches and Booth, who is presented as a Machiavellian character, inciting the already inflamed passions of the others. He ends the scene contemptuously quoting from *Julius Caesar*. The words Booth quotes establish once again, not only his acting background, but the affinity he feels with Brutus and his co-conspirators:

Men at some time are masters of their fates:
 The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
 But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
 (*Julius Caesar* I. ii. 138-40)

The scene pulsates with an atmosphere of dislocated emotions and barely contained anger. It is followed by the scene in which Sondheim articulates the mindless patriotism and middle class banality of the average 'normal' American. The contrast is acute, emphasized by the music to which Sondheim sets the lyrics. Souza's march 'El Capitan' epitomizes the excitement and establishmentarian brouhaha of a political rally, while the cheerily martial 'The Washington Post' places us in an orderly, yet up-beat, society. In this scene Sondheim uses the unambiguous emotional context of the music, not only to reinforce the humour of the characters' words, but to satirize the society they represent and from which the assassins feel they have been barred.

This middle class milieu is evoked in phrases such as 'no gentleman pushes his way to the front' (Sc. 4: 30), but is subtly balanced by the less careful and more impolite 'runt' and the reply, which is no more than 'a grunt':

I say, 'Listen, you runt,

You're not pulling that stunt –
 No gentleman pushes his way to the front.
 I say, 'Move to the back!' which he does with a grunt –
 Which is how I saved Roosevelt!
 (Sc. 4: 30)

The dichotomy between how the characters would normally express themselves and how they articulate themselves in front of a microphone as they enjoy their brief moment of fame is reiterated by the wife who cannot wait to get a word in, interrupting her husband in brash and common fashion with the words, 'I thought I'd plotz' (Sc. 4: 32). She ends up, however, with the consciously affected, 'I was saying to Harold, "This weather is bliss!"' Sondheim's sensitivity to the niceties of class is seen clearly in such examples, as is the suggestion of the origins of the would-be assassin made by another of the Bystanders as, 'Some left-wing foreigner, that's my guess –' (Sc. 4: 34), which is a derisive counterpoint to Zangara's passionate avowal:

You think I am Left?
 No Left, no Right.
 No anything!
 Only American!
 (Sc. 4: 34)

There is the ironic suggestion in those last two words that not only does Zangara see himself as American but that Americans, being neither Left nor Right, have no considered political standpoint. Yet, while asserting his own 'American-ness', Sondheim subtly establishes Zangara's European origins:

You think I care who I kill?
 I no care who I kill.
 Long as it's King!
 (Sc. 4: 32)

For him the person in authority is characterized by the word 'King' rather than the New World 'president' and the inaccurate grammar that tends to Romance language syntax also emphasizes his foreignness. For Zangara even his 'American-ness' becomes an empty soubriquet. He is an 'American nothing' (Sc. 4: 32).

Technically Sondheim makes use of multiple rhyming which is one of his favoured methods of producing a comic effect:

I say to him, "Where do you	
Think you're trying to go, boy?	a
Whoa, boy!"	a
I say, "Listen, you runt,	b
You're not pulling that stunt –	b
No gentleman pushes his way to the front."	b
I say, "Move to the back!", which he does with a grunt –	b
Which is how I saved Roosevelt.'	
(Sc. 4: 30)	

The cumulative effect of this extended rhyming is complex. Sondheim, as I have noted (see p. 65), has stressed that, 'Rhyme always implies education and mindworking'. Certainly the people who articulate these lines are drawn from middle class America. However, in 'How I Saved Roosevelt' the rhyming creates other effects:

I get up to clap,	a
I feel this tap	a
I turn – this sap,	a
He says he can't see,	b
I say, "Find a lap	a
And go and sit	c
On it!"	c
(Sc. 4: 30)	

The monosyllabic rhymes tumble over each other in short clusters whose impetus captures the frenetic energy and naïve delight of the Bystanders and their desire to have their opinions captured by the media for posterity. Andy Warhol's 'fifteen minutes of fame' syndrome is brilliantly evoked:

I saw right away he was insane –
<i>(Dragging a reluctant Bystander #2 forward)</i>
Oh, this is my husband, we're from Maine –
(Sc. 4: 33)

The use of different rhyme schemes for each section characterizes every Bystander's recollection

of the attempted assassination as if it was a separate event. Sondheim contrasts their breathless desire to be famous, if only for a moment, with their blatant inability to recognize the potential tragic nature of the event they are witnessing. For Sondheim life seems to consist of innumerable small, sometimes seemingly unimportant, actions or events which, by their consequences, change or modify the pattern of a person's existence and whose significance may only be seen in retrospect. They are the 'moments' which make up a life in *Into The Woods*; the 'little' movement of pulling a trigger which itself triggers a cataclysmic event in *Assassins* or the subtle imagery which is found in 'Someone in a Tree' in *Pacific Overtures*, where the reality of an historical event is modified by those who witness it, who are a 'fragment of the day' (Act I: 74):

It's the pebble, not the stream.
 It's the ripple, not the sea
 That is happening.
 Not the building, but the beam,
 Not the garden but the stone,
 Only cups of tea
 And history
 And someone in a tree.
 (Act I: 79)

In *Assassins*, the Bystanders want to be part of history by forcing themselves into the limelight in an attempt to make themselves important, as if suggesting that their lives are not in themselves fulfilling, however much someone like Zangara may see their lives as representing everything he has been denied. Their lack of meaningful, spiritual substance is pithily expressed in Sondheim's lyrics:

WIFE:
 It was a historical event –!
 MAN:
 – Worth every penny that we spent!
 (Sc. 4: 33)

These are lines which succeed in being funny as well as meaningful.

The comedy is heightened as Sondheim makes use of the actual orchestration and musical timing of the music to support stage 'business', just as he had done with the punctuation of his original

score in Mrs Lovett's 'The Worst Pies in London'. The conversation he constructs sits easily and with no sense of strain on the music:

BYSTANDER 4:

He made our vacation a real success!

(As the bass drum in the orchestration sounds, a camera flashes)

BYSTANDER 5:

Are you with the press?

PHOTOGRAPHER:

Yes.

BYSTANDER 5:

Oh God, I'm a mess ...

(Sc. 4: 34)

But Sondheim goes further than creating comedic lyrics which at the same time reveal the banality of the Bystanders' perceptions and priorities. He again makes use of an 'operatic' principle, that of intertwining two different situations, which develop separately, but are interwoven within the action of one scene, so that they appear simultaneously before the audience. Thus while the Bystanders comment on the present situation, Zangara not only describes the process by which he has come to do what he does, but takes the audience into the future as he goes to the electric chair. This technique is one which Sondheim uses in *Sweeney Todd* in both 'Kiss Me' and 'More Hot Pies', but in these two instances different conversations happen simultaneously, within the same time-frame. In *Assassins* it is the time-frames themselves which are dislocated. Vocally and harmonically the lyrics in *Sweeney Todd* are more complex and richer in their soaring romanticism. In *Assassins* Sondheim concentrates on the ironic implications inherent in the contrast between the sensationalist, publicity-seeking public and the single-minded, self-derogation of Zangara, as well as the emotional connotations of the musical framework with its explicitly patriotic appeal and optimistic tone. It is an interesting distinction and shows how Sondheim will use, to advantage and in different ways, accepted techniques from other art forms.

Contrasted with the inane, self-aggrandizing remarks of the Bystanders, Zangara's passion is pitiable:

Zangara have nothing,

No luck, no girl,

Zangara no smart, no school,
 But Zangara no foreign tool,
 Zangara American!
 American nothing!
 (Sc. 4: 34)

His pessimism and despairing reasoning, may induce sympathy, yet Sondheim does not hesitate to show Zangara's unstable and twisted personality in the reasoning which provides a motive for his intended action:

First I figure I kill Hoover,
 I get even for the stomach.
 Only Hoover up in Washington,
 Is wintertime in Washington –
 I go down to Miami, kill Roosevelt.
 (Sc. 4: 31-32)

In the final stanzas the voices of the Bystanders and Zangara come together joining, musically, two diametrically opposed sections of American society:

BYSTANDERS:

Lucky I was there!
 I'm on the front page – is that bizarre?
 And all of those pictures, like a star!
 Just lucky I was there!
 We might have been bereft of F –

ZANGARA (*Simultaneously*):

No fair
 Nowhere!
 So what?
 No sorry!
 And soon no Zangara!

Who care?
 Pull switch!
 No care
 No more,
 No–

(Electrical hum; the lights dim briefly, then rise)

BYSTANDERS:

– D –

(Hum; lights dim briefly and rise again)

R!

(Hum; lights dim briefly and rise again)
(Sc. 4: 34-35)

The depth and complexity achieved by the combination of music and lyrics places an additional burden on the writer of the book, not only because book scenes take longer to establish, but because *Assassins* is written in revue-style sketches, which by their nature, do not lend themselves to in-depth exposition or development. Sondheim is quoted as saying:

Any writer takes as many pains as he can over each individual word, but the words are more important in a lyric, more important even than to a playwright, because each line is practically a scene in itself (Zadan 1990: 231).

The form of the piece may be more easily accommodated by the lyricist's preoccupations and strengths than those of the dramatist and the lyricist's words couched in the emotional ambience provided by music impact more strongly than the book scenes.¹⁴ This is not to detract from Weidman's singular achievement in *Assassins*. His dialogue is focussed and pithy and, as the following dialogue demonstrates, he can also create a scene that is not only pertinent, but delicate and charming:

CZOLGOSZ:

What is this?

GOLDMAN:

An idea, Leon. An idea of social justice. Of a world in which men are not merely created equal but allowed to live that way.

CZOLGOSZ:

And this is your idea?

GOLDMAN:

Not mine alone, but mine.

(He puts pamphlet in his pocket. She smiles, looks at her watch.)

Good God! I have to go.

CZOLGOSZ:

If you please – I would like to walk you to the station. May I?

GOLDMAN:

It's a free country. *(Beat)* That was a joke.

CZOLGOSZ:

May I?

GOLDMAN:

You may.

(He takes the suitcase, she takes it back.)

They make us servants, Leon. We do not make servants of each other.
(He looks at her, then takes the suitcase. She smiles. They exit.)
 (Sc. 5: 19)

Sondheim is always aware of the debt he owes to the writer of the book. As he points out:

It's the book that the musical theatre is all about, not the songs, and I'm not being modest. It annoyed me deeply when the reviews of *Follies* said the show was good 'in spite of the book'. The show is good because of the book. A book is not only the dialogue, it's the scheme of the show, the way the songs and dialogue work together, the style of the show Any book writer I work with knows I am going to steal from him and I try to help him wherever I can too (Zadan 1990: 236).

Weidman, in a conversation with this author, described just such an instance of this cross-pollination of ideas. In discussing the genesis of 'Another National Anthem', he stated:

In the very first draft, I had taken the show as far as the scene in which all the assassins, for the first time, appear together as a group and start a litany of reasons why they had done what they had done. It would be the beginning of a musical number which would gather them all together and propel us into the last scene. I never wrote more there. At one point Steve had trouble getting into the number. He phoned and asked had I written anything in the last Texas depository scene which had been cut, but which might act as a springboard for the lyric. I had written a stretch of dialogue where one of the assassin's said, 'We like the other National Anthem, the one they don't play at the ballpark' – and Steve took that page (February 23 1997).

It is interesting that Weidman's book establishes Czolgosz as an earnest, serious, passionate man, an articulate promoter of workers and an angry opponent of their exploitation. He is also sensitive, as the scene quoted previously testifies, and possessed of the old world manners of a gentleman. However, the style and tone of 'The Ballad of Czolgosz' (Sc. 8: 50-53), in which Sondheim tells the story of Czolgosz's assassination of McKinley, is radically different from what one might expect, even taking into account that the song is performed in narrative form by the ubiquitous Balladeer. His words trivialize Czolgosz, set as they are to happy-go-lucky music, evoking nothing so much as a rumbustious hoe-down, a thigh-slapping barn dance of a song, reminiscent of the music that Hollywood films use to characterize a bustling Western town or the sunny American wholesomeness of *Oklahoma!* The Balladeer's description of Czolgosz complements and supports the musical ethos which is featured with phrases such as:

Said, 'Time's a-wasting,
 It's nineteen-one.
 Some men have everything
 And some have none,
 So rise and shine.
 (Sc. 8: 50)

'Rise and shine' is a colloquial, light-hearted phrase that suggests wholesome 'American values', whilst 'nineteen-one' has the casual feel of slang and suggests the style of the narrator of the song rather than supporting what we know of Czolgosz, who has been characterized as speaking in a carefully polite and formal manner, as one does a foreign language. Words such as, 'Woke with a thought/And away he ran' suggest a frivolity at variance with the character that Weidman has created. It is difficult to reconcile this man with Czolgosz in the scene with Emma Goldman; the man who so lucidly and bitterly tells us,

A gun kills many men before it's done,
 Hundreds,
 Long before you shoot the gun:

Men in the mines
 And in the steel mills,
 Men at machines,
 Who died for what?

Something to buy –
 A watch, a shoe, a gun,
 A 'thing' to make the bosses richer,
 But
 A gun claims many men before it's done ...

Just one ...
 More,
 (Sc. 7: 49)

with the jaunty chap who is about to walk 'to the head of the line'.

Sondheim is once again using the Balladeer to present another, more modern, perspective that has the effect of disengaging the audience's sympathy and, once again, it is with regard to a character with whom the audience could empathize. Even if one accepts that supposition, there

are still instances where the lyrics are clumsily subservient to the musical style. Examples, such as the contraction of the date to 'nineteen-one' and the words that the Balladeer puts in Czolgosz's mouth show a dichotomy between what we have learned about him and how he is presented in 'The Ballad of Czolgosz' where we are told he:

Wrapped him a handkerchief
 'Round his gun,
 Said, 'Nothin' wrong about
 What I done.
 (Sc. 8: 53)

From the context of the song it is not clear whether these words refer to his killing of the President, in which case, surely, the words would be in the future tense, for at this point in the lyric Czolgosz has yet to assassinate McKinley, or if the words refer back to, and are a reminder of, his earlier conversation with Emma Goldman:

CZOLGOSZ:

What do I know?! Nothing! What have I learned?! Nothing! What have I done—!

GOLDMAN (*interrupting*):

I'll tell you what you have done. Since you were a little boy of five or six you have permitted yourself to be brutalized and beaten down, brought to the brink of madness by despair and desperation.

(Sc. 5: 38)

If the latter is so, is Czolgosz then repudiating Emma Goldman's hypothesis which is made so movingly and strongly in Scene 5? In my opinion, although Czolgosz does not respond to Goldman's words with a definitely positive reply, the whole tenor of the scene suggests that she does articulate his own feelings of impotence and his awareness of the injustices of life, so why now would the Balladeer quote words which suggest that Czolgosz accepts that there was nothing wrong with his youthful acceptance of society's injustices? There is a third hypothesis and this is mooted by the quotation that is given of Czolgosz's actual words explaining his actions in the notes accompanying the Original Cast Recording. He is quoted as saying, 'I killed the President because he was the enemy of the good people – the good working people ... *I done my duty*' (my italics) (RCA VICTOR 60737-2-RC: 7)

I believe it is possible, given Sondheim's interest in, and use, of original source material in his work that this phrase stuck in his mind to surface in the phrase, 'What I done'. In contrast, when Czolgosz speaks almost the same words in Weidman's book scene his use of English is grammatically correct, 'What have I learned?! Nothing! What have I done—!', rather than the ungrammatical, though colloquial, original quotation. But for me this particular lyric lacks Sondheim's usual scalpel-like precision and meticulousness. This is due, not only to the anomalies I have discussed, but also because in this number the words are truly at the mercy of the rollicking, rolling, relentless movement of the music.

It is a situation which is exacerbated by Sondheim's use of the extended chorus. This is a technique which Sondheim uses effectively in *Sunday in the Park with George*, where the extended chorus is used with dramatic expediency to provide a musical *tour de force* for the performer playing Dot. Dot's matter-of-fact acceptance of her situation in the first chorus,

Well, there are worse things
 Than staring at the water on a Sunday.
 There are worse things
 Than staring at the water
 As you're posing for a picture
 Being painted by your lover
 In the middle of the summer
 On an island in the river on a Sunday,
 (Act I: 7)

is expanded, as her irritation and exhaustion increase, to:

Well there are worse things
 Than staring at the water on a Sunday.
 There are worse things
 Than staring at the water
 While you're posing for a picture
 After sleeping on the ferry
 After getting up at seven
 To come over to an island
 In the middle of the river
 Half an hour from the city
 On a Sunday.
 (Act I: 8-9)

Dot's feelings are clarified in the extended development of the lines, and in the subtle verbal exchanges that Sondheim makes. Thus, 'as you're posing', which suggests an active involvement in the artistic process of producing a work, becomes 'while you're posing', which suggests that staring at the water is now a state divorced from the artistic process and the result of boredom. The inconveniences which Dot has accepted in the first chorus now loom large in her mind as she contemplates George's thoughtlessness. She is stuck 'in the middle of the river/Half an hour from the city'. Moreover, the line which, in the first chorus, defines Dot's relationship with George, 'Being painted by your lover', is tellingly omitted from the final chorus.

This use in *Sunday In the Park with George* is, however, not repeated successfully in *Assassins*. The additional lines in the extended chorus seem forced and awkward. This is because Sondheim is using actual place names which, though factually correct, are not lyrically expedient and add nothing to the song in the way of dramatic exposition or character development. By the time 'To the Pan-American Exposition/In Buffalo./In Buffalo' has been expanded to,

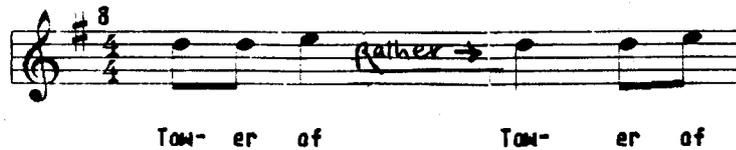
To the Temple of Music
By the Tower of Light
At the Pan-American Exposition
In Buffalo,
In Buffalo,
(Sc. 8: 51)

and further to:

In the Temple of Music
By the Tower *of* Light (my italics)
Between the Fountain of Abundance
And the Court *of* Lilies (my italics)
At the great Pan American Exposition
In Buffalo,
In Buffalo.
(Sc. 8: 53)

the performer is stumbling over the words as the metre places unnatural emphasis on words like 'of' in the phrases 'Tower of Light' and 'Court of Lilies'. It is true that the melisma that the performer in the Original Recording uses on the word 'of' is not written in the music, but the

music itself gives the word a crotchet beat so that the emphasis falls on 'Tower of Light' rather than the more natural 'Tower of *Light*':



(Vocal Score: 83)

The semi-quavers also make it almost impossible to hear the last syllable of the word 'Fountain'. The impression is given that to facilitate the 'feel' of the song with its free-wheeling musical drive, most unusually, Sondheim sacrifices words to the musical structure.

So, for example, the careful and sensitive definition of Emma Goldman's reply to Czolgosz, as it appears in Weidman's book scene, when he asks if the concept of universal freedom is hers: 'Not mine alone, but mine' (Sc. 5: 39), is lost when it is repeated in the song as:



(Vocal Score: 84)

The delicate pause in the text is lost in a phrase which could easily and appropriately have contained a quaver rest:



Sondheim produces his best work when his lyrics are put to the service of the dramatic context of the piece and are intrinsic to the characters who perform them. When form dictates content the results are less successful. 'Gun Song' is a finely crafted example of Sondheim at his best. The lyrics become the dramatic context of the scene and define the characters who sing them and, in

in some ways, the song evokes the musical richness of *Sweeney Todd*. Indeed, the opening music is reminiscent in tone to the opening of 'Poor Thing' as Czolgosz describes the process of making a gun. The music pulses inexorably in repetitive phrases to support the 'list' technique which Sondheim uses to express the relentless measures need to construct a gun:

The musical score consists of three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The piano accompaniment features a steady, repetitive rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, often with triplets and slurs, creating a driving, mechanical feel. The vocal line is a simple, rhythmic melody that follows the lyrics.

System 1: Measures 9-11. Lyrics: "Men in the mines to dig the iron, Men in the mills to".

System 2: Measures 12-14. Lyrics: "forge the steel, on at machines to turn the barrel,".

System 3: Measures 15-17. Lyrics: "Hold the trigger, Shape the wheel--it takes a lot of men to make a". Measure 17 is marked *Pesante*.

(Vocal score: 62)

Sondheim again uses the tempo of a slow waltz with its feeling of continuous motion to reinforce the monotony of the repetitive process. The repeated alliteration in 'men in the mines', 'men in the mills', 'men at machines' and 'mold the trigger' helps to drive the phrases along. The repetition of the same grammatical construction in the parallel phrases gives the impression of a continuous, unending factory line which accelerates as the process comes to a climax; the last two verbs 'mold' and 'shape' become in the process almost like commands, and also godlike, in contrast with the less forceful infinitives of the previous lines. All this relentless activity is needed to produce 'one gun'.

At this point the tone of the piece changes as Booth, a machiavellian Pied Piper, insinuates his view point that all Czolgosz needs to do is move his 'little finger' and he will be able to change the world. The simplicity of the action contrasts with the effort needed to make the gun, and the implicit irony of his words is made explicit in the lyrical cadences of the music. It is an irony pointed up more clearly as eventually all the other characters: Guiteau, Czolgosz and Moore build up the four-part harmony with Booth, producing the mellifluous sounds of a barbershop quartet: purposeful, controlled and peaceful.

It is also interesting that here Sondheim makes use of the word 'little', for it is a word he uses often and to devastating effect to show how a tiny action can have enormous repercussions. In the same way, in all his lyrics, Sondheim is aware that the substitution of one word for another can dramatically change the emotional situation. His meticulous choice of words is such that any 'little' sloppiness or strained use of vocabulary is jarring, for the smallest change is meaningful. In this instance in *Assassins* the word 'little' is used to underline the tiny effort that is needed to promulgate events of great magnitude. It is similar to the Baker's query in *Into the Woods* as to whether it matters if something is 'a little bent' (Sc. 2: 30), with the attendant moral implications. Pseudolus, likewise, can exhort us to 'have a little freedom on me' (Act I: 130) with all its inherent contradictions whilst Mrs Lovett in *Sweeney Todd* dismisses Todd's wife, Lucy, as a 'pretty little thing, silly little nit' (Vocal Book: 16) in a perfunctory and uncaring manner.¹⁵

Guiteau's subsequent arrival is heralded by an upbeat whirling waltz, which serves to establish both the character's optimism as well as the dramatic intent of the scene. His words eulogize a

gun's power which can:

Remove a scoundrel,
 Unite a party,
 Preserve the Union,
 Promote the sales of my book –
 Insure my future,
 My niche in history.
 (Sc. 7: 46)

Once more Sondheim uses the parallel list technique, but this time for comic effect. After the grandiose and high-minded suggestions of the preceding lines, Guiteau's self-serving motives are revealed in the bathos of, 'Promote the sales of my book'. These three characters – Guiteau, Czolgosz and Booth – harmonize a modified version of Booth's first chorus. Their close harmonies evoke feelings of peace and cooperation and here the nostalgic resonances of the waltz are used to strengthen these characteristic connotations which clash with the violence inherent in the lyrics:

And all you have to do
 Is
 Squeeze your little finger
 Ease your little finger back
 (They click the triggers)
 You can change the world.
 Whatever else is true,
 You
 Trust your little finger
 Can –
 (They click again)
 Change the world.
 (Sc. 7: 47)

With the entrance of Sarah Jane Moore the mood changes once again, leading into a brilliantly conceived monologue set to music – similar in form to Mrs Lovett's 'The Worst Pies in London' from *Sweeney Todd*. Here the lyrics form part of a song cycle rather than a complete song in themselves and, as in Mrs Lovett's *tour de force*, the cadences of speech are skilfully set to the musical accompaniment, whilst the rhyming is deceptively artless. As she searches in her bag, she sings:

It's a gun,
 And you can make a state –
 – ment –
 (Pulls out shoe)
 Wrong –
 With a gun –
 Even if you fail.
 It tells them who you are,
 Where you stand.
 This one was on sale. It –
 No not the shoe –
 Well actually the shoe was, too–
 (Drops it back in [bag], fishes around)
 No, that's not it –
 Shit, I had it here –
 Got it!
 (Sc. 7: 48)

Even where the rhymes are artful, as in 'fail./It' and 'sale. It –' they come across as being without artifice, part of the character's manic and broken thoughts as she rifles through her bag. Her 'Shit, I shot it' coming as it does as an unexpected interpolation in the middle of the melodious unity of the barbershop quartet is an unexpected, wonderfully farcical interjection.

* * * * *

Even at this stage of a long, well documented career, critics frequently fail to recognize and appreciate the depth of Sondheim's dramatic abilities and the integral part his contributions play in the works with which he is associated. Twenty-five years after Sondheim first came to London's West End with *West Side Story*, Michael Billington, writing of the London production of *Assassins*, stated:

But the great thing about the show is that Sondheim's songs earn the right to be there. They are not decoration on the cake or a tranquillizing narcotic. Instead, as so often in Sondheim they are masterpieces of irony counterpointing form and content (1992:14).

I have no quarrel with the view advanced in the last sentence, but to suggest that Sondheim's work has to earn the right to be considered part of the musical piece, as if he is still working within the constraints of a tradition where songs are added merely for their entertainment value,

is to show ignorance of the seminal importance of Sondheim in advancing and developing the musical as an art form. Taken in the context of this one scene alone Sondheim's lyrics are the drama, without them the scene does not exist. More and more Sondheim transcends the limitations which the word 'song' implies to create a coherent dramatic statement. As he expresses it:

The important thing about the book is the characters, the essence of what dramatic songwriting is about. Wilson Mizner said, 'People beat scenery'.¹⁶ That's what musical theatre is about. When you are writing songs for a dramatic piece you must ask yourself always, 'Why are the songs necessary to the play?' Not why are they enhancing or fun, but why are they necessary? (Zadan 1990: 237)

Indeed, what Sondheim is proposing is not a new or revolutionary point of view. His quoting of Mizner is an echo of Keats's observation 'Scenery is fine but human nature is finer'.¹⁷ The play is still the thing and Sondheim's contributions become, more and more, exactly that.

In the 'Gun Song' the song (for want of a more exact word) is the scene and so the dramatic development of the characters is contained in the lyrics and the music. As we have seen the different characters are presented one by one: Czolgosz, the committed promoter of the working class; Booth, the insinuating voice of anarchy; Moore, scatterbrained and out of her depth; Guiteau, the manic self-important prisoner of hope, all of whom come together finally to create a complete barbershop quartet, joined harmonically to symbolize their unity. This established musical style of ensemble singing, which originated in the nineteenth century, is used by Sondheim to create a sound which evokes the old fashioned values and happy family environment with which this style of singing has come to be associated. This section is sung a cappella suggesting Sondheim has chosen a particular style where musical accompaniment does not affect our emotional response as music does. It is as if he has omitted a subconscious influence leaving the characters to speak for themselves, yet, at the same time, using a means of expression which is itself suggestive of ironic contradictions. So a beautiful, simple, romantic sound harbours lyrics which, in context, promote criminal action and its resultant chaos:

123 124 125

All you have to do is, Crook your lit- tle

All you have to do is Crook your lit- tle

All you have to do is Crook your lit- tle

All you have to do is Crook your lit- tle

126 127 128

fin- ger. Hook your lit- tle fin- ger 'round

fin- ger. Hook your lit- tle fin- ger 'round

fin- ger. Hook your lit- tle fin- ger 'round

fin- ger. Hook your lit- tle fin- ger 'round

129 130

(Bang) Shit! I shot it

(click) You can change the world

(click) You can change the world.

(click) You can change the world.

(Vocal Score 70-71)

The sonorous chords which lead into Czolgosz's final statement are also reminiscent of *Sweeney Todd*, not surprisingly, as Czolgosz is commenting on the same iniquities which characterized the Industrial Revolution in England. Musically, what is notable is that Sondheim slips from the simple, light key of C Major into the darker, more melancholic key of C Minor as Czolgosz begins to sing, and his voice creates dissonances with the accompaniment to create an ominous, brooding effect, intensifying his words and his mood:

149 150 151

A gun kills man- y men be- fore it's

152 153 154

done, Hun- dreds,

(Vocal Score: 73)

Czolgosz recapitulates briefly the opening lines of the lyrics:

Men in the mines
 And in the steel mills,
 Men at machines,
 Who died for what?
 (Sc. 7: 49)

His contention is that those who make the gun are themselves destroyed by it as they struggle, underpaid and overworked in dreadful conditions, with no hope of escaping to a better life.

Given these circumstances, the death of the President, at Czolgosz's hands, is hardly of importance, especially when the victim symbolizes the society which Czolgosz condemns for creating the conditions in which they live.

Sondheim's consistent awareness of the dramatic development of a work and the words and images which give depth and texture to it can be seen in the way Czolgosz's lyrics refer back to the scene in the saloon (Sc. 3). His words at this point echo Hinckley's to him when the insular young man is berated by Czolgosz for accidentally breaking a bottle. Hinckley replies, 'It's *just* (my italics) a bottle, man' (Sc. 3: 26). For Czolgosz it is more – a symbol of the work and suffering that has produced it – and he cannot destroy it even when prompted to do so by Booth. But now the death of a President – symbol of oppression – is seen as: '*Just ...* (my italics)/One more' (Sc. 7: 49) and Czolgosz feels justified in murdering him. Sondheim is sensitive to the nuances of the character, which have been established by Weidman, and to the way each character expresses himself so that there is an organic and coherent synthesis of book and lyrics.

It may be that a shift in balance towards the musical metaphor is understandable in *Assassins*. As Sondheim has said, 'Music is very rich, in my opinion, the richest form of art. It's also abstract and does strange things to your emotions' (Zadan 1990: 231). This observation, though relevant to all his work, is particularly significant with regard to *Assassins*. In no other work are established musical styles, evoking such specific imagery and ethos, used as extensively to provide a particular historical context and emotional ambiance. But, more importantly, the styles themselves inspire a semantic shift in the lyrics, in that even when the words seem apposite – as, for example, Hinckley's and Fromme's opening lyrics in 'Unworthy of your Love' – the dramatic context generates another level of meaning which resonates with irony and produces contradictory responses from those which the musical genre tends to produce. Further, Sondheim often extends the implicit contradictions by changing the lyric content so that the words themselves express feelings not appropriate to the musical style in a vocabulary which is unexpected. This creates an additional tension and corresponding ambiguity which is both complex and deliberately unsettling. In this particular example the anomalies are developed even further as Sondheim modifies the music to support the darker passions that Fromme and Hinckley express so it becomes heavier and uses fuller chords than is associated with the musical style of a lyrical ballad:

65 66

Let... me be worth- y of your

67 68

love, ... Set you free...

69 70

I... would come take you from your

mp cresc. poco a poco

71 72

I would come take you from your

life

It is a very complex process and one which suggests Sondheim's art is developing to the point where to speak of him as a composer/lyricist does not fully do justice to his achievement. The music and words are so interdependent that there is no disjunction and the two different functions become one.

* * * * *

The narrative framework which the Balladeer provides is used again, in Scene 12, as Guiteau is about to ascend the scaffold. But the narrative thread is intertwined with Guiteau's own words, providing the audience with his subjective viewpoint, artfully demonstrating not only the journey which Guiteau has taken that leads him to the scaffold, but the character of the man taking it: his optimism; his dreams and his religious fervour. Sondheim's lyrics subtly trace how these characteristics gradually develop into paranoid delusion. In the first chorus Guiteau sings:

Look on the bright side,
 Look on the bright side,
 Sit on the right side
 Of the Lord.
 This is the land of
 Opportunity,
 He is your lightning
 You His sword.
 (Sc. 12: 66)

However, when he sings it for the second time the perspective has changed:

Look on the bright side,
 Not on the black side.
 Get off your backside,
 Shine those shoes!
 This is your golden
 Opportunity:
 You are the lightning
 And you're news!
 (Sc. 12: 67)

The reference to God ('He') has become 'you' referring to Guiteau himself. However, by using the second person 'you' instead of the subjective 'I' Guiteau involves the audience in his paranoia.

which has developed into a grandiose and ego-driven contest of cosmic proportions in which he places himself on an equal footing with God, 'Hell,/If I'm guilty,/Then God is as well' (Sc. 12: 67). At the same time Guiteau displays the same childish desire as the spectators in 'How I Saved Roosevelt' to be noticed. By using 'you' there is an underlying implication that Guiteau is not alone and that the situation he represents is exploitable by others, as the Balladeer also suggests with his words, 'Tomorrow they'll all climb aboard!' (Sc. 12: 69). So his actions are extended from those of a single crazed individual to suggest a scenario that not only lends itself to, but also encourages, conspiracy. As we discover in *Into the Woods* Sondheim uses 'and'/'or' to posit two entirely different, but possible, eventualities. In *Assassins* the substitution of the word 'He' by 'you' confers in the lyrics greater complexity of meaning than is at first realized.

In 'The Ballad of Guiteau' we are once again confronted with the concept of the American dream. We see how Sondheim uses and develops the introductory passages which Weidman establishes in Scene 3, where Guiteau gives rein to his vision of America's promise:

GUITEAU:

I think you should get another job.

CZOLGOSZ:

What other job?! There is no other job!

GUITEAU:

Don't be ridiculous. Why, look at me: I've been an attorney, an evangelist, I've sold insurance. I'm a celebrated author. Last week I was a bill collector, and next week I'm going to be Ambassador to France.'

CZOLGOSZ:

I can't be no 'celebrated author'. I can't be no Ambassador to France.

GUITEAU:

Can't, can't, can't. You know your problem? You're a pessimist. This isn't Poland, old boy. This is America! The Land of Opportunity!

(Sc. 3: 27)

Guiteau's opportunity becomes 'golden', but in order to achieve it we see how tarnished the dream becomes when taken out of context and manipulated by unhappy or evil people. Guiteau's concept is driven by manic paranoia and the Balladeer shifts from his role of narrator to become an almost demonic figure fuelling Guiteau's abnormal belief in himself by the use of meretricious arguments:

BALLADEER:

Look on the bright side,
 Not on the sad side,
 Inside the bad side
 Something's good!
 This is your golden
 Opportunity.
 (Sc. 12: 69)

Sondheim's Balladeer repeats Guiteau's use of the word 'golden' with all its connotations of value, goodness, magnificence and worth, taking Guiteau's previous lines in the song and subtly converting them to sustain his own subversive intent. By using the same staccato cake walking musical style of burlesque for the Balladeer, we are almost seduced into accepting his words, willed into viewing the characters within the context that such a musical form suggests. Guiteau and the Balladeer become a 'double act', evoking a whole tradition of musical theatre, as fuelled by the Balladeer's enthusiastic affirmations, Guiteau dances his way up the stairs to the scaffold, happily propelled by his manic dislocation from reality:

BALLADEER:

You've been a preacher –

GUITEAU:

Yes, I have!

BALLADEER:

You've been an author –

GUITEAU:

Yes, I have!

BALLADEER:

You've been a killer –

GUITEAU:

Yes, I have!

BALLADEER:

You could be an angel –

GUITEAU:

Yes, I could!

(Hangman puts hood over Guiteau)

BALLADEER:

Just wait until tomorrow,
 Tomorrow they'll all climb aboard!
 What if you never
 Got to be President?
 You'll be remembered –
(Guiteau dances briefly)

Look on the bright side –

(Again)

Trust in tomorrow –

(Once more)

GUITEAU, BALLADEER:

And the Lord!

(As the Hangman pulls the trap door lever, blackout)

(Sc. 12: 68-70)

As in *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim uses the musical form and style to distance the audience from the actual horror of what is being enacted on stage. So the accusatory and truthful, 'You've been a killer –' (Sc. 12: 71) is accepted just as we accept Mrs Lovett's relish of cannibalism in, 'It's priest!'/'Have a little priest' (1-65).

I have noted how Sondheim reiterates words and phrases to create a cohesive development in both character and thematic material. There is also, however, a subtle use of imagery and words that link the characters from different eras to suggest a unity of delusion. Guiteau's, 'He is your lightning' is similar to the images drawn from nature by Hinckley, 'You are mind and water and sky' (Sc. 10: 59). Fromme sings in the same song to Hinckley that he is, 'Wind and devil and God'. She is as deluded in her feeling for Hinckley as Guiteau is about his relationship with the Almighty. Guiteau's grandiose claims that, 'I have saved my country./I shall be remembered' hark back to Booth's, 'What I did I did well,/And I did it for my country.' (Sc. 2: 21). In this way Sondheim reinforces Weidman's contention that the assassins are a group, linked by a common purpose, based on their disillusionment with the American dream and as such are peculiarly American. It should be noted, however, that 'The Ballad of Guiteau' shows us ultimately Guiteau the man – an individual deluded in his own particular way. It is the Balladeer who suggests, and by his very presence establishes, a link between Guiteau and others of similar disposition and with similar aims:

Just wait until tomorrow

Tomorrow they'll all climb aboard!

What if you never

Got to be President?

You'll be remembered.

(Sc. 12: 69)

Sondheim's method of condensing and consolidating allusions is illustrated aptly in these lines as the phrase 'they'll all climb aboard', not only refers to those who will emulate Guiteau but is also an artful reminder that President Garfield was killed in a railway station.

'Another National Anthem' is the number which finally brings all the conspirators together to articulate their bitterness. The assassins are shown once more as being outside of society by means of the image of another American institution – the ball park where the people gather to watch their sportsmen compete. Once more it is a situation characterizing a stable, successful society indulging a common interest that evokes feelings of enjoyment, competition and the prospect of winning. This other national anthem which is, 'Not the one you cheer at the ball park', makes a powerful indictment:

BYCK:

It's the other national anthem, saying –
If you want to hear –
It says, 'Bullshit!' ...

CZOLGOSZ:

It says, 'Never!' –

GUITEAU:

It says, 'Sorry!' –
(Sc. 15: 84)

The atmospheric chords at the beginning of the number (a) and the wistful accompaniment to the Balladeer's words (b) build slowly with an intensifying militaristic thrust to the music (c):

(a)

The musical score for (a) consists of four staves. The top staff is a vocal line with three measures, each starting with a fermata and a 'Taped' instruction. The second staff is a vocal line with three measures, each starting with a fermata and the word 'Ahh,'. The third staff is a vocal line with three measures, each starting with a fermata and the word 'Ahh,'. The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment line with three measures, each starting with a fermata and the word 'Ahh,'. The piano accompaniment line has a dynamic marking of 'mf p' and a crescendo hairpin.

(Vocal Score: 114)

(b)

did- n't mean a nick- el you just

Musical score for section (b) featuring a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line consists of quarter and eighth notes. The piano accompaniment includes a treble and bass clef with various rhythmic patterns.

(Vocal Score: 118)

(c)

91 Lis- ten to the tune that keeps sound- ing in the

92

Snare drum

93 distance On the out- side com- ing through the ground To the

94

dim mp

Musical score for section (c) featuring a vocal line, piano accompaniment, and a snare drum part. The key signature has two flats (Bb, Eb) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line includes measures 91, 92, 93, and 94. The piano accompaniment includes a treble and bass clef with various rhythmic patterns and dynamics like *mf*, *dim*, and *mp*. The snare drum part is marked with 'X' symbols and includes accents.

(Vocal Score: 125)

The lyrics reinforce the driving and relentless beat of the music, parallel phrases which pile one on top of the next, intensifying the assassins' despair and anger:

No, they may not understand
 All the words,
 All the same
 They hear music ...
 They hear screams ...

 They hear the sobs,
 They hear the drums ...

 The muffled drums,
 The muffled dreams.
 (Sc. 15: 83-84)

Balanced against the despairing diatribe of the assassins comes the Balladeer's assertion that, in this society which they reject, the assassins can:

Choose
 What to be,
 From a mailman to a President.
 There are prizes all around you,
 If you're wise enough to see.
 (Sc. 15: 82)

His, however, is not simply the voice of a patriotic American propagating the idea of the American dream. There is a cynical twist to his argument as he lifts the assassins' words that society is filled with 'promises and lies' (Sc. 15: 86) and suggests that America is a place 'where you can make the lies come true' (Sc. 15: 87). But this, paradoxically, is also the place where the mailman can win the lottery, substantiating the ideas promulgated by the Proprietor in the opening scene of *Assassins*:

Some guys
 Think they can't be winners.
 (Smiles and shakes his head)
 First prize
 Often goes to rank beginners.
 (Sc. 1: 6)

The assassins all want their prize. It is their entitlement in a society where anything is possible; where the mailman can win the lottery. This is a fact stated twice by the Balladeer, but given the Balladeer's ambivalent moral stance, should he be believed? Is it enough that such a thing is possible? Is this one of society's promises or lies? These questions articulate the intricacy that informs Sondheim's lyrics in a very subtle and understated way. It is the complexity of the American dream that the assassins refuse to confront. This is a society where anything is possible 'if' That simple word encapsulates the reality of the dream: the inequalities, the inequities and the fact that all of us are, 'Slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men' (Donne, *Death Be Not Proud*, l. 9).

A sane man understands and enjoys the daydream of winning the lottery, but knows its limitations and the part that chance plays in determining the outcome. It is only because they are not sane that the assassins, in this scene, are able to come in from the cold, as it were, and embrace the simplistic expression of the American dream:

You can always get a prize ...
 You can always get your dream.
 (Sc. 15: 89)

But it is not true. We know it is not true. It is a dangerous accretion to their earlier statement that:

Everybody's
 Got the right
 To their dreams.
 (Sc. 1: 13)

As the other assassins disappear, only Byck remains, leaving the audience with his sardonic and cynically statement: 'Sure, the mailman won the lottery ...'. The ambiguities remain deliberately unresolved for the audience.

It would appear that Sondheim's lyrics have taken us full circle, encapsulating the attitudes and stories of the assassins, to create a homogenous group, in as far as it is possible, given the ambivalence shown in the contradictions which the Balladeer's character, in particular, elucidates.

It is a dramatic necessity as the last book scene, which takes place in the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, is Weidman's imaginative recreation of Oswald's assassination of Kennedy and his attempt to draw together all the disparate events that the work has described. Weidman accepts that the other assassins need Oswald to validate their actions:

BOOTH:

We need you, Lee.

MOORE:

Without you, we're just footnotes in a history book.

GUITEAU:

'Disappointed office seeker.'

CZOLGOSZ:

'Deranged immigrant.'

BOOTH:

'Vainglorious actor.'

FROMME:

Without you we're a bunch of freaks.

HINCKLEY:

With you we're a force of history.

GUITEAU:

We become immortal.

(Sc. 16: 100)

Weidman uses references from history and literature to make the arguments proposed by the assassins more impressive. Booth once again draws attention to the actions of Brutus and the assassination of Caesar; he also describes the plot and quotes from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* to validate his arguments that without performing some noteworthy deed, such as assassinating a President, Oswald is, like Willie Loman, doomed to a life of mediocrity and insignificance. That such an action would reward Oswald with fame and notoriety is not disputed, but the argument that performing such an action would in some way bestow immortality on the other assassins is a dubious one, for what is there to suggest that Oswald's notoriety will be any less ephemeral than that of his predecessors? Why should his fame last longer than theirs and, if it does, why should theirs have faded when their deeds, or proposed actions, were as heinous? The logic of the argument is, however, superceded by the fantasy that Weidman creates in the dialogue between Oswald and Booth; the nightmare-like appearance of the other conspirators; the disconnected voices of Artie Bremer and Sirhan Sirhan and the brilliant theatrical device of having them all, in turn, translate Zangara's impassioned speech from

Italian, so that they become a Greek chorus articulating their pleas to Oswald:

CZOLGOSZ:

You think you're powerless. Empower us.

BOOTH:

It's in your grasp, Lee. All you have to do is move your little finger – you can close down the New York Stock Exchange.

GUITEAU:

Shut down the schools in Indonesia.

MOORE:

In Florence, Italy, a woman will leap from the Duomo clutching a picture of your victim and cursing your name –

CZOLGOSZ:

Your wife will weep –

FROMME:

His wife will weep –

ZANGARA:

The world will weep –

GUITEAU:

Grief. Grief beyond imagining –

HINKLEY:

Despair –

MOORE:

The death of innocence and hope –

CZOLGOSZ:

The bitter burdens which you bear –

BYCK:

The bitter truths you carry in your heart –

GUITEAU:

You can share them with the world.

(Sc. 16: 101)

The music, which bleeds in under the voices, creates a hypnotic chant, building to a nightmarish, discordant finale. It is a powerful and dramatically insinuating achievement:

ALL:

We admire you ...

We're your family ...

You are the future ...

We're depending on you ...

Make us proud.

(Sc. 16: 102)

The chorus ends with a recapitulation of the words originally sung in 'Gun Song' and which Booth has also spoken just a few moments earlier:

All you have to do is squeeze your little finger.
 Squeeze your little finger: ..
 You can change the wor –
 (*Oswald fires.*)
 (Sc. 16: 102-3)

As they sing the words, the world is changed and Kennedy dies. If we believe, as Czolgosz's words would have us believe, that their lives and acts are 'given meaning' by the events in the Depository, then that conviction, in my opinion, is the result of a consummate, theatrical sleight-of-hand exercised by Weidman and Sondheim. It is interesting that Gottfried observes that Sondheim 'made sure there was no song involving Oswald' (1993: 183), perhaps suggesting some patriotic impulse on the part of the composer. Sondheim himself says:

Yes, I avoided writing a song for Oswald in *Assassins* because I felt he was not a character who could sing (Sondheim to Lambert: 1996).

Sondheim's decision was dictated by his interpretation of the character of Oswald within the scenario that he and Weidman had created and not because the subject matter was not suitable to be set to music. It was a dramatic choice and not one compelled by any limitations of the genre or of the imagination and creative process.

The last scene sees the assassins reappear in what is described in the text as 'limbo' (Sc. 17: 104). They reprise, almost word for word, the opening song sung by the Proprietor in the first scene: 'Everybody's Got the Right'. But in this final version the dogmatic utterances of the Proprietor are calculatingly altered. Where the Proprietor asserts that it is a free country and, 'Means your dreams can come true' (Sc. 1: 12), Hinckley now construes as, 'Means that you've got the choice' (Sc. 17: 105). Booth's words that a free country also means, 'They listen to you' (Sc. 1: 12) are translated into the more reasonable view of Czolgosz, 'Means that you get a voice' (Sc. 17: 105). These are very subtle changes and, perhaps, too far removed from the first rendition to be effective as a means of demonstrating to an audience any development in how the assassins

modify their points of view. However, the word 'connect' is used several times to articulate, quite vehemently, how the assassins feel:

OSWALD:

Means you get to connect!

MOORE, FROMME:

That's it!

ALL:

Means the right to expect

That you'll have an effect,

That you're gonna connect –

(Advancing, guns at their sides)

Connect.

Connect!

Connect!

(Sc. 17: 106)

I find the word, with its connotations of the vocabulary of group therapy, jarring in the same way that the phrase, 'Join the group' (Act II: 112), as used by the Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods*, seems superficial. It may be that the slight changes in 'Everybody's Got the Right' together with the attempt to portray the assassins in a slightly more reasonable light would have been more effective if the number 'Something Just Broke' had been included in the original production. As Sondheim describes it:

[This number] was originally intended for the New York production if it had transferred to Broadway. When it didn't, I finished writing the piece for the London production (Sondheim to Lambert: 1996).

'Something Just Broke' tells of people's memories of what they were doing when they heard the news of Kennedy's death. As Michelle Fine, the actress who has appeared in several productions of Sondheim musicals, including *Assassins*, says, 'It focuses on the mourners rather than the murderers making sure we do not take their side' (Fine to Lambert: 1996):

HOUSEWIFE:

I was out in the yard,

Taking down the bed sheets,

When my neighbour yelled across

VOICE:

The President's been shot!

WOMAN:

I remember where I was,
Just exactly where I was,
In the yard out back,

MALE VOICE:

The President's been shot!

SALESCLERK:

I was getting me a shoe shine ...

WOMAN:

Folding sheets.

GENTLEMAN:

When I heard

(Vocal Selections: 57-58)

The song builds up into a montage of voices representing the ordinary American citizens devastated by the death of their President. Writing of the production of *Assassins* at the Derby Playhouse in June 1995, Gerry Gibbs suggests that, 'The absence of the new number, 'Something Just Broke', gives the more normal run of humanity even less of a look-in than there was in the production which first introduced the song' (1995: 7). This observation indicates the function that this number plays and the modifying effect on an audience's perception of the show. The author says:

If there was a missing element, it was the element of expressing the grief and pain of the ordinary people. We have had requests to do it [*Assassins*] without that number but it was very moving and that had to do not so much with the song as a song but how it affected the material that came after it (1997: Weidman to Lambert).

The ordinary people that Weidman speaks of are those who are satirized in 'How I Saved Roosevelt'. 'Something Just Broke' suggests that there is another America, beyond the warped passions of the assassins; one that may be ordinary, but one that is real. The song brings us face to face with a society, within which the idea of the American dream may exist, but where it is subordinated to the realities of life. This America sees the assassination as:

HOUSEWIFE:

Something to be mended.

STOCKBROKER:

Made me wonder who we are.

HOUSEWIFE:

Something we'll have to weather.

LADY:

It was seeing all those torches ...

HOUSEWIFE:

Bringing us all together.

POLICEMAN:

He was me ...

LADY:

He was us ...

HOUSEWIFE:

If only for a moment.

(Vocal Selections: 64-5)

The song suggests a sense of community in a world where that feeling no longer exists. Sondheim speaks of the fact that the protagonists, the assassins, also have something in common, 'They were entirely different people, but they were motivated by a similar kind of passion' (Rothstein: 1991), yet their motivations were not the same, ranging from the political to the personal, and, as Sondheim adds, 'Some were less than crazy, and some were more than crazy.' Under those circumstances the only passion which binds them is the virulence of the irrational; the one thing they have in common is the solution that they choose: assassination. What Sondheim and Weidman create is their own myth, one which draws on preoccupations particular to America: the concept of the American dream; concerns about gun control in a country where the right to carry a weapon is the jealously guarded dispensation granted to every American; the place of America as the melting-pot of displaced and impoverished people promoted in their constitution and the emotional connotations which the very word America embraces.

It is no coincidence that the authors place the assassins in a fair-ground: a setting where the passion for guns can be freely indulged and also one where halls of mirrors distort and confuse the perceptions and ghost trains provide a journey into a surreal world, one where we can enjoy being frightened, for the fear is not real and the experience merely an illusion. Within this context the dramatic exploitations do not have to conform with reality nor, indeed, do they. The book makes giant imaginative leaps to bring the protagonists together and, in creating their own myth, the mythological parameters of the beliefs and cultural icons of America are themselves distorted. The ambiguities which proceed from this are such that the complexities and anomalies are subtle and complicated. In addition we have the contradictions and ambivalences which

Sondheim's lyrics and their context suggest, even when the characters themselves do not demonstrate any great depth of motive or meaningful emotional life. Characters switch allegiance from one point of view to another, sometimes within the scope of one song and it is by their juxtaposition to each other that deeper resonances are extracted to create a symbiosis where none exists. These methods suggest there is a greater complicity and unity of purpose between the assassins than ever actually occurred but which does much to substantiate the myth that Weidman and Sondheim have created.

Assassins is a serious attempt to accommodate complex issues, developing an intellectual hypothesis about the wider implications of the nature of American society and the chimera of the American dream. Gordon, for example, states:

He examines assassinations not because of some sick fascination with violence and death, but in order to better understand and perhaps alter the mores of our society. He confronts pain in order to cauterize the decay and heal the sickness which lurks at the core of our society (1992: 337).

I prefer Sondheim's own explanation of his choice of subject matter – that he thought it was a 'great idea for a musical' (see p. 179). However, Gordon's quote does signify how seriously Sondheim's work is regarded. I believe it is always the dramatic possibilities which intrigue Sondheim: the exploration of the character of a man who could write an optimistic hymn whilst awaiting execution for the assassination of a President of the United States fascinates Sondheim and suggests dramatic opportunities which arguments as to whether or not society shapes a particular kind of person do not. If people beat scenery, then character beats theory.

That *Assassins* engages us on an emotional level cannot be disputed. It is the music which creates the emotional subtext that is at the heart of *Assassins*. Sondheim uses different and quintessential American musical forms that are accessible and familiar. They recall American history and culture, creating an ambience specific both to era and style. He uses musical genres which are entrenched in the collective experience of American culture through films, television, theatre and popular musical idioms. It is the music of *Assassins* which suggests that there does exist a larger community that has all but been lost. Weidman, in the Introduction to the printed text, says that

these assassins are 'peculiarly American' (1991: X). Whether or not one agrees with him there is no doubt that *Assassins* is intrinsically an American musical.

Sondheim's art lies in taking these forms and using them in such a way as to invert our conditioned emotional response to them by the dramatic context in which he places them and in writing lyrics which seduce us with their apparent simplicity. Then, by the felicitous use of a single word or phrase, he plunges us into a world that is at once deceptively uncomplicated yet also resonant with possibilities, anomalies and contradictions. The words and music together create a unique cultural vocabulary which is rich and reverberent, inspiring a thematic unity which lends depth and maturity to his work.

Assassins may be a dark musical; the premise on which it is based may not be totally persuasive but as an example of the ever increasing artistry and maturity of Sondheim's work – 'Attention must be paid.'

Endnotes

1. John Weidman's involvement in theatre is not surprising given that his father is Jerome Weidman, the novelist and playwright, author of *Fiorello!* and *I Can Get It for You Wholesale*. He was a law student who wrote plays and had submitted one to Hal Prince. The play was *Pacific Overtures*, which Prince persuaded Weidman to write first in Kabuki style, and then suggested it should be the basis for a musical, at which point Sondheim became involved in the project.
2. *Sunday in the Park with George* fulfilled James Lapine's obligation to Playwrights Horizons of a commission that he had received from the organization to write an original script.
3. In addition, Milton Babbitt, the composer with whom Sondheim studied composition (funding his course with the money he had received for taking the Hutchinson Prize, the highest musical award at Williams College), is quoted as saying, 'Steve was always very principled' (Zadan 1990: 7). George Oppenheimer, a writer with whom Sondheim collaborated, producing television scripts for a long running series called *Topper*, first broadcast in 1953, said that Sondheim was, 'One of the most loyal kids I've ever met' (Zadan 1990: 8).
4. Scott Turow was a Fellow in creative writing at Stanford, before attending Harvard Law School. He has written a series of best selling novels including *Presumed Innocent* (1987); *The Burden of Proof* (1990) and *The Laws of Our Fathers* where he writes of,

'The awful doomed inquiry of our middle years, the harpy's voice that whispers in dreams: Is this as happy as I will ever be? Do I have the right to just a little more? Or is there nothing better I should hope for?' (1996: 3).

5. Paul Anka, the Canadian pop-singer, had a worldwide hit with his song 'Diana' in 1957.
6. The Beach Boys were pop icons of the sixties, whose songs epitomized the Californian beach ethos: sea, surf, sunshine and girls. Some of their most famous songs include: 'California Girls'; 'Surfin' Safari' and 'Barbara Ann'. Manson and his followers went on a murderous spree which culminated in the massacre of several people including Sharon Tate, actress and wife of Roman Polanski; her unborn child and Jay Sebring, a Hollywood hairstylist.
7. 'I am What I am', written by Jerry Herman for his musical *Le Cage Aux Folles* (1984), has become the Gay Movement's own 'National Anthem', affirming a person's right to be what he or she is, with words such as:

'I am what I am
And what I am needs no excuses.
I deal my own deck,
Sometimes the ace, sometimes the deuces.
It's one life and there's no returning, no deposit.
One life – so it's time to open up your closet.
Life's not worth a damn
Till you can shout out:
I am what I am.
8. The Vocal Score (1990: 16) has 'blood *in* (my italics) the clover', where the printed text (1991: 20) has 'on'. I think 'on' 'sings' better, though 'in' does suggest a more thorough permeation.
9. The Proprietor's misgivings are seen, in retrospect, to be justified when Sara Jane Moore is discovered with the dead body of her dog, which she has just shot by accident (Sc. 13: 71) and when she reveals, in the same scene that she has just brought her son along with her. Weidman's text reaffirms the earlier summation of their characters, as each attacks the other in terms which echo the Proprietor's earlier assessment:

MOORE:

Teenage slut!

FROMME:

Stupid housewife!

(Sc. 13: 73)

10. This technique of having one character describe the thoughts and feelings of another by means of a letter, or in this case a diary, is used extensively and in even more complex permutations in *Passion*.
11. This extract is quoted from an open letter to Horace Greeley, who had reproached Lincoln for his hesitation in freeing the slaves.

12. 'Righteous whore' does have a compelling biblical ring and combines an adjective which could be said to capture Lincoln's inherent moral integrity with a noun which characterizes someone of questionable ethics and morality, but 'spite' seems to have been chosen for its euphonic quality to provide an inner rhyme with 'righteous'.
13. An informal survey showed that the majority of people think of Abraham Lincoln as a man who was killed because he fought to outlaw slavery. John Wilkes Booth was a racist who killed the good and honourable President because of his policies to outlaw slavery. It is the simple, yet simplistic, response, I believe, of most people.
14. Sondheim apart, this operatic principle is seldom employed in musical theatre. Jerry Herman's successful use of it in *Dear World* is one of the few instances in recent shows as it is a technique that can be less judiciously applied.
15. Though not appearing in the lyrics of *West Side Story* the word 'little' appears in a significant context in the script. Maria, facing the gang members after Tony's death, asks, 'How do you fire this gun, Chino? Just by pulling this little trigger?' (Act II: 62)
16. I agree with Sondheim's assertion even though, as Meryle Secrest reveals, he misquotes Mizner. As Secrest notes:

Wilson Mizner is also quoted as having said, speaking of prospecting versus the gentler charms of the Klondykes' saloons and dance halls, 'Flesh beats scenery,' a profundity that, to his chagrin, Sondheim misquoted for years (1998: 106).
17. The letter was written in September 1818 and is quoted in *The Life and Letters of John Keats*, Lord Houghton (ed.) 1927: 130.

CONCLUSION

Passion opened on Broadway on May 9 1994, with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by James Lapine. *Passion* is based on a relatively unknown Italian movie, *Passione d'Amore*, which is itself derived from an obscure novel by Tarchetti, written in 1869. The story is of an ugly, neurotic woman, whose obsessive love for a young officer begins by seeming ridiculous and yet, by the force of her passion, ends with his utter surrender to her love. Both the subject matter and the treatment show Sondheim once again breaking new ground; creating images and condensing words and music to create a song cycle, almost claustrophobic in the use of recurring motifs, themes and complex dislocations of lyrics, where a character articulates not what she herself says, but what that character would wish another to say to her, as in Fosca's piercingly heartfelt, 'I Wish I Could Forget You'.

Thematically, Sondheim returns in this work to issues and images which have preoccupied him in earlier pieces, providing a continuity within his work which allows a basis for comparison. For example, the significance of flowers as an image of both beauty and foreboding, used in *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*, emerges as a major thematic component in *Passion*. 'A woman's like a flower .../A flower's only purpose is to please' (Sc. 8:84) is Fosca's bitter rejoinder to the sentiments expressed by her parents, in a society where beauty is an essential requirement for a wife. It is flowers which Fosca gives to Giorgio, although she knows that:

There is a flower
Which offers nectar at the top,
Delicious nectar at the top,
And bitter poison underneath.

(Sc. 2: 22)

Ludovic, her treacherous suitor, suggests that, had he known he was going to meet Fosca, he would have brought her flowers, regarding them as an initiation to the ritual of courtship, whilst Clara, in anticipation of Giorgio's visit, fills their room 'with every flower in bloom' (Sc. 11: 99).

The contrast between light and dark, which constituted one of the points of reference in *Into the Woods*, finds clear and cogent expression in *Passion*, in the names of the two women, Clara and Fosca, who personify the two amours that embrace Giorgio: the dark obsessive feelings of Fosca

for whom love is, 'As permanent as death,/Implacable as stone' (Sc. 7: 61), contrasted with Clara's lambent desire to 'share a sunrise' and make love 'lighted by the moon' (Sc. 12: 107). It is these two characters through whom Sondheim articulates another major preoccupation: the relationship between the parent and the child, which, as we have seen, is at the heart of *Into the Woods*. Fosca's parents are overly protective of their daughter, epitomized by their reiteration of the word 'careful' to her, as she is courted by Ludovic. It is a word not to be lightly dismissed, especially as Fosca in her innocence, reacts just as Red Ridinghood does (see p. 135) with regard to the wolf:

I sensed in him a danger,
Deception,
Even violence.
I must admit to some degree
That it excited me.
(Sc. 8: 81)

If Fosca and her parents illustrate the problematic aspects of the parent/child relationship, Clara's actions show the most loving and self-sacrificing aspects of the parental role. She knows that it is her responsibility to stay with her child, despite the love she feels for Giorgio. Meanwhile, Giorgio returns to Fosca, a woman he has characterized as a 'capricious child' (Sc. 11: 99), seeing in her unconditional devotion a love which is both a commitment and a completion. Fosca's passion may be traced from the neurotic impulse that drives Johanna in *Sweeney Todd*, or the obsessive fervour of Judge Turpin. However, it is couched in a vocabulary that is singular and specific to her character: precise, controlled, yet evoking in its repetitions her abnormal psychology:

I do not read to think.
I do not read to learn.
I do not read to search for truth,
I know the truth.
The truth is hardly what I need.
(Sc. 2: 22)

Yet, although Fosca concedes that she reads 'to dream', she is not, unlike the protagonists of *Assassins*, taken in by a dream's possibilities. Fosca admits, 'I know how soon a dream becomes

an expectation' (Sc. 2: 23), but she inhabits the dry world of her disappointed heart, knowing that if you have no expectations, there can be no disappointment.

In its intensity and passion, this work goes beyond anything that Sondheim has written; its concept is that of a chamber musical, with soaring, lyrical passages and a complex and dramatically functional use of reprises. The romantic impulse of the music and the overblown nature of the emotions depicted are held in check by lyrics that are direct and ingenuous, yet they are still imbued with the opposites and contradictions that characterize Sondheim's work. *Passion* opened in London on March 26 1996 to mixed reviews. However, most of those critics, who voiced reservations about the piece, tended to credit the production with a seriousness of purpose unusual with regard to musical theatre.

Sondheim's choice of subject matter continues to be diverse and unpredictable and, with each new subject, he demonstrates the infinite variety of musical styles which he can use to make each work a singular and distinctive addition to his remarkable output. I believe that the depth to which one is able to examine and discuss Sondheim's work in a meaningful way, demonstrates the level to which he has endowed the musical theatre with a rare and important credibility. His love for the medium has enhanced his commitment to it and he still works within its parameters, even while he extends its usage and its ability to make a meaningful statement. As a composer he approaches music as a dramatist, surely something no other practitioner in the medium has accomplished to such a degree, using its vast emotional repertoire to both intensify and comment on the situation or the character as a novelist does, with all the attendant ironies and depths that demand input from an audience for, like the great Belgian chanteur and composer, Jacques Brel, Sondheim 'rarely offers solutions, but states the confusion beautifully' (Clayson 1996: 18). He proves that art and entertainment are not mutually exclusive in musical theatre, a heavy burden, when, as we see, musical theatre still depends to a large extent on lightweight, though charming productions such as *Beauty and the Beast* or *Whistle Down the Wind*.

The perceptions which people have about musical theatre do influence the way that Sondheim is regarded. The general public still thinks of musical theatre as a form of light entertainment, revelling in the colour, the spectacle and songs that they know, either through age-old familiarity,

or from hearing the 'hit song' of a particular piece played on the radio or television. In addition, there are the views of some involved in serious theatre that musical theatre is to be regarded only as entertainment and any attempt to develop its function is pretentious and inevitably doomed to failure.

There is no denying the difficulties inherent in the musical theatre: the hybrid composition of the form; its collaborative nature, which can lead to a conflict in conception, such as that between Prince and Sondheim with regard to *Sweeney Todd* (see p. 111) as well as the audience's response to the form. Sondheim has demonstrated a consistent and committed belief in the ability of the musical to extend itself and in this belief he has never compromised. If his works have suffered, it is due in no little part to the fact that they have been judged, by many, by the stereotyped critical criteria to which musical theatre has so long been subjected. In addition, the intellectual dichotomy, which makes an arbitrary distinction between 'art' and 'popular' music, becomes simplistic when assessing Sondheim's work.

As Dot says in *Sunday in the Park with George*, 'All it has to be is good' (1986: 7), but if musical theatre is to be regarded seriously, it must be examined seriously and in depth. The work must be good enough to stand the scrutiny that one would give to any author or composer who seeks to create something meaningful and of lasting worth; something which addresses issues or relationships in such a way that we see them with a fresh understanding and which connects as more than an ephemeral entertainment. In his work, Sondheim has extended the function that the title 'composer/lyricist' indicates to the point where his contribution stamps everyone of his idiosyncratic and unpredictable choices with one appellation: 'A Sondheim musical.' The implications of that description I have attempted to address in this dissertation, giving substance to my contention that Sondheim has created a body of work, and through it a frame of reference, where musical theatre may be accepted as an art form.

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