The Theatre of the Real

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he title of this chapter comes from the last line of Sondheim’s 1984 Pulitzer Prize–winning musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*. For purposes of theatre of the Real, the quotation indicates what marks Sondheim’s work, even more than Yeats’s or Beckett’s, as the quintessential example of theatre of the Real. The “many possibilities” referenced are the themes and variations that occur when a *sinthome* is created through the combined efforts of two or more people engaged in a creative endeavor. Musical theatre relies on ensemble work and thus lends itself to the simultaneous creations of *sinthomes* more than drama does. McMillan writes, “There is a drive for ensemble performance in the musical that sets this form of drama apart from realistic prose drama and its focus on the psychology of individualism” (75). Ensemble work replaces causality with the illogical presentation of lyric time, allowing the characters involved to escape the Symbolic. Sondheim’s work manifests the *sinthome* and allows the characters to experience a Real moment on the stage. The audience is witness to this manifestation and, in some cases, is able to embody the play and experience its own Real moments, too. The audience members at a Sondheim show can make the play a manifest part of their own lives.

The manifestation of theatre of the Real is a careful, pivotal balance which stages the constant flux of a subject’s excess and lack. It is the experience of surplus *jouissance*, which, according to Lacan in *The Other Side*
of Psychoanalysis, is the remainder after the master has experienced his own jouissance (107). In Sondheim’s work, he is the master, especially as he writes both music and lyrics. His jouissance comes from aesthetic creation, leaving his characters and his audience with the ability to experience the leftover. If surplus jouissance is, to take a popular term, “sloppy seconds,” then it is intimately linked to the abject and thus has greater innate ability than the master’s jouissance to free the subject. It is usually the hysteric who is able to experience surplus jouissance, as she is in the position to help the master achieve his own jouissance and then take what is left as her victory. In theatre, both the visual and the audio components of the play are in the position of the hysteric.

The key to manifesting the Real is doing the work with another person or group of people. This is radically different from Lacan’s original formulation, but Lacan does not consider the theatre in his formulation. His concerns with art, even with Antigone, address the relationship between the work of art and the appreciation of that work by one person. The purpose of the Real is to use the individual contact with it to make life in the Symbolic more manageable. Since both theatre and the Symbolic rely on collaboration, they, at first, seem irreconcilable with the Real. In fact, what Sondheim’s theatre proves is that group efforts can also help to manifest the Real, or make that moment tangible for character and audience alike.

Throughout his career, Sondheim has had several important collaborative partners: Harold Prince, George Furth, Burt Shevelove, John Weidman, and James Lapine. Not every creative project involved each man, because the projects each required a different set of talents drawn from the psychic needs of the collaborators. Some efforts reflect the movement of the drive in one direction, but as the artists involved change in their own lives, their drives also shifted, propelling them personally in new directions. Traditionally, we think of the drive as a continuous motion focused on one thing. That, however, is too much like desire to be correct. Instead, I propose that the drive itself is a state, like that of tension or anxiety, that circles around the vortex of the Real. That which it circles can change as the subject reaches various stages of abjection. Thus, the drive can run in reverse, if that is what is needed to maintain the integrity of the work of the drive. When the drive changes directions, collaborative partners must also change. As Lacan states in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, “the aim is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take; the aim is the way taken” (179). Sondheim’s partners are akin to Lacan’s aim, or the paths through which, or with which, the subject of the drive must travel. It seems both Sondheim and his partners intuitively understood
and allowed Sondheim the freedom to work with a number of people on an almost rotating basis. Each of Sondheim’s works is thus fresh and new, while it still explores the same basic theme of the impossible necessity of interpersonal relationships, both romantic and parental, as templates for how some characters achieve a moment in the Real, from which they can return better prepared for daily life.

Up to this point, we have considered the theatres of Yeats and Beckett as approaching an ideal theatre of the Real. The ideal theatre of the Real would develop a new form to incorporate the Real experiences of both creator and actor, so that the Real would not be mimicked, but exposed for its painful value. This event would have to occur on a new stage or in a new pastoral space that is able to present sensory experiences of the natural world that give witness to the throbbing thrill of its generative power without all the trappings of conventional pastoral images.

In Yeats’s work, the audience finds the figure of the dancer, who is set into the continuous motion of the drive, whirling herself into abjection, but her abjection is for the Other, not for the self. Because she is not totally free, what could be synhomatic action for herself becomes only her symptom, but her action does become synhomatic for her Other, who is so motivated by her movement that he is able to access the rhythm of his drive and pursue his own Real. The audience, as witness to such events, can use the example of the dancer figure to set itself into motion as well, with the understanding that the dance, which the audience members begin, must be done for themselves, and not for any partners they might have. Yeats’s theatre is not quite Real because it is missing the elements of nondependent partnership and action for oneself instead of for another.

Beckett’s theatre does not present moments of the Real, either, but instead it presents characters who recount their missing attempts with the Real. Beckett’s characters are so enmeshed in the Symbolic, so concerned with their relationships to the master, that they do not have a chance to manifest their Real moments. Beckett’s characters are too mired in abjection to move past the wasted materials.

Sondheim’s innovations in musical theatre are able to combine the synhomatic movements of Yeats’s dancer figures with Beckett’s abject humor to create a new form, or theatre of the Real, which allows author, character, and audience to bear witness to painfully triumphant moments of the Real. These moments have the power, when acted upon, to create new non-Symbolic, visceral understanding and to change life in the Symbolic for the better, making the Symbolic more easily manipulated by the subject and thus more bearable.
Sondheim’s theatre of the Real developed through his young adulthood and early experiences working on Broadway. Since Sondheim’s life is not as familiar to many of us as are the lives of Yeats or Beckett, it is important to gloss some of his formative experiences. Meryle Secrest, Sondheim’s biographer, depicts his childhood as one of wealthy emptiness. Sondheim himself recalls, “My father and mother used to take me out of bed at cocktail time if they had clients, they’d drag me out in my pajamas to play ‘The Flight of the Bumblebee.’ I took lessons for about two years. It is really a lump, very difficult to make work except of oompah, oompah” (Secrest 20). Sondheim’s parents had active business and social lives, leaving him very much alone. Again, he tells Secrest, “I don’t remember my mother at all during those years [age 5–10]. . . . I don’t think she was around. I don’t think she cared. I think my father wanted to share things with me; I think my mother did not. I have no memory of my mother doing anything with me” (Secrest 21). He was raised primarily by nurses and cousins until the age of ten, when his parents divorced and his father remarried. Sondheim maintained an amiable relationship with his biological father, but he was able to choose his own father figures, or the men who would mold and shape his tastes and career.

Sondheim must have been a confident young man, despite his mousy looks, because he had little fear in befriending Oscar Hammerstein, who would become his teacher and his pseudofather. Sondheim’s mother, Foxy Sondheim, knew Hammerstein through his wife; both women were part of the same social circuit. Foxy, a social climber, decided to buy a summer house in the then fashionably rural Doylestown, PA, only several miles from the Hammersteins’ farm. The social connection, combined with Sondheim’s emerging friendship with the Hammersteins’ son, Jamie, led Sondheim to spend most of his adolescent summers with the Hammerstein family. It seems Sondheim’s musical destiny was set, not by drive for his art but by determination to get away from his mother and be in a friendly household. Still, during those summers, Sondheim learned much about music from the great lyricist and mentor.

Because Sondheim was not serious about the study of music for the
purposes of a career until his second year at Williams College, he was also able to formulate his own musical tastes without the pressures of having to like “the greats,” such Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart, none of whom he claims as essential influences. As Steve Swayne writes, “Sondheim’s emergence as an aficionado of classical music was in no way assured. His love of music certainly goes back to his early years—at least to the age of five—and was driven by his love of innovation and technology” (5). It seems natural that Milton Babbitt, the great modern composer, was destined to become his teacher.

Even the decision to work with Babbitt was Sondheim’s own. He continually was able to choose the men who would formulate his body of knowledge and style. By choosing for himself, Sondheim retained a great amount of control over his destiny. His father figures, or teachers, were not imposing or imposed figures of the Symbolic patriarchy, but they were more like those described by Kristeva’s concept of the Imaginary father, who fosters aesthetic endeavors. These early learning experiences were not oppressive, but collaborative, so that Sondheim could experience the pleasure of working with other great minds.

Despite the positive experience of collaboration, Sondheim knew, from early childhood, that interpersonal relationships could be devastatingly hard to manage. Not much is written about Sondheim’s romantic life, as his biographers respect his desire for privacy in that area, but some themes emerge from Meryle Secrest’s Sondheim: A Life. Though Sondheim is homosexual, he has not had many openly gay affairs. During Sondheim’s early life, he appeared to have approximations of heterosexual love affairs with several women, including Mary Rogers and Lee Remick, but those couplings were really just intense and inspiring friendships, without a sexual component. His longest intimate relationship was with his house-man, Louis Vargas. As Sondheim said, “He was the equivalent of a wife. In the traditional sense.’ Their harmonious relationship lasted until Louis’s death of AIDS in 1993” (Secrest 344). Secrest makes no mention of romantic feelings between the two men, but they are certainly not impossible to rule out.

Peter Jones, as young composer and lyricist, came to Sondheim in 1990 looking for a mentor. “A few weeks or months later, Sondheim was telling his friends that he was in love, really in love, for the first time in his life” (Secrest 375). Sondheim was sixty years old. In 1994, after some difficult times, the two exchanged wedding rings. “Sometime afterwards, one of Sondheim’s anniversary gifts to P.J. [Peter Jones] was the title page of Pas-

3. See Tales of Love for an expanded explanation of this theory.
sion, reprinted and framed, with a dedication to him. Life, it seemed, was now imitating art” (Secrest 381).

Although *Passion*, his most recent show to appear on Broadway, is a total manifestation of theatre of the Real, many plays throughout his career have embodied Real moments and characteristics. This chapter will explore moments and themes of Sondheim’s most Real theatrical endeavors: *Company, Follies, A Little Night Music, Pacific Overtures, Sweeney Todd, Merrily We Roll Along, Sunday in the Park with George, Into the Woods,* and *Passion.* Not all of these plays embody pure theatre of the Real, as *Passion* does, but each manifests at least one of the major recurrent themes or practices that make Sondheim’s theatre of the Real.

*Company,* Sondheim’s earliest manifestation of theatre of the Real, is the story of five married couples, and three lovers, each in a relationship with Bobby, a bachelor, whose ambivalence about marriage causes conflict among his friends. The show ends not in traditional comedic form with Bobby’s marriage, but with his realization that some type of commitment to another person is necessary to live.

*Follies* presents the simultaneous decay of life and American musical theatre, as aged Broadway chorus girls and their husbands gather for a nightmarish trip through their pasts and their unconscious longings at a party before their old theatre is demolished. As the next day breaks and the party ends, the Real has come and gone, leaving the characters a bit broken, but a bit wiser.

In *A Little Night Music,* Sondheim presents a modern variation of a Jonsonian masque with the characters doubling as both the nobility and the satyrs. Courtly intrigue and romance become farce as the characters must realize that their affairs are not as grand as they want to believe. These characters, just as those in *Follies,* find themselves faced with images they do not like and with chances to change themselves into what they want to be.

*Pacific Overtures* marks a big departure for Sondheim, as it is the first overtly political piece of his career. The play makes use of Perry’s “invasion” of Japan to show how the Symbolic can push out an Imaginary that has been sequestered for too long. The play goes on to imply that only a Real moment could save the situation from ruin, but that Real moment never comes.

*Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* presents the title character as a man living in the Real, or in psychosis. His murderous actions

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4. Deidre, the female protagonist, even asks her former love, “Don’t you love farce? / My fault, I fear,” in the often taken-out-of-context ballad, “Send in the Clowns.”
incite traditionally cathartic feelings in the audience and expose the anguish of the Real.

*Sunday in the Park with George* links aesthetic creation to the Real through an exploration of the life of Georges Seurat and his fictional grandson George. Both men risk happiness to pursue art, and in the final scene, they show the audience that aesthetic pursuit produces *jouissance* for the creator and perhaps, given the effectiveness of the production, for the audience as well.

In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim substitutes the wish for the aesthetic creation and presents fairytale characters on quests for their desires. When they achieve their goals, the characters are still miserable, proving that the drive is unquenchable. To think the drive can be sated is to fool oneself. The drive must be allowed to go on, in a Real rhythm, to keep the subject moving, as movement is the only way to achieve the Real.

Finally, in *Passion*, Sondheim gives us the bizarre love triangle of dashing soldier, his beautiful mistress, and a hideous other woman. When the hideous other woman and the dashing soldier become entwined in an inexplicable love affair, doomed to end in death and abandonment, all theatre convention is abandoned, and the Real is laid bare on the stage.

＞“WHITE—A BLANK PAGE OR CANVAS”

*Sondheim’s Sinthomes*

Sondheim creates and produces theatrical works that put forth a development of the Lacanian Real, which can be attained only while endeavoring with another person, or people, who are also on a quest. This is not to imply that the *sinthomes*, or even the quests, are the same. To be truly Real, the material letter of the *sinthome* and its creation must still be radically unique; however, what Sondheim’s work reveals is that extreme individuality can be cultivated only in relief against others engaged in similar processes. The *sinthomes* are created both within and as a result of Sondheim’s work. They cannot be visualized as unlifted pen strokes, but are mosaics of perspectives, trials, and opinions. For the *sinthome* to manifest itself, it must have proximity to another entity trying to achieve a similar position. The theatrical *sinthome* cannot work alone; it must be part of an ensemble of *sinthomes*. Beckett’s dictatorial direction and Yeats’s insular drawing-

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5. From “Sunday,” *Sunday in the Park with George.*
room anti-theatrics prevent their theatres’ necessary collaborations.

For Sondheim, the *sinthome* is created out of the abject material put forth by the characters during the performance. It is not some outlandish or overtly theatrical creation, but it is the kernel of realization that the ideal of the Imaginary must be replaced by a variation of a commonplace object or occurrence from the subject’s daily life. That *sinthome* can then be a bridge from the Imaginary, or Symbolic, to the Real, and back again. We can find justification for this formulation in Lacan’s *Le Sinthome*. He writes:

> And I make the real the support of what I term ex-istence, in this sense: in its ex-sistence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a borromean knot with them, offer it resistance. In other words, the real only has ex-sistence—in rather an astonishing formulation of mine—in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary. (*Le Sinthome* 14)

What Lacan depicts here is the *sinthome* as a visitor, knocking against the fourth wall of the Real. In the theatre, the *sinthome* is what knocks on, and then knocks down, the barrier between stage and house, making the action and reaction continuous. The action on the stage, and the reactions of the audience, are literalizations of that knocking-down process. Once the audience is not just captivated by, but empathizing with, the action of the play, that play is Real and the audience, too, can have a Real experience.

If the subject, either actor or audience member, takes the experience in the theatre and internalizes it, then the body becomes the fourth wall into and out of which abject material must pass. The ways in which those materials pass are everyday occurrences: urination, defecation, perspiration. They are as commonplace as Stevens’s “Complacencies of the peignoir.” To allow the Real to be a breakthrough and life-changing moment, its catalyst and materiality must be part of daily life. That is why, even when delving into the realm of fairytales or the lives of artists, his characters are intensely human, and thus flawed.

For Lacan, as well as for Sondheim, “The writing of little letters, little mathematical letters, is what supports the real” (*Le Sinthome* 20). In this view, we have to have a completely mundane Symbolic that has enough

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6. See Wallace Stevens’s poem “Sunday Morning” from either *Harmonium* or his *Collected Works*.
weight, through repetitive acts, to support the hole of the Real in its center. Repetition is like the caloric intake of the psyche. When we habitualize something, we give it an importance that it did not have as a one-time Symbolic event. At the same time it is given weight, however, it is drained of significance. The rote process of the habit fails to stimulate the subject. Without the weight of habit, the subject has nothing substantial enough to collapse in order to create the hole from which the Real can spring.

To explain how Sondheim is able to reach such an innovative approach to the Real, we must first explore the ways in which he works, with a team of artists, to bring a musical to the Broadway stage. For Sondheim, the rings of the Borromean knot—or the interlocking circles of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—are the intersecting book, lyrics, and score, which are all held together in the performance, which binds the component parts together with the sinthomatic weaving of collaborative efforts.

Musical theatre is a naturally collaborative art because of its enormous artistic scope. As Steve Swayne points out in How Sondheim Found His Sound, many musicians and lyricists understand dramatic form, but most playwrights do not know much about music theory. This adage underscores the need for at least two people to conceptualize the original story for a musical. Those two people are quickly augmented, out of necessity, to include producers, directors, choreographers, scenic and costume designers, and orchestrators.

With so many people working in what constitutes musical theatre’s own, albeit artistic, version of the Symbolic, it is a difficult task to make the experience Real. Sondheim is able to make that Real emerge on the stage because he is able to catch the most essential elements of each collaborator’s drives in the vortex of his circulating need for creation. Thus, with Sondheim and his collaborators, the work on stage is the result of the collision and incorporation of many individual drives into one passion, so potent that when presented, it has the ability to change not only the genre of musical theatre, but the lives of all who are part of its presentation. The actors involved add another hysterical dimension, making the dramatic text live and sing. Prior to performance, drama can only be Imaginary; the Real can break through only when it is lived. Because drama does live, in actual time and space, it has more potential than other literary work to achieve any kind of Real.

The Real that Sondheim creates and presents to his audience takes place in the theatre as the new pastoral space. We must remember that the conventional pastoral, derived from the ancient eclogue form and transformed into the idylls of Medieval Romance, is a Symbolic world. The powers
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of nature are limited to those that adhere to society’s moral and political structures. The Real pastoral, however, is much truer to the workings of the actual natural world than the conventional pastoral is. It is a wild, unpredictable, yet beautiful place that awakens the mind and body by producing both ecstatic and terrorizing emotions in the intruding subject. While Sondheim’s theatre is designed for theatre’s most commercial medium, Broadway, the houses in which Sondheim works are transformed through what is presented onstage.

The Real pastoral does not have to be part of the natural world but can be part of human nature, and thus can be located anywhere a subject resides. Sondheim’s theatres are Real pastoral spaces because they present characters whose experiences of raw emotion, without sentimentality, jar both themselves and the audience watching into a new experience.

The key to making this pastoral space is the nature of Sondheim’s work, which can be rather glibly described as sentiment without sentimentality. This dictum, which could also easily be applied to nearly all modern literature, highlights the importance of human emotion without explanation, apology, or emphasis. When emotions are hyperbolized, as they are in Yeats, or numbed, as in Beckett, they can lose their potency. Yeats’s drawing-room dancer plays and Beckett’s dramaticules have coterie audiences, partially because of their awkward relationships to the emotional expectations of general audiences. Sondheim, at least in most of his major productions, *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Follies* excluded, was able to entice Broadway audiences with productions of unadulterated feeling and honest emotion without embracing nostalgia or sentimentality.

The ways in which Sondheim deals with emotional material on the stage are at the heart of his categorization as a modern playwright. Little, if any, work has been done to explore this classification, but some scholars have hinted at it. Steve Swayne notes that while Sondheim was most profoundly influenced by Ravel (10) and Rachmaninoff (22), both Romantic composers, his most important teachers were Oscar Hammerstein and Milton Babbitt. Sondheim was not Hammerstein’s official student. Because of the friendship between the Hammersteins and Sondheim’s mother, Foxy, and the close proximities of their summer houses in Doylestown, Sondheim was able to spend much time with Hammerstein, absorbing all the great teacher and father figure had to offer.

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7. Sondheim’s shows have all been written for Broadway theatres, with the exception of *Sunday in the Park with George*, which was written for an off-Broadway stage. Sondheim’s latest musical, *Bounce*, has not yet had a Broadway début.
Sondheim studied music with Babbitt, one of America’s greatest Modern composers, while at Williams College, which, incidentally, he entered as an English major (Secrest 85). According to Babbitt, Sondheim was such a disheveled young man that “Sylvia [Babbitt] and I became almost his second parents” (Secrest 86). This statement reveals that like most Modernists, Sondheim felt a great lack at the core of his being, one that in Lacanian terms allowed the Real to glimmer through. The ironic heart of Modernism is not a red valentine, or even a bloody, pulpy thing, but an empty space, where those images used to reside. With the hole of the Real already carved out, it is easier for Modernists like Sondheim than for some other artists to explore the Real. Babbitt’s depiction of the young Sondheim makes this reading evident.

Babbitt also taught Sondheim the art of “long-line” compositions, which allow a composer to sustain a musical idea for the duration of a piece, regardless of its length (Secrest 86). By exploiting this idea of musical unity, Sondheim, the Lacanian Modernist, is able to play with one idea and a multitude of variations, keeping the audience focused on a singular point that becomes the production’s sinthome. Such “long-line composition” can be likened to the use of images in Modern literature that appear to connect disparate moments and characters. The incongruent experiences act like Žižek’s “parallax” moments, explained in The Parallax View, to be the oppositional elements or sides of the same object.

Joanne Gordon, in Art Isn’t Easy: The Theatre of Steven Sondheim, also makes overtures toward the consideration of Sondheim as a Modernist. Quoting a number of critics responding to Follies, she states:

> It is interesting to note how many of the critics, in attempting to explain the meaning of Follies, have compared it with great literary masterpieces. Doris Hering, the reviewer for Dance Magazine, quotes extensively from Eliot’s Four Quartets in her critique of Follies; Brendan Gill of the New Yorker makes reference to Yeats’s A Dialogue of Self and Soul; Jack Kroll of Newsweek finds “Fitzgeraldian overtones”; and T. E. Kalem of Time sees the work as “Proustian.” (Secrest 81)

The connection here between Sondheim and Modern writers, especially Yeats, cannot be overlooked. What these critics recognize is that at the heart of each of these artists is a gap, a longing—personal, political, or...

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8. Consider the plane in Mrs. Dalloway as the quintessential embodiment of this literary technique.
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both—that leaves a fissure in their conception of self. That vortex is created by the centrifugal force of the drive, which leaves open a space for creation. The artistic outputs are the materializations, or letters, of the holes made by the drives.

For Yeats, in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” the hole is the split between the external presentation and internal composition of one subject. The soul admits, “For the intellect no longer knows / Is from the Ought, or Knowler from the Known” (“Self and Soul” ln. 36–37). The soul has reached a Real existence, where differences are extinguished by the sin-thome. Still, the Self of the poem, who dominates its structure, claiming more than two-thirds of the verses, has not caught up to the Soul, but is still in the Symbolic, questing for the Real: “I am content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought; Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot! / When such as I cast out remorse / So great a sweetness flows into the breast / We must laugh and we must sing” (“Self and Soul” ln. 65–70). The Self wants to reach the Real, and when it does, it proposes music and dancing, as if the Soul were already part of a musical’s cast that the Self would like to join. This nearly joyful way of interpreting the Real is one not often asserted, and joy is certainly not a tenet of Modern literature, but here, in both Yeats and Sondheim, we find joy amidst the pain and collapse of the world. In Sondheim’s Modernism, as in Yeats’s and even Eliot’s, it is the music which helps to manifest the space of the Real, making the body, either of the actor or of the audience, the ultimate Real pastoral.

Sondheim, according to Joanne Gordon, also makes interesting use of Modernist literary devices, such as stream-of-consciousness. When analyzing Sunday in the Park with George, she writes, “As the staccato notes that mirror George’s brush strokes resume, the painter is given an extraordinary soliloquy of sound. Like something out of James Joyce’s Ulysses, the soliloquy possesses a free-form structure that barely contains a flood of words linked not grammatically or logically but emotionally” (Gordon 273). The concept of access to a character’s interior monologue is an old one in theatre. Any student of Shakespeare can recognize that device. Sondheim’s innovation removes self-consciousness from the presentation. Just as Bloom, in Ulysses, is not speaking to the reader or trying to give her comprehensible access to his thoughts, so too George, in Sunday, is not aware of his revelations to the audience. He is completely immersed in his drive at that moment, and his words, coming out in tangentially related patterns, are his form of abjection, spitting out any semblance of the Symbolic, to allow greater connection with his art.
It is too simplistic to claim that George, in *Sunday*, is a semi-autobiographical portrayal of Sondheim himself, but George, as a character, can be used as a segue into Sondheim as a creator. When George paints, he is essentially alone in the world he is creating, blocking out all other characters, to their distress. When Sondheim works, despite the intensity of his collaborative efforts, his songwriting occurs while he is alone, with only his piano, under the pressure of creating a song for a specific character during rehearsals.

To understand why Sondheim's collaborative process creates theatre of the Real, it is important to learn how he works alone. As a composer and lyricist, Sondheim actually works less in collaboration with other people than many other creators of Broadway shows who write only words or music. For his first two musicals, *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, Sondheim wrote only the lyrics and went to his mentor, Hammerstein, for advice. Out of that conversation, Sondheim learned:

Instead of writing Madame Rose you write for Madame Rose as played by Ethel Merman. It turned out to be very useful, because when I wrote Joanne in *Company* I wrote for Joanne as played by Elaine Stritch. I wrote Mrs. Lovett as played by Angela Lansbury, and Sweeney Todd as played by Len Cariou, too. It’s not so much that you tailor the material, but you hear the voice in your head whether you want to or not. (Secrest 134)

This statement proves that Sondheim’s songwriting, whether he is collaborating with a composer or not, is still a collaborative process, as he takes the singer into consideration. The singer becomes his partner, and the song is tailored to that singer’s personality, making a final artistic outcome that is unique to, almost *sinthomatic* of, that particular creative process.

Just as Sondheim imagines his singers and takes their characteristics into account when composing, he also envisions an Imaginary, or ideal, audience who will be filling the theatre’s seats. He genuinely cares that his lyrics will receive the hearing they deserve and writes to make them both Symbolically and emotionally available. He believes “that lyrics exist in time. An audience cannot ask a performer to slow down or repeat, for ‘the music is a relentless engine and keeps the lyrics going’” (Gordon 12). Music is an embodiment of the drive, and lyrics are needed to act as a conduit between an audience in the Symbolic and a creation in the Real. Sondheim emphasizes that lyrics are secondary to music: “Lyrics go with music, and music is very rich, in my opinion the richest form of art. It’s also abstract and does very strange things to your emotions...” Lyrics therefore have
to be underwritten. They have to be very simple in essence” (Gordon 13). The idea that words are in service to music subjugates the Symbolic to the Real, making it a necessary gateway, but one that can be discarded. Sondheim himself uses syllabic nonsense in many songs to merge music and voice, giving hearing to two versions of the auditory drive. Examples can be found in “You Could Drive a Person Crazy” from Company, and “Color and Light” from Sunday in the Park with George.

Musically, for Sondheim, “content dictates form” (Gordon 14), which shows a privileging of essence over presentation. Content, which is theme, or the emotional component of a Sondheim musical, is linked to the drama, or movement, which is always probing in the direction of the Real. The form created then is an entirely new substance, a theatrical revolution in Bennett’s terms. That form is sinthomatic of the production and is reducible to a singular point.

“I THOUGHT THAT YOU’D WANT WHAT I WANT”9

Sondheim’s Real Couples

When writing music and lyrics, Sondheim makes sure that the final presentation is a cohesive whole replicating, in art, the unary trait of the drive. When working with his greatest collaborators—George Furth, Hal Prince, and James Lapine—Sondheim also tries to meld his ideas with theirs to maintain that unary output.

Company is Sondheim’s first Broadway hit and what many critics consider the first “concept musical.” The “concept musical” is “essentially non-narrative, or at least non-linear in its narrative approach, and that often takes some aspects of a revue” (Knapp 294). The “concept” approach allows Sondheim to achieve his first unary presentation, which ironically begins as a series of disparate one-act plays, exploring various aspects of committed, romantic relationships, written by George Furth. It was neither Furth nor Sondheim who conceived of the idea as a musical; it was Hal Prince (Secrest 190). The script presented a great challenge to Sondheim, who claimed it was “antithetical to singing. Every time I tried to develop a song out of dialogue it didn’t work. Which is why all the songs in Company

are either self-encapsulating entities or Brechtian comments on what is happening” (Secrest 192). In a play that is about the radical disconnection between people supposedly intimately involved with each other, it seems that the songs and dialogue should reproduce that disconnect, which is exactly what happens in Company.

“Sorry-Grateful” comments on the preceding scene, during which husband Harry and wife Sarah furtively take sips of bourbon and bites of brownie, while trying to outdo each other with karate moves. The scene reveals the adversarial nature of marriage, and the song underscores that with poignant commentary: “You’re always sorry, / You’re always grateful, / You hold her thinking, ‘I’m not alone.’ / You’re still alone” (Company 33). In the dramatic scene, Harry and Sarah share a space in which they are still intensely alone. The song reinforces that message, unifying the presentation. It also reveals a bit of Sondheim’s innovative Real. The characters can bear their loneliness only with the other nearby. Sondheim’s Real requires another to be present and in the same state, so that jouissance does not collapse into mourning or explode into melancholy.

Working with Sondheim not only on Company, but on A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, A Little Night Music, Merrily We Roll Along, Follies, Pacific Overtures, and Sweeney Todd, Harold Prince is the producer/director with whom Sondheim has shared the greatest number of successes. Their work styles, though, as Sondheim himself notes, are radically different. While discussing the process of creating Follies, Sondheim said, “‘The trouble there . . . was that Hal’s a day person and I’m a night one. He starts off the day on high and drops off after a few hours. It takes me a few hours just to wake up. But there’s a minute or two as we pass each other when ideas flow’” (Secrest 207). What Sondheim describes is the near impossibility of creative collaboration; like clichéd ships passing in the night, artists catch only a few starry-eyed moments with each other and from those moments develop an idea. The process described here is also one of completion. What one party lacks the other has, but the collaborators do not fill each other’s lacks.

The Sondheim/Prince partnership also demonstrates how a Real relationship need not end in drama and pain. Sometimes, it can just peter out, as both parties see the need to explore new ways of creation or make new sinthomes for the self, when the old ones have ceased to work. Such was the case with Sondheim and Prince after the disastrously short run of Merrily We Roll Along. Secrest writes about the decision to use totally inexperienced actors for the show’s leading roles, “In retrospect, Prince and Sondheim agreed that it had been a catastrophically bad idea to imagine that
a cast of starry eyed adolescents would be equal to the task of portraying dissipation and disillusion” (311).

Since *Merrily We Roll Along* tries to return to the ideal at its end, the audience knows that ideal is doomed, and the *sinthome* no longer works. After a run of terrible reviews, “Prince told Sondheim he thought their partnership had ‘run out of steam,’ Sondheim said. And that was that. Sondheim had lost the most important collaborator of his life” (Secrest 320).

One can argue, however, that Prince is not his most important collaborator, because the dissolution of the partnership with Prince made way for the great work he did and still may do with James Lapine. With Lapine, Sondheim created *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*, the three shows in which he manifests potent experiences of theatre of the Real. It is important to figure out what about this partnership differs from Sondheim’s other collaborative efforts. Like Prince and Sondheim, Lapine and Sondheim have very different working styles; Lapine works quickly, whereas Sondheim is methodical (Secrest 329), allowing them to complete, or complement, each other.

It is the introduction of the interior monologue into the creative process, however, that makes their enterprises unique:

Writing with Sondheim involved the usual requirement that the playwright contribute lengthy monologues that would never be used, but which would help the composer further define a character that had sprung to life in the mind of its originator. Sondheim said, “For ‘Color and Light’ . . . and even the title song, James wrote interior monologues never to be spoken. They were [a] sort of stream-of-consciousness that I could take from.” (Secrest 329)

Sondheim uses interior monologues that will never be presented on stage to generate ideas about characters that will feed his compositions. This process works exceptionally well with Lapine, as Sondheim’s additional praise of Lapine’s verbal style proves. He calls Lapine’s prose “extremely delicate fabric” (Secrest 329) and retains many of his lines of dialogue to preserve the integrity of Lapine’s intent. That intent, though, also serves Sondheim’s needs as a composer. Both men aim at nuance and subtlety of emotion, interested more in shadow than in light. The exploration of the interior of the character, and the ability of Sondheim, the older, more seasoned writer, to follow the lead of the younger artist, prove that to keep the itself alive,

10. This calls to mind Joanne Gordon’s point that *Sunday* is a musical with Joycean uses of language and narration.
the drive must sometimes shift direction. Here, the drive runs in reverse to maintain the integrity of the work being created by it. Work with Prince was no longer driving Sondheim, and he felt that dissatisfaction. Work with Lapine revitalized him, allowing him to go from *Merrily We Roll Along*, a flop, to *Sunday in the Park with George*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. The reason is perhaps that Lapine could see the value in *Merrily* and make it a success in La Jolla in 1985, when Prince deemed it a failure (Secrest 320). Lapine’s vision, or *synthia*, overlapped with Sondheim’s, even before they began collaborating. Perhaps the greatest and most surprising benefit to Sondheim’s collaborative experiences, especially given his close relationship with Broadway great Oscar Hammerstein, is Sondheim’s lack of what Harold Bloom called “the anxiety of influence.” As Steve Swayne points out, though, “Sondheim feels no such anxiety” (4).

Without the anxiety of living up to his predecessors’ formulas, Sondheim is able to write *Passion*, his most Real statement on romantic love, but certainly not his first. A theme of the impossible necessity of romantic connection runs throughout Sondheim’s career, beginning with the first musical on which he worked, *West Side Story*. Sondheim was only the lyricist for the show, taking a back seat to the difficult Leonard Bernstein, the composer. The show, a contemporary retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, fuels the family feud with racial tension. Tony is white; Maria is Hispanic. Neither culture approves of the other, and thus a Symbolic fence is erected. The conflict, centering on ethnicity, which is really another form of identity imposed by the Symbolic order, ends with Tony’s murder, but unlike Shakespeare’s Juliet, Maria remains alive. Their passion, their drive, is strong enough to incite others to kill, but it does not tempt them to suicide. Maria is more passionately attached to the dead Tony than she was to the live one, as the curtain closes on her waving a gun to keep her family and his friends at bay. The relationship may have been Symbolic, but the passion was Real.

Sondheim was able to propel the characters close to the Real, as he learned the importance of merging song and action. This was Sondheim’s first show, and he was not adept at envisioning the directorial choices to which his songs would lead. Faced with a version of “Maria” that required the actor simply to sing to the audience, with no accompanying action, choreographer Jerome Robbins exclaimed, “You stage it” (Secrest 123). Sondheim learned that his lyrics and later his music must be contiguous with the action.

Ironically, since Sondheim openly admits he does not like Brecht’s work,
Stephen Sondheim's "Many Possibilities"

Sondheim's shows have Brechtian overtones. Sondheim and choreographer Jerome Robbins had a volatile working relationship, but Sondheim still tried to support Robbins's interests and learn from them. Robbins was fascinated by Brecht's Lehrstück plays, which aim at teaching the audience the importance of learning a lesson, regardless of what that lesson may be. Robbins first suggested that Sondheim tackle a musical version of *The Measure Taken*, and when Sondheim rejected that, he recommended *The Exception and the Rule*: “Sondheim did not admire the play and disliked most of Brecht’s work” (Secrest 188), so that project never developed, but Brecht must have affected some of Sondheim’s sensibility because Sondheim’s next major work after that was *Company*, a show that makes use of Brechtian alienation.

The opening of *Company*, with music/lyrics by Sondheim and book by George Furth, highlights alienation in its usual sense of subjects separated from each other. Bobby, the single friend of several married couples, is never available to spend time with his friends. The opening song is a series of answering machine messages being left for Bobby on his birthday. The friends circle inward as the messages come to an end. The stage direction says, “They [the married friends] look out front and speak tonelessly” (*Company* 4). Sondheim and Furth indicate that the dialogue that follows should be intoned, not spoken or sung. The confrontational stances of the couples, combined with the intonation, functions similarly to Brechtian alienation, forcing the audience out of its comfort zone and expectations of musical theatre. This ritual action recalls Yeats’s usage of similar effects by the musicians in his dancer plays.

In a song about the oxymoronic state of marriage, the husbands sing, “You’re sorry-grateful, / Regretful-happy, / Why look for answers where none occur? / You’ll always be what you always were/ Which has nothing to do with, all to do with her” (*Company* 34). Sondheim must create new compound words, ee cummingsesque phrases, to describe the emotional state of marriage, because no single word used in the Symbolic order is adequate to capture the range of emotions.

In the scene that follows “Sorry-Grateful,” Bobby starts to pull away from his own identity in the Symbolic, using a version of a Brechtian rehearsal technique. Brecht advised his actors to speak the words “he said” or “she said” before each line of dialogue, in rehearsal, to enhance actor/character alienation. Bobby separates himself from his social persona when he states, “You two are—he said with envy—just beautiful together” (*Company* 35), as if the Real Bobby is not the speaking Bobby.
It is Bobby’s position within the desires and drives of the married couples that is most interesting about Company. Amy, a soon-to-be wife, points out the problem with love: “A person can’t stand all that sweetness, Paul. Nobody human can stand all that everlasting sweetness” (Company 65). The human being, or the subject of the Real, cannot endure the phoniness of Symbolic emotion, yet the desire of the couple, as a social construct, is to maintain that sweet façade. The couples all share in a desire to have Bobby get married, become part of a couple. That desire is really a veiled form of aggression. In the play, the sexual drive of the individuals in each couple becomes sublimated and turns into a universal aggressive drive. In wishing for Bobby the misery that the couples share, the couples are actually doing Bobby a favor. They are trying to position him in a place of discomfort, which, unbeknownst to them, could lead him to a Real experience.

By the end of the play, Sondheim’s poignant lyrics summarize what Bobby has learned, that the examples of couples he has seen are not enough, but that a partner is needed to be alive, or Real. McMillan explains that Bobby remains outside of the ensemble composed of the rest of the cast (97), which I believe he does because he now knows how to be Real, even if he cannot achieve that position. He sings, “Make me confused, / Mock me with praise, / Let me be used, / Vary my days, / But alone is alone, not alive” (Company 116). To live, or to be Real, one must have a partner who excites both the sexual and aggressive components of the drive. Bobby’s last line, repeated three times, is the title phrase, “Being Alive.” He has not found that partner yet, but at least he knows what he needs. Knapp points out that “whether the conclusion represented by this song [Being Alive] is the ‘truth’ about Bobby may be contested, but it is a conclusion well grounded in the show based as it is on the need for Bobby to experience firsthand what the others have known all along; the comfort of resolution absorbs and heals the pain of actually needing it in the first place” (302). I disagree with the last portion of Knapp’s analysis; Bobby’s final words are not resolution, but they are realization. In them, he acknowledges that he must take on sexuality and romance himself, instead of just commenting on others’ experiences.

Romance is found in Sunday in the Park with George, but the two characters who compose the couple are thwarted by art or painting, which is the third party in their relationship. George sings fairly early in Act 1, “There’s only color and light” (Sunday 596). He is not just speaking about the painting he is making, but summarizing his worldview: “While he is sketching his work, Seurat is prone to sing for his characters, give voice to
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them as he sketches them” (McMillan 162). George interprets everything in life through his particularly sinthomatic way of seeing. In Act 2, George describes Seurat’s artistic technique: “Having studied scientific findings on color, he developed a new style of painting. He found by painting tiny particles, color next to color, that at a certain distance the eye would fuse the specks optically, giving them greater intensity than any mixed pigments” (Sunday 669). Like Beckett’s Krapp, before giving in to his multifaceting impotence, George is on a quest to find a new way of presenting a vision to the world. That vision, and the process of presenting it, is the sinthome, but for George, that process is, at first, not sinthomatic enough. By locking himself into the solipsistic world of his own creation, he destroys his relationship with Dot, his muse. George’s sinthome relies too much on the tendencies of the fetish to allow him to be Real. The fetish reduces the object to a component part that defines that object for the fetishist, but that component part is not the object’s unary trait. The fetishist, through fetishizing, denies the object the right to self-nomination. George reduces Dot to her artistic usefulness, denying the fullness of her identity. It is not painting Dot, but the act of painting itself, which becomes George’s sinthome. Throughout the play, George comes to see the range of emotions and expressions that his relationship with painting can have. It is his true sinthome because it does not enslave but catalyzes George as a subject.

Dot, disgusted that George sees her only as he wants to see her, and not as she wants to be seen, leaves for America with another man, although she is pregnant with George’s child. That child, Marie, makes the connection between the baby and the painting, equally creative endeavors in “Children and Art.” For Marie, the painting is their “family tree.” There is no difference between creating a life and creating a work of art; both actions are sublimations of the same drive.

George of Act 2 cannot understand Marie’s words and is left searching for his creative drive in the final scene, on “la grande jatte.” Pondering his place as an artist, George is confronted by Dot’s ghost, who mistakes him for Seurat. She reminds him:

Look at what you’ve done,
Then at what you want,
Not at where you are,
What you’ll be,
Look at all the things
You gave to me.
Let me give to you
Something in return.
I would be so pleased . . .
(“Move On,” *Sunday* 704)

Dot here, as much the muse as any of Yeats’s dancer figures, is not con-
tent to remain an inspiration for the Real without being allowed to have
access to that Real herself. Dot knows that she too can be Real if she is
allowed to reciprocate the immortalizing and loving gestures with which
George immortalized her. Dot, of course, cannot give back to Seurat, but
she can give to his great-grandson the words of aesthetic creation, “Design,
composition, tension, balance, light” (*Sunday* 706). They are words
belonging to the Symbolic order, but George cannot read the last word;
Dot must say it, thus calling forth the vocative drive, or rhythm of poetic
discourse, linked to the Real. When Dot says, “Harmony,” a line immor-
talized by the impossible warmth of Bernadette Peters’s voice, she gives
George and herself the key to a Real coupling. The parties cannot be the
same, but they must be harmonious. In other words, their *sinthomes* must
work together to form something that gives *jouissance* to both involved.
To last, that *jouissance* cannot be a static thing but must be one that offers,
as the last line of the play, “So many possibilities” (*Sunday* 708).

The ending of *Sunday in the Park with George* also depicts what hap-
pens when art moves from the Real to the Imaginary and then back. Dot,
as a ghost, can be understood by the audience to be uncanny, a figment of
the Imaginary register. When she demands of George, “Give us more to
see” (*Sunday* 705), the Imaginary is making a demand on the Real, but that
demand is not for a product of the Symbolic; it demands that the Real give
abject material. In this case, the abject material is aesthetically pleasing, so
that it can use that process of giving as a model to become Real. In essence,
what Dot requires of George is the exact demand an audience makes on
a production. The audience requires that the actors put forth something
that can be used by them as an example of how they can become Real.
The audience and the actors are other versions of the impossible couplings
Sondheim presents.

Perhaps the most Real-ly successful couple that Sondheim gives his
audience is that of Giorgio and Fosca in *Passion*. Giorgio is a handsome
soldier, romantically involved with Clara, a beautiful, married woman.
When transferred, he meets the sister of his Colonel, who is plagued by
physical and mental illness, which result in her physical disfigurement.
Fosca becomes obsessed with Giorgio, who rebuffs her at first but is later
pulled into her obsession and sacrifices his Symbolic love with Clara for one night of indescribable passion with Fosca. The work runs for an hour and a half with no intermission, locking the audience into Fosca’s tension and anxiety. The show was praised by critics, even such previously harsh ones as Robert Brustein, who “found himself ‘sobbing uncontrollably’” (Secrest 390). This through-composed musical did not, however, receive many accolades from its audiences, perhaps because it reverses Symbolic expectations. The play’s epistolary structure is unexpected, as it creates a nearly episodic presentation. The letters, presented as songs, also reverse expectations, as they are not always sung by the writer, but frequently by the receiver. Having the recipient sing the words of the writer helps to mesh the psychologies of the characters, which can be disconcerting for a musical theatre audience that is accustomed to clearly drawn characters. *Passion* also reverses conventional musical theatre’s comedic ending. Instead of the pretty girl winning the heart of the dashing young man, the pretty girl is thrown aside for the ugly duckling, who never grows into a swan. This is no fairy tale.

Lyrics to the play’s opening song, sung by the first set of lovers while they are naked in bed, show that in terms of the Real, the relationship of Clara and Giorgio is doomed from its start. Clara claims their meeting was a “—Happening by chance in a park” (*Passion* 4), but Giorgio corrects, “Not by chance, / By necessity—” (*Passion* 4). Contingency is key to the Real, as anything resembling plan or order is governed by the Symbolic. If Clara and Giorgio met according to some design, or necessity, their relationship could not be Real:

Some say happiness
Comes and goes,
Then this happiness
Is a kind of happiness
No one really knows
("Happiness," *Passion* 5)

This passage implies that theirs is a permanent happiness. Nothing can be permanent in the Real, so their happiness is actually something many in the Symbolic know.

No one in the Symbolic can truly understand the connection between Giorgio and Fosca, even Doctor Tambourri, who tries to bring them together. As Giorgio’s drive begins to tangle with Fosca’s, he sings, “Everywhere I turn, / There you are. / This is not love, / But some kind of
obsession” (*Passion* 91). It is necessarily unclear whose obsession is being described, though, Fosca’s or Giorgio’s.

When Giorgio and the Colonel quarrel about Giorgio’s relationship with Fosca, Giorgio asserts, “Signora Fosca is as responsible for her actions as am I for mine” (*Passion* 119), which sets up both partners as being free enough to make their own choices to enter the Real. Their love defies all expectation of both character and audience, yet it is so potent that it must draw the viewer into its passionate tension. As the audience is able to relate to these characters, it is able to see the worth of the Real.

Sondheim makes love the transferable agent of abject power, which anyone, character or audience, can experience. Both Giorgio and Clara sing separately, at the end of the play, the same line, “Your love will live in me” (*Passion* 131). Love, usually a Symbolic emotion, in this play reaches its Real potential while still retaining a familiar quality to all involved. The familiarity of the term marks love as a *sinthome* that is more than material letter, but an entire word whose letters themselves are meaningless but whose newly defined terms can mark any number of Real couplings.

Relationships that approach the Real are found not only between lovers, but also between parents and their children. It is almost too easy to say that the theme of discontent between parents and their children stems from Sondheim’s own questionable relationships with his parents, but the Sondheim family romance is one certainly hard to forget. Sondheim recalls about his early to middle childhood:

> I don’t remember my mother at all during those years. . . . I don’t think she was around. I don’t think she cared. I think my father wanted to share things with me; I think my mother did not. I have no memory of my mother doing anything with me. And my father, it was only on occasional Sundays that we would go to ball games. Otherwise, I was what they call an institutionalized child, meaning one who had no contact with any kind of family. You’re in and though it’s luxurious, you’re in an environment that supplies you with everything but human contact. (Secrest 21)

The feeling of alienation that Sondheim expresses in regard to his early years differs greatly from the stifling and angst-filled relationship he had with his mother after his parents’ divorce when he was ten years old. He recalls the following disturbing post-divorce memories: “She would hold my hand in theatres. . . . I remember going to a play with her and she not only held my hand, but looked at me during the entire play. It was really upsetting. . . . Well, she would sit across from me with her legs aspread.
Stephen Sondheim’s ‘Many Possibilities’

She would lower her blouse and that sort of stuff’” (Secrest 30). Though Sondheim doesn’t say it, it seems obvious that his mother, Foxy, was trying to make her son into a substitute for her husband. When that didn’t work, their relationship turned tendentious, and Sondheim chose not even to attend his mother’s funeral.

Throughout her life, though, Foxy remained proud of her son’s accomplishments. Secrest writes, “Foxy Sondheim went to all of his musicals, boasted about him constantly,” and although their friends knew the relationship was strained, “‘She had his picture by her bed and would always say he had just been there’” (220). This portrait posits her as a prime model for Madame Rose, in Gypsy, Sondheim’s second major Broadway musical, for which he wrote lyrics alone. The play is really the story of Madame Rose and her obsessive need to live out her own dreams of fame through the lives of her children, forcing them into the dying world of vaudeville. In collaborative efforts, it is often difficult to give credit for one idea to one or two members of the team, but “there is no doubt that Laurents [the book writer] and Sondheim, working in such close rapport, shaped Gypsy between them and that Styne [the composer] was the malleable third man” (Secrest 135). Thus, it is not too much of a stretch to see that Madame Rose is a version of Foxy Sondheim.

If true, then Gypsy Rose Lee, who takes revenge on her mother through her appalling success as a burlesque performer, is a stand-in for Sondheim, whose own work, while not obscene, did buck musical theatre convention and put material on musical theatre stage that had never before been exposed. It is the concept of exposure here that is most important. True, by today’s standards, Gypsy’s act is mild, almost appropriate for network TV, but it was shocking when first performed. The character must shed the costumes and pretense put onto her by her mother so as to establish her own identity. She abjects herself in front of an audience so that it can be witness to her truth, that she is becoming her own person instead of clinging to the identity chosen for her by her mother. Thus, the child is a triumph of the movement to the Real, despite the Symbolic mother’s lack of approval.

Sunday in the Park with George gives another example of a mother disappointed with a son, and a son willing to publicly abject himself to gain freedom from her. George’s mother is a figure in his painting, and he seeks her approval during Act 1. He sees beauty in a world where she sees only decay. The abjection of the Industrial Revolution changing the banks of the Seine is disturbing to her Symbolic comfort, but George is excited by the changes because he can make them into anything he wants. What she sees
as abject and dirty is, for George, the fodder for his *sinthomatic* art. While he tries to please her with the lyric, “You watch / While I revise the world” (*Sunday* 636), she whispers, “Oh, Georgie, how I long for the old view” (*Sunday* 637). The mother figure, as the older generation enmeshed in the Symbolic, is not pleased with the changes the younger generation wants to make to it, but that impetus to change would never occur without the oppression of the older generation.

There is a fine line between oppression and wisdom in Sondheim’s greatest work about parent/child relationships, *Into the Woods*. This play combines the tales of Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and Rapunzel with the addition of several new characters, a childless baker and his wife. The intertwining of the tales, as Raymond Knapp points out, has an incestuous nature, as the tales share and nurture each other. This perversion of the tales themselves leads to a puzzle-like atmosphere, which seems deceptively easy to solve but is, of course, much more difficult to sort out than it appears. The end of Act 1 sees the characters’ wishes granted, but Act 2 exposes the problems that result when dreams come true. Sondheim and Lapine make Rapunzel’s mother, a witch, played stunningly by Bernadette Peters in the original production, a central figure. She had locked her daughter away in a tower to keep her safe, and, of course, Rapunzel resents her for that entrapment. In a pivotal scene, after Rapunzel has escaped to run off with her prince, she confronts her mother in the woods. The witch laments that she could not make her daughter happy and cries, “Ah, but I am old, I am ugly I embarrass you. You are ashamed of me; you are ashamed. You do not understand” (*Into the Woods* 60), which segues into “Children Will Listen.” The Witch’s lines recall themes familiar to many audience members: parental guilt, generational difference, lack of understanding. These are all Symbolic tags for what can make parent/child relationships Real. If both the parent and the child are able to recognize the barriers to communication, they can start to find ways to relate to each other that are not Symbolic. In other words, they can begin to return to the echolalia of the Imaginary, but with the knowledge that such infantile communication is also a construct, they can instead form a conjoined *sinthome*.

The Witch is never able to do this with Rapunzel because Rapunzel is trampled by the giant first. She screams, “Children can only grow from something you love, to something you lose” (*Into the Woods* 106). Instead

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11. The plot puzzles that often appear in Sondheim’s work are appropriate to his own love of puzzles and board games.
of actual death, the metaphoric loss of a child or a parent can be positive. The relationship between the baker and the mysterious man proves this. As the baker journeys through the woods, he repeatedly encounters the Mysterious Man, who assaults him with riddles, fraying his nerves but forcing him to act instead of mindlessly searching. In Act 2, the Mysterious Man confesses that he is the Baker’s father. The Mysterious Man defends his absence and comforts the Baker on the loss of his wife by chanting, “They disappoint, they disappear, they die but they don’t” (*Into the Woods* 122), conveying to the Baker that the ones we love must fail us, so that we can turn that failure into success. Instead of always depending on the other, the subject can learn to depend on herself. That self-reliance allows the subject to create a *sinthome*, or particular method of survival. To create a *sinthome*, a tangible object or relationship in the Symbolic must be sacrificed, so that a new corporeal reality may manifest itself.

The Baker is not ready to accept that responsibility and replies, “No more questions please, no more jests, no more curses you can’t undo / left by fathers you never knew / no more quests” (*Into the Woods* 123). The Baker is tired and wants to return to the Symbolic, but the woods and his father will not let him. He is even ready to give up on parenthood, until the play’s end when the ghost of his wife returns. She tells him, “Just calm the child.” To calm is to initiate someone into the Symbolic. Before a person can be Real, she must be part of the Symbolic or else she can never reject it. The parent’s job is to give the child access to all the registers; the child’s job is to reject the parent as an Imaginary or Symbolic representation, so that the parent, too, is free to enter the Real.

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Sondheim’s Real Cacophony
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In several of his shows, Sondheim presents the actual moments at which the Real can be entered. These appear as nearly cacophonous musical moments, which underscore the representation of group madness or individual psychotic break. The tamest of these moments occurs in *Merrily We Roll Along*, one of Sondheim’s most underappreciated plays, which tells the story, in reverse, of three high school friends working their way to prominent positions as a composer, a lyricist, and a journalist while trying to either retain or shed their innocence. Charley, the lyricist, or master of the Symbolic, clings ironically to the Imaginary world, in which
he and Frank would be able to write music without the business pressures that accompany it. During a television interview, Charley is asked how he and Frank write together. The song “Franklin Shephard Inc.” details how they work, full of interruptions by secretaries and lawyers, which Charley cannot accept as part of the artistic process. He begins to use the words “Mutter,” and “Buzz,” and “Hum” as onomatopoetic moments, in which this process ceases to make sense. The artistic process, which at one time, not dramatized in the play, might have been Real no longer exists, with the intrusion of the Symbolic business world. Charley is devastated by this change. Forgetting that he is still in the confines of a television studio, giving an interview, Charley explores his disappointment aloud, until he slowly looks around, remembers where he is, and mocks himself openly for being so publicly Real. He does not apologize for his behavior, though, which is significant. By backing away from his moment of sheer anxiety, he is not faithful to his truth, but at least he does not speak about it regrettfully. Charley is a character who, because of a failed partnership, cannot stay in the Real and whose breakdown represents where he was, not where he is going.

George, in *Sunday in the Park with George*, is also a character going on a quest. The Act 1 finale of *Sunday in the Park with George* shows George as the consummate artist, bringing together all the fragments of abject material that litter the landscape of his painting into a coherent whole, or *sinthome*, which in the play only he witnesses. As George is about to finish the painting, his characters speak loudly across the stage to each other. Their conversations are trivial and prickly. They are merely conventional snippets of daily life. George has rid himself of all such connections and must call the figures together into harmonious union, which will create the material letter that is the Real George. An arpeggiated chord, one in which each note is played separately, begins the song during which George quiets and arranges the figures. By the end of the song, whose mellow harmonies mix voices from across the stage with each other, as George mixes dots of color on the canvas, the figures are ready to speak the same, now meaningless, word “Sunday,” which is repeated three times. The triple repetition calls to mind each of the registers through which George has had to pass.

He begins the play already rid of the Symbolic, but his painting and his relationship with Dot waver between the Imaginary and the Real. The noisy, needling figures at the beginning of the finale expose the underside of the placid Imaginary which George thought he was creating. By seeing that breakdown and fixing it to his, and only his, standards, George is able to create his own *sinthome* and enter the Real for a brief moment.
Ben, in *Follies*, is the character who has the most significant and sustained psychotic break of Sondheim’s characters, but *Follies*, as a whole, is a show about the crumbling of the Symbolic and the Imaginary into the gap forced open by the Real. It is the story of aged “follies” girls, returning to their former theatre for one last party before it is torn down. Borris Aronson describes his scenic design as being metaphorical of the show’s themes: “‘I wanted it to be more than just a music hall.’... Aronson designed a fan-shaped and lacy collage reminiscent of a Victorian Valentine, ‘a flash of color amidst the doom’” (Secrest 207), while the rest of the stage resembled a crumbling statue.

As the party progresses, the characters relive their glory days, perform their old numbers, and try to recapture their pasts, knowing all the while that their attempts are futile. Many have mini-breakdowns leading up to Ben’s grand psychotic break. Stella’s number, “Who’s That Woman,” known as the “mirror number,” outlines the horror one woman faces when her Symbolic and Imaginary collide in reflection. At this point, Stella’s song is no longer a replicated number from her past, but a psychic realization. When she looks in the mirror, she cannot immediately recognize herself. She criticizes the reflection for its attention to the physical demands of the Symbolic, mocking the reflection’s beauty rituals. The song ends as Stella realizes that she is the image. Stella’s Imaginary is singing and gradually becomes aware of her Symbolic self and is disgusted by it. This reverses the infant’s initiation into the Symbolic that Lacan outlines in *Ecrits*.

Phyllis’s “The Story of Lucy and Jessie” again portrays the split subject with Lucy as the younger version of one’s Symbolic self, and Jessie as the older version. Neither version is happy with itself and longs to be the other. At the end of the song, Phyllis insists, “If Lucy and Jessie would only combine / I could tell you someone / Who would finally feel just fine” (*Follies* 80). Phyllis is in the position of the hysterical but wants to heal herself by unifying her shattered self-conception. This unity, though, would be Symbolic, as “feeling fine” is a measurement of one’s adherence to conventional expectations. Phyllis refuses the Real, whereas her husband Ben reaches it in a moment which makes the audience very uncomfortable.

Faced with the crumbling façade of his own Imaginary, depicted by his realization that his marriage is a lie and his business acumen is a front for a deeper lack of meaning, Ben tries to force his jaunty Symbolic motto onto himself and the audience in “Live, Laugh, Love.” As Ben listens to the absurdity of his own lyrics, he starts to lose and then forget them, abjecting his words and leaving a Symbolic trail of refuse on the stage. After going blank, “[t]hen he sings, shouting desperately” (*Follies* 84), and, as the stage
directions indicate, “A flash of light and deafening sound as everything breaks apart and disassembles insanely. Bits and pieces of other songs shatter through. The chorus line, although broken up, is still dancing, as if in a nightmare. The noise reaches a peak of madness before slowly starting to recede” (Follies 85). Not only is Ben abject, but his abjection is an example to the others, who also begin the process. It cannot last, however, and Ben finally screams out “Phyllis,” his wife’s name. She comes to him and the music resolves itself, or ends its cacophonous experiment.

Phyllis, as a name, is no longer Symbolically invested. The characters are all still abject; instead, Ben is calling out for his partner in the Real. Although they are returned to their previously Imaginary and Symbolic worlds, the characters carry with them the experience of the Real. They see the parade of chorus girls now for what it truly is, an Image that cannot exist. They see the Symbolic as nothing but an externally imposed dictum. They know they must live with it, but they will no longer live in it.

The effect on the audience is profound. Being witness to a breakdown is terrorizing. It awakens the audience and calls them to question their own Symbolic lives, before they suffer any longer.

“What Ought to Be Clowns”

Sondheim’s Rogues

So far, the suffering we have been dealing with in Sondheim’s work is personal in nature, but there are also social and political conditions presented in some of his plays, which, like Yeats’s mythologically driven plays, convey the suffering of a group. This happens most obviously in Pacific Overtures, Sweeney Todd, and Assassins, each of which posits a rogue figure as the agent of change. The rogue figure is the comedic figure with whom the audience is both eager and afraid to identify. She is able to shift alliances and adjust the world to her own liking without compromise, and thus she disrupts the Symbolic order. Audiences react to her with distasteful envy, as the rogue is in control even over them, but that control gains their respect. The not fully developed rogue figure in Pacific Overtures is the Reciter, a traditional character in Kabuki theatre, from which the show derives many of its techniques. As we have already noted, Sondheim was not a fan of Brecht, yet Pacific Overtures, the story of Commodore Perry’s forced opening of Japa-

nese ports to Western trade, is “essentially a Brechtian polemic about what happens when capitalism and industrialism invade an ancient and poetic culture” (Secrest 279). John Wiedman, who wrote the book, even had in mind that this would be an Epic experiment (Secrest 280). Sondheim was not instantly convinced he wanted to be involved, but after research into Japanese music, he got excited about the endeavor.

The play is based on Japanese Kabuki, which differs greatly from Yeats’s uses of the Japanese Noh: “Unlike the more religious orientation and very formal, aristocratic Noh, Kabuki is an eclectic theatre of the common people. In its popularity, its emphasis on pure entertainment, its elaborate costumes, large stage, choreography and music, it clearly has much in common with its American counterpart” (Gordon 178). To blend the traditional aspects of the Kabuki and make it metaphorically accessible to all, a recent production staged by Terry Nolan at the Arden Theater in Philadelphia used only male actors and performed the play as theatre-in-the-round. The powerful merging of old expectations and new staging techniques made for an assault on the audience’s preconceived ideas.

The figure of the Reciter also plays with ideas of a play’s narrator, as he fluidly enters and exits the action of the play while commenting on the action. The Reciter sings:

The farmer plants the rice,
The priest exalts the rice.
The Lord collects the rice.

The merchant buys the rice.
The craftsman makes the sword
And sells it to the lord
And buys at twice the former price
What he counts on his lord to protect with his sword:

All: The Rice!
(“The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea,”
Pacific Overtures 13)

The play’s lesson, implied throughout, is revealed at the play’s end when “the Emperor gradually sheds his outer garments and immobile masks, and it is the Reciter who emerges. The authority figure of the theater-piece becomes the political power. Implicit control becomes explicit” (Gordon 201). This is a negative moment in the play, though. Perry’s wishes are
coming true; Japan, once Real in its ability to remain self-contained and self-defined, is no longer so. Instead, it is open to trade and able to be defined by the Other. The Reciter is the master rogue figure, not Real, but able to manipulate the Symbolic to carry out his wishes.

In Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street, Mrs. Lovett is the rogue figure able to reconfigure negative social conditions to get what she desires. The world of Sweeney Todd is one “in which brutality has reached apocalyptic proportions . . . Sweeney’s theatrical extravagance is intended to reawaken an audience’s awareness of its own insensitivity and inurnment to aggression” (Gordon 209). By exposing the audience to itself, Sondheim is trying to get the audience to be aware of its behavior, in much the same way as Brecht’s Epic Theatre impels the audience to act. Sondheim, like Brecht, does not demand that his audience members act in a certain way, but only that they examine what they are doing. He puts the audience in the place of the Greek-like chorus who sing throughout the show, commenting on the action in a journalistic, not personally invested manner. The chorus repeatedly warns the audience, “Behold the tale of Sweeney Todd,” making Todd into a troublingly dark fairy tale figure whose terror must be examined. Todd is a Nietzschean figure, “a superhuman creature determined upon a course of indiscriminate bloody purgation” (Gordon 233) by the end of the play. Todd’s drive is to kill the men who destroyed his life, the Judge and the Beadle. When that does not work, drive expands its dimensions to include all people as representative of the Symbolic order, which could produce and preserve figures, such as the Judge, who rape and kidnap at will. Still, Todd’s actions are motivated by his drive, regardless of how violent or extreme the audience deems it. He has our sympathy.

Mrs. Lovett is also a character driven by the need for love in her lonely life. She implicitly understands that she needs to be part of a couple to be Real, and she sees her counterpart in Todd, but she does not have the audience’s sympathy. From her first entrance, Mrs. Lovett is a comic figure as distasteful as her pies, which she freely admits are terrible. In “Not While I’m Around,” she patronizes the simple-minded Tobias as he expresses genuine affection for her as a mother figure. She is a rogue because she only uses Tobias’s affection to her advantage.

The audience sees her as a fully developed rogue figure during the climax of the play, when she is forced to admit that she has known since the beginning that Todd’s wife is the beggar woman roaming about town, while he was seeking revenge for her death. Because she is the keeper of

13. Sondheim first uses this technique with the Lieder singers in A Little Night Music.
knowledge, she represents the master's discourse and must be destroyed in a blaze of glory when thrown into her own oven. As the play ends, the chorus reprises “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”: “They emphasize that this has been a parable not a series of Real events” (Gordon 249). *Sweeney Todd* makes use of the rogue figure and allows the audience to witness what happens when a would-be Real character, like Mrs. Lovett, becomes prey to the allure of power in the Symbolic.

*Assassins* also makes use of the would-be Real character, who falls to the Symbolic. *Assassins*, written with John Weidman, presents the lives of the assassins and would-be assassins of United States presidents. The play is partially narrated by the Balladeer, “who can attain omniscience from time to time, as when he narrates the assassination of McKinley” (McMillan 154). Omniscience implies the phallic power of the Other, so the presence of such a character indicates that this is a play in which many of the figures will struggle with and against their Symbolic natures. The assassins are presented as pathetic figures, but rogues nonetheless, who believe that assassinations are gateways to their own versions of the American dream. In a bastardization of a Fitzgeraldian theme of the American dream, the assassins “are as much a product of that culture as the famous leaders they attempted to kill” (Gordon 318). The refrain, “Everybody’s Got a Right to Be Happy,” recurs like an insult, exposing the dirty ways in which “everybody” has to act to build the Symbolic façade of happiness.

The assassins begin as rogue figures, on the fringes of society, but eventually, as the Booth lyrics attest, they become Antigone-like figures of the Real. John Wilkes Booth sings after he shoots Lincoln:

> . . . 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.
> (Gordon 326)

Just as Antigone buries her brother, thus condemning herself to death, so that she and her country could be free of the oppression of government, Booth tries to eliminate the government that he sees as stifling. The problem is that Booth and the other assassins do not realize they are eliminating only symbols of the Symbolic. They carry out *sinthomatic* actions
but cannot have a Real moment because the truth which they think those actions will bring is exposed as a lie. The assassins believe that their murderous plots will somehow free them and their country, but once the murders are committed, they see that their visions were myopic. Ironically, the dead presidents function as rogues, then, able to manipulate the Symbolic, even in death.

“THE WAY IS CLEAR”\(^\text{14}\)

*Sondheim’s Pastoral*

To experience the Real, a subject needs to inhabit a specific space, a Real pastoral, which breaks all the conventional pastoral expectations and provides a harrowing assault of natural forces that both spur and reflect the subject’s psychic experience. Three of Sondheim’s plays, *Follies*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Into the Woods*, present different variations on the idea of the Real pastoral.

In *Follies*, the stage itself is the location of the Real pastoral. Boris Aronson’s set, as already briefly described, suggests the dereliction and decay of the characters’ psyches. Aronson said about his set, “If you see a statue and a hand is missing or a nose is broken, it leaves so much more to the imagination than if it were complete” (Secrest 207). That missing piece defines Aronson’s set. The “missing hand” is the representation of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, removed because the subjects interacting in that space are no longer concerned with objects of desire, but with the drive itself. The stage is void of all representations of life; there are no trees, no flowers or wheat fields; there is only the decay itself, pulling in the characters. While the space may look comparatively dead, and we usually associate only the living with the pastoral, the deadness of the stage is, in fact, pastoral. Death, as a space of the new pastoral, can be traced back to Yeats’s mytho-Christian dancer plays, while pastoral decay is Beckett’s visual legacy. Death is a life process and, as such, is part of the drive. In *Follies*, the characters enter the dead interior landscape as decaying, stilted souls, but “[a]t the end, on a sunny morning, the characters take their leave of the empty theatre, beyond which, for the first time, one can glimpse the street scene outside” (Secrest 207). The street is not the natural world, but it is life, in a raw,\(^\text{14}\)

bustling state. After a night of Real experiences and breakdowns already analyzed, the characters are able to see the value of that street scene.

*Follies* also comments on the nature of theatre itself. Sondheim implies that if the theatre, as an institution, continues without innovation or embraces the innovative turns some practitioners want to take, it will merely crumble. Theatre needs to become more Real to survive as an art.

In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sondheim follows up on the connections among the pastoral, art, and the Real. In the play, as in his real life, Seurat implements new discoveries in optics to build a world on his canvas. Instead of using the wide, luminous brushstrokes of the Impressionists, Seurat painted with tiny dots of color juxtaposed against each other, so that color variation is formed by the human eye, instead of by mixing paint on the pallet. This makes the very process of viewing Seurat's paintings an active experience for the senses. During Act 1, the audience follows Seurat as he creates his huge canvas, *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte*. The audience meets the figures in the painting and witnesses George's transformations of them. The painting, which is a populated landscape of a small island in the Seine, looks like a conventional pastoral at first glance. Closer examination shows the smokestacks of impending industrialization in the distance. Monkeys and dogs are not roaming free, but are on leashes. This pastoral is being tamed by humanity while George is taming his own life by fixing figures into the painting. He is not, however, trying to gain control in the Symbolic, as he has no desire to rule over these characters' actual lives. Even when Dot begs, “Tell me not to go” (*Sunday* 632), George refuses to tell her what to do. Instead, he turns to the painting and fixes her there, in his Imaginary world.

Sondheim's great statement on the nature of aesthetic creation, “Finishing the Hat,” explains how a painting, produced by George's Imaginary, becomes Real. The hat of the title is the one Dot wears in the painting. He becomes fixated on it, as a fetish object in the Symbolic, but as he creates it on the canvas, it transforms from fetish into *sinthome*. The hat is his world, as he sings:

Coming from the hat,
Studying that hat,
Entering the world of the hat,
Reaching through the world of the hat
Like a window,
Back to this one from that. . . .
George makes the hat into his *sinthome* and allows himself to enter the world of the Real, which, for him, is literally set in paint. The painting is akin to the act of listening, which Lacan describes as a process in analysis during which “we teach the analysand to splice together his symptom and the parasitic real of jouissance. . . . To render jouissance possible is the same thing as . . . to hear a meaning” (*Le Sinthome* 20). Instead of “hearing” that meaning, George paints it.

For a moment he and the audience believe that the world of the painting can peacefully embrace the Real, but as Act 2 opens, all learn that the Real painting is anything but comfortable. At the opening of the act, “It’s Hot Up Here” makes clear the point that the Real is oppressive, especially for those caught in someone else’s Real. In this song, the figures of the painting once again spring to life and complain about their positions as objects of art:

> It’s hot up here  
> A lot up here  
> It’s hot up here  
> Forever . . .

> It’s not my fault  
> I got up here.  
> I’ll rot up here,  
> I am so hot up here.  
> (“It’s Hot Up Here,” *Sunday* 658)

While the aesthetic pastoral that George creates for himself is his own Real, it is not Real for the others involved. In this way, Sondheim’s work exposes a problem with the Real. Unless carefully undertaken, it can infringe on

15. The vibrato or “spin” with which Mandy Patinkin in the original cast recording sings the word “Look” embodies all the anxiety the character is experiencing during the creative process.
others' freedoms and impede their abilities to reach their own moments of Reality.

The Real pastoral of Into the Woods is one in which the characters first enter without thought and subsequently choose to enter, making the space one of the Real and showing them the problems of creating a Real without injuring someone else. Into the Woods is a play about wishes and their outcomes. The first act sends the characters on their journeys:

Into the Woods
Without delay
Be careful not
To lose the way
Into the woods
Who knows what may
Be lurking on the journey.
(“Prologue: Into the Woods,” Into the Woods 21)

The characters embark on their quests, wary of the pastoral, but not of the wishes themselves. By the end of the act, the characters have all had their wishes granted: Cinderella and Rapunzel have their princes, the baker and his wife have their child, Little Red Riding Hood has slain the wolf and saved Granny, Jack has found the goose that lays the golden egg. All is well. The pastoral woods have been momentarily scary, but all have come out better than they entered, so they believe.

But all is not well. Even as the opening song portends, “Be careful though,” the characters are careless. They do not think about the results of their wishes and are subsequently disappointed when they come true. The wishes of Act 1 all belong to the realm of desire. They have objects which will fulfill them: the prince, the child, the goose. In Act 2, the wishes remain, but this time they have no object. Now, the characters understand that they are going back to the woods

To find
to fix
to hide
to move
to battle
to see what the trouble is.
(“Ever After,” Into the Woods 94–95)
Instead of the object, which composes the first set of wishes, the second set is composed of actions. The woods, as the pastoral, now are not a place to find things with Symbolic meanings and attachments, but are a place of action. They are also a place of death. By the end of Act 2, only four main characters remain alive. The pastoral, inhabited by giants, has killed the rest. The murderous female giant is an interesting representation of the figure of the master or Big Other, who is usually depicted as male. Given Sondheim’s overbearing mother, though, it is not hard to imagine why his creative impulses would change the gender of the master to female. In Kristevian terms, the female giant is the phallic mother, more dangerous and demanding than even the Big Other is, as she has the ability to create and destroy in one stroke. As the characters weave their ways through the woods, avoiding the footsteps of the angry giant, who is out to seek revenge for her husband’s death at Jack’s hand, they come closer to their own moments of the Real as they abject themselves of all Symbolic ties. As the Baker’s Wife realizes before she dies:

There are vows, there are ties  
There are needs, there are standards  
There are shouldn’ts and shoulds . . .

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  
Now I understand—  
And it’s time to leave the woods.  
(“Any Moment,” Into the Woods 112–13)

Options outside of the norm, contingency and multiplicity are possible only in the Real. The woods are the space for change, and while they momentarily may sate desire, as does the Baker’s Wife’s encounter with Cinderella’s prince, that moment cannot last. What can last is a remnant of that brief encounter with the Real that a subject can take out of that space and into daily life. However, Into the Woods shows the audience how disorienting the Real can be. The Baker’s Wife attempted a Real experience. She and her husband began the play as threats to the expected outcomes of the already familiar fairy tales by intruding into their formerly discrete
plots (Knapp 153–54). From the beginning, they occupied a tenuous space in the plot, which, by the middle of Act 2, the wife is ready to accept. After her affair, she is so disoriented that she stumbles and falls prey to the giant. Her death proves how damning the Real can be, if not handled with caution.

The journeys into and out of the woods mimic the circulation of the drive itself and are thus reminiscent of the movements of Yeats’s dancer figures. The quests into the pastoral realm act as cataclysmic events, but unlike Yeats’s dancers, who dance to be sinthomatic for others, not for themselves, the circular movements into and out of the woods firmly root the travelers into their own sinthomatic patterns. The pastoral acts as the track on which the drive toward the Real can circulate. The movement shows the audience that they, too, should take up their own quests. By encouraging the audience toward movement of its own, Sondheim’s usage of the pastoral suggests to the audience that action be taken, in whatever form the audience members deem necessary.

“CAREFUL THE THINGS YOU SAY”¹⁶

Sondheim’s Audience

Sondheim’s particular awareness of his audience is what both connects him to and sets him apart from Yeats and Beckett. It is also what makes his theatre more Real than any of their attempts. Sondheim uses catharsis, as does Yeats, to appeal to the emotions of his audience members, but he does so without Yeats’s mythic grandeur. Instead, his link to catharsis is an appeal that highlights emotion without sentimentality. Joanne Gordon claims that “the experience of catharsis is not generally associated with the American musical theatre, although one happily applies the term to Wagnerian opera. Sondheim has shown, however, that a gut-wrenching theatrical experience of music and words does not always have to be presented in a language other than English” (5). Although I would argue that Rodgers and Hammerstein certainly prepare audiences for cathartic experiences with musicals such as Oklahoma and Carousel, Gordon’s point is valuable. Sondheim’s seamless use of music and lyrics produces a doubling effect on the audience, making the emotional content more intense as it is presented in numerous forms at once. In this way, as subtly hinted at by Gordon, perhaps unknowingly,

¹⁶. From “Children Will Listen,” Into the Woods.
Sondheim creates theatre that is unified in the presentation of all its elements.

Gordon uses “concept” to define Sondheim’s creations. The word “concept” implies that all elements of plot, music, lyric, design, and presentation are integrated to convey one dominant mood or idea (7). Sondheim says about this tendency, “Then I like the book writer to write at least one scene, so that I can get into the characters as seen through his eyes and ears, especially as regards their diction. I like to subsume my collaborators and have them subsume me. That always makes for an integrated piece. That is something I was brought up to do by Oscar Hammerstein. What satisfies me the most in the musical theater is the sense of one piece” (Swayne 123). The Real partnership that Sondheim here describes is what makes it possible for the resulting work to be conceptually unified, and for the audience's reaction to be intensified by that unification.

According to Secrest, it is “emotional impact that would be characteristic of his [Sondheim's] best work” (89). Sondheim would learn to do that using what Hammerstein taught him; Hammerstein believed that “his [Sondheim's] main consideration should be how to relate the work to the audience’s experience. Without exactly saying so, he was trying to convey that fact that if the sympathies of the audience were not engaged, it did not matter how brilliant the work” (Secrest 90).

One way for the audience to have sympathy or empathy for a character is to expose the tension of that character and let the audience relate the character’s anxiety to its own angst. Analyzing *Into the Woods*, which achieved huge critical and commercial success, Secrest writes, “In making their [the characters’] themes explicit, something of value had been lost in Sondheim’s work. Frank Rich thought, ‘The tension between his meaning and his expression of that meaning is what gives a Sondheim musical its theatricality’” (355). While it is unfair to say that *Into the Woods* is too explicit in its presentation of theme, Rich’s point is well taken. Sondheim’s music and lyrics shine when they reveal tension, not resolution. By expressing that tension, Sondheim’s music is able to create a gap into which the audience can fall, seeking first to understand the character presented, and then the audience member’s own reaction to that character. Such is the case of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.*

*Sweeney Todd* builds catharsis in a rather traditional fashion, appealing to the audience's senses of both pity for and fear of the title character. Sweeney has withstood unlawful imprisonment at the hands of an evil judge who raped Sweeney’s wife and left her to wander the streets insane, while raising Sweeney’s daughter as his own. At the play’s opening, the judge is planning
to marry that girl, Johanna. Sweeney returns to England, bent on revenge, and meets the shifty yet charismatic Mrs. Lovett, who never tells Sweeney his wife is still alive, to feed her own desire for a thriving business and a revitalized love life. Together, Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett act like demonic Robin Hoods, killing off the neighborhood scum to feed the masses, but these masses pay for their food. As Mrs. Lovett forestalls Sweeney from killing the Judge and encourages him to kill others, turning them into meat pies to sell for profit, the audience sees Sweeney’s growing agitation and pities him; he is consistently prey to the women in his life: his wife’s beauty, his daughter’s innocence, and Mrs. Lovett’s trickery. Still, Sweeney is an everyman, a barber who once had a promising career and a beautiful wife and daughter. He could be anyone in the audience, but isn’t quite. The audience can pity him without getting too close.

Yet the audience does get nearly too close, as they fear him also. In a 2005 staging at the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia, Terry Nolan’s superb direction had Sweeney running through the audience, with his knife in hand. The audience, so enmeshed in the action, literally feared for themselves. It was not just the potential physical harm that frightened the Sweeney audience; it was the fear that under the wrong circumstances, any person in the audience could become Sweeney.

The play ends when the Company and Sweeney sing:

TODD AND COMPANY: Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd!
   He served a dark and hungry god!
TODD: To seek revenge may lead to hell,
MRS. LOVETT: But everyone does it, and seldom as well
TODD AND MRS. LOVETT: As Sweeney,
COMPANY: As Sweeney Todd,
   The Demon Barber of Fleet . . .
   Street!
(The company exits. Todd and Mrs. Lovett are the last to leave. They look at each other, then exit in opposite directions, Mrs. Lovett into the wings, Todd upstage. He glares at us malevolently for a moment, then slams the iron door in our faces. Blackout.)
(Sweeney Todd 538)

The company sings directly to the audience, giving instruction. It has witnessed the ravages of the Real and wants to caution against it, but the audience, so engrossed and overpowered by the play, leaves, warned but enamored with the danger it has witnessed. The play shows that revenge
will bring downfall by immersing us in the Symbolic realm of justice and revolt against its ironic misuse. Still, we are all prey to its appeal; there is no escape from the inevitability of human nature, categorized here by the negative connection to the desire for revenge. Revenge, though, has an object. In Lacanian terms, what the audience fears is not the murderous rage and subsequent action that Sweeney takes, but the possibility, as in Sweeney's case, that the actions will be bungled and the Real opportunity missed.

Sondheim creates characters, like Sweeney Todd, who are unexpected on the Broadway stage or whose presentations differ from conventional expectations. Audiences confront this alienation from character, especially in *Into the Woods* and *Passion*. American audiences, raised on fairy-tale stereotypes, expect Little Red Riding Hood to be a sweet, unassuming child, with a good, compassionate heart, whose only goal is to help her sick grandmother. Instead, Sondheim presents a selfish, violent child, whose bossy, precocious nature leads her into danger.

As Little Red is preparing for her journey to visit her grandmother, she stops at the Baker's house, asking for "Just a loaf of bread . . . and perhaps a sticky bun, or four" (*Into the Woods* 7). As staged, Little Red loads up her basket with goodies for which she cannot pay, while the Baker's wife removes them as quickly as possible, so as not to lose too much profit. Still, Little Red leaves with a nice bounty of sweets.

After she is eaten by, and then saved from, the Wolf, Little Red is proud to wear his pelt as a cape. She puts on the power of the patriarchy to convey, in Symbolic terms, the authority she, as a female figure, has over traditional male figures. To further this image, Little Red wields a knife, which in one recent production was kept between the actress's breasts, implying that the male phallus can be contained by the woman, not in the expected place of the vagina, but between the breasts, symbols of sustenance and nourishment, to remind the audience that women are needed to sustain the façade of patriarchal authority, but that, at any time, they can use that patriarchal authority to castrate. Broadway audiences, used to Curly saving Laurey from Jud, are surprised that it is a girl, not even a grown woman, who is in the position of the weapon-wielding hero, ready to slay giants. When the other characters

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17. Little Red is able to do what Yeats’s Leda in his famous poem “Leda and the Swan” cannot accomplish. That is, Little Red conquers the patriarchy by assuming its costume; Leda tries to own the branding she has received, but cannot make her scar her own *sinthome*.

18. The production about which I write is all the more intriguing, as it was staged at St. Hubert Catholic High School for Girls in Philadelphia. The actress playing Little Red, Vanessa Turchi, was only 15 during the performance.

19. The characters mentioned here are the leading roles in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma*. 
force her to mind the Baker’s Son with Cinderella, instead of killing the giant with the Baker and Jack, the audience is both appalled and appeased. The audience has come to admire her spunk, but many are not ready to accept that pugnacity for more than a few minutes; the break in the Symbolic order that Little Red represents must be repaired, and that, in terms of character, is what I would see as a flaw in the drive toward the Real of this piece.

The Witch of Into the Woods is another character whose initial presentation adheres to stereotypes, but whose transformation jostles the audience, thus alienating them from their expectations. The Witch begins the play costumed as a haggard old woman with a crooked nose and a finger always pointing with accusation. She can cast spells and lift curses, yet she is unhappy. Her ulterior motive for sending the Baker and his Wife into the woods to find “The cow as white as milk / The cape as red as blood / The hair as yellow as corn / The slipper as pure as gold” (Into the Woods 18) is to have the curse, placed on her by her mother, reversed. The witch wishes to be beautiful.

Not only does she wish for beauty, but at the end of Act 1, she, like every other character, gets her wish. She is as beautiful as any Broadway heroine, but her beauty, which is usually a powerful asset to a Broadway heroine, is her downfall. Just as Yeats uses masks to universalize the identity of his dancer figures, the witch’s ugliness acts as her mask. It allows her to represent a type, instead of an individual, dulling and conventionalizing the audience’s reaction to her. When she appears as a beautiful woman, she again risks being stereotyped as merely a pretty face, but Sondheim avoids that by combining her acquisition of beauty with the loss of her magical powers. The witch glories in her beauty at the end of Act 1, but she quickly laments the loss of her magic when in the beginning of Act 2 she learns she is powerless. Sondheim shows the audience that the Real power of a woman is found in her ability to lead without magic. When the characters have to find a way to appease the murderous giant running amok in the woods, her advice is correct; the only thing practical thing to do to appease the murderous giant is to sacrifice Jack to her, since Jack is the one who killed the giant’s husband. No one will listen to a beautiful woman, though, only to an ugly witch. She sings, spitting at the others in the woods, “I’m not good / I’m not nice, I’m just right / I’m the witch / You’re the world” (Into the Woods 121). The choppy sentences indicate the snippy, disgusted tone of a character who realizes that the Symbolic cannot accept a woman who is both smart and pretty.

In a grand move, totally disillusioned with the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the witch totally abjects herself by disappearing completely. She
attacks the other characters with words, agents of the Symbolic and still the only thing they understand, insisting:

It’s the last midnight
It’s the last verse
Now before it’s past midnight
I’m leaving my last curse
I’m leaving alone. You can tend the garden it’s yours.
Separate and alone
("The Last Midnight,” Into the Woods 122)

To be “separate and alone” is to deny these characters the chance to find a partner in the Real, one who can experience a moment of jouissance with the subject and help that subject back to reality while standing as a reminder of the Real moment. The witch, the most beautiful woman on stage, cannot be that partner. The partners must be two people alike in spirit, not in body.

The coordination of spirit, despite physical deformity, is the heart of Sondheim’s most Real play, Passion, which also thwarts ideas of conventional beauty. Clara, the traditionally beautiful woman, is Giorgio’s lover at the beginning of the play. The two are happy and approaching jouissance at the play’s opening, proclaiming to each other:

Some say happiness
Comes and goes
Then this happiness
Is a kind of happiness
No one really knows
("Happiness,” Passion 5)

Happiness that exists without knowledge or understanding is not happiness of the Symbolic. It can be Real or Imaginary, and for Giorgio and Clara, it is only Imaginary. The further away Giorgio moves from her, first in body and then in spirit, the more Clara lets the audience realize that the couple’s love is fading. Clara tries to re-create it with words, making an Imaginary love out of a Symbolic agent:

I close my eyes,
Imagining that you are there,
Imagining your fingers touching mine,
Imagining our room,
The bed,
The secrecy,
The world outside,
Your mouth on mine—
("Fourth Letter," Passion 20)

Sondheim’s lyrics draw the listeners more deeply into the intensely private world of Clara’s love affair. The beautiful woman has no actual lover, but she creates one out of bits and pieces of memory. She builds an uncanny image of her once lover, but the uncanny is a fearful thing. It can freeze the observing subject, and not allow for movement.

With Clara gradually locking herself in an Imaginary world, Fosca, the ugly, sickly, anxiety-ridden sister of Giorgio’s commanding officer, breaks out of her Imaginary. Her unbridled need for love and companionship inexplicably links to Giorgio’s own drive. His desire for Clara has subsided and is replaced by his drive, which first takes the form of Fosca’s own drive, as he tells her, “Tonight it [his heart] loves you as you wish” (Passion 58). At first, Fosca can encircle only a part of Giorgio in her drive, but, by the end of the play, her drive merges completely with his.

She explains, in Scene 10, “Loving you / Is not a choice, / It’s who I am” (Passion 100); by the end of the play, Giorgio also does not have a choice:

Love without reason, love without mercy,
Love without pride or shame.
Love unconcerned
With being returned—
No wisdom, no judgment,
No caution, no blame.

No one has ever known me
As clearly as you.
No one has ever shown me
What love could be like until now:
Not pretty or safe or easy,
But more than I ever knew.
Love within reason—that isn’t love
And I’ve learned that from you.
("No One Has Ever Loved Me," Passion 122)
This is the love for which Bobby longs in “Being Alive,” which ends Company. It took Sondheim more than twenty years to express Bobby’s drive, but he does so in Giorgio. It took bravery to let a Broadway hero lust after and love a woman so damaged in mind and body that she could only catalyze an experience of the Real.

Giorgio has that moment at the end of the play, when “suddenly, Giorgio lets out a high-pitched howl—a cry that is clearly reminiscent of Fosca’s—as lights fade to black” (Passion 125). The vocative drives of the two lovers have reached the same fevered pitch. Uttering the sound of the Real makes that moment manifest for the characters and binds them to each other through a guttural howl that gives voice to their shared sinthome. Badiou’s theory of the truth event can explain this moment. The characters do not witness the same event, but they share in the same relationship that acts as their truth event. While they react to that event with different facets of fidelity, they utter that fidelity using the same sound. Fosca’s ugliness and Giorgio’s inexplicable love for her are not easily apprehended by the audience. The audience is distanced enough from the characters to consider how and why they are feeling, instead of indulging in pure emotion.

Several of Sondheim’s plots also operate using a technique akin to Brecht’s alienation effect, which separates the audience from any emotional impulse it might have in relationship to the characters. Intellectualization replaces emotion in Epic Theatre, which is designed to highlight the alienation effect. The plot of Passion, in which the ugly girl finds jouissance and the pretty girl loses her love, is virtually unheard of on the Broadway stage. Usually, musical theatre is designed to make the audience feel along with its pretty heroine. To thwart that expectation is to alienate the audience. Elements of the plots of Company and Merrily We Roll Along also work with the alienation effect to disconcert the audience’s expectations and prepare them for their own Real experiences.

In Company, the hero, Robert, probably a latent homosexual, is encouraged by his married friends, especially the women, to settle down and get married. He resists throughout the play, dating a series of women, each of whom he claims to be excited by, and about, but none of whom he marries. At the end of the play, Robert understands what Real love is, something that pricks and nudges until one is forced to feel one’s own body and emotions, not just those socially prescribed, but he remains unwed. Against a tradition that includes weddings, sometimes multiple weddings, as in Guys and Dolls or Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Company’s ending is a shock. The shock is derived from the audience’s realization that alternatives to the Symbolic exist, and they can be both freeing and terrifying, as they are for Robert, but they
should be explored. That exploration should not simply be the intellectual response that Brecht encourages, but rather an active, visceral experience.

Sondheim also makes bold innovations with plot in *Merrily We Roll Along*, which is told backwards, beginning with middle-aged, disillusioned characters, and ending with them at their high school graduation. The younger the characters get, the less they are immersed in the Symbolic order, and the more they believe in their Imaginary constructs. The audience first meets them as Franklin Shepard, the protagonist, returns to his alma mater to give the commencement address. He intimates that he will tell the graduates the story of how to survive in life, essentially how to master the Symbolic order, but the story Sondheim tells is how the Symbolic masters him. By having the characters devolve, Sondheim shows the value of the Imaginary as a key state in which one can build one’s *sinthome*. Each of the three lead characters is an artist, so their Imaginaries are sublimated versions of their drives. They have chances, when young, to build their *sinthomes*, but they do not take those chances.

The play failed miserably on Broadway, closing after only sixteen performances (Secrest 319) because of what some critics claim was the inability of the audience to like the characters, who “were introduced at their worst—jaded by success, embittered by rejection” (Secrest 310). That is not the actual nature of the failure, though. The play does not fail because it alienates its audience; it fails because it does not alienate them. In the disillusioned characters, the audience sees reflections of itself, and it does not like those presentations. The audience’s own Imaginary images are shattered when they confront themselves on stage, and thus, for the many audience members who are not willing to leave the Symbolic and the Imaginary and enter the Real, they choose to leave the theatre instead.

**“LET OTHERS MAKE THAT DECISION”**

*Sondheim’s Music*

Sondheim’s music, although alienated from his predecessors’, entices audiences to return. According to Steve Swayne’s *How Sondheim Found His Sound*, a Sondheim musical is unique because it blends classical influence and style with American musical history to create a sound that is seductive without being sweet, lush without being cloying. Swayne analyzes Sond-
heim’s comparative relationship to Jerome Kern in the following manner: “Chief among those similarities between Kern and Sondheim is their propensity toward frugality of musical means. ‘All of [Kern’s] best songs,’ wrote Sondheim, ‘have that economy indigenous to the best art: the maximum development of the minimum of material’” (53). Just as Sondheim does with emotional content, the musical idea is stripped bare and then molded and shaped throughout the composition. It is as if Sondheim’s original musical motive is a line, which he knots, unties, and reties in melodic and harmonic shapes that mimic what the human psyche does with the circulating registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Each Sondheim song represents the function of the sinhome, able to suture the disparate elements of the psyche represented by the discrete musical notations.

Sondheim songs are also sinhomatic links to the characters who sing them. Unlike much of the music of Broadway greats, such as Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin, whose songs, for the most part, can live outside of their theatrical settings, only two or three Sondheim songs have had life outside of the plays in which they are set. “Send in the Clowns” has garnered the greatest out-of-show attention, but there are many others, better songs whose meanings are totally lost without the contexts of the plays to which they belong. The primary reason is that the songs are vehicles for character development and not simply mediations on emotions already expressed in dialogue. When Nellie Forbush in South Pacific sings “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair,” the audience already knows she is trying to get over her love for Emile, but when Cinderella sings “On the Steps of the Palace,” the audience has no idea that she is uncertain about her future with the prince until she begins to sing.

Swayne uses the example of “Not While I’m Around” from Sweeney Todd to show how music and characters are inextricable from each other. He writes about the song:

To begin with, it refutes the idea that Sondheim could not write a hummable melody; this song is achingly beautiful and quite memorable. Coupled to the relative simplicity of the melody is its uncomplicated “abab” formal structure (which together forms the first part—A—of a larger ternary structure). All of this is in keeping with the character who introduces the song, Tobias (Toby), a sweet-hearted but dim-witted fellow who knows no guile. His song, in other words, is as straight-forward as he is. But in the central part of the song (B), which contrasts sharply with the opening section, Toby’s agitation and inability to order his thoughts are reflected in a change of melody, vocal range, harmony and form. (Swayne 42)
Character and musical form are built together, making their presentation unified, even when what is presented is a conflicted character. Swayne summarizes this configuration in the quick argument, “Structure is dictated by the drama; content dictates form” (197). The structure of the plot arises from the action; the specific substance that is abjected as the action occurs is then used to make to make the musical forms that suture together the disparate characters, and even those characters’ disparate reactions. Sometimes, the division which is brought together by musical form expands beyond character into theme, allowing the suturing process to stand as an example to the audience of how it, too, can use a material substance, even one as fleetingly intangible as song, to restitch itself.

Sondheim gives an example of thematic suturing through music in *Sunday in the Park with George*. Swayne points out what the listener intuits about “The Day Off” of Act 1 and the “Putting It Together” of Act 2. He explains, “The chief element that links these two songs is their multisection construction put to the service of multiple character development. It is a structural parallel, not an inherently dramatic one” (226–27). I would like to modify Swayne’s point here; yes, the structural parallel is most prominent, but the dramatic one is present, too. The connection between the two scenes proves that the hardships of the artists cross time and space and arise from similar jealousies and misunderstandings. Just as Seurat tries to assemble his painting, George in Act 2 tries to construct his artistic vision through his “cromolumes.” Both must endure intolerance and misunderstanding, and both ultimately survive. Sondheim’s musical parallel links the two men, to show how different people can use the same basic material as fodder for their varying Reals.

The necessity of variation in both Sondheim’s world and the psychic world of the Real is underscored by Sondheim’s comments on the reprise. Sondheim states, “I find the notion that the same lyric can apply in the first act and the second act very suspect. . . . I have found places [in my work] where the music could be reprised, but I’ve never found one where the lyric could be reprised” (Swayne 228). The lyric cannot be reprised because it provides the Symbolic content of the work. As Sondheim’s characters move through his plays, they slough off the Symbolic as they move toward the Real; thus, words that had meaning in the first act are meaningless to them in the second. To simply reprise would be to deny the character potential movement toward the Real. To put this idea in Yeatsian terms, the character

21. Swayne does not believe that Sondheim here exaggerates as he did reprise lyrics in *Forum* and *Night Music* and uses a reprise technique for the song commentaries that recur in *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily, Into the Woods*, and *Assassins*. 
would stop spinning; to use Beckettian imagery, the characters would be mired in their own pastoral wastelands.

The final element of the Real, which Sondheim presents in his dramas, is the impetus to act. Just as Yeats wants his figures to whirl their ways into the Real, or Beckett shows why his characters could not move toward theirs, so, too, does Sondheim push his audiences in new directions. He does this overtly at the end of both *Into the Woods* and *Sunday in the Park with George*.

*Into the Woods* ends with Cinderella’s “I wish,” extending out over the audience, asking them not only to wonder what her wish is, but also forcing them to think about their own wishes and how those wishes may or may not be fulfilled. Of course, the audience has already witnessed that wishes, like drives, are unending. Once one is fulfilled, another arises. The wish, then, is the partial object of desire, but the act of wishing belongs to the drive. Sondheim ends the work, then, subtly asking his audience to stay in the motion of the drive.

*Sunday in the Park with George*, although its composition precedes *Into the Woods*, ends with the gap that the continuing swirl of wishes opens. George’s last words are “So many possibilities,” a phrase that resolves musically into a glimmering final note. The innumerable options, presented to the audience on the white canvas, the last show’s last visual image, are the possibilities left after abjection has been completed. The white backdrop represents the empty subject, who now can formulate her own *sinthome* out of any one or any combination of those possibilities.

Sondheim presents in lyrics and music the key to the Real that Lacan theorized. Unlike Yeats, whose work showed how one person could act as a driving force for another person, and unlike Beckett, whose characters acted as linchpins for their own drives, Sondheim encourages his characters, and his audiences as well, to experience the Real. No other theatre practitioner still writing is able to present, in such seamless yet raw form, characters who show the audience the ultimate *jouissance* of a Real encounter. Swayne reminds us that Sondheim said specifically about the writing of Company, “it’s more important than ever before to make personal contact” (147). That personal contact is not only interpersonal but intrapersonal as well. To make contact with oneself is the only way to manifest the Real.