



# Stephen Sondheim

This composer/lyricist has been a Broadway mainstay for over 50 years.

**W**hen it comes to the modern Broadway musical, perhaps no single person has had more influence than Stephen Sondheim. His prowess as both a composer and lyricist has won him just about every entertainment award possible, including an Oscar, a Pulitzer Prize, and seven Tonys—one of the latter for lifetime achievement.

Sondheim was only 27 when he wrote the lyrics for 1957's *West Side Story*, a groundbreaking reimagining of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. More than 50 years later, his work continues to be performed on professional—and school—stages all over the world. "What I like about songwriting is [creating] songs used to tell a story," Sondheim told *Movieweb.com*. "That's why I don't write songs apart from theatrical pieces. I like songs that are part of a dramatic texture."

Sondheim started writing for the stage as a teen at the George School in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. His musical *By George* was reportedly well received by his peers. By that time, Sondheim's mother had introduced Stephen to their neighbor, lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, of *Oklahoma!* fame. Sondheim asked the Broadway legend for a critique—and got an earful about what was wrong with the play! "He started right from the first stage direction," Sondheim told the Academy of Achievement in 2005. "He treated me as if I were a professional, and by the end of the afternoon I was on my way to being a professional.... He said, 'If you want to learn to write musicals, why don't you take a good play, one that you like, and make it into a musi-

cal? Then take a play that you like but you think is flawed, and see if you can improve it and turn it into a musical. Then take a story, not one that you've written...like a novel or something like that, and make it into a musical. And then make up your own story and make it into a musical.' He said, by the time you get all those four done, you'll know something. And that's exactly what I did."

After high school, Sondheim considered majoring in math and earned a liberal arts degree at Williams College. "Math and music are intimately related," he told the Academy of Achievement. "It's well-known: Mathematicians and musicians are often one and the same." Sondheim is noted for his love of solving and creating puzzles, and he relates this to music as well. "That's another aspect of compositional techniques that I enjoy—fitting things together."

What "fits" can change through casting, rehearsals, and previews. "You know your cast well and you know their strengths and weaknesses, and you can start writing for them," Sondheim explained. "Just the way Shakespeare wrote for his actors."

In addition to composing memorable tunes, Sondheim—who started an organization in 1981 for aspiring dramatists called Young Playwrights—says a writer of musicals must also understand how each song suits the action onstage. "Choreograph it yourself in some way," Sondheim advised in the Academy interview. "I take off from what the book writer has written, sometimes using a line of his as a springboard, and ad lib...improvise that character."

During his long association with Hammerstein, Sondheim says he learned many artistic and business lessons, but one of the most valuable was to not be afraid of failure. "The worst thing you can do is censor yourself," he told the Academy of Achievement. "You must not edit until you get it all on paper.... Put everything down, stream-of-consciousness—no matter how clichéd it may seem." **T**



#### SELECTED CREDITS:

- ▶ *West Side Story*
- ▶ *Sweeney Todd*
- ▶ *Into the Woods*
- ▶ *Gypsy*

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