

Class 12: He Wrote the Music Too

A. These Beautiful Girls

1. Class title 1 (Sondheim)
3. Ziegfeld posters [original #2 omitted]

Let's start with some music. You may remember that in my first class on the interwar years, I showed these two posters of the **Ziegfeld Follies**, with its slogan "Glorifying the American Girl". Here is **Stephen Sondheim** (1930–2021) revisiting the era in his 1971 musical *Follies*.

4. Section title A (These Beautiful Girls)
- 4v Class title, repeat

I'll show you the complete scene in a moment; the rest of the show will be our feature after the break, all from the 2017 revival at the **National Theatre** in London. But I want to talk first about the class as a whole. I found I had three competing titles, so made a title for each.

4w Sondheim posters

The first is simple: "**He Wrote the Music Too.**" We have seen Sondheim twice already in this course, with *West Side Story* in 1957 and *Gypsy* in 1959, both times as a lyricist. But after that, with the exception of a largely forgotten collaboration with **Richard Rodgers**, he worked only as a composer, setting his own lyrics. Here are the first four shows he composed: the farce ***A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*** in 1962, which was a big success; the oddball ***Anyone Can Whistle*** of 1964, which flopped; then the first two musicals he felt were completely his own: ***Company*** in 1970 and ***Follies*** from 1971, which we have just sampled. We will touch on the all four of these

- 4x Title transformation: Concept
- 4y Concept Musicals

Previous musicals had told a story, but *Follies* developed from an **idea**: how would it be to bring contemporary people into contact with ghosts of their former selves? *Company* from the previous year was also an idea show, as you shall see—or as we now call it, a **Concept Musical**. Here are some other examples, before and after. Concept musicals organize their material by theme rather than narrative sequence. They may overlap different time frames or show events in random order. This opens the door to psychological analysis, social criticism, and similar ideas.

4z Scene from *Follies*

You can see how this works out in *Follies* if I play the complete version of the clip I just played. The set is the dilapidated theater where the Follies used to perform; called **Weissman's** here, but obviously **Ziegfeld**. Showgirls from various years have been invited back for a reunion before the place is

demolished. Meanwhile, the theatre is haunted by the ghostly figures of their former selves. The singer **Roscoe**, the old Emcee, played by tenor **Bruce Graham**. [2. 3. 4. reassigned]

5. **Sondheim: *Follies*, “These beautiful girls”**
6. **Juggling Theatre and Real Life**

There is one more title I considered: **Juggling Theatre and Real Life**. This should be clear from the scene I played. The people invited to the reunion all wear real clothes and lead real lives in the outside world. But the Ziegfeld world in which they met is deliberately artificial, theatricality carried to its *ne plus ultra*. The songs in the show alternate recreations of show numbers with real-life interactions. *Gypsy* had done the same (and so, incidentally, had *Cabaret*). So *Follies* is perfect for a course subtitled **From Fantasy to Realism**. Sondheim has always been a realist writer in terms of people and their feelings. But the tools he uses to explore them are often steeped in the conventions of theatre.

B. Funny Things Happen [11:10]

7. **Section title B (A Funny Thing Happened)**
8. **Plautus**

As I said, Sondheim has always been interested in traditional theater. And you could hardly get anything more traditional than a pastiche of the ancient Roman plays of **Titus Macchius Plautus** (254–184 BCE), upon which much of the Western tradition of farce is based. The book was written by **Burt Shevelove** [almost “shovel off”] (1915–82) and **Larry Gelbart** (1928–2009); their show ran for 964 performances. The tune you just heard, the upbeat opening “Comedy tonight,” is right up there with other Broadway show-biz numbers, like “There’s no business like show business” from *Annie Get Your Gun* and “Another opening, another show” from *Kiss Me, Kate*. But it was a late addition. The show was not doing well in out-of-town tryouts and the producers asked **Jerome Robbins** for his advice. He suggested starting with a number that would play up the madcap, bawdy aspects, and Sondheim basically wrote the tune on the road. I’ll play you two versions of the actual number: first **Nathan Lane** in the 1996 Broadway revival, and then the 1966 film with the original leading character, **Zero Mostel**. Let’s compare them.

9. **Sondheim: *Forum*, opening 1996**
10. **Sondheim: *Forum*, film opening**
11. **— stills of both the above**

What did you think? It is obvious that the film, although older than the video, is in higher definition, but try to forget that. The main difference is that the film, directed by **Richard Lester** (1932–), is filled choc-a-bloc with scenery, props, extras, and visual gags. By contrast, the Broadway production is intended to look like an illustrated book, but just seems amateurish. The film was very successful, but was criticized as riding roughshod over the special qualities of the stage production. It also pushed Sondheim’s music aside, cutting 7 of the original 15 numbers, and relegating several of the others to background. But *Forum* was never a true musical in the sense of a show carried primarily by its score. In addition to the

15 numbers already mentioned, Sondheim wrote a further 8 that were cut along the way; clearly the integrity of the score was not a high priority. [Cut if >10:18. All the same, let me play one more from the film. It comes when the super-macho braggart soldier **Miles Gloriosus** (**Leon Greene**) comes to claim his virgin bride; I am sure that Sondheim deliberately cultivated echoes of Petruchio in *Kiss Me, Kate*.

12. Sondheim: *Forum*, film, Miles Gloriosus]

C. Letting Go [11:20]

13. Section title C (*Anyone Can Whistle*)

And so, very briefly, to *Anyone Can Whistle*. It was one of Sondheim's few flops, mainly it seems because the book writer **Arthur Laurents** (1917–2011), who has worked so successfully with Sondheim on *West Side* and *Gypsy*, took it into his head to try a political satire like *Of Thee I Sing* and set it around a California mental hospital as in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The montage I just showed included the original poster, **Angela Lansbury** in the premiere production (her first musical role), a fairly recent British revival, and **Patti LuPone** singing the title song during the COVID lockdown. I think it worth playing her song in full, partly because it is such an earworm, partly because she is obviously moved by it, and partly because its theme of somebody unable to let go is a link to my next feature, *Company*.

14. Sondheim: *Anyone Can Whistle*, title song

D. Zeitgeist in a Time of Change [11:26]

15. Section title D (*Company* cast album)

That was the opening ensemble from a rather wonderful documentary by **D. A. Pennebaker** about the making of the cast album of *Company*; I will post a link to it on the web—with much, much else. But let me explain my title, “Zeitgeist in a Time of Change.” With the subject of *Company*—young urban professionals in New York City a whole decade before *yuppy* was even a word—Sondheim completes the journey promised in the subtitle of this course, “...to American Realism.” *Company* is the perfect snapshot of the *Zeitgeist* of a particular place and time.

16. The cast of *Company* (NY Philharmonic, 2012)

The show came about when the actor and playwright **George Furth** (1932–2008) showed a series of one-act plays he had written to **Harold Prince** and Stephen Sondheim. Each play was a vignette about a couple in contemporary New York City dealing with subjects such as marriage, divorce, and commitment. Prince thought that they could make the material for a musical, if linked together by a central unmarried figure, **Robert**, who is friends with all of them. The number you have just heard comes at the opening, where they throw a surprise party for his 35th birthday—a thin pretext for what

is very much a concept show. Let's see how one of those vignette scenes works; I'll start from where the group picture shown here breaks up. The actors are **Neil Patrick Harris** as Robert, **Martha Plimpton** as Sarah, and **Stephen Colbert** (yes, *the* Stephen Colbert) as her alcoholic husband Harry.

17. Sondheim: *Company*, Sarah and Harry

18. — still from the above

The scene goes on for at least as long as that again; did you like it? I must confess to not liking the show at all at this stage, and in many respects I still don't—though I do admire it. I don't share—and this is entirely personal—New Yorkers' belief that their city is the most fascinating place in the world. And as one reviewer said at the time, these are precisely the people one goes out of one's way *not* to meet. This is a simplified production staged in front of an orchestra in a concert hall, but I have not seen any that intrigues me for its design qualities: set, props, or costumes. So what is there to like? Well, that the music is not so predictable. I assumed that the scene with this first couple would end with a song for one or both of them, but in fact Sondheim has one of the other characters provide musical punctuation. And the more the show gets less talky and more music-driven, the more I find myself liking it.

19. Anika Noni Rose, Christina Hendricks, and Chryssie Whitehead in *Company*

I'll play a sequence of numbers from a little later in the act. Bobby tells his friends that he is dating several women, and we hear them in a doo-wop trio ("You could drive a person crazy") that I am pretty sure is a nod to the **Supremes**. Then comes some more dialogue, which I shall cut. Then we return to the birthday party music as the men encourage him to take the plunge ("Have I got the girl for you!"). But Bobby fantasises about each of their wives ("Someone is waiting").

20. Sondheim: *Company*, "You could drive a person crazy"

21. Sondheim: *Company*, "Have I got a girl for you" and "Someone is waiting"

22. Aaron Lazar and Katie Finneran in *Company* (NYPO, 2011)

I'll throw in one more piece, because it is the sort of thing Sondheim does so well. Two of his friends, **Amy** and **Paul**, are finally getting married after living together for years. Robert is to be the best man. Sondheim sets the scene beautifully with a choir soloist in a church, but Amy implodes. The singer are **Katie Finneran** and **Aaron Lazar**; the conductor is **Paul Gemignani**.

23. Sondheim: *Company*, "Getting married today"

24. Matt Doyle as Jamie in *Company* (Broadway, 2021)

Now look at this. Here is **Matt Doyle** as Amy/Jamie in **Marianne Elliott's** gender-bending production on Broadway a few years ago. Let's have him explain it.

25. *Keeping Company with Sondheim*, Matt Doyle

26. Marianne Elliott

This is what I meant by calling this section *Zeitgeist in a Time of Change*. *Company* is a brilliant time-capsule, but how do you keep a time-capsule relevant as decade follows decade? Sondheim and Furth willingly made adjustments to the text for later revivals. In 1995, **Sam Mendes** (the director of the

Cabaret with Alan Cumming) did a production in London whose importance was not merely to use a Black actor (**Adrian Lester**) in the role of Bobby, but subtle shifts of emphasis so that it was no longer a show about couples plus an observer, but a show about one man's fear of commitment as reflected by the observations taking place inside his head. And in 2020, with Sondheim's full approval, Marianne Elliott began preparing a version with a female Bobbie, plus the gender switch of Amy into Jamie. As Elliott pointed out, the character's situation is infinitely more poignant when she is a woman fighting against a ticking biological clock. This comes from near the beginning of an hour-long documentary about her process; I'll put the full thing on the website.

27. *Keeping Company with Sondheim*, opening sequence

28. Class title 2 (an adaptable show)

E. Fantasy Meets Reality [11:10]

29. "In Buddy's Eyes," still

I did make an animated title for this second hour, which is devoted to *Follies*; I'll show it in a minute. But I realize that I was too ambitious in expecting you to understand it at first sight, so let me explain the situation. The context, as you know, is that former showgirls have returned for a reunion before the old theater is torn down. Among these is **Sally Plummer** (**Imelda Staunton**, in a very different role from her Rose in *Gypsy*, though equally neurotic), her rather ordinary husband **Buddy** (whom we don't see in this clip), the successful diplomat **Benjamin Stone** (**Philip Quast**), and younger versions of Sally and Ben. Sally and Ben had an affair years ago, but they broke up and she married Buddy as the safer choice. In this song, "In Buddy's Eyes," she is telling Ben about how much Buddy means to her—but really we can see that the old attraction still exists between them. I think that is enough. This is how the song ends.

30. Section title E (Fantasy Meets Reality)

30z Stage set for *Follies* at the National Theatre

It is pure serendipity, but I can't think of a better way of ending a course on **Fantasy Meets Reality** than with *Follies*. For what was the **Ziegfeld** world but the most elaborate fantasy? Yet the showgirls are real people, and when they leave the stage they marry and start families and lead real lives. In the clip you just saw, it would be hard to think of either the present-day characters or their younger versions as completely real. They are presented through theatrical metaphor, which is of course artificial, but they wear real clothes and have real feelings. And that is the point. *Company*, I think, is real in observing the social dynamics of a peculiar subgroup within a peculiar city. But this *Follies* song at least is real in a deeper, emotional sense, of a person trying to convince herself that she is happier with the road she has chosen—and perhaps she really is happy, or at least content; it is not a zero-sum situation. "In Buddy's eyes" has an emotional reality that you seldom get in a musical. I feel the title song in *Anyone Can Whistle* has this too, which was why I played it.

31. The old and young quartets

But enough philosophy; let me give you a quick run-down of the show. There is a lot in it, so I'll focus on numbers affecting just these four: **Sally**, **Ben**, and to a lesser extent their spouses **Buddy** and **Phyllis**. Unfortunately, this means passing over some famous numbers performed by secondary characters; I put some of them on the website. You know the premise and saw part of the opening at the start of class. That was the end of a magnificent 12-minute sequence, unfortunately too long to play. The first major number to follow it is an ensemble called "Waiting for the girls upstairs." Ben and Buddy recall waiting to take Phyllis and Sally out on dates; the number eventually involves two interlinked quartets: the characters now and their younger selves. Alas, these ensemble numbers were too difficult for me to add titles, as I did with the solos.

32. Sondheim: *Follies*, "Waiting for the girls upstairs"

33. — still from the above, with number list

In between vignettes in which more minor characters play versions of their original numbers, we get episodes in the story of Ben and Sally. He is the first, actually, to muse on the "Road not taken"; her song that you just heard is a sort of delayed response to that. Ben's next number, "Too many mornings," is his confession that married life and financial success has been an empty existence. It begins to move into a duet for him and Sally, but then Buddy bursts in with the first part of his song, "The right girl." He realizes he has made the wrong choice—but the second part of his song (which we haven't time to play) reveals that he also knows the right one, his long-term out-of-town lover Margie. **Peter Forbes** is Buddy.

34. Sondheim: *Follies*, "Too many mornings" and "The right girl" (first part)

35. Peter Forbes as Buddy

We've heard about Sally's spouse Buddy, and now we've seen him. It's time we met Ben's wife **Phyllis**. This time, I am going to give you a complete number, "Could I leave you?", because it is a Sondheim *tour-de-force* and a gift to any actress. Ben asks Phyllis for a divorce. Her reply starts off self-pitying and pathetic, but gradually morphs into vitriolic and vindictive. And it is all set ironically to a great romantic waltz! Here is **Janie Dee** to sing it.

36. Sondheim: *Follies*, "Could I leave you?"

37. Loveland opening

I said that Sondheim knows theater and loves its devices. Above all, I think he knows **Shakespeare**, and his trick of putting impossible situations to rights with a spot of enchantment. *A Little Night Music* (1973), which is the one show of his I have directed, is very close to *A Midsummer Night's* in using the enchantment of the countryside to bring warring couples back together. *Follies* is also close to *Midsummer*, only the enchantment that sorts everything out is a piece of pure theatre, an evocation of pure Ziegfeld in which each character will have his or her own featured number. It is as though the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play at the end of *Midsummer* had the therapeutic magic of Oberon rather than the blundering theatrics of rank amateurs. The sequence is called "**Loveland**." Here's how it starts, with the beginning of the first vignette, the start of post-showbiz life for Ben and Phyllis.

38. Sondheim: *Follies*, opening of Loveland sequence

39. Loveland opening, repeat

I have to say, though, that the effect of the *Loveland* numbers is not to heal the characters straight away, but rather to make them explode, to bring them to a screeching halt at a dead end where there is no way to go but back. If the sequence is therapeutic, it is more like rebreaking a broken arm so that it can be set straight. So here, back to back, are Sally's final number, the torch song "Losing my mind" (her equivalent of "Send in the Clowns"), followed by the end of Ben's "Live, laugh, love." He starts it with the assurance of Fred Astaire in a movie musical, but he cannot sustain the role. In despair, he calls for Phyllis, and she comes.

40. Sondheim: *Follies*, "Losing my mind"

41. Sondheim: *Follies*, final scene

42. Class title 3