



# Art Isn't Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim

*Joanne Gordon*

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The new musical theatre of Stephen Sondheim shuns the traditional story of love triumphant, probing instead the more disturbing issues of contemporary life.

Confident that the musical is America's greatest original contribution to theatre, Joanne Gordon explicates the works of Sondheim to repudiate the common perception of the genre as mere escapist entertainment.

Gordon notes that Sondheim tackles real themes, that he has no fear of introducing pain, trauma, and complex ideas onto the Broadway stage. Tracing Sondheim's career from his initial success as lyricist for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy* to the opening of *Into the Woods*, Gordon demonstrates that the value of Sondheim's work obviously lies in its seriousness of theme coupled with its disturbing content; less obvious, but equally important, is Sondheim's innovative use of form.

From *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* through *Anyone Can Whistle*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Into the Woods*, Sondheim's music and lyrics prove to be inextricably woven into the fabric of the entire work. Both music and lyrics, Gordon stresses, "grow out of the dramatic idea inherent in the show's concept and themselves become part of the drama that previous theatre songs would only reflect."

Sondheim, Gordon notes, asks much of an audience that may not want to be challenged. In short, to enjoy a Sondheim play, the audience must participate intellectually. The audience willing to expend the effort will not be cheated, Gordon insists, because Sondheim, throughout his career, has demonstrated that "musical theatre can be serious, poignant, and still exhilarating."

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