

The Man in the Corner: Reflections on Stephen Sondheim’s Humble Genius

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“There are giants that walk among us, but all too often we don’t realize their impact when they are alive.”—Miles Chapin



For former actor Miles Chapin, the world of theatre and music was deeply interwoven into his childhood. His father, Schuyler Chapin, was the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, while his mother Betty Steinway’s family founded the Steinway & Sons piano company. The family would often rub shoulders with world-class artists, ranging from Leonard Bernstein (or Lenny, as Chapin refers to him) to Richard Rodgers, even visiting their homes for gettogethers and holiday parties.

“When we were children, my brothers and I weren’t necessarily starstruck, but more just curious to learn about these people, who they were, and what they were doing,” Chapin said. “There are giants that walk among us, but all too often we don’t realize their impact when they are alive.”

Among these living legends, many of whom had larger-than-life egos to match, was a quiet and somewhat aloof individual who would often keep to himself. “He was this slightly disheveled, reserved man in the corner,” said Chapin. “He often looked as though he had just rolled out of bed.”

The young man was none other than Stephen Sondheim, whom Chapin refers to as “Steve.” The late songwriter was, at the time, just beginning to make a name for himself on the Great White Way, having only written songs for a few large productions.

Chapin’s parents, along with their best friends Mary (Richard Rodgers’ daughter) and husband Hank, would have New Year’s Eve parties where guests would watch as many as five movies in a row on 16mm film. Sondheim would join and help select the movies. “This was one of my educations in cinema,” Chapin reflected.

And despite his apparent introversion, Sondheim was always open to conversation.

“One thing many haven’t mentioned about Steve: He was the easiest person in the world to talk to,” reflected Chapin. “Even when I was 12, he wanted to hear what I had to say. If there was something I had enthusiasm for, he wanted to know why—and not in an intimidating or demanding way. He could really draw you out.”

It was this modest, unassuming nature and genuine interest in learning about others to which Chapin attributes much of Sondheim’s success, as well as the emotional resonance of his writing. His lyrics are clever, but not simply for the sake of being so—they are imbued with an empathy and sensitivity to human nature that makes them both unforgettable and “actable,” as Chapin put it. Their versatile simplicity allows them to be interpreted by many different styles and approaches, a visceral effect that could only be achieved by someone with a high degree of emotional intelligence. “He was usually the most intelligent person in the room, but he didn’t need to force that on you,” Chapin remembered.

An appropriate (albeit unconventional) example Chapin called to mind is the song “What Do We Do? We Fly!” from the lesser-known Sondheim musical, “Do I Hear a Waltz?” One lyric that stands out to Chapin, which few have quoted, describes airplane food.

“The shiny stuff is tomatoes
The salad lies in a group
The curly stuff is potatoes
The stuff that moves is soup
Anything that is white is sweet
Anything that is brown is meat
Anything that is grey don’t eat
But what do we do? We fly!”
—Stephen Sondheim, 1965

The humorous and relatable nature of the lyric, as well as its versatility from a performance standpoint, perfectly encapsulates what made Sondheim’s work so memorable. “He had tremendous sensitivity to the human condition. He once even stated, ‘I don’t write characters—I explore characters,’” said Chapin.

For Chapin, who has appeared in several notable motion pictures, including “Hair” and “The People vs. Larry Flint,” the humanistic quality of Sondheim’s songs is their most striking trait, more so because it reflected Sondheim’s personal nature. Even as his career and fame grew, Sondheim’s ego did not.

“He was aware of his status as a living legend, because that was a fact, but he never sought to be put on a pedestal,” Chapin said. “He was a sophisticate, but not of the affected ‘brandy and dinner jacket’ type. He was more of the ‘Socratic’ variety, meaning he saw and understood both himself and the context of things going on around him as a continuum, all while wearing his personality and talent lightly.”

To Chapin and countless others, Sondheim’s passing signifies the loss of a legend, someone who had an indelible impact on theatre during its golden age.

“You see this global celebration going on in his honor, and it’s amazing how it sustains,” Chapin said. “Steve’s keening curiosity and ambition for creating new work is what kept his art alive. We need more visionaries like that.”

While the landscape of Broadway and theatre at large has changed drastically since the mid-20th century, the immortal nature of Sondheim’s works signifies a bright future for the industry, particularly as they are remade, both onstage and on the big screen.

With the recent opening of the “West Side Story” remake—one of the songwriter’s earliest and most celebrated works—Sondheim’s passing now signifies an especially sad yet poetic transition. As a new generation explores his work, the future of musical theatre seems bright—thanks in large part to Sondheim, whose songs continue to resonate.

“He truly ‘made a hat where there never was a hat,’ and time will tell if we ever get to see someone achieve this level of impact. I hope we will.”

Click here to learn about Stephen Sondheim’s work. In addition to his background as an actor, Miles Chapin is now a real estate agent in New York. You can learn more about Miles here.