



STAR-STUDED 'SONDHEIM' TRIBUTE: Barbara Cook (left) & Vanessa Williams in *Sondheim on Sondheim*. Photo: Richard Termine

Theater Review

***Sondheim on Sondheim* is an entertaining compendium of American musical-theater icon's greatest hits (& misses)**

Sondheim on Sondheim

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Conceived and Directed by James Lapine

Studio 54

254 West 54th Street

(212-719-1300), www.roundabouttheatre.org

By David NouNou

In a season featuring very few original musicals, plenty of revivals, and chock full of "Variety Specialty Musicals," such as *Come Fly Away*, *Million Dollar Quartet*, *All About Me*, and the rock opera *American Idiot*, now Stephen Sondheim has re-entered this theatrical fray in *Sondheim on Sondheim*. Previously, his songbook specialty musicals were featured in 1977 in *Side By Side By Sondheim*, and in 1999 in *Putting It Together*. What makes this compilation different and special is that Mr. Sondheim himself is featured in the show, via the use of interviews shown through various multimedia monitors and screens. He is our guide, from his youth, being an only child, his parents' divorce, the people who helped influence his career (such as his neighbor, the great Oscar Hammerstein), and the ones with whom he collaborated.

There is no doubt that Mr. Sondheim is a genius and a living legend. Anyone who has seen a Sondheim musical can attest to that. His skill of the rhyme and key changes are second to none. He has changed the face of musical theater and turned it into a serious adult art form. If he would have written nothing more than simply the lyrics to musicals such as *West Side Story* (music by Leonard Bernstein), and *Gypsy* (music by Jule Styne), he would still be in the pantheon of musical prodigies, for they are two of the most brilliant and perfect scores ever written. However, Sondheim has written full scores for countless musicals, and his shows have been awarded the Tony five times as best Musical of the Year: They are *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, *Company*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Passion*. Not to mention the ones that were nominated but didn't win, such as *Sunday in the Park With George*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Into the Woods*, and my own favorite musical of all time, *Follies*. (Alas, it didn't win the Tony in 1972. Talk about being robbed of Best Musical.)

The novelty of *Sondheim on Sondheim* is that Mr. Sondheim has opened himself up and allowed us into his world: The shows we know, the scores we are familiar with, but here through multimedia he sheds new light on his art with amusing anecdotes about the origin of the shows and what went into them.

One such moment is "Smile, Girls," a song that was deleted from the second act of *Gypsy*, and one can only give a sigh of relief and say thank God. There are many more of these delightful moments about his shows that inform us about how a wrong or bad song can alter the outcome of a musical.

No Sondheim show can be done without singers with good voices, and this show is full of them, most notably Barbara Cook. What a pleasure to see her back on the Broadway stage. When I was a small boy, I had the good fortune to have my parents take me to see Ms. Cook (in my second Broadway show) as Marion, the librarian, in *The Music Man*, and Amalia in *She Loves Me*. I won't mention the years for both our sakes. She was enchanting then, and the years since haven't diminished her lovely voice and presence. At age 83, Barbara Cook still has the mellifluous voice that made her a theater icon. Listening to her rendition of Sondheim's most popular song, "Send in the Clowns," is a rare treat indeed.

The show also stars the incredible Vanessa Williams, who's not only a pop superstar and Emmy-nominated TV actress, but a Sondheim veteran. (She was nominated for a Tony for her role as The Witch in *Into the Woods*.) Ms. Williams is beautiful and haunting, singing one of my all-time favorite Sondheim songs, "Losing My Mind" from *Follies*. It's truly an amazing moment of Broadway theater hearing Williams sing this cherished Sondheim classic while Barbara Cook does a melodic version of "Not a Day Goes By."

Euan Morton (who earned a Tony nomination for playing Boy George in *Taboo*) is the best among the men, especially when he sings "Franklin Shepard, Inc." from *Merrily We Roll Along*. Tom Wopat, Norm Lewis, Leslie Kritzer, Erin Mackey, and Matthew Scott complete the ensemble. The show helps conjure up wonderful memories of the original versions of the Sondheim classics, and I couldn't help but leave the theater with a big smile on my face, remembering I grew up in the Sondheim era. However, even those who were too young to remember most of these musicals and their respective songs will find that *Sondheim on Sondheim* is a fitting tribute to one of America's greatest living musical-theater legends.

Published April 26, 2010

Reviewed at Matinee Press Performance on April 25, 2010

Broadway and Off-Broadway Listings

MUSICAL REVIVALS



LADIES OF 'SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM': (left to right) Erin Mackey, Vanessa Williams, Leslie Kritzer, Barbara Cook. Photo: Richard Termine



SONDHEIM ON SONDHEIM

There is much to enjoy in *Sondheim on Sondheim*, mainly the songs, Sondheim in multimedia interviews, and a dazzling cast headed by Barbara Cook, Vanessa Williams, Tom Wopat, and Euan Morton. There have been other Sondheim compilations before, but this adds the distinction of having Mr. Sondheim guide us through his life and career. There are amusing anecdotes about the scores he has written, the collaborators with whom he has worked, and the people who have influenced him. It's fun to hear about what songs were written for some shows, and how they have been replaced with the songs we are familiar with now. It's a marvel to appreciate the man's immense portfolio: Starting as a lyricist for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy* to creating entire scores for *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday In The Park With George*, *Into The Woods*, and *Passion*, and that's just to name a few. *Sondheim on Sondheim* is a fitting tribute to a man who helped shape the American musical as we know it.

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