

**Deloitte.**The Cambridge Union Society
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Cambridge, CB2 1UBEmail : pressofficer@cus.org**PRESS RELEASE - 17/02/2015****Stephen Sondheim**

On the evening of 17th February 2015, multi-award winning composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim spoke to the Cambridge Union via video link.

He provided advice for budding composers, telling them to start away from a piano, get some ideas and then test them out. He pointed out that a score is more than just a collection of songs, and said stressed the importance of continuity in a show. Mr Sondheim also explained that getting to know the characters is essential to producing a score, as this is what dictates the harmonic and rhythmic language of the musical. He said that his main piece of advice, though, was simply to practise. He said composers and lyricists should learn the tools they would need, but then should just try to write something, to learn by doing.

When asked if he believes the quality of the score is different when a musical is written in collaboration or with the same composer and lyricist, he explained some people work well in collaboration and some don't. It is a question of working "as one" to make a good product, and that varies from person to person. However, he was very honest in admitting that he prefers writing by himself, quipping that there are "fewer people to argue with".

When asked about his writing process, Mr Sondheim was quick to tell the audience that "the book writer is key to any show". He believes that then a great deal of conversation and thought is needed to make the musical "seamless". In terms of creating the music, he explained that he looks for a "hook" in the lyrics, a key idea, then thinks up a melodic line for this and expands both. In response to a question about whether he writes songs in isolation of a score then tried to fit them in, he replied firmly in the negative. Mr Sondheim reiterated Rodgers and Hammerstein's stance that a musical is unique, a score and not a collection of songs, and that each musical is written with the specific characters in mind.

He talked further about his writing process when asked how much he thinks about the actor when writing, explaining that it is the character, not the actor, who guides his decisions – every decision he makes, every word, every shift of key, every length of phrase has a reason linked to the character. He stated that he also imagines the performance on stage as he writes. He was then questioned on his involvement with the staging of his shows, to which he replied that he explains to the director how he sees it, then stays away from rehearsals until the director has shaped the performance, when he will make a few queries about the show and give some opinions.

When asked if there are any stories he wanted to make but hasn't been able to, Mr Sondheim explained that normally he is approached by someone else with an idea, but occasionally things just strike him – *Sweeney Todd* came about following seeing a play, and the current project he's working on is an idea he's had for a while. He said that he has had to drop ideas on a few rare occasions because other people have told the story he was going to first, but he told the audience that he's always at least tried to tell the stories he has wanted to tell.

He was asked on his opinions on using new versus known stories in creating musicals, and Mr Sondheim brought up the difficulty with making good commercial art, as it has "one foot in the box office and one foot in quality". He said that as a producer he would encourage new stories, but good-humouredly admitted that he himself is currently working on an adaptation.

When asked if there were any of his unadapted musicals that he would like to see get a cinema adaptation, Mr Sondheim recommended *Company*, saying that despite it being very much of its period, its structure and idea would make a good movie. He related that there had been plans in the works to make *Follies* into a film about movie stars no longer at the top of their game, and he believes this would still work.

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Mr Sondheim named the musical that satisfies him most of his oeuvre, the one that came closest to being what he and his collaborator wanted it to be, as *Assassins*, though he admitted it is very rare for something an artist creates to satisfy them completely.

He was asked how much of himself goes into his work, to which he replied that everything comes from himself, has some meaning in it, but, though he does have songs related to things he's experienced, especially in *Merrily We Roll Along*, he never writes about himself.

Mr Sondheim responded to a request for his views on the future of musical theatre by saying that the question was "unanswerable", since "if you could predict it, it wouldn't be a surprise". He mentioned a musical premiering in New York that night called *Hamilton* – a rap musical. He said this production was going out on a limb and taking chances, and used it as an example of how musical theatre is continually developing in ways we never would have expected.

By Helen Dallas
Co-Head of Press, Lent 2015

A large, faint watermark of the Cambridge Union Society crest is centered on the page. It features the same shield and circular frame as the logo in the top left, but is much larger and lighter in color. Below the crest, the words 'PRESS OFFICE' are written in a large, bold, sans-serif font.

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