



Stephen Sondheim: A Life

Meryle Secrest

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In the first full-scale life of the most

important composer-lyricist at work in musical theatre today, Meryle Secrest, the biographer of Frank Lloyd Wright and Leonard Bernstein, draws on her extended conversations with Stephen Sondheim as well as on her interviews with his friends, family, collaborators, and lovers to bring us not only the artist--as a master of modernist compositional style--but also the private man.

Beginning with his early childhood on New York's prosperous Upper West Side, Secrest describes how Sondheim was taught to play the piano by his father, a successful dress manufacturer and amateur musician. She writes about Sondheim's early ambition to become a concert pianist, about the effect on him of his parents' divorce when he was ten, about his years in military and private schools. She writes about his feelings of loneliness and abandonment, about the refuge he found in the home of Oscar and Dorothy Hammerstein, and his determination to become just like Oscar.

Secrest describes the years when Sondheim was struggling to gain a foothold in the theatre, his attempts at scriptwriting (in his early twenties in Rome on the set of *Beat the Devil* with Bogart and Huston, and later in Hollywood as a co-writer with George Oppenheimer for the TV series *Topper*), living the Hollywood life.

Here is Sondheim's ascent to the peaks of the Broadway musical, from his chance meeting with playwright Arthur Laurents, which led to his first success--

as co-lyricist with Leonard Bernstein on *West Side Story*--to his collaboration with Laurents on *Gypsy*, to his first full Broadway score, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. And Secrest writes about his first big success as composer, lyricist, writer in the 1960s with *Company*, an innovative and sophisticated musical that examined marriage à la mode. It was the start of an almost-twenty-year collaboration with producer and director Hal Prince that resulted in such shows as *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, and

A Little Night Music.

We see Sondheim at work with composers, producers, directors, co-writers, actors, the greats of his time and ours, among them Leonard Bernstein, Ethel Merman, Richard Rodgers, Oscar Hammerstein, Jerome Robbins, Zero Mostel, Bernadette Peters, and Lee Remick (with whom it was said he was in love, and she with him), as Secrest vividly re-creates the energy, the passion, the despair, the excitement, the genius, that went into the making of show after Sondheim show.

A biography that is sure to become the standard work on Sondheim's life and art.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Frankie Lampkins:

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