

**“MY ARM IS COMPLETE”: A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO GESTURAL LIFE IN STEPHEN
SONDHEIM’S MUSICAL GENRES**

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Traditionally, musical theatre has been accepted more as a practical field than an academic one, as demonstrated by the relative scarcity of lengthy theory-based publications addressing musicals as study topics. However, with increasing scholarly application of cognitive theories to such fields as theatre and music theory, musical theatre now has the potential to become the topic of scholarly analysis based on empirical data and scientific discussion. This dissertation seeks to contribute such an analysis, focusing on the implied gestural lives of the characters in three musicals by Stephen Sondheim, as these lives exemplify the composer’s tendency to challenge traditional audience expectations in terms of genre through his music and lyrics.

Based on the research of David McNeill and others, scholars have argued that the synchronization of speech and gesture support their conflation into a single language for the purposes of audience understanding and response to theatre and film. Meanwhile, research relating to cognition and music has indicated that music and gesture are similarly connected, supporting the relevance of gestural interpretation to the communication of musical notation as well. With regard to musical theatre in particular, the work of composer Stephen Sondheim lends itself to studies related to the relevance of gesture to

audience affective response, given Sondheim's tendencies to write with an actor's physical interpretation in mind.

My three main chapters, therefore, address the language of music, lyrics, and gesture in three musicals that both support and challenge traditional audience response in terms of the genres within which they are most easily categorized. The first addresses *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* as farce, analyzing implied physical tendencies related to base aggression and laughter most often associated with farce. The second addresses *Sweeney Todd* as melodrama, examining the ways in which Sondheim's music and lyrics imply an onstage gestural life that both supports and pushes beyond traditional audience expectations for engagement in the fear and delight related to melodrama. Finally, I address *Into the Woods* as romance, analyzing this musical's relative exploration of concerns based in romantic heroism through the communicative value of its music/lyric/gesture language.

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, musical theatre has been accepted more as a practical field than an academic one, as demonstrated by the relative scarcity of lengthy theory-based publications addressing musicals as topics of study. A review of relevant literature reveals an assortment of historical studies and reference material,¹ as well as several in-depth analyses of the journeys of musicals from inception to production². Yet, analyses of musicals from such theoretical perspectives as semiotics, post-colonialism, post-modernism, and cognitive studies are few and far between.

Among the studies that do exist, those addressing the work of Stephen Sondheim provide examples of analyses drawing upon comparatively academic foundations, given Sondheim's reputation as a creator of thematically and musically multi-layered and "heady" works. Joanne Gordon's and Sandor Goodhart's compilations of essays³ are prime examples; yet, the featured essays lack the scope of full-length studies and therefore do not allow their authors to provide comprehensive theory-based treatments of the works they address. Gordon herself has completed a full-length study of Sondheim's work⁴,

¹ These include John Kenrick's *Musical Theatre: A History*, Stanley Green's *Broadway Musicals: Show by Show*, Larry Stempel's *Showtime: A History of the Broadway Musical Theater*, and Richard Kislak's *The Musical: A Look at the American Musical Theater*.

² These include Tim Carter's *Oklahoma!: The Making of an American Musical*, Bruce D. McClung's *Lady in the Dark: Biography of a Musical*, and Theodore S. Chapin's *Everything Was Possible: The Birth of the Musical Follies*.

³ These are Gordon's *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook* and Goodhart's *Reading the Musicals of Stephen Sondheim*.

⁴ This is Gordon's *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*.

offering an enlightening thematic analysis, though not addressing modes of audience reception or interpretation within the context of any of the theoretical notions listed above. Within the vein of in-depth theoretical analysis, writers in the field of music have set a more comprehensive precedent with regard to musical theatre in general and Stephen Sondheim in particular, with Stephen Banfield's excellent book⁵ offering a detailed breakdown and musical analysis of Sondheim's work as a composer. It is my hope, then, that this dissertation will provide a similar resource for scholars of audience reception in the field of theatre, breaking new academic ground within the realm of musical theatre by offering an in-depth examination of Sondheim's work from the perspective of theories of cognition and audience reception. In striving to offer such an in-depth, theory-based examination, I will be drawing upon the analyses and experimental work of Banfield and many other scholars and researchers within the fields of music, cognitive psychology, and genre studies.

The cognitive approach to understanding art, literature, and performance has burgeoned during the past 20 years, though not without controversy regarding its value as a window through which we might gain further understanding of well-known works of art. Many scholars of a more traditional, philosophical approach to the analysis of art have argued that science offers very little value in reconfirming what we already know from an open reading or viewing of a work of art. Amy Cook, who applies a cognitive neuroscience-based approach to understanding Shakespeare, has addressed this perspective, citing a statement by Raymond Tallis in which Tallis expresses his dismissal of the cognitive approach:

⁵ Banfield's book is entitled *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*.

Tallis, an Emeritus Professor of Geriatric Medicine at the University of Manchester, whose essay titled “The Neuroscience Delusion: Neuroaesthetics is wrong about our experience of literature and it is wrong about humanity”, points to an essay in *TLS Commentary* by A. S. Byatt in which she turns to neuroscience to explain her love of John Donne’s poetry. Tallis claims that Byatt could have given her reading without the sciences and that may be true, but that assumes that the goal is to create readings of literature and not explanations of humans and their engagement with literature.⁶

Cook thus argues for the validity and education value of approaching art through a scientifically based analysis that might shed light on our understanding of brain functioning describing creative processes, links between corporeal and emotional responses to creative works, and even analysis of fictional characters as they communicate with one another and with audiences. Cook concludes that, “The test for me of the application of... neuroscience to works of literature is not if it answers with finality some question, but rather whether or not it helps us get to the next question of interest.”⁷

In this vein, several scholars have offered cognitive-based analyses of audience understanding of, and response to, live theatre, including two whose work will be relevant to the present study. First, Bruce McConachie has offered an in-depth overview of various cognitive processes as they affect audiences of live theatre in *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Theatrical Spectating*. In addition, Carl Plantinga has offered *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience*, a guide to understanding the cognitive processes of film spectating as it relates to audiences’ conscious and unconscious responses to what is communicated emotionally through artistic presentation. Given the intense emotional and thought-based reactions expressed by critics and audiences in

⁶ Cook Amy. *Shakespearean Neuroplay: Reinvigorating the Study of Dramatic Texts and Performance through Cognitive Science*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, page 18.

⁷ Ibid. 19.

reaction to the work of Stephen Sondheim, I will draw extensively on these studies and studies like them in my cognitive-based analysis of Sondheim's work.

SONDHEIM AND AUDIENCE RESPONSE

It is commonly acknowledged by theatre scholars and practitioners alike that within the field of criticism, Stephen Sondheim has proven to be a controversial figure. From his works' inceptions through numerous revivals, Sondheim's musicals have elicited strong responses ranging from adoring to begrudged admiring to disapproving, and many reviewers have repeatedly demonstrated high levels of ambivalence regarding their experience of the composer/lyricist's work. John Lahr, who Joanne Gordon terms "one of Sondheim's ardent castigators," has repeatedly lamented what he sees as significant creative shortcomings resulting in an absence of the warmth and humanity traditionally associated with the American musical: "His mature musicals sing about a new American excellence: desolation."⁸ Specifically, Lahr has found himself alienated by Sondheim's characters: "Sondheim speaks proudly of how his songs define and advance the characters in his musicals. But what distinguishes the characters in most of his later work is that they have no character."⁹ In these and other critiques, Lahr compares Sondheim's work with more traditional musical fare, reacting strongly against the relative "darkness" of Sondheim's work, as indicated by the characters' lack of relatability.

⁸ Lahr, John. "Music Men: The Theatre." *The New Yorker* 81.36, pg. 96.

⁹ Quoted in Gordon, Joanne. *Art Isn't Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*. Carbondale: Da Capo Press, 1992, page 12.

Yet, some critics, such as Laurie Winer of the *New York Times*, have found much to like in what they have seen as unprecedented depth in many of Sondheim's characters. Addressing the character development of Dot (*Sunday in the Park with George*), Phyllis (*Follies*), Joanne (*Company*), Mrs. Lovett (*Sweeney Todd*), and Cinderella (*Into the Woods*), Winer concludes that "[I]t's Mr. Sondheim's wiser strain of woman who is defined not by the relationships in her life but solely by her hard-fought and often moving journey toward self-knowledge."¹⁰ Winer thus also compares Sondheim's work with more traditional musical theatre fare, finding Sondheim's characters functioning conspicuously within a realm of challenges representing those of real life and emerging with admirable development and strength.

Such extremes of response can be observed in overall audience reaction to productions of Sondheim's work as well, as Frank Rich has noted:

One sits in a theatre where people are cheering or sneering; the pitch and conflict of battle drift into intermission, where heated arguments ensue. At the packed closing performance of *Follies* at the Winter Garden in 1972, people threw flowers at the stage in the same theatre where, only a week or so earlier, audiences had greeted the same production with indifference and coughing. At an early preview of *Sweeney Todd* (1979), dozens of unprepared theatergoers ran for the exits once it became apparent that cannibalism was on the evening's menu. At the final-week performance of the short-lived *Merrily We Roll Along* (1982), scattered clumps of theatre-goers rose to give every song an ovation while the majority of the house looked on in perplexed, dumbfounded silence. I never saw a performance of *Sunday in the Park With George* (1984) at which some members of the audience didn't walk out early – often not even waiting until intermission to do so – while others, sobbing in their seats, refused to budge until well after the house lights were up.¹¹

Here again, Sondheim's work indicates significant challenging of audience expectations of musical theatre, reflected in passionate responses of varying valence. Given this

¹⁰ Winer, Laurie. "Why Sondheim's Women Are Different." *New York Times*: 26 November 1981, A.1.

¹¹ Rich, Frank. "Stage View; Sondheim's Winding Paths." *New York Times*: 29 November 1987, A.1.

observation, it is perhaps not surprising that most critics have reported experiencing high levels of ambivalence in response to a single production of a musical by Sondheim. Frank Rich, for example, has demonstrated such ambivalence through the years, as exemplified by his *New York Times* review of *Sunday in the Park with George*. Approximately midway through the review, Rich states that:

As is often the case in Sondheim musicals, we don't care about the characters... To Seurat [Sondheim's main character] these people are just models for a meditative composition that's not intended to tell any story: In his painting the figures are silent and expressionless, and even Dot [Seurat's lover] is but fodder for dots.¹²

Yet, as he continues to analyze the piece, he returns to the topic of the characters, almost praising their apparent emotional disconnection from each other and the audience as he notes the following:

The show's most moving song is 'Finishing the Hat' – which, like many of Mr. Sondheim's best, is about being disconnected. Explaining his emotional aloofness to Dot, Seurat sings how he watches the rest of the world from a window while he's obsessively making art. And if the maintenance of that solitary emotional distance means that Seurat's art (and, by implication, Mr. Sondheim's) is 'cold,' even arrogant, so be it. *Sunday* argues that the esthetic passion in the cerebrally ordered classicism of modern artists is easily as potent as the sentimental passion of romantic paintings or conventional musicals.¹³

Indeed, regarding a musical featuring characters who seemingly fail to elicit concern from audiences, Rich repeatedly applies terms such as “moving”, “aesthetic passion,” and “potent” – all of which imply the existence of considerable emotional response – even as he describes the emotionally alienating quality pervading the piece. Concluding his review, Rich observes that “Mr. Patinkin is a crucible of intellectual fire – ‘he burns you with his eyes’ – says Dot, with reason – and the wonderful Miss Peters overflows with all the

¹² Ibid. “Sunday in the Park With George: Review.” *New York Times*: 03 May 1984, C.21.

¹³ Ibid.

warmth and humor that George will never know.”¹⁴ Thus, Rich ultimately finds that warmth and humor are not completely abandoned in *Sunday*, though such qualities do not function in these characters as they would in a traditional musical.

Based on these responses, one can observe that audiences are often challenged on emotional and thoughtful levels by Sondheim’s work, which asks them to attend to character development and narrative scenarios not traditionally explored in American musical theatre. One might ask, what might concern audiences regarding the narrative environment of musical theatre characters about whom we are not invited to “care” in the traditional way? Through a cognitive-based study of the communicative implications of music, lyrics, and gesture, I will examine the ways in which three of Sondheim’s works have both fulfilled and challenged audience expectations in terms of genre, posing possible answers to the question of audience concern for Sondheim’s non-traditional characters and the narratives they portray.

SONDHEIM AND GENRE

One of Sondheim’s interests in developing his “non-traditional” musicals has been the exploration of genre, a fact that itself sets Sondheim’s approach apart from that of composer/lyricists of more traditional musicals. Indeed, before Sondheim began exploring elements of historical genres such as melodrama and farce within his musicals, musical theatre could be considered a genre in itself in the sense that it relied upon formulaic narrative and the elicitation of specific emotional response. With the work of writers such as Jerome Kern and Rogers and Hammerstein, the musical theatre “genre” evolved from a

¹⁴ Ibid.

presentational form, emphasizing spectacular song and dance numbers, to a plot-based form, usually featuring a love story and sympathetic character development. Sondheim, however, has demonstrated an interest as an audience member, and therefore also as a writer, in the creation of a more strongly visceral theatrical experience – one that seeks to take audiences on a ride through emotion systems such as pity, fear, repulsion, disdain, guilt, and transcendence. Discussing his passion for melodrama and farce, Sondheim has explained:

[M]elodrama is theatre that is larger than life – in emotion, in subject, and in complication of plot... Complications of plot, larger-than-life characters, grand gestures, and nonnaturalistic acting are common to both melodrama and farce... The theatre is the one place where you can create larger than life, and melodrama and farce represent the two forms best suited to that kind of circusy quality that I love in the theatre.¹⁵

The type of engagement Sondheim discusses here clearly relies upon audience members' emotional concerns in response to the characters onstage, regardless of whether they love or hate them. The exploration of genre, then, has provided Sondheim with a means through which to engage his audiences in an emotional experience that challenges their expectations. Within the context of three genres in particular – melodrama, farce, and romance -- Sondheim has sought to challenge traditional notions of the emotional and thought-based concerns associated with musical theatre and with the genres within which he works.

Such an approach to the exploration of genre in musical theatre functions within a historical tradition of reevaluation of audience expectations throughout the history of live performance. According to historiographer Hayden White, "Texts are rendered intelligible -- or rather their intelligibility is accounted for – by their systematic insertion into a

¹⁵ Sondheim, Stephen. "Larger than Life: Reflections on Melodrama and Sweeney Todd." *Melodrama*, edited by Daniel Gerould. New York: Literary Forum, 1980, page 4.

'history' that is conceived to be not only sequenced but also layered in such a way as to require different methods of analysis at the different levels on which it achieves the integrity of what is normally thought of as the 'style' of a 'period'."¹⁶ Emerging as they did in a period in which the established "style" of musical theatre highlighted the salience of audience experience of sympathy and nostalgia, Sondheim's genre musicals introduced a new focus on emotion systems that challenged the intelligibility of the musicals themselves for audiences of musical theatre. For example, audiences of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in 1962 were likely to attend the theatre with some knowledge concerning the sympathetic characters associated with musical theatre at the time as well as some knowledge concerning the humorous characters of farce as a genre. A musical farce such as *Forum*, however, served to re-channel such knowledge and associated expectations in terms of a hybrid "genre-musical," requiring audiences to re-evaluate the concerns traditionally associated with the individual forms of musical theatre and farce, suggesting a more layered understanding of the two forms. Similar challenges exist regarding audience response to the musical melodrama *Sweeney Todd* and the musical romance *Into the Woods*.

With reference to *Forum*, as we will see, Sondheim primarily communicated with his audiences in terms of emotional and thought-based concerns associated with pure farce, recalling traditional notions of farce through the communicative qualities of music, lyrics, and associated gestural life. Through his work on *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*, however, Sondheim questioned not only traditions of musical theatre, but also traditional notions of the genres he chose to explore through his music-based interpretations. As

¹⁶ White, Hyden. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, page 146.

Hayden White explains, "Following Louis Hjelmslev's suggestion, a form (such as the genre of the romance) is seen to have its own content, which can be distinguished from any content of events, characters, and situations with which it might be filled in a given writer's adaptation of it for representing a reality historically different from that for which the genre was invented."¹⁷ Thus, Sondheim's interpretations of melodrama and romance not only follow and draw from an extensive historic evolution of these genres, but they question the traditional nature of the genres themselves, even as they present unmistakable elements of melodrama and romance within the context of contemporary musical theatre.

Thus, in the cases of all three of the musicals featured here, Sondheim challenges his audience members to focus their attention on works in production that do not readily conform to prototypes with which audiences of American musical theatre are likely to be familiar. As critics and audience members have noted through the years, most of Sondheim's musicals – not simply those that can be associated with a formal genre – have presented this type of challenge. Qualities of genre, however, offer a fruitful foundation for a pioneering discussion of audience response to the works in terms of cognitive studies, since Sondheim has expressed an interest in the "visceral" experience of genre and since the three exemplary works represent a progression of Sondheim's achievements during the first twenty years of his work as a composer/lyricist.

¹⁷ Ibid. 152-153.

SONDHEIM AND “GRAND GESTURE”

One of the phrases Sondheim applies in the quote above to express his passion for melodrama and farce is “grand gesture,” which he envisions as a key element in an audience member’s visceral experience of a staged representation of these genres. Thus, although Sondheim is a composer of music and lyrics, both of which appeal to audiences’ processes of auditory reception and response, he places emphasis on the visual aspects of the theatrical experience as well. Such visual imagery, in Sondheim’s view, clearly functions in tandem with his music and lyrics to create the emotionally engaging theatrical environment so critical to the genres he loves.

Sondheim has, in fact, indicated that he carefully plans and imagines his characters’ specific physical interpretations of his music and lyrics while he writes. In an anecdote describing his interaction with actor Alun Armstrong, who played Sweeney Todd in Declan Donnellan’s National Theatre production in 1993, Sondheim relates the following:

I was rehearsing Alun and the quintet in the letter-writing scene in the second act. I worked out with him when he dipped the pen in the inkwell, and when he wrote and when he signed, when he grunted and when he giggled – all that to go with the quintet singing – because I work everything out in detail. He’s an aggressive fellow, and he actually turned and he said: “You mean you thought these things out when you were writing this down?” He thought that that kind of stuff – when you dip a quill pen – is worked out during rehearsal. I said, “yes, of course, every single dip.” Now the director may change it, but I know exactly when I want him to dip the pen in and when I want him to cross out a word and repeat a word. There are moments during “The Letter” when he writes a word and then he thinks, and he kind of slavers over the word because he likes it so much because it’s going to draw the judge into his trap. That’s all worked out.¹⁸

Sondheim thus feels that the gestures that occur during music are inherent to the illustration of character and naturally indicative of a character’s thoughts and motivations;

¹⁸ Horowitz, Mark Eden. *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions*. Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2003, page 12.

he thus writes music and lyrics to complement this relationship. Clearly, Sondheim draws upon a global comprehension of communicative forms to construct the language through which he conveys thoughts and feelings to his audiences. Consequently, for audience members who have seen the composer/lyricist's work in full production, it is difficult to imagine the song "The Worst Pies in London" without also envisioning Mrs. Lovett's beating the rubbery pie crust dough with her rolling pin in emphasis of the downbeat, or to imagine "Color and Light" without George Seurat's accompanying paintbrush strokes.

Accordingly, Sondheim is known to place at least as much emphasis upon a performer's ability to act his pieces as upon his or her ability to sing them. In the following analysis of Donna Murphy's audition for the role of Fosca in *Passion*, Sondheim observes:

When Donna Murphy auditioned for us we gave her this piece [from *Passion*]. Her audition performance could have gone on stage that night. She's intelligent. There's something in her that identified with the character right away, and I write careful scenes. I say this with no modesty at all: When I'm writing dramatic stuff, I'm a playwright. This is a worked-out scene, and I can instruct the actress how to play this scene, and the music is part of the dialogue. I can tell her why the music gets quick *here*, why it gets slow *here*, why there's a ritard there, why there's a so-called key change *here*, why it suddenly goes up and down – all of that – because I have reasons. Now the actress may choose to ignore them, but Donna, who was just auditioning, did not have a chance to ask me, but she understood it. And this piece is psychologically very well laid out, and all it takes is a good actress to understand it exactly. It's one of the reasons why actors like to sing my stuff – because I'm essentially a playwright in song, and I'm not asking them to sing songs, I'm asking them to play scenes.¹⁹

From Sondheim's perspective, then, his music and lyrics are gestural – meant not to be simply sung or said, but to be embodied, and he comprehends an intense connection between the physical life of the character and the psychological and emotional life of the character. When asked by Mark Eden Horowitz if he ever had the desire to write non-vocal music, Sondheim responded: "When I first played my music for Jerry Robbins, he said: 'You

¹⁹ Ibid. 25.

ought to be writing ballet” – that I write dance music. It had never occurred to me, but he was right. If I wrote any concert music, it would be ballet.”²⁰

Sondheim, who meticulously envisions how his actors will physicalize his music and lyrics, does write “dance” music in a sense. Though his work is more often interpreted through acting technique than through the more stylized medium of dance, the composer does create music to which body movement is intricately intertwined from its inception to define character relationships, suggest mood, and ultimately communicate central emotions to his audiences through a melding of auditory and visual stimuli.

Sondheim, then, is critically concerned with his audiences’ visceral experiences, writing music and lyrics that suggest the embodiment of the “grand gestures” he loves. In doing so, as we will see, he draws upon audience members’ basic cognitive tendencies to experience emotional response through what we will call the “language” of music, lyrics, and gesture. To understand this concept, however, one must first understand critical current research connecting thought, speech, and gesture in the human brain.

THEORY AND CRITICAL FOUNDATIONS – THOUGHT, GESTURE, AND SPEECH

Recent research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience has focused on the significance of gesture in human communication, examining the role of body movement in the expression and comprehension of thought and emotion. Aside from examining the application of movement of the body as a language in its own right (as in American Sign Language), scientists have shown that the gestures most often accompanying everyday

²⁰ Ibid. 20.

speech are more integral to the formation of communication as a whole, and less that of an added accessory, than previously assumed. It is now, in fact, generally believed that synchronization of speech and gesture dictates their conflation into a language, demonstrating that gestures are as directly linked to and indicative of the speaker's thoughts as are the words chosen. As psychologist and speech and gesture specialist David McNeill wrote in 2005, "[C]ommencing with [Adam] Kendon in 1972 and continuing with ever-increasing vigor into the present day, gestures are regarded as parts of *language itself* – not as embellishments or elaborations, but as integral parts of the processes of language and its use." (Emphasis in original)²¹

In McNeill's terms, then, language is comprised of speech and gesture. In support of this idea, McNeill describes research performed over the past twenty years leading scientists to endorse the gesture/speech model of language construction, beginning with his own 1992 study of delayed auditory feedback (DAF). In this study, McNeill demonstrated that gestures made while a subject is speaking tend to remain synchronized with speech even when speech is slowed down as a result of the speaker's being allowed to hear what he or she is saying after a slight time delay. (This is equivalent to the distracting "echo" effect that occurs when we engage in a "bad connection" phone conversation during which we hear what we have said into the phone after a fraction-of-a-second delay.) When speech is impeded by the delay, gestures also tend to slow down to match the rate of speech, thus implying a single communication system.

In 1994 and 1999, McNeill and Cassell, respectively, noted that subjects fluently translated gesture into speech and vice versa, indicating a parallel between the two modes

²¹ McNeill, David. *Gesture and Thought*. Chicago: University Press, 2005, page 13.

of communication. When shown a gesture such as a hand moving up and down, subjects recalled the image in words, describing a “bouncing” motion; when asked if they were presented with the original information in the form of gesture or speech, they couldn’t remember, indicating their tendency to conflate the two.

Then, in 1997 and 1998, Iverson and Goldin-Meadow published results demonstrating the gestural inclinations of blind subjects during conversation. These researchers showed that blind subjects utilized gesture extensively when conversing with other blind subjects. Based upon this observation, McNeill concludes that “lack of vision does not impede thinking in gestural terms. This is dramatic evidence of a speech-gesture bond.”²²

Finally, McNeill cites a study completed by Mayberry and Jaques in 2000 focusing on subjects previously diagnosed with clinical stuttering. Through this study, researchers found that engaging in gestural movement tends to assist a subject in resisting the inclination to stutter, encouraging speech to flow in tandem with the gesture. Conversely, when stuttering does occur, gesture is likely to be impeded as well, reinforcing the concept of a unified speech/gesture scheme.

Since the year 2000, other researchers have corroborated and expanded upon the work of McNeill and the scientists whose studies he references. In 2010, a French research team published a developmental study presenting evidence that speech and gesture varied in relative degrees depending upon the ages of their subjects, suggesting that speech and gesture develop at corresponding rates.²³ Also in 2010, Marianne Gullberg applied theories

²² Ibid. 26.

²³ See Colletta, et al. “Age-related changes in co-speech gesture and narrative: Evidence from French Children and Adults.” *Speech Communication* 52.6, pp. 565-576.

of the link between speech and gesture to a meta-analysis arguing for the facilitation of second language acquisition (SLA).²⁴

Within the last ten years, all of this research and discussion has influenced critical writing within humanity-based fields that place emphasis on gestural life for the communication of thought and/or emotion to large audiences, such as film and theatre. For example, in 2003, television psychologist Geoffrey Beattie published *Visible Thought: The New Psychology of Body Language*, drawing upon McNeill's foundation and based partially upon studies he completed as the psychologist for the TV show *Big Brother*. Many of his examples draw upon his observations of *Big Brother* participants because their gestures coincided with speech to form their interactions with the other participants within the *Big Brother* house, a scenario that, for Beattie, offered an unprecedented long-term study of subjects' behavior within a controlled environment. Significantly, Beattie places emphasis not only upon the effect of gesture on communication within the house, but also upon the apparent effect of gesture upon national audiences whose impressions of each participant's thoughts and behavior determined whether they would vote for or against that participant to remain a member of the *Big Brother* community.

In 2008, Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* contributed an analysis of theatrical presentation, also drawing upon McNeill's work as one of the cognitive foundations he applies to explain audience response to theatre in production. Here, McConachie draws upon the connection between speech and gesture to illuminate a myriad of acting choices and audience interpretations

²⁴ Gullberg, Marianne. "Methodological reflections on gesture analysis in second language acquisition and bilingualism research." *Second Language Research* 26.1, pp. 75-102.

mapped out by Tennessee Williams in one of Blanche's emotional speeches to Stella in *Streetcar Named Desire*. He explains that:

A simple reading of this speech already suggests that Williams melds implicit manual gestures into his dialogue with such ease that good actors have a panoply of riches to choose from when they embody and give voice to Blanche at this point in the play. As McNeill explains, speech-gesture units in everyday conversation emerge from the thoughts of the participants, and their thoughts follow from their intentions and emotions... Looking at Williams's words and thinking about the probable "beats" that actor/Blanche will embody and articulate, it is not difficult to predict where some of her manual gestures will likely occur.²⁵

McConachie argues that the "beats," or thought changes, an actor finds in Williams' script possess an inherent gestural nature. The actor then draws upon the intricate connection between speech and gesture to explain what McConachie argues is the implicit communication of thought and emotion to audiences within a theatrical setting. This then leads to a deeper understanding of the methods by which Tennessee Williams sought to communicate with his audiences through the words and actions of his intricately developed characters.

In the same vein, I will demonstrate that Stephen Sondheim's compositions suggest patterns of gestural interpretation that function with his music and lyrics to stimulate affective communication with audiences. In doing so, I will further argue that through his musical and lyrical choices and the inherent gestural patterns they suggest, Sondheim has offered significant challenges to audience expectations regarding genre.

²⁵ McConachie, Bruce. *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 90-91.

EMOTION AND AUDIENCES

Following these precedents and drawing upon the above-mentioned researchers' conclusions, I will approach my analysis of Stephen Sondheim's work through a study of the ways in which McNeill's merging of speech and gesture into a single language, representative of thought, might contribute to illuminating Sondheim's approach to the visceral communication of genre to his audiences. There are numerous cognitive definitions of emotion and analyses of the processes by which emotion is communicated within the context of the audience experience, and I have chosen to draw upon Carl Plantinga's theories of spectating, since Plantinga often addresses the relevance of genre to audiences' ultimate understanding of a work. Though Plantinga's definitions and analyses of audience emotional experience pertain to film spectating, the theories involved are easily applicable to live theatre as well.

Plantinga's theories of audience emotional response also fit nicely within the present interdisciplinary context because they evolve from what Plantinga terms a "cognitive-perceptual" approach to understanding audience response. Such an approach draws upon concepts of emotion as it derives through cognitive processing on both unconscious and conscious levels and thus remains open to the realization that audience response is complex and multidimensional, rather than reliant on a single process. Explaining the significance of unconscious cognitive processing for emotional response, Plantinga writes, "The feeling of fear is felt consciously, of course. But the processes leading up to that feeling may or may not occur consciously. Most cognitive theorists reserve an important place for the unconscious mind and unconscious mental processes –

for the cognitive unconscious.”²⁶ Plantinga applies the term “automaticity” to refer to the phenomenon of immediate and unconscious emotional reaction to a situation, utilizing the example of Charles Darwin’s account of his reaction to a snake behind glass at the zoo – though Darwin knew he was safe, he still jumped back in fear when the snake struck.²⁷ Such immediate, unconscious, emotion-based responses are critical to audience reactions to the presentation of a fictional narrative as well.

On the other hand, Plantinga argues that conscious deliberation also plays a role in the elicitation of specific emotional reactions. Here, Plantinga presents as an example a story of two characters, Jack and Jane, each of who comes face to face with a bear in the woods. Jack has no weapon and has been told of the dangers of wild bears; he thus responds with salient feelings of fear. Jane, however, has a pistol that she believes will protect her from the bear should it attack – she is thus excited by the adventurous circumstances surrounding her meeting this wild animal. Thus, the difference in the content of these two characters’ conscious deliberation forms the beliefs that lead these two characters to contrasting emotional reactions to the same situation.

Emphasizing the idea that emotional response can result from conscious or unconscious cognitive processing, or a combination of the two, Plantinga formulates a definition of emotions as “concern-based construals.” Plantinga applies this terminology to describe emotional response as follows: “I have an emotion because I construe that a situation relates significantly to one or more of my concerns.” Since such concern-based construals, or emotions, formulate in response to situations within a subject’s environment,

²⁶ Plantinga, Carl. *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator’s Experience*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009, pp. 49-50.

²⁷ Ibid. 51.

they possess a number of qualities that help to define the relationship between subject and environment, and Plantinga lists several of these qualities. I have listed below five of the most foundational of these qualities:

- (1) Emotions are experienced in time... Our appraisal of a situation changes as the situation unfolds.
- (2) Emotions evolve in response to feedback... Our emotional life occurs in streams that continuously evolve in response to ever-changing construals, actions and action tendencies, bodily states, and feelings.
- (3) Emotions are related to stories... Movies are influential enough that they have the potential to attach emotions and affects to kinds of stories, thus regulating emotional experience.
- (4) Emotions vary in intensity and duration. Emotions may be mild and fleeting or strong and long lasting. Emotions can build in intensity or gradually attenuate.
- (5) Emotions may be mixed or ambiguous. For example one can be both horrified and fascinated by a monster in a horror film. While one can easily imagine such a situation, the overall experience is mixed in that the emotions contrast in valence (positive and negative) and associated action tendencies (flight or fear versus attraction and lingering proximity.)²⁸

Thus, Plantinga observes that emotions may be simple or complex, but always evolving in response to a constantly changing environment.

Finally, Plantinga explains the ways in which his theory of emotions as concern-based construals might be applied to audience experience of fictional narrative. Indeed, fictional characters' reality, though not audience reality, implies the potential for significant audience emotional response paralleling human real-life emotional response. According to Plantinga, such responses to the audience experience are basically similar to our responses to real life situations: "Rather than posit some entirely different breed of emotion, I argue that 'art emotions,' the emotions and affects elicited by narrative film and other arts, have close affinities with the typical emotions of our extra-filmic lives."²⁹ Following this, Plantinga addresses the issue of how we, as spectators, are able to feel such emotions from

²⁸ Ibid. 59-60.

²⁹ Ibid. 62.

one moment to the next in response to a fictional scenario presented on stage or screen – that is, a scenario that is clearly not part of the audience’s reality. In answer to this question, Plantinga points out that:

[W]e can respond emotionally to unasserted thoughts, such as imagining losing a loved one or imagining winning the lottery. Imagine smashing your thumb with a hammer; the more vivid your imaginative picture, the more likely you are to respond... We have emotional responses to nighttime dreams, daydreams, imaginings, and ideas.³⁰

The theatrical event, like the scenarios listed above, is a situation that similarly elicits basic-level affective responses that mimic “real-life” emotions.

Plantinga also explains how it is possible for audiences to simulate a character’s affective experience during a theatrical presentation and to later form a more varied and complex affective-based evaluation of a work of staged fiction as a whole, involving sympathy or antipathy for characters and overall enjoyment of a cathartic theatrical experience. To this end, Plantinga poses the theory that “[B]elief is not essential to emotion. As I am thinking of concern-based construals, emotions can result from impressions or the way things appear to the subject; they are sometimes automatic and only partially rooted in judgements, thoughts, and beliefs.”³¹ Here, Plantinga draws upon current theories that much basic-level empathetic response is subconscious and thus automatic and occurring independently of any belief system the spectator may later apply to his or her overall evaluation of the theatrical experience. Conversely, then, when a spectator does apply upper level processing, including consideration of overall mood, memory associations, and beliefs, he or she is able to form a more evaluative, yet still affect-based, reaction to the fictional scenario presented onstage. Plantinga thus lays the

³⁰ Ibid. 65-66.

³¹ Ibid. 65.

foundation for understanding the function of the overall affective experience of an artistic portrayal of a fictional scenario, such as live theatre, in terms of the affective implications of such variables as style, or, as applicable to the current analysis, genre.

It is evident from the above discussion, then, that the process of theatrical spectating is naturally concern-based, as is our experience in life. Auditory and visual stimuli lead audiences to formulate specific construals regarding characters and situations onstage, stimulating in turn the formation of related emotional response and other cognitive processing leading to an evaluation of the audience experience as a whole. Thus, motivated by his concern for the visceral experience of genres of theatre associated with high levels of auditory and visual stimulation, Sondheim, it would seem, is particularly inclined to create work with the potential to stimulate highly varied – and non-traditional -- concern-based construals in audiences.

In addition, since Sondheim is a composer as well as a lyricist, his auditory method of communicating with audiences is, of course, not simply speech-based but musical as well. Thus, in the current analysis of Sondheim's auditory and visual communication with audiences, discussion of the visceral effects of music and of a music/gesture dyad will play a significant role. Accordingly, musicologists working within the framework of cognitive theory have extensively studied the relationship between music and emotion; scientists have also studied, albeit less extensively, the relationship between music and embodied emotion, including gesturally induced affect. An understanding of these foci is thus also critical to the analysis to follow.

MUSIC AND EMOTION

Paralleling studies of emotional contagion in response to visual and word-based stimuli presented in a theatrical setting, such as those described above, extensive research exists specifically describing the process of musically induced emotional response. In this vein, cognitive psychologists have explored models for the induction of emotion in response to rhythm, tempo, harmony, and melody (sometimes studied separately and sometimes taken as a whole) in musical presentation. Patrik N. Juslin and Daniel Västfjäll have compiled a meta-analysis of such studies in their 2008 article examining the application of cognitive mechanisms to the reception of music, inducing an affective response in the listener/audience member.³² Juslin and Västfjäll focus on six such mechanisms and their application to affective musical reception, citing the work of numerous researchers in their overview. These six mechanisms are relevant to this study because they describe the methods and manners through which listeners and audience members have been shown to react emotively to music. Not surprisingly, they are manifestations of the empathetic process described above with regard to emotion and audiences within the context of theatrical spectating in general.

Significantly, the noted effects of musically stimulated brain mechanisms are also addressed (though not in cognitive terms) by the population of musicologists who have adopted Sondheim's work as a target of study. Thus, from various musicological perspectives, the concepts discussed below can be observed as underlying numerous

³² See Juslin, Patrik and Daniel Västfjäll. "Emotional Responses to Music: The Need to Consider Underlying Mechanisms." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (2008) 31.5, 559-575. For more information on music and emotion, see also the series of responses following this article.

existing analyses of Sondheim's compositions, including analyses I will cite here and in the following chapters. In addition, when approaching the following exploration of the cognitive mechanisms stimulated by music, one should remember that these mechanisms are not exclusive – “instead, they should be regarded as complementary ways in which music might induce emotions.”³³

The first of the brain mechanisms Juslin and Västfjäll apply to their understanding of musical reception resulting in emotive response is brain stem reflexes. Brain stem reflexes are subconscious, low-level processes that function under the umbrella of the larger auditory processing system to help notify the brain when sounds signify danger, alarm, or some other message relevant to the subject's well being. It is believed to be these processes that allow us to judge sounds as pleasing, irritating, frightening, etc... Though clearly not all listeners will form identical opinions regarding the emotional import of a piece of music, much research has shown that various types of music possess auditory qualities that strike the majority of listeners as happy, sad, scary, unsettling, and so on. In a chapter on musically induced emotion, Patrik Juslin provides a chart³⁴ laying out these qualities in detail – “happy” music, for example is most often characterized by fast tempo, major mode, simple and consonant harmony, perfect 4th and 5th intervals, smooth and fluent rhythm, staccato articulation, and medium vibrato. Meanwhile, “sad” music is associated with slow tempo, minor mode, small intervals, legato articulation, pauses, and slow vibrato; while “angry” music features fast tempo, minor mode, dissonance, major 7th and augmented 4th intervals, staccato articulation, accents on tonally unstable notes, and

³³ Ibid. 563.

³⁴ Juslin, Patrik N. “From Mimesis to Catharsis: Expression, Perception, and Induction of Emotion in Music.” *Musical Communication*, edited by Dorothy Miell, Raymond MacDonald, and David J. Hargreaves. Oxford: University Press, 2005, pg. 96.

medium-fast vibrato rate. These studies, of course, confirm from a cognitive perspective the tendencies that musicologists, composers, singers, music therapists, and other analysts, practitioners, and listeners have long noted regarding the unique emotional effects of music. Sondheim, for example, is known for his utilization of the emotionally unsettling minor mode demonstrated in “No Place Like London” when the angry Sweeney Todd sings:

There’s a hole in the world like a big black pit
And it’s filled with people who are filled with shit
And the demons of the world inhabit it
And it goes by the name of “London.”³⁵

As evidenced by the above list of musical characteristics contributing emotional value to segments of music, many of the same characteristics are associated with different emotional implications – i.e., fast tempo with both happy and angry music, and minor mode with both angry and sad music. Thus, as stated above, there is ample room for variation in listeners’ reactions depending upon which musical features become salient for each listener; further, it is the experience of the music as a whole that ultimately defines the emotive response, rather than one or two specific characteristics alone. Thus, the emotional implications of Sondheim’s overall musical choices must be understood in terms of the complexity of many contributing factors, and trends will be observed here based on factors that have been considered salient by several prominent musicologists as well as by Sondheim himself.

The second relevant cognitive mechanism to be discussed with regard to affective audience reception of music is closely related to brain stem reflexes. This mechanism is

³⁵ Sondheim, Stephen and Hugh Wheeler. *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*. New York: Applause, 1991, pg. 33.

emotional contagion. In terms of communication of affect through music, Juslin and Vastfjall explain emotional contagion as:

...a process whereby an emotion is induced by a piece of music because the listener perceives the emotional expression of the music, and then “mimics” this expression internally, which by means of either peripheral feedback from muscles, or a more direct activation of the relevant emotional representations in the brain, leads to an induction of the same emotion.³⁶

Thus, emotional contagion as it applies to music relies upon a mimicking process; our own brains’ tendencies to reproduce the emotional content of the world around us leads to the production of affect. If a type of music registers as “sad” to a listener, the listener’s own perception of sadness may be compounded by his/her brain’s tendency to reproduce this affect.

The third cognitive mechanism to be noted in the context of affective musical reception is termed “evaluative conditioning.” Evaluative conditioning is the brain process by which listeners learn to associate a certain type or piece of music with the emotional experience that most often accompanies that music, drawing upon memory and imagery processes discussed above. For example, calliope music is often experienced at fairs or carnivals, particularly in relation to carousels, Ferris wheels, and other traditional rides. For this reason calliope music is very often considered a catalyst for happiness, joy, excitement, and other emotions we might find ourselves experiencing as we indulge in cotton candy and dizzying rides. For over a century, musicologists have applied the term leitmotif to describe this concept – a term often referencing the recurring melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic themes found within the music dramas of the nineteenth century composer Richard Wagner. The application of leitmotif is now considered one of Stephen

³⁶ Juslin and Vastfjall 565.

Sondheim's trademark techniques for identifying specific characters and concepts within his scores and for subsequently recalling for his audiences the emotional impact of those characters and concepts. Numerous critical responses to Sondheim's music identify repeated examples of leitmotif, such as the "Sweeney chord" (minor, with an inverted major 7th)³⁷, or the various melodic motifs of the characters and stories in *Into the Woods*, such as the "beans motif"³⁸. Thus, while a recurring musical construction such as the "Sweeney chord" may be jarring in itself due to its minor mode and unique construction, it is made more jarring through evaluative conditioning by repeated association with the macabre and frightening character of Sweeney himself.

The fourth brain mechanism discussed by Juslin and Vastfjall as a means through which music induces emotion is visual imagery. As these researchers explain, "This refers to a process whereby an emotion is induced in a listener because he or she conjures up visual images (e.g., of a beautiful landscape) while listening to the music. The emotions experienced are the result of a close interaction between the music and the images."³⁹

When music induces the "conjuring" of visual images as described above, the brain processes at work resemble those active during visual perception, although in the case of visual imagery, there is no material object perceived through visual processing. Rather, some aspect of a particular piece of music triggers an association with an image that consequently appears in the mind of the listener. This phenomenon is similar to evaluative conditioning in its associative nature; however, the basic induction of visual imagery through musical sounds is less based in the training of the brain and more reliant upon the

³⁷ Horowitz 128.

³⁸ Banfield 406.

³⁹ Juslin and Vastfjall 566.

listener's own experiences of the music. In addition, the musical induction of visual imagery is particularly significant to the current study because imagery associated with music in the theatre is often based in recurring gestural patterns.

The fifth brain mechanism to be discussed with regard to affective musical reception is closely related to both evaluative conditioning and visual imagery in that it involves the induction of emotion through association of music with some other concept. This mechanism, that of episodic memory, relies even more specifically, however, upon the individual experience of each listener, since it is the process by which music invokes memories from the listener's past, leading to the incitement of emotions related to those memories. Citing a common cliché, Juslin and Västfjäll explain that "[t]his is sometimes referred to as the 'Darling, they are playing our tune' phenomenon (Davies 1978)."⁴⁰ Though the emotional implications of musically induced episodic memory are largely specific to each listener, emotional reactions to specific types of music based in episodic memory often function within the relatively wide boundaries of an entire culture. That is, music relating to a cultural or historical event experienced by masses of people is likely to induce many similar emotions for the various individuals who shared the experience, as Sondheim knew well when he composed *Assassins*. In this musical, Sondheim utilizes what music analysts term "pastiche", or a collection of musical references (melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, etc...) that suggest the style of musical works already known and recognized. Sondheim repeatedly utilizes pastiche in *Assassins*, creating an intricate web of references to various American musical traditions, including folk music ("Ballad of Booth"), calliope ("Opening Shooting Gallery"), cakewalk ("Ballad of Czolgosz"), and popular love ballad

⁴⁰ Ibid. 567.

("Unworthy of Your Love"), to name a few. While not all audience members will associate these songs with identical episodic memories, many are likely to relate on a personal level to these styles that have influenced American musical tradition so profoundly; and these musical styles are likely to induce emotions inspired by audience members' memories of associated common experiences.

The sixth and final brain mechanism to be introduced for the purpose of understanding affective musical reception is musical expectancy. Juslin and Västfjäll describe musical expectancy in this way:

[Musical expectancy] refers to a process whereby an emotion is induced in a listener because a specific feature of the music violates, delays, or confirms the listener's expectations about the continuation of the music. For instance the sequential progression of E-F# sets up the musical expectation that the music will continue with G# (Sloboda 1992). If this does not happen, the listener may become, for instance, surprised.⁴¹

The creation of musical surprise in this manner is, along with leitmotif and pastiche, one of Sondheim's favorite techniques, as he explains in the following excerpt from his discussions with Mark Eden Horowitz:

The reason a lot of people complain [my] music is difficult is because it does tend to change. It's something I picked up partly from Cole Porter and partly from Leonard Bernstein. One of the things about Lenny's music that I like is he keeps surprising you... And the result is that the ear is constantly freshened, and that's what keeps music alive over a period of time. People who like my music and say they discover new things in it the more they listen to it, it's because there are these little surprises scattered throughout.⁴²

In keeping his music fresh for his audiences, then, Sondheim writes with the conscious purpose of communicating with them by setting up musical expectancy and by either confirming or denying their expectations depending upon his intent. An exemplary in-depth analysis of this technique can be found within Raymond Knapp's discussion of *A*

⁴¹ Ibid. 568.

⁴² Horowitz 8.

Little Night Music, focusing upon Sondheim's interspersing of musical references to the Viennese waltz (a form of pastiche) and his subsequent repeated musical denial of those same references.⁴³

MUSIC AND GESTURE

The relationship between music and gesture, in terms of resulting affective expressiveness, has also been explored and iterated within the context of the research of David McNeill and others. Grounding the concept of a music/gesture merger paralleling McNeill's speech/gesture merger, several cognitive psychologists and music theorists have presented research illustrating the inherently gestural nature of music. For example, many studies focus upon the influence of a musical conductor's gestural choices on the affective expressiveness of the attending musical ensemble⁴⁴. Thus, while McNeill examines the transposition of gesture to speech and vice versa, these researchers observe the fluidity with which gesture is also interpreted in musical form. It has further been shown that musical notation tends to imply gesture as well as sound. In *Deepening Musical Performance through Movement: The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interpretation*, Alexandra Pierce describes her process of discovery of a direct link between the affective nature of music and the full-bodied gestural approach of the musician and/or conductor at work:

⁴³ See Knapp, Raymond. *The American Musical and Performance of Personal Identity*. Princeton: University Press, 2006, pages 50-62.

⁴⁴ For examples, see Morrison, et al., "The Effect of Conductor Expressivity on Ensemble Performance Evaluation," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 57.1, 37-49; and Luck, Geoff and John A. Sloboda, "Spatio-temporal Cues for Visually Mediated Synchronization," *Music Perception* 26.5, 465-473.

Here began a search for the precise movement quality of various elements. It started with familiar gestures for beat, melody, phrase, and followed its nose from there by experientially matching sound with kinesis. The search involved the full body, not just hands and arms, and gradually winnowed out for an element a match between movement and sound, between feelings and sound.⁴⁵

Pierce goes on to list 10 musical elements that, she argues, can be affectively heightened by embodied interpretation, including relative harmonic completion of phrases, continuity of melody, rhythmic quality, reverberation, musical climax, juncture, and motif.

In the remainder of her book, Pierce contributes a comprehensive discussion of the intricate gestural mapping naturally derived from musical notation and the musician's heightened ability to communicate affect by fully engaging in gestural expression⁴⁶ while interpreting the music. Thus, as McConachie discusses the role of gesture in defining and expressing the "beats" of an acting script, Pierce discusses the role of gesture in a musician's interpretation of musical notation, connecting one musical "thought" to the next, as in her description of reverberation as follows:

Again and again, a playing gesture and its sound search for their ending, even as the next gesture stirs into beginning. This is reverberation, the continuous mobilization of playing action that settles to rest even as it moves on. It depends on letting gestures through, allowing them to carry out both their articulating and their integrating functions. Singling out reverberation for study brings into prominence this paradox of resting while acting – the physical counterpart of dividing up the sound into notes, phrases, and measures while maintaining its continuity.⁴⁷

Pierce thus speaks of musical performance as much more than interpreting through sound the notation written on the page; there is indeed a "physical counterpart" integral to the

⁴⁵ Pierce, Alexandra. *Deepening Musical Performance through Movement: The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interpretation*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007, page 3.

⁴⁶ In this context, "gestural expression" refers not simply to the gestures required to play an instrument and thus produce sound (although these gestures may carry emotional value), but also to ancillary gestures, which are gestures of a purely expressive nature, unnecessary to the production of sound and varying in specificity from one musician to the next.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 120.

musician's expression that exists beyond the simple level of gestures necessary to create musical sound. Significantly, Pierce refers to the musician's natural inclination to embody this counterpart, not by overlaying gesture upon sound, but by "letting the gesture through." The gestural counterpart, then, is inherent in the music itself; and it is this counterpart, working in conjunction with sound, that communicates affect and thoughtful intent to an audience:

Reverberation reflects the intention that precedes an action, commitment during the action (including the desire to communicate with an audience), and fulfillment of the action – although a next action may adjoin (as when ending and beginning fuse on a note or chord), or may even overlap (as in fugal expositions). Reverberation also reflects – all along the path – the emotional and thought-filled content of an action.⁴⁸

Musical notation, then, can imply gestures as well as sound (melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, etc...), just as a theatrical script implies gesture and speech. Both communicate to audiences through a language comprised of audio and visual information, and it follows that when experienced together, music, speech and gesture possess communicative properties not wholly possible lacking the presence of any one of these key elements.

It should also be noted, when exploring a music/speech/gesture triad and its affective implications, that many cognitive-based studies have attributed some linguistic properties to music, indicating significant parallels between speech and music. Though this debate is ongoing, most researchers do attribute to music some of the properties of language (albeit to varying extents⁴⁹), strengthening the argument for a strong

⁴⁸ Ibid. 121.

⁴⁹ The debate regarding the extent to which music possesses linguistic qualities is complex and ongoing. It is generally recognized that music functions on a syntactic level (relying upon syntax built on contextual information suggested by harmonic progression, musical mode, rhythmic patterns, etc...); however, researchers disagree on whether or not music may possess semantic import as does spoken language. For a recent meta-analysis, see Barbro B. Johanssen (*European Review* (2008), 16:413-427 Cambridge University Press),

music/gesture connection in light of McNeill's research on speech and gesture, and further supporting the current analysis.

Significantly, research on audience response to dance has corroborated the conflation of music and body movement into a single language, informing our current perception of the potential intensity of emotional experience of those observing a musical production. In a groundbreaking 1997 study by Krumhansl and Schenck, three separate groups of subjects were presented with a section of a ballet performance. The first group, labeled Audio Only (AO), could only hear the music; and the second group, Visual Only (VO), could only see the dancers; while the third group, Audio-Visual (AV) could both see and hear the performance. All subjects were asked to rate (1) their perception of musical phrasing, that is, the points at which they comprehended a change of musical phrase based upon their auditory, visual, or audio-visual experience and (2) the emotional intensity of their experiences.

Two key findings were drawn from this study, arguing for the conflation of audio and visual stimuli into a single language from the perspectives of the three groups of audience members described above. First, members of all three groups demonstrated an overall similar comprehension of the structure of musical phrasing, indicating that the audio and the visual interpretations of the piece communicated similar information to

summarizing current findings articulating presumed neurological differences and similarities between language processing and music processing. For engaging research specifically supporting cognitive tendencies toward semantic processing of music, see Koelsch, Stefan; Elisabeth Kasper; Daniela Sammler; Katrin Schulze; Thomas Gunter; and Angela D. Friederici; "Music, Language, and Meaning: Brain Signatures of Semantic Processing"; *Nature Neuroscience* (2004), 037:3; 302-307.

audiences regarding musical timing and emphasis – evidence that the two modalities of communication naturally function together. Second, it was found that the AO and VO situations elicited related emotional responses from their audiences and that the AV group was affected on a level informed by the measured emotional effects of the other two groups. It seemed from this study, then, that audio and visual stimuli mutually contribute similar information in order to describe the emotional impact of an audience member's experience.⁵⁰

Following this study, in 2006, a group of four major researchers in the field of music cognition -- Bradley W. Vines, Carol L. Krumhansl, Marcello M. Wanderley, and Daniel J. Levitin -- performed a similar study, in which subjects were presented, not with dance performances, but with clarinetist performances.⁵¹ As with the Krumhansl and Schenck study, audience member subjects were categorized into AO, VO, and AV groups. Paralleling results of the earlier study, AO subjects and VO subjects noted similar patterns of musical phrasing, illustrating again the tendency of both auditory and visual stimuli to communicate the syntax of the music. However, AO and VO trials did not elicit similar emotional ratings from their audiences during corresponding segments of the performances. This displayed a variation from the results of the dance study, likely because the full body motion of the dancers had embraced the music and vice versa so that audio and visual stimuli experienced separately produced similar emotional intensity. In the clarinetist study, the performers' body movements were somewhat reigned in by the

⁵⁰ See Krumhansl, Carol, and D. L. Schenck. "Can Dance Reflect the Structural and Expressive Qualities of Music? A Perceptual Experiment on Balanchine's Choreography of Mozart's Divertimento No. 15." *Musicae Scientiae* 1, 1997. 63-85.

⁵¹ See Vines, et al. "Cross-modal Interactions in the Perception of Musical Performance." *Cognition* 101 (2006), 80-113.

restrictions of playing the instrument; therefore, audio information often elicited high emotional intensity while visual information elicited low emotional intensity and vice versa. Vines et al. refer to these repeated situations in their study as “segments of interest” and explain them as follows:

These segments of interest (SOIs) occurred when the tension conveyed in sound contrasted with the tension conveyed visually. For example, seeing Performer R’s smooth and controlled body movements served to *dampen* the tension experienced when the sound contained loud, high pitched and fast moving melodic lines. Conversely, visual information served to *increase* experienced tension when Performer W’s punctuated and highly expressive movements contrasted with the subdued and quiet sound. These SOIs exemplify naturally occurring discrepancies in emotional content conveyed through vision and sound. In response to the independent sensory streams, participants did not ignore one or the other modality, but integrated the two into an amalgamation influenced by both sight and sound. These findings show that the emotion conveyed visually does indeed contribute to the overall experience, and that sound and vision interact in an observer’s experience.⁵²

Thus, Vines et al. illustrate that even when audio and visual stimuli produce differing levels of emotional response separately, the responses are additive – that is, they combine to produce in audiences a mediated level of tension that neither type of stimulus produces individually.

Based upon these studies, then, it seems that audiences often tend to perceive performed visual and audio stimuli as a single unit, just as the two modalities are formed in the brain of a speaker or composer/lyricist as a single unit. Significantly, although the focus of Vines, et al.’s study is audience reception, they briefly cite the work of McNeill, drawing a parallel between his elaboration on the common origin of audio and visual stimuli in human brain processing and their own observations of common receptive processing of those same stimuli.

⁵² Ibid. 104.

Thus, in the analyses to follow, I will argue that gestural qualities inherent in Sondheim's work effectively fuse with his musical and lyrical choices to fabricate a language that tends to evoke customized levels of emotional reaction in audiences.

One question that will likely surface in response to my stated thesis is: Though Sondheim himself may feel that he imposes a gestural scheme upon his writing, doesn't the director of a specific production actually lay out the primary choreography and gestural components during rehearsal with the actors? Certainly, specific gestures are suggested and worked out during rehearsal. However, given the current belief that gesture and speech are linked within a single language system, serving to communicate the speaker's thoughts, a clean separation between the process of composing music and lyrics and the process of working out gesture on stage becomes less probable. Rather, it is likely that certain gestural tendencies and styles are inherent within the communication of a composer's meaning. Thus, while gesture is explored and elaborated upon in rehearsal, it is also an extension of the author's work, a medium working in conjunction with the music and lyrics in order to allow the resulting language to perform its communicative function. As noted above, Bruce McConachie argues for a direct link between Tennessee Williams' script for *Streetcar Named Desire* and the gestural interpretations of an actor who has completed appropriate script analysis in preparation for the role of Blanche. Indeed, though specific gestures may vary, a trained actor's gestural emphasis naturally accompanies the thought and emotional value of the script:

In common actor parlance deriving from the ideas of Stanislavsky, actors engender the thoughts of their characters by playing the intentions and working within the emotions of their roles. By altering their intentions and emotions, actors trigger a different "beat," a new unit of thought distinct in speech and gesture from the previous one... Although the actor doing a "beat analysis" of [Blanche's] "Don't hang back with the brutes" [speech] has

many options to choose from, the general structure of Williams' speech will guide most performers in their choices.⁵³

My analysis rests upon this foundation, elaborating upon the ways in which Sondheim's music and lyrics offer a guide through which his actors develop gestural patterns, thus communicating to audiences through the language of music, speech, and gesture.

Given these observations, it would be inaccurate to assert, in answer to the question posed above, that all gestural components of a musical production are worked out during rehearsal. Although specific gestural choices are made and physically "set" during rehearsal, much of the overall gestural mapping is worked out within the script and score of the piece, in tandem with music and words. This is not meant to imply a diminished role on the part of the performer or the director of a production; rather, performers and directors must be uninhibited, intuitive, versatile, and able to commit fully to the personal choices they make in order to successfully embody the physical life implied within the work; their jobs are more vital than ever.

We may now apply studies of the link between speech and gesture, as well as the link between music and gesture, to analyze the communicative process of a composer/lyricist such as Stephen Sondheim, who appeals to his audiences through the unified "language" of music, words, and gesture. Within this context, gesture originates with speech and music in order to form a language that may be orchestrated by a performing artist and then perceived by audiences as an amalgamation of the auditory and visual stimuli carrying with it a customized emotional intensity further defined by the cognitive processes of each audience member. Stephen Sondheim appears to know this intuitively, and he utilizes these communicative tendencies to their fullest extent

⁵³ McConachie 90.

throughout the composition of his farcical, melodramatic, and romantic interpretations of musical theatre. It is for this reason that he refers to himself as a “playwright in song”, placing so much emphasis on the quality of acting with which a performer presents his songs and imagining the movement that is to accompany his music and lyrics. It is also for this reason that he loves to create pieces that challenge audience expectations based on their traditional experiences of both ancient genres and the contemporary American musical.

Thus, it is perhaps not surprising, given the current cognitive approach to understanding Sondheim’s work, that critics have reacted with such intense emotional response to Sondheim’s unique musicals. In the chapters to follow, we will discover the ways in which the music, lyrics, and gestural patterns associated with the genre musicals to be discussed function to both recall and challenge traditional notions of musical theatre as well as traditional notions of the genres at hand.

CHAPTER ONE: THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC, LYRICS, AND GESTURE -- THE CHALLENGE OF SONDHEIM'S GENRES

In preparation for embarking upon a detailed analysis of Stephen Sondheim's works as affective embodiments of the genres they represent, this chapter applies the theory bases presented thus far to proffer solidified concepts of the processes by which specific types of gesture can function with specific types of speech and music to invoke audience response. Thus, this chapter seeks to provide the definitions, terminology, and examples necessary to go about recognizing and interpreting the relevant gestural components of Sondheim's musical and lyrical language and their effects on audiences. Beginning with a discussion of the conceptual differences between speech and gesture and the nature of specific types of gesture, I will construct a working definition of gesture as it most clearly pertains to audience reception of the performance of musical theatre as presented here. As an illustration, I will examine an example of a gestural study of a singer in concert, in order to present a basic-level precedent for the more multi-faceted study to follow. A close look at this example will begin to reveal the nature of the affective language through which music, lyrics, and gesture function to affect audience concerns in response to Sondheim's characters. Finally, based in a clear understanding of the visceral foundations of this communication, a discussion of the emotional foundations of "traditional" musical theatre and the genres of farce, melodrama, and romance will establish a framework for viewing

three of Sondheim's musicals within the context of the challenges they offer audiences in terms of visceral connection with the characters and narratives presented onstage.

ELEMENTS OF GESTURE

As stated in the Introduction, David McNeill argues that speech and gesture share a common expressive origin, collaborating as aural and visual components of language. McNeill further breaks down gesture into categories on a continuum, moving from gesticulation (gestures inherently accompanying speech) to sign language (gestures occurring without – and serving to take the place of – speech.) Though this dissertation will not address sign language, it will discuss the implications of on-stage gesticulation, as well as emblematic gesture and the more embodied form of pantomime – the two other categories on McNeill's continuum. In order to better clarify the function served by each of these categories, I will examine the continuum in detail, applying McNeill's terminology to explain the roles of gesticulation, emblem, and pantomime as they relate to the role of speech in communication.

According to McNeill, speech presents sounds (in the form of words) that carry semantic import and are arranged syntactically. In contrast, gesticulation, the form of gesture naturally accompanying speech for the purpose of illustrating the speaker's main idea, presents images that are "materialized" and "global" in nature. This may be taken to mean that speech is by nature primarily symbolic – sounds come together in specific organizational patterns (syntax) to form sentences that represent pre-determined concepts to those who comprehend the verbal language spoken. The gestures that most often

accompany speech, on the other hand, are motoric – that is, action-based (materialized), and they serve to illustrate the overall (global) concept to which speech refers. For this reason, gesticulation is helpful for the speaker and listener who do not speak the same verbal language.

The same is true for pantomime, though in the case of pantomime, speech is absent. As with gesticulation, the gestural elements comprising pantomime are motoric and primarily global, or meant to be taken as a whole, rather than comprised of syntactic elements.⁵⁴ Emblems, on the other hand, are motoric but not global – they are physical motions or poses that stand for, or symbolize, specific meaning, as in the case of the well-known “OK” symbol comprised of touching tips of the thumb and forefinger. As such, emblems may be accompanied by speech, but they do not require the support of speech to communicate their messages. Thus, emblems, like sign language, feature a one-to-one correspondence between the specific gesture executed and an associated meaning, maintaining the linguistic property of direct symbolism without the accompaniment of speech. In addition, emblems are culturally specific, each carrying unique meaning within an individual cultural tradition. As we will see, this is critical to the premise of Chapter I, which examines a number of emblematic poses as they reflect the composition of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* in the style of farce.

Gesticulation, pantomime, and emblem, then, each serve a specific materially communicative purpose deriving from Sondheim’s musical and verbal syntax, as we will

⁵⁴ McNeill is careful to distinguish the pantomime described here from the more formalized “theatrical” pantomime, which McNeill concedes “has its own traditional forms and rules,” rules that often do include syntactic construction. (McNeill 8.)

discover in detail with regard to the three musicals discussed in the Chapters to follow. In *Thought and Gesture*, McNeill clarifies the role of each as follows:

“Gesticulation” is motion that embodies meaning relatable to the accompanying speech... Gesticulation is by far the most frequent type of gesture in daily use, and it covers many variants and usages. It is made chiefly with the arms and hands but is not restricted to these body parts – the head can take over as a kind of third hand if the anatomical hands are immobilized or otherwise engaged, and the legs and feet too can move in a gesture mode. (cf. McClave 2000)...

“Emblems” are conventionalized signs, such as a thumbs-up or the ring... for “OK.”

“Pantomime” is a dumb show, a gesture or sequence of gestures conveying a narrative line, with a story to tell, produced without speech.⁵⁵

To clarify the roles of speech and gesture as McNeill describes them, I will draw upon a classic example of communication through speech versus communication through gesture. The word “tree” corresponds to a specific object that grows in the ground and possesses roots, bark, branches, and very often, leaves. “Tree” carries semantic import, that is, very specific meaning – the word corresponds to the concept of something tree-like in the minds of the speaker and listener. To create more complex images, we combine many such meaningful words as follows: “The giant pulled the tree toward him.” The image of the tree remains, but we have expanded the concept to create the image of a character’s acting upon the tree. In this way, speech carries very specific meaning; and it is also what McNeill calls “synthetic” – it conveys concepts that are constructed, or synthesized, by the syntactic arrangement of smaller concepts.

Gesture (aside from formal sign language), on the other hand, does not represent concepts in this fashion. There is no specific gesticulation, pantomime, or even emblem corresponding to the concept of a tree, since gestures do not carry extensive semantic import as words do. Rather, gestures are material – they are physicalized images that

⁵⁵ Ibid. 5.

correspond to concepts; and as such, they cannot be broken down into building blocks and diagramed like sentences. Rather, the meaning of a gesture must be taken as a whole. Thus, to describe the concept of a giant pulling on a tree, one might make a pulling motion and lean back in order to embody the nature of the concept. If gesture were reflective of speech in its communicative properties, one would act out the process of (1) embodying a giant, (2) embodying the act of pulling, and (3) embodying a tree. However, we do not supplement our speech in this manner; rather, gestures support speech by materializing in global form.

Within this global and material framework, gesticulations, the most common of the three types of gesture addressed here, suggest meaning through various approaches.⁵⁶ In the example above, the tree-pulling gesture suggests meaning iconically. This means that to some degree the gesture directly imitates the concept to be communicated, creating an image that visually invokes the main idea of, in this case, someone pulling on something else. McNeill explains the iconicity as follows: "Various aspects of the gesture – form, hand (standing for the character's hand, and opening it as if grasping an object with some thickness), trajectory (a curved path), direction (backward), etc. – correspond to aspects of the event, a character bending back a tree."⁵⁷ In this sense, gesture suggests pictorially the concept to be communicated, exemplifying what is perhaps the most commonly utilized manner of gestural materialization.

Gesticulations may also communicate metaphorically, as is often the case during narrative. Through this technique, gestures function to establish the location of an abstract idea in space. In McNeill's example, drawn from experimentation through which speakers'

⁵⁶ See McNeill pp. 38-43.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 39.

gestures were studied as they narrated a situation to a listener/observer, a speaker described a division of characters based upon their supposed morality, gesturally placing the “good guys” in the center and the “bad guys” on the left of the space in front of her. As a technique for the supplementation of verbal story-telling, metaphoric gesticulation is an especially useful tool for the actor, and one that is often fine-tuned during monologue and scene coaching. An actor interpreting Hamlet’s famous monologue, for example, will often gesturally place everything associated with continuing to live (“to be”) in one spatial area and everything associating with dying (“not to be”) in another to physically materialize each abstract option, thus assuring a stronger emotional connection and clearer understanding of Shakespeare’s text for both the actor and the audience.

A third dimension of gesticulation, the deictic, comes closer to bearing semantic meaning than other forms of gesticulation, almost qualifying as emblematic, since a deictic gesture always invokes direction. The physical materialization of the message “look that way,” however, is not set in stone as emblems are and can be embodied in numerous ways, including the aversion of one’s gaze or the jerking of one’s head, as well as the more common pointing of the index finger.

Finally, McNeill observes a fourth dimension of gesticulation – the beat – which he explains is a physical materialization of the passing of time. This can be utilized to signify impatience (as in tapping one’s finger while waiting for something), enjoyment (as in tapping one’s foot to lively music), or emphasis (as in the physicalization of a musical downbeat), to name a few interpretations.

Significantly, McNeill also notes that a single gesticulation may embody many of these dimensions, thus fulfilling several communicative purposes simultaneously and

functioning as a multi-dimensional physicalization of speech. In the present study of *Into the Woods*, for example, deictic gestures function to pinpoint the characters' passionate attempts to place blame on one another for the situations in which they find themselves within their narrative, thus serving a metaphoric purpose as well as a deictic one.

Finally, pantomimic and emblematic gestures take on symbolic import within the context of the cultural background of the actors and/or the audience, or within the world that exists as the characters' staged reality. Cultural symbolism as representative of farce is explored through gesture in my analysis of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, which draws upon techniques of ancient Roman Comedy to communicate the main attributes of the stylized world of the characters in this piece. Such symbolic gesture is also present in *Sweeney Todd* – in this musical Todd's raised arm grasping his razor becomes emblematic not only of his driven nature and anger as a character but also of the power the razor lends him as a prop that is effectively an extension of his arm in this musical melodrama.

Gesture, then, functions in a number of ways to communicate affect as the complement of speech. It serves to illustrate narrative, define concepts metaphorically, indicate direction, and signify the passing of time. In addition, specific gestures may be made to adopt layers of symbolic meaning as a result of cultural trends or pre-established codes. A picture (in the form of a gesture) is not exactly worth a thousand words, since, in reality, they are not interchangeable. Rather, it seems, a gesture supports a thousand words, and vice versa.

For the purposes of the present study, gesture will include body movements fulfilling any or all of the four purposes described above (iconic, metaphoric, deictic, and

beat), as well as emblems and pantomimic sequences that adopt layers of symbolic meaning further defining their relevance in heightening audience members' engagement. Thus, the gestures examined here will serve an expressive purpose beyond the simple completion of a task, eliminating the need to speculate on the possible relevance of every bodily movement performed by actors on stage as a defining aspect of Sondheim's work. Gestural studies to follow may, however, examine movement that happens to involve the completion of a task; there are, for example, many occasions on which characters perform cooking or housework with an emotive impact that allows the movements involved to carry meaning as gestural inductions of affect. In addition, since this study examines the work of an artist who communicates with his audiences through the aural forms of music and lyrics, only gestures accompanying music and/or lyrics will be analyzed. Thus, gesture, as explored in the current study, will include actors' bodily movements that:

- (1) are motoric, but are often made to assume symbolic meaning as in the cases of emblem and pantomime,
- (2) serve an expressive purpose beyond the simple completion of a task, though completion of a task may be involved, and
- (3) occur simultaneously with music and/or lyrics.

It will become apparent that even within these parameters, a wealth of inherent gestures can be shown to enhance the auditory elements of Sondheim's work.

Within the vein of probing the ways in which a music/lyric/gesture triad manifests itself onstage, eliciting reactions from an audience, a few researchers have presented analyses of popular concerts, complete with breakdowns of the manners in which singers' gestures function with music to affect audiences. Since this type of study very often focuses

on the gestural aspects of playing a character on stage, it is worth examining one of these studies as an example of gestural analysis of a songwriter's work, including the ways in which gesture is allowed to communicate character and ideas to audiences.

ROBBIE WILLIAMS – A GESTURAL STUDY

Jane W. Davidson, a prolific music psychologist, singer, and music theatre director, has conducted several gesture studies of popular singers in concert, including Annie Lennox, The Corrs, Rosie Brown, and Robbie Williams. Particularly relevant to the current study, Davidson often analyzes the gestures in which these performers engage in order to assume a character, or role, during their performance of a song. Prefacing her case study of Robbie Williams, Davidson explains that she chose Williams because of the singer's own interest in his stage presence and the way he "flicks from his 'stage persona' and his 'intimate, shy self'"⁵⁸ during his performance. In addition, her analysis focuses on Williams' performance of "She's the One" (1998), a song co-written by Williams, and thus exemplary of his work not solely as a performer but as a songwriter as well. We can thus assume that Williams' gestural interpretations reflect the inherent qualities he intended as a songwriter, rather than overshadowing the work of a songwriter through his own presence as a rock star. Consequently, a study of Williams' performance of this song allows us a look into the way a studied actor might interpret the work of a musical theatre songwriter through the embodiment of a character. As Davidson explains in the preface to her gestural study, "It is

⁵⁸ Davidson, Jane W. "She's the One': Multiple Functions of Body Movement in a Stage Performance by Robbie Williams." Chapter 12 of *Music and Gesture*, edited by Anthony Gritten and Elaine King. UK: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2006, pp. 208-225, p. 213.

argued that singers can give us helpful insight into the specific meanings of the gestural codes used in music as they are often tied to text and literal narrative.”⁵⁹ Much like the actor playing Blanch in McConachie’s analysis of the embodiment of Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Robbie Williams communicates through his physicality what cannot be communicated through words alone.

During his performance of the song “She’s the One”, Williams relates a narrative of two lovers, repeatedly referring to a couple in his audience as an embodied example of the lovers about which he sings. The musical style is that of a traditional ballad, demonstrating in Juslin’s terms the characteristics that invoke “tenderness” -- slow tempo, major mode, lowered singer’s formant, legato articulation, and accents on tonally stable notes. As his narrative unfolds, he engages in all the types of gestures described above; and Davidson notes that, much of the time, Williams’ audience imitates him. Thus, as narrator, Williams is also a leader, cuing his audiences to engage with the rhythm of the music and to indicate their concern for himself and with the couple he chooses as the subject of his story.

As the musical introduction to the song begins, Williams bows to the couple about which he chooses to sing; and he points his right index finger at the audience – both gestures that assume a deictic quality. Here, moving slowly in time with the gentle tempo of the musical introduction, the singer directs his audience’s collective attention to members of its own number, indicating focus on the chosen couple on house left. In addition, bowing is a symbolic gesture, resulting in an emblematic pose that in most cultures indicates humility, respect, or dedication – through this choice of this gesture, Williams dedicates the song to the couple.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 208.

As he sings, Williams nods his head in time with the music, a beat gesture that keeps time for himself and his audience while simultaneously compounding the steady rhythmic quality of the music – a quality that helps to define the song as a “love ballad” and suggests the very type of gentle visual imagery Williams offers through the swaying of his head. In addition, by gesturally emphasizing this rhythm, Williams makes salient for his audience the ballad-like nature of the song, inviting his audience members to engage episodic memory processes in recalling past romantic experiences associated with this type of song. He is then able to relate these suggestions of romantic memories back to the present by indicating the couple on house left. As the audience sways and sings along, Williams’ nodding becomes more emphatic in an emblematic gesture of approval and encouragement. By the time he reaches the first chorus of “She’s the One,” Williams performs what Davidson refers to as “upwards scooping hand gestures” to further encourage audience participation by signifying a “taking in” or joining of himself and the audience as a single entity. At this point, personal audience memories invoked by the ballad-like quality of music become universal – individual audience members are invited to appreciate the shared nature of the experience of longing for another person or being in love. By setting up an emphasis on the group experience in this way, he easily elicits audience participation when at the end of the chorus he sings “You’ll be so high you’ll be flying...”, pantomiming by making a flying gesture with his arms, which his audience delightfully imitates.

Later in the song, however, as the music slows to begin Verse 4, Williams switches to a more private persona when he walks up steps on the stage away from his audience and toward his band, where he sings “we were one; we were free” while looking at the floor and

becoming “introspective.”⁶⁰ The lowered sound level suggests an element of sadness reflected by Williams’ thoughtful stance – easily suggestive of a more solitary reflection on love and the loneliness that can exist in its absence. Williams’ embodiment of this feeling thus communicates a vulnerability that is identifiable to most audience members. Before the song concludes, however, Williams shifts character again, adopting the persona of rock star as he “Puts mic in stand. Both hands on mic, leans back singing with great physical engagement and ‘effort’.”⁶¹ These gestures engage Williams with the beat, symbolically suggesting his unity with the music and encouraging audience members to unify once again through the collective experience of the rock concert. In this vein, Williams returns as the song ends to direct interaction with the audience, giving them an emblematic peace sign as he sings the final lyrics – “You’re the one; She’s the one.”⁶²

Davidson’s gestural analysis is relevant here both for its emphasis on Williams’ onstage characterization and for its corresponding observation of audience engagement. It is true that actors on the musical theatre stage do not tend to interact directly with their audience members as often as popular singers in concert, since theatre regularly maintains the convention of the “fourth wall” separating the world of the audience from the world of the characters and the narrative being presented. However, Davidson’s study illustrates exemplary means by which Robbie Williams’ gestures function with his music and lyrics to suggest his characterization -- first as a singer who is really “one of the group”, engaging as a peer to his audiences and allowing them to become characters in his song; then as an introspective and vulnerable man reflecting on a private relationship; and finally as a rock

⁶⁰ Ibid. 219.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. 220

star engaging fully with his band and sending his audience both the beat and his gratitude. All these personas effectively engage audience cognitive processing on many levels, including affective concern, individual memory processing, and culturally conditioned response. Audience engagement is in turn reflected in his audience members' responses, whether they are swaying back and forth, imitating his arm movements that literally illustrate the lyrics (as in "flying"), or simply demonstrating attentive posture while singing along. Within the context of a musical theatre production, audiences are less likely to be as demonstrative. However, as previous analysis of emotional contagion indicates, this does not mean that they are less emotionally engaged.

As demonstrated by Davidson's study, audiences naturally engage with specific gestures that suggest characterization and establish relationships in the context of lyrics and music. This analysis is brief and relatively basic, examining gestures that most often function to reinforce the emotional value of the music and lyrics at hand, as when Williams associates the musical style of the love ballad with gestural tendencies toward sharing, inclusion, introspection, and finally rock star iconicity. Yet it forms the basis for an understanding of more complex embodiment of feeling and thought onstage, embodiment that communicates with audiences viscerally to suggest communicative patterns both traditionally indicative of narrative and genre and specifically central to the development and the denial of traditional farce, melodrama, and romance in Sondheim's musicals.

GENRE AND AUDIENCES

As noted in the Introduction, theatrical forms are understood in terms of dominant styles featured during varying periods of history. In *Engaging Audiences*, Bruce McConachie notes that not only is historical context relevant in determining the function of genre, but cognitive tendencies play a significant role as well. According to McConachie, “the general elements of theatregoing in all cultures are constituted both by evolutionary universals that transcend historical contexts and by distinctive historical interactions specific to time and place that function within evolutionary constraints.”⁶³ To further examine the “evolutionary universals” of genre, McConachie draws upon the theories of cognitive philosopher Daniel Nettle, who explains the concept of genre as a form of categorization emerging from our basic human affiliation with the process and benefits of storytelling. According to Nettle, theatrical presentation throughout history has focused on love and status as two primary factors of concern with regard to the process of storytelling, since these are two factors that tend to contribute to our most salient concerns in real life and thus form the strongest fodder for interesting storytelling. Nettle argues that these two themes and variations on them have defined the foundation upon which generic forms have emerged and morphed. McConachie confirms from the theatre historian’s perspective that most theatrical endeavors have featured -- and continue to feature – these salient themes, observing that, with variation according to cultural paradigms, theatre throughout history tends to portray stories concerning the success or thwarting of romantic love and/or extremes of social status ranging from immortality to death. McConachie thus

⁶³ McConachie 174-175.

endorses Nettle's delineation of genre and derives from them four universally occurring categories, which are as follows:

- (1) Tragedy, which features an attempted status change resulting in a negative outcome,
- (2) Heroic drama, which features an attempted status change resulting in a positive outcome,
- (3) Love Tragedy, which features a mating oriented goal with a negative outcome,
- (4) Comedy, which features a mating oriented goal with a positive outcome.⁶⁴

Primarily within these universally occurring parameters, genres, including those discussed here with regard to Stephen Sondheim's musicals, grow and morph in response to social and cultural trends. Thus, these four categories will form a basis from which the genres discussed here can be understood as we delve into critical details concerning socially and culturally grounded audience expectations regarding the three pieces to be discussed. Moving forward, but remaining within the scope of Nettle's concept of the functioning of genre, I will address in the following chapters each genre to be discussed in terms of varying definitions offered by writers and philosophers such as Eric Bentley, Hayden White, and Northrop Frye.

Such analysis, drawing from universal concerns associated with the specific affective nature of genre to be expressed, forms, as noted above, only half the critical backdrop against which we must most effectively evaluate audience response to generic form. The other half relies on the evolution of genre in response to changing social and

⁶⁴ McConachie 177.

cultural environments. Taken together, both these influences contribute to forming what Hans Robert Jauss first termed the “horizon of expectations” of an audience – the compiled elements of prior awareness of the theatrical experience based on both universal concepts and cultural understanding. When works of art challenge either universally or culturally accepted elements of generic paradigms, typical audience construals with regard to these paradigms are also called into question. In short, audience expectations are challenged and the concerns elicited from audience members are likely to be different from those expected by those same audience members. According to Susan Bennett, “At its first publication/performance, a work is measured against the dominant horizon of expectations.”⁶⁵ Audience expectations, such as those of the critics cited in the Introduction, will thus remain an important background concept against which to evaluate the methods of affective communication to be addressed in the following chapters with regard to Sondheim’s genre musicals.

MUSICAL THEATRE AND SONDHEIM’S GENRES

Scholars have most often addressed American musical theatre as a form of comedy, and many historians still apply the term “musical comedy” to refer to the form as a whole. Indeed, comedy – which functions according to Nettle’s guidelines as a mating-oriented genre with a positive outcome – forms the functional realm within which we may understand most musical theatre as it existed during the time of Sondheim’s development as a composer/lyricist. According to Eric Bentley, comedy not only features, but relies

⁶⁵ Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. London: Routledge, 1997, pg. 49.

upon serious – and often negative -- affective foundations to fabricate and expand the narrative it most often presents:

We conventionally consider comedy a gay and lighthearted form of art, and we regard any contrasting element as secondary, an undertone, an interruption, an exception. I am proposing, instead, to regard misery as the basis of comedy and gaiety as an ever-recurring transcendence. Seen in this way, comedy, like tragedy, is a way of trying to cope with despair, mental suffering, guilt, and anxiety...⁶⁶

Thus, the traditional basis of comedy as Bentley has described it relies upon its audiences' abilities to recognize and understand a serious emotional problem or conflict that must be overcome. Functioning under the umbrella of Nettle's broader categorization, comedy as discussed here features a central love story; thus, the emotional challenges and conflict presented are typically construed around concepts pertaining to romantic relationships. According to Bentley, only after the pain or anger facing the main characters is defeated do joy and happiness result: "The comic dramatist's starting point is misery; the joy at his destination is a superb and thrilling transcendence."⁶⁷ Thus, both the misery and the transcendence relating to love are critical to audience understanding of the genre.

In terms of Plantinga's concept of emotions as concern-based construals, Bentley's definition of comedy allows for a wide variety of scenarios eliciting concerns based in negative emotion systems such as fear, anger, blame, guilt, etc..., as part of a narrative process that ultimately leads to a recognition of positive concerns based in joy and happiness. True to Nettle's theory of the functioning of genre, such emotion systems with regard to comedy have historically functioned within the thematic realm of goals

⁶⁶ Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama*. New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1964, pp. 301-302.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 302.

surrounding mating and love – and this is exactly what we find when we examine the evolution of American musical theatre as an art form of the twentieth century.

By the 1960s, when Stephen Sondheim debuted as a composer and lyricist of Broadway musicals, American musical theatre had evolved from the presentational form featured in early musicals and in burlesque, vaudeville, and variety show toward a tradition of sentimentalism associated with narratives most often surrounding a central love story. Most historians recognize *The Black Crook* (1866) as the first American musical, since the piece had enough extended continuity of storyline to present an evening of musical numbers tied together through common elements of narrative and theme. Cecil Smith describes the musical as “a flashy combination of French Romantic ballet and German Romantic melodrama, decidedly more retrospective than forward-looking in its style and materials.”⁶⁸ At this point, musical theatre retained many of the stylized conceptual notions of traditional European genres, including heavy doses of comic and melodramatic exaggeration. By the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, such flashy, lightly narrative-based musicals shared the Broadway scene with other presentational, more vignette-based forms, such as musical revue, burlesque, and vaudeville. One of the first musicals to advance musical theatre into the next phase by addressing narrative and character on a more detailed and serious level was Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* (1927), which presented a love story set against the backdrop of Mississippi riverboat entertainers. Setting a precedent for dramatic storyline and sympathetic character development in musical theatre, *Show Boat* “was perhaps the only musical comedy to achieve a dramatic verisimilitude that seemed comparable to that of the

⁶⁸ Smith, Cecil and Glenn Litton. *Musical Comedy in America*. New York: Routledge, 1996, pg. 2.

speaking stage.”⁶⁹ Thus, *Show Boat* was one of the first musicals to eschew most of the exaggerated presentational qualities of both the musical melodrama and the playful, vignette-based vaudevillian style of musical entertainment.

Following the example of *Show Boat*, the musicals of Rogers and Hammerstein further developed, and eventually epitomized, the plot-based musical by the 1950s, during which time a young Stephen Sondheim studied under Oscar Hammerstein’s mentorship. Also following the example of *Show Boat*, which addressed themes of race relations, most of Rogers and Hammerstein’s musicals offered some thematic conflict of a serious social, political, and/or personal nature, perpetuating a trend of dealing with more serious themes in musical theatre. For example, *Oklahoma* (1943) addressed themes of violence and abuse, *Carousel* (1945) dealt with death, and *South Pacific* (1949) featured themes of prejudice and racism. Other common elements shared by these and most musicals of the 1940s and 1950s were a featured love story and sympathetic main characters, i.e., characters with whom audiences could easily identify and who easily elicited audience sympathy.

The term “musical comedy,” as we have seen, implies serious emotional concerns followed in general by happy endings, in accordance with Bentley’s concept of comedy described above. Indeed, most musicals of the time lived up to such generic expectations, offering endings that allowed lovers to unite. Even if they were not united in the traditional sense, as in works such as *Carousel* (1945) and *The King and I* (1951), their unity was usually implied on a spiritual or sentimental level. In 1957, Bernstein and Sondheim broke

⁶⁹ Ibid. 158.

this mold with their musical tragedy, *West Side Story*, which, though lacking the happy ending, did elicit sympathy from most audiences for its star-crossed lovers.

Against this backdrop of musical theatre tradition, then, Sondheim's work as a composer/lyricist introduced characters and narratives that tended to strike discord with many audiences whose expectations did not allow for musical theatre that questioned the established paradigm. For some, of course, Sondheim's genre musicals, particularly the humorous *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, offered a refreshing change from what had become the usual musical theatre fare. Often, however, audiences felt alienated, or even repulsed, in response to such main characters as the horrific Sweeney Todd. As we have seen, Sondheim's work has almost never failed to elicit strong reactions, both positive and negative. In the chapters that follow, I seek to deploy some methods to explain why the composer/lyricist's genre musicals proved to be particularly jarring for audiences accustomed to more traditional brands of musical theatre and genre.

In this vein, each chapter will delve into the type of genre to be addressed, specifically focusing on typical tendencies of each genre to elicit affective response from audiences under the general guidelines of Nettle's evolutionary approach to the function of genre. To accomplish this, I will draw primarily on Eric Bentley's analysis of farce relating to *Forum* as it can be understood within the parameters of Nettle's approach to comedy. Bentley also discusses melodrama in detail, and I will apply this analysis to my discussion of *Sweeney Todd*, situating the melodramatic form under Nettle's heading of tragedy, or drama of attempted status change with a negative ending. Bentley's analyses are easily applicable since he offers a clear, yet thorough, analysis of genre as a concept that has

functioned to describe theatrical spectating as an affective-based experience since the time of Aristotle.

The third genre to be discussed, applied here as a lens through which to examine the affective implications of *Into the Woods* – romance -- is more obscure, and I will rely on Northrop Frye’s analysis for a summary of the functioning of this genre. Romance, as examined here, will function within the domain of Nettle’s heroic drama, which features an attempted status change with a positive outcome. Ultimately, the surprising elements of Sondheim’s work – i.e., Sondheim’s tendency to “play” with paradigms of both musical theatre and genre -- will emerge in the form of musical/lyrical/gestural communication that challenges audience expectations surrounding concerns typically related to the paradigmatic forms at hand and their association with the basic concepts critical to our fundamental understanding of genre.

Though Bentley presents separate discussions of farce and comedy, both generic manifestations conform to Nettle’s more general framework for comedy, which emphasizes a human fascination with love and features a positive outcome. As McConachie notes, Nettle’s evolutionary approach to genre relies upon scenarios that derive from instinctive human pleasures: “Nettle begins with the observation that the dramatic mode, to gain popularity and staying power, must have imitated some form of activity that most hominids would have found innately enjoyable.”⁷⁰ This attraction to pleasures that are “innately enjoyable” forms the most critical element of Bentley’s formula for farce. To this end, Bentley addresses farce in terms of primal pleasure associated with audiences’ abilities to empathize with characters performing exciting and enjoyable acts, while feeling

⁷⁰ McConachie 175.

none of the consequences associated with performing those acts in real life. This exemplifies the ability of the genre to utilize exaggeration toward the end of ultimate audience enjoyment:

A source of pleasure far deeper than those directly available has been tapped. Inhibitions are momentarily lifted, repressed thoughts are admitted into consciousness, and we experience that feeling of power and pleasure, generally called elation. Here is one of the few forms of joy that can be had, so to speak, for the asking. Hence, the immense contribution of humor to the survival of the species.⁷¹

Thus, while comedy, as Bentley describes it, might form a more enlightened embodiment of Nettle's concept of the genre, farce finds its identity in a more complete reversion to primal instinct. In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, as we will see in Chapter Two, Sondheim works primarily within this farcical realm, offering audiences more than mere silliness, but the ability to appreciate exaggerated comic acts within the context of understanding their universality and the primal enjoyment that lies therein. In indulging in such reversion to references of primal instinct, however, Sondheim challenges the dominant paradigm for musical comedy established by Rodgers and Hammerstein and others, whose works represent the "golden age" of the American musical. Regarding *Forum*, the question of audience affective engagement is not one of whether or not we like or feel close to the characters, but rather one of whether or not we derive enjoyment from the farcical experience – and there is much evidence to support the formulation of such basic enjoyment. Here, specific emblematic poses and pantomimic routines will be shown to evolve from Sondheim's musical and lyrical choices to represent both ancient and contemporary cultural narrative elements commonly associated with the genre. In addition, gestural embodiments of Sondheim's music and lyrics will contribute to an

⁷¹ Bentley 230.

understanding of *Forum's* challenging of audience expectations regarding musical comedy. When gestural analysis is cited it is based on the 1996 Broadway revival, starring Nathan Lane and directed by Jerry Zaks, the filmed production of which is housed at the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape Archive. Though this recording is available for limited scholarly access only, it is the only official recording of a Broadway production of *Forum* currently available.

Next, Chapter Three will address *Sweeney Todd* as melodrama, offering an interpretation of melodrama deriving within the framework of Nettle's concept of tragedy. Again, Nettle's reliance on primal instinct becomes a significant defining factor of genre as Bentley discusses the appeal of melodrama as an exaggerated form presenting and eliciting heightened awareness of the type of pity and fear traditionally associated with ancient tragedy. Addressing the cultural appeal of melodrama, Bentley emphasizes the genre's evolution as an exaggerated form, with the underlying result being an analysis of audiences' experiences of the joy that stems from a comfortable understanding of the universality of the human experience of pity and fear. Thus, Bentley writes, as Aristotle did, of pity for melodramatic characters leading to audience members' experiences of self-pity -- the type of self-pity that moves one toward the experience of having a "good cry" -- an overall pleasingly cathartic experience.⁷² Regarding fear, Bentley writes, "Perhaps the success of a melodramatist will always depend upon his power to feel and project fear... Therein lies the universality of melodrama."⁷³ Significantly, he goes on to describe such fear as often being exaggerated to the point of being "irrational," in the sense that it is out of proportion with the fear generally experienced in real life and thus ultimately held at a safe

⁷² Ibid. 197-199.

⁷³ Ibid. 200-201.

distance from audiences – the “larger-than-life” characteristic that Sondheim notes as helping to describe the “circusy” quality that ultimately drives his love of the theatre. As we will see in the analysis of *Sweeney Todd* to follow in Chapter Three, Sondheim, as musical melo-dramatist, promotes communication with audiences in manners that not only elicit engagement in the fear and pity characteristic of melodrama, but also take audiences a step further in the vein of challenging expectations of both melodrama and musical theatre. This involves affective implications that might be most simply described as diabolical. In a detailed study of this musical, gestures are shown -- occasionally in tandem with props -- to evolve from Sondheim’s music and lyrics to reveal embodied character traits that ask audiences to challenge traditional notions of hero and villain within the context of both melodrama and musical comedy. From Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett to the more minor characters, those onstage in this musical sing and gesture in ways that tend to elicit a myriad of affective responses not necessarily in accordance with concern-based construals traditionally associated with either form. Gestural analyses in this chapter will be based on the 1982 video recording of the original 1979 production, starring George Hearn and Angela Lansbury, which is easily accessible and highly representative of the musical and gestural content of the production when it debuted in 1979.

Finally, I have chosen to address Sondheim’s romantic fairy-tale musical because here, again, the composer/lyricist draws from more than one strict performance tradition with the ultimate result of challenging notions of affective response typically associated with each. Through his work on this musical, he explores some of the basic emotions experienced by audiences of both melodrama and farce – this time within the framework of what Northrop Frye discusses as romantic drama. Frye explains that “[t]he complete form

of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero.⁷⁴ As such, the romance presents concerns and struggles associated with seeking social status or socially recognized accomplishment, ultimately featuring a positive outcome for a heroic figure. Within Nettle's evolutionary generic categorization system, the romantic form thus best fits criteria for heroic drama. Like comedy, the romance features transcendence with a positive outcome for the protagonist; however, the quest at hand is of an epic social nature rather than an individual love-based one, as Hayden White, who bases his analysis on that of Northrop Frye, succinctly explains:

The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification, symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation – the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the resurrection of Christ in Christian mythology. It is the drama of triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall.⁷⁵

Thus, romance, as described here, portrays concerns surrounding fear and pity associated with both self-discovery and discovery of the workings of the world. Guilt, blame, and transcendence also serve as factors of concern in this genre. Chapter Four thus analyzes the ways in which Sondheim's music and lyrics suggest a gestural life that both communicates and challenges the traditionally recognized affective components of such a narrative. The manners in which characters understand, misunderstand, and interact with one another socially is also shown to be a key focus in this piece's tendency to challenge

⁷⁴ Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: University Press, 1957, pg. 187.

⁷⁵ White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973, pg. 8.

typical concerns associated with works of musical comedy. In this chapter, references are made to the widely distributed production recording, filmed in 1990 and starring original cast members Bernadette Peters (Witch), Joanna Gleason (Baker's Wife), and Chip Zien (Baker).

In all chapters, I have chosen to draw specific examples and gestural studies from recorded New York or New York-based productions, since Sondheim was personally influential in the development of these productions. In addition, when possible, as in the cases of *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*, I have chosen the most accessible recorded productions so readers may reference the sources if desired. Only in the case of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is such a recording not readily available. Therefore, I reference the only New York production recording accessible, which, as stated above, is housed at the New York Public Library's Theatre on Film and Tape Archive.

Building on the theoretical foundations established here, the following chapters will examine Sondheim's works of farce, melodrama, and romance within the context of their relative fulfillment of these genres even as they function as works of musical theatre. To do this in a manner that does not ignore critical elements of cognitive processing and understanding the theatre experience, it will be necessary to consider not only the composer's music and lyrics – which have been examined extensively in studies and careful analyses to be referenced throughout – but also the ways in which implied gestural patterns are likely to function under McNeill's theory of the implicit connection between gesture and thought to add affective intensity to the experience of these musicals.

It is my desire that this study will not only suggest the emotional depth with which Sondheim's musical choices, when embodied, function to both reflect and challenge

traditional notions of the forms in which he has worked, but also to emphasize the importance of exploring live musical theatre in terms of embodied cognition. A wider understanding of the complex levels on which audiences naturally engage in both musical theatre and genre will likely function to initiate the formulation of further questions regarding the development and reception of such live theatre as it relates to typical concern-based construals of paradigmatic elements.

CHAPTER TWO: GESTURE IN MUSICAL FARCE -- *A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM*

Referencing the formulaic tradition of the ancient comedies of Greece and Rome, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* presented its 1962 audiences with a fictional narrative, based on the works of the ancient Roman playwright Plautus and demonstrating a farcical style in the format of musical comedy. As noted in Chapter One, both farce and musical comedy possess origins within the comic tradition, both having evolved under Nettle's concept of comedy, featuring a central love-based conquest with positive results. In the following pages, we will uncover characteristic affective qualities traditionally associated with farce in order to establish groundwork for a detailed discussion of the ways in which *Forum* embodied farcical fare that challenged the salient expectations of 1960s audiences regarding the more "enlightened" form of musical comedy.

According to Nettle's evolutionary theory of genre, the earliest forms of comedy would most likely have served first and foremost to fulfill a primal need to purge base feelings such as anger and aggression through engagement in play and laughter. Early comedy, in the form of ancient Roman farce -- also known as "low" comedy due to its tendency to cater to our basest primal instincts undiluted by more "highly evolved" thought processes -- has historically served this purpose. Most 1960s audience members thus shared at least some awareness, as most theatre-goers still do, that farce accomplishes

these goals by featuring stock character types performing exaggerated antics as they present a loosely plot-based series of scenarios also exaggerated beyond the realm of situations typically encountered in real life.

Describing farce within these general parameters, Eric Bentley elaborates most extensively on the function of farce as an affectively engaging generic form that continues to appeal to our basic desire to purge aggression through laughter. Bentley tells us that effective farce, in featuring violent physical antics of an exaggerated nature, tends to elicit an understanding of pity for the victims of frequent verbal and physical abuse onstage as well a sense of aggression in response to such abuse. Contrasting farce with the also exaggerated genre of melodrama, Bentley explains, "The difference is that whereas in melodrama we recoil from the enemy in fear, in farce we retaliate. If melodrama generally depends for its power on the degree of fear it can arouse, farce depends on the degree of aggression..."⁷⁶ Thus, Bentley points to farce as a genre that not only allows audiences access to primal feelings of anger and aggression in response to the world in which farcical characters function, but also allows the primal satisfaction that accompanies instant retaliation. Thus, within other genres, such as melodrama as noted above, such emotional qualities of anger and aggression often lead to feelings of fear; in response to farce, however, laughter is more likely to dominate audience reaction than fear. As Bentley notes regarding the farcical world onstage, "If we were not laughing so hard, we would find such worlds terrifying."⁷⁷

How, then, do audiences read a violent or aggressive farcical situation as worthy of laughter rather than fear? Bentley, Bergson, and others have noted that audience members

⁷⁶ Bentley 246-247.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 247.

tend to laugh at farcical imagery instead of recoiling in fear because they are presented with a fantasy-based, or “playful” context that is less grounded in reality than that of other genres, even other forms of comedy. Bergson tells us that “[It] is only in its lower aspects, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking contrast to reality: the higher it rises, the more it approximates life.”⁷⁸ Because of this “striking contrast to reality,” audiences of “lower” comedy such as farce are allowed some level of identification with much of the hostility and aggression played out onstage, very often without the possibility of actual destruction of, or even serious negative impact on, characters, actors, or spectators. In other words, farce introduces a “safe” environment in which playfulness allows an embracing of “base” emotions exaggerated to an extent to which we are not able to engage in real life without the threat of dire consequences, as Bentley explains:

Farce in general offers a special opportunity: shielded by delicious darkness and seated in warm security we enjoy the privilege of being totally passive while onstage our most treasured unmentionable wishes are fulfilled before our eyes by the most violently active human beings that ever sprang from the human imagination.⁷⁹

Thus, traditional farce presents audiences with highly passionate and excitable characters. In addition, it provides an on-stage environment so exaggerated that it may encourage audience understanding, and even sympathy, with such characters without the threat of guilt or responsibility that would presumably exist in response to an identification with such base behavior presented within a more serious context. Referencing the exemplary antics portrayed in Charlie Chaplin films, Bentley describes the “reckless violence” and comparative lack of consequence characteristic of farce:

⁷⁸ Bergson, Henri. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. New York: Cosimo Inc., 2005, pg. 100.

⁷⁹ Bentley 229.

Prongs of a rake in the backside are received as pin pricks. Bullets seem to pass right through people, sledge-hammer blows to produce only momentary irritation... Chaplin's delicacy of style is actually part of the pattern: he parades an air of nonchalance when acting in a manner that, in real life, would land him in Bellevue or Sing Sing.⁸⁰

In the world of traditional farce, then, violence and aggression that would normally elicit fear and cause destruction are received with relative nonchalance by the characters onstage and thus by audiences of the genre, because the consequences of actions onstage do not parallel those in real life due to a general eschewing of the "rules" of reality.

Plantinga applies the term "fantasy" to describe such audience sense of removal from reality.⁸¹ In response to farce, audience fantasy and enjoyment rely heavily on emotion systems relating to audience members' understanding of the comparatively playful nature of the world of the characters themselves – for, in farce, as in the Charlie Chaplin example above, anything goes, much as it does in a world of pretend play. Often, in fact, farcical characters appear to redefine the rules of the fictional world as they move through their narrative. In this sense, we can say that two levels of fantasy exist simultaneously. First, audiences frame the performance within the context of its existence as a narrative separate from their own reality. Second, the established reality of the farcical characters themselves resembles fantasy in the sense that the rules of the fictional world do not resemble those of real life and are often repeatedly questioned and redefined during the course of the narrative, suggesting to some extent the existence of a world of pretend play based in the characters' improvisational impulses. Indeed, it is not unheard of, as we

⁸⁰ Ibid. 222.

⁸¹ Plantinga utilizes the term "fantasy" broadly, as it applies to audience awareness of the world of narrative as it exists separate from the real world, allowing subsequent audience enjoyment of the cognitive effects of various genres presented onstage. He is careful to point out that "fantasy" in this context implies no inherent suggestion of traditional Freudian references to sexuality or dreams, though it does not necessarily preclude this suggestion. See Plantinga, 38-47.

will see, for farcical characters themselves to occasionally “step outside” the world of their narrative to comment directly to the audience, displaying a perspective that indicates their own awareness that they are playing. Consequently, on one hand, farce invites audiences to identify with the characters in a fashion that elicits a sense of aggression or anger in response to seemingly serious and often threatening situations; on the other hand, farce allows audiences a sense of identification with the fun of the play-narrative offered by a context in which the characters themselves seem to arbitrarily modify the rules of their own reality. This juxtaposition of base aggression and violence with an environment of playful fantasy within the narrative of the farcical world itself defines a “dialectic” unique to the genre, as Bentley explains:

“Farce brings together the direct and wild fantasies and the everyday drab realities. The interplay between the two is the very essence of the art – the farcical dialectic... Actually, to press the analysis further, the surface of farce is grave and gay at the same time. The gay antics of the Harlequin are conducted with poker-faced gravity. Both the gaiety and the gravity are visible and are part of the style.”⁸²

Thus, though farcical characters may take themselves seriously (at least most of the time), they exist in a world of play, a world where they may also appear – if the farce is well-written – to redefine their own reality according to impulse and where seemingly serious situations quickly reverse themselves into humorous scenarios. For this reason, as Bentley argues, a farcical character could not exist effectively within another genre, even within most non-farcical comedy: “Bring on stage a farcical comic like Harpo Marx, and all appearances are in jeopardy. For him, all coverings exist to be stripped off, all breakables to be broken. It would be a mistake to bring him into a drawing room comedy: he would

⁸² Bentley 241.

dismantle the drawing room.”⁸³ Farce, then, presents an environment featuring comparatively few rules, much like improvisational play. Due to this singular feature, audiences of farce also find themselves comparatively less governed by rules of propriety regarding the urge to laugh at the antics onstage and more willing to identify with farcical characters in seemingly serious situations without fear of self-judgment or consequences. This “dialectic” between seriousness on one level and play on another lays the foundation for audience response to farce resulting in laughter.

Here, it is thus helpful to take a moment to establish an understanding of the process of laughter, which is a critical part of the instinctive reaction that makes comic forms so relevant to the generic tradition under Nettle’s evolutionary theory. Bruce McConachie, in his chapter on social cognition and audience spectating, draws upon Robert Latta’s research to describe the functional process of audiences’ building and engaging in laughter as a release of emotional tension built up as a result of continued experience of such affective responses as pity aggression:

First, the person who will laugh becomes unrelaxed, a muscular-chemical state that may be produced by many causes. Next, some stimulus event produces a “cognitive shift” and the person realizes that the state of tension that he or she has adopted is no longer necessary. Finally, s/he “relaxes rapidly or fairly rapidly through laughter.” This three-step process – tension, cognitive shift, relaxation-through-laughter – recurs in real or fictional humorous situations, according to Latta.⁸⁴

Thus, while the seriousness of a particular character or situation may promote the escalation of audience tension, a subsequent reversal in the form of a sudden change in circumstances due to the highly volatile situational nature of farce will likely offer a release of such tension, to be expressed by audiences in the form of laughter. The circumstances

⁸³ Ibid. 242-243.

⁸⁴ McConachie 107.

cognitively describing the impulse to laugh, then, relate directly to the farcical dialectic as Bentley describes it, stemming from a repeated interplay between seriousness and levity.

Finally, since farce operates on a level exempt from many of the rules of the more “elevated” genres, farce, in contrast to the more morally pedantic genre of melodrama, tends to feature -- and often gleefully exalt -- behavior traditionally considered immoral. In describing this tendency, Bentley emphasizes not only frequent patterns of violence portrayed onstage, but also persistent jokes aimed both at those less fortunate and at traditionally respected institutions, such as marriage and religion. Offering a common example, Bentley explains that, “In the application of the formula which is bedroom farce, we savor the adventure of adultery, ingeniously exaggerated in the highest degree, and all without taking the responsibility or suffering the guilt. Our wives may be with us leading the laughter.”⁸⁵ In the narrative world of farce, then, societal rules, like other rules to which audience members may be accustomed, are made to be broken. Such themes of impropriety without traditional consequences may even seem inevitable, since farcical fare, as Bentley notes, allows audiences to delight to a significant extent in the forbidden pleasures being presented onstage.

By examining such recurring themes as adultery and other frequently addressed behavior patterns leading to situational humor, farce presents to audiences a specific kind of what Plantinga would term “paradigm scenarios.” According to Plantinga, who cites the research of several other psychologists focusing on the development and functioning of our emotion systems, recurring emotional patterns tend to develop in response to specific situational circumstances or scenarios within our environment. “We call scenarios that are

⁸⁵ Bentley 229.

consistently repeated until they become conventional ‘paradigm scenarios,’” Plantinga explains, citing examples of common paradigm scenarios for fear as follows:

Fear occurs when the subject construes his or her safety or well-being as significantly threatened, and the object of the fear is the source of the threat. The relationship of emotions to stories is a key to the ideological significance of Hollywood, because the movies show us how and what to fear by constructing and foregrounding objects of fear, formulating the nature of the threat, and demonstrating “proper” responses. Should we fear swimming due to the threat of sharks, or sleeping alone in dark bedrooms that might be haunted by ghosts? The movies have an influence in altering and exaggerating our fears, in part based on the scenarios for fear that are consistently repeated.⁸⁶

Thus, conventional situations in fictional narrative tend to elicit patterns of affective response based around specific emotional systems that we come to associate with the various types of situations presented, and this concept applies as easily to theatre as it does to film. A character onstage, might, for example, discover lipstick on her husband’s shirt collar, a common scenario for anger and jealousy, which audiences will understand as being directed toward the character’s husband and his supposed lover. Critical to the current discussion, Plantinga further notes that “genres also embody combinations of paradigm scenarios, scenarios that are exaggerated, transformed, combined, and repeated according to various conventions.”⁸⁷ The scenario named above, that of lipstick-on-the-collar implying adultery, for example, will, after initiating affective responses within the realm of anger and jealousy, lead to further responses of widely varying valence and intensity according to the genre in which it is presented. Thus, within the world of farce, as Bentley notes, such a scenario is likely to involve not only deceit leading to anger and aggression, but also retaliation. Such action is then likely to lead to other predictably

⁸⁶ Plantinga 81-82.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 82.

farcical scenarios, including more deceit, mistaken identity, and resolution resulting in amusement and very often laughter on the part of audiences.

Pursuing a discussion of gestural patterns as they assist in formulating an affective language based on Sondheim's music and lyrics to *Forum*, then, we will discover the significant ways in which affective responses akin to pity, aggression, and ultimate enjoyment within the context of play reveal *Forum* as farce, often in defiance of audience expectations concerning the more "highbrow" scenarios commonly associated with musical theatre. In doing so, the discussion of gesture as a linguistic element will primarily address gestural patterns, emblematic poses, and pantomimes, since these globally symbolic "stock" gestural manifestations, like the paradigm scenarios they help communicate, have evolved within the realm of situation-based comedy through the ages. Thus, many of the gestures to be discussed in this chapter are relatively "standardized," drawing upon cultural symbolism either originating in antiquity or accumulated more recently within the development of the comic tradition. Consequently, we will see how, in a sense, paradigm scenarios characteristic of the farcical tradition suggest corresponding gestural paradigms.

In order to understand such gestural paradigms, I will reference the research of the historian C. R. Dodwell, who, in his 2000 book detailing his study of gestures found in ancient Roman plates depicting theatrical scenes, identifies a number of ancient gestures and explains their apparent cultural meaning in terms of the thought patterns suggested. In his study, Dodwell examines class-oriented gesture patterns (i.e., slaves versus citizens) as well as emblems illustrating deep thought, supplication, approval, and other thoughts and desires commonly expressed both now and then, and heightened within the context of physical comedy. In order to see how Sondheim's compositions recall such gestures

originating from the depths of antiquity, we will examine several of the musical numbers from *Forum* within the context of the evolving paradigmatic foundations of the gestural life suggested by the lyrics and music.

“COMEDY TONIGHT”

The production number “Comedy Tonight” opens *Forum* and introduces its characters within the context of an overriding paradigm scenario for affective responses involving pleasure and entertainment – that of child-like pretend play, a scenario for fun and laughter typically featuring poses, pantomime, props, role play, etc..., to symbolize imaginary circumstances. Pretend play, as described by cognitive psychologists, significantly resembles Bentley’s description of the type of interaction that occurs regularly in farce, involving an eschewing of the rules of real life, combined with a juxtaposition of serious emotional engagement in the moment and a driving sense of fun. Thus, “Comedy Tonight” effectively establishes the ground rules for the farce to come, not only setting up the foundation for a fictional narrative as any opening number might do, but also clearly indicating the characters’ own awareness of their presentation – a pretend world within the play itself. Notably, the style of music, lyrics, and gesture in this number is presentational – that is, these components feature characters who directly address their audience, alluding broadly and frequently to their own production, and demonstrating the characters’ framing of their own narrative within a world of play:

PROLOGUS: Playgoers, I bid you welcome. The theatre is a temple, and we are here to worship the gods of comedy and tragedy. Tonight, I am pleased to announce a comedy. We shall employ every device we know in our desire to divert you.⁸⁸

Thus, Sondheim and his co-writers establish from the beginning of *Forum* the concept that the characters themselves are presenting the narrative to come; for after Prologus explains directly to his audiences that they are about to see a comedy, he executes a deictic gesture to the orchestra, cuing them to begin playing “Comedy Tonight,” and demonstrating physically his control over the evening’s festivities as a sort of Master of Ceremonies. Further, Prologus not only narrates the Prologue, as his name suggests, but he is also a character in the “play-within-a-play” to be presented:

PROLOGUS: Pseudolus is probably my favorite character in the piece. A role of enormous variety and nuance, and played by an actor of such... let me put it this way... *I* play the part.⁸⁹

Thus, from the start, Sondheim, Shevelove, and Gelbart apply the dramatic tool of reflexive commentary, laying the foundation for the presentation of their comedy as farce – in case there was any doubt among audiences that these characters exist in a world of play, the characters declare this fact themselves.

As the opening number begins, Sondheim embraces this concept through his application of musical style and the incorporation of a kind of pretend play within his rhythmic and melodic structure. In “Comedy Tonight,” Sondheim offers a number that is upbeat, demonstrating a march-like quality. As Banfield observes, “‘Comedy Tonight’ tips the entertainment model [of *Forum*] from revue to parade.”⁹⁰ “Parade” is an effective term, describing the type of musical number that suggests to audiences, through emotional

⁸⁸ Sondheim, Stephen, Burt Shevelove, and Larry Gelbart. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. New York: Applause, 1991, pg. 19.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 22.

⁹⁰ Banfield 102.

memory, a sense of excitement gleaned from a moving display of curiosities, in this case the ancient Roman stock characters listed lyrically -- liars, lovers, clowns, courtesans, eunuchs, etc... -- and thus supporting the presentational tone established by the words of Prologus.

Yet, as Banfield notes, "Comedy Tonight" is more than a simple list song exhibiting the farcical characters presenting the narrative to come – it is also a musical embodiment of the very type of playful scenario it describes. Musically, Sondheim's opening number begins with the suggestion of triple-meter rhythm, as in an upbeat waltz, based on the opening four notes – a false suggestion since the number quickly reveals itself to be composed in 4/4 time. The composer's application of the opening two-note D-G interval repeated in cross-rhythm (accompanied by the lyrics "Something famil-") provides this rhythmic gag, setting up audience expectancy for a waltz in a number that is in reality not a waltz at all. This technique, Banfield attests, lays the foundation for parallel playfulness to be found in Sondheim's lyrical gags within the number; thus, the deceptiveness suggested by the rhythmic switch reflects the duality of meaning presented by pun-based lyrics such as "Weighty affairs will just have to wait..."⁹¹ Correspondingly, similar "gags" are offered in gestural form, when, as the script provides, "During this scene, there are musical interludes during which Prologus and the Proteans do various bits of pantomime and general clowning, using a prop leg"⁹² – a suggestion reflected in Meryle Secrest's description of the number in production as featuring "sight gags making use of prop arms and legs and mechanical stage effects."⁹³ Such pantomiming and other gestural pretend play utilizing props to symbolize real body parts thus functions to present, in embodied form, the type of

⁹¹ Ibid. 115.

⁹² Sondheim, et. al. 19.

⁹³ Secrest, Meryle. *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, pg. 154.

“fooling” in which Sondheim engages as he offers his audience the building and denial of musical expectancy during “Comedy Tonight”, coupled with a description of paraded human curiosities. Thus, the world of playfulness established by the gags Sondheim offers musically and lyrically creates an effective backdrop for the characterization of these ancient Roman players through the use of gag props and antics that demonstrate their inherent penchant for tomfoolery.

Throughout “Comedy Tonight,” Sondheim also establishes in other ways the idea that visual and auditory information must not simply be taken at face value within the narrative to follow. In addition to the momentarily deceptive rhythmic pattern described above, which is repeated throughout the number as though persistently attempting to redefine the number as a waltz, Sondheim includes ironic lyrics suggesting situations that are clearly not in agreement with the scenarios suggested by the stage directions. For example, as the score provides circus-like underscoring, Prologus proclaims:

And these are the Proteans, only three, yet they do the
work of thirty. They are difficult to recognize in the
many parts they play. Watch them closely...

*(PROTEANS appear in and out of SENEX's house in assorted costumes as
PROLOGUS comments)*

A proud Roman. A patrician Roman. A pretty Roman.

A Roman slave. A Roman soldier.

(PROTEAN appears with crude wooden ladder)

A Roman ladder.

(PROTEAN enters, juggling)

Tremendous skill!

(He juggles badly. PROTEAN enters)

Incredible versatility!

(He fumbles in changing wigs. PROTEAN enters with gong)

And, above all, dignity!

(He strikes gong, his skirt falls)⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Sondheim, et. al. 22.

Accompanying these lyrics in production, the “Proteans” – members of the lower class – engage in a rapid, uninhibited movement style, featuring a variety of deictic gestures, emblematic poses, and short pantomimes illustrating clumsiness, foolishness, and generally undignified behavior, all of which can be viewed in the preserved copy of the 1996 Broadway revival, starring Nathan Lane and directed by Jerry Zaks, stored at the New York Public Library’s Theatre on Film and Tape Archive.⁹⁵ Here Sondheim offers several gags through his application of lyrical sardonic inferences of poses and pantomimes that are polar opposites of those executed. Through the use of personification of a prop ladder, Roman Proteans are equated with a crude wooden tool, while a “versatile” character proves to be anything but versatile and a “dignified” character finds himself the focal point in a scenario that is anything but dignified. As in Bentley’s description of traditional farce, lower classes literally become the “butt” of derogatory jokes, and anything goes since rules are made to be broken.

Though the actions of the players in this passage are suggested by the stage directions accompanying the number, Sondheim’s playful music and sardonic lyrics clearly indicate the uninhibited and undignified gestural style with which these actions are accomplished. In illustrating such a style, these gestural sequences presented in production serve to indicate what might be seen as paradigm scenarios suggesting some of the primary situational circumstances found to elicit audience engagement in the ancient works of Plautus, arguing for the role of such scenarios in recollecting the age-old tradition of farce. C. R. Dodwell’s studies of ancient drawings and engravings depicting the scenes from the

⁹⁵ The number of viewings allowed is controlled and strictly limited by staff at the office of Jerry Zaks, who owns the rights to the stage movement in this production. For this reason, gestural breakdowns provided here will be less specific than those provided for the Broadway productions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Into the Woods*.

ancient Roman stage tell us that “Slaves are the butt of mockery in our pictures not only for their over-ebullience but also for another supposed characteristic. This is the vulgarity of their body language...”⁹⁶ The musical and lyrical aspects of the language of “Comedy Tonight” thus offer an environment ripe for the execution of poses and vulgar gestural habits suggesting paradigm scenarios found in ancient farce and repeated in contemporary production.

As “Comedy Tonight” established musically, lyrically, and gesturally the key concept of playfulness as a kind of meta-scenario upon which *Forum* would unfold as a farce, it challenged audience expectations associated with the typical characteristics of 1960s musical comedy as described in Chapter 1. In establishing the type of playful scenario described above regarding the narrative to come, *Comedy Tonight* clearly eliminates the possibility of themes and scenarios that challenge characters’ and audiences’ affective understanding of love on a serious level before offering resolution, as other musicals of the time were apt to do. Rather, the number establishes the musical’s identity as one existing further in the realm of true farce than true musical comedy as 1960s audiences would have understood the genres.

Significantly, the opening number of *Forum* did not always establish the groundwork for pure farce, nor did it prepare audiences for the playful antics to come – though it did attempt to draw audiences into affective engagement with a more traditional musical theatre style. Before Sondheim composed “Comedy Tonight,” he had composed

⁹⁶ Dodwell, C. R. *Anglo-Saxon Gestures and the Roman Stage*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000, pg. 29.

another number⁹⁷, “Love is in the Air,” which served as prologue to *Forum* during its out-of-town tryouts:

Love is in the air,
Quite clearly.
People everywhere
Act queerly.
Some are hasty, some are halting,
Some are simply somersaulting.
Love is going around.

Though the number was “charming” in Sondheim’s words, its lilting melody and quaint lyrics suggested the more sophisticated nature of contemporary musical theatre instead of the raucous farce Sondheim and his co-creators intended to write. In no way did “Love Is in the Air” capture the bawdy, romping nature the show required, and it consequently did not allow the actors to effectively introduce the gestural qualities that prepared audiences to eschew their expectations of musical comedy for the playful context of the farce to come. According to director/choreographer Jerome Robbins, who was brought in to improve the show after its unsuccessful presentation out of town, “The opening number is killing the show... You’ve got to write an opening number that says baggy pants.”⁹⁸ It is clear that by this statement, Robbins meant he wanted a song that would allow and inspire all the gestural antics, poses, and imagery that effectively communicate to audiences the playful context of farce – a song like “Comedy Tonight.” And indeed, when the music, lyrics, and gesture of “Comedy Tonight” remained true to the playful nature of the musical as a whole, *Forum* was interpreted as a success.

⁹⁷ Sondheim actually composed two opening numbers for *Forum* before he composed “Comedy Tonight” – “Invocation” and “Love Is in the Air.” “Invocation” was eliminated from the score during the rehearsal process and was never presented for a public audience, but “Love Is in the Air” was presented during out-of-town tryouts.

⁹⁸ Secrest 154.

This opening number, then, allows what Bentley terms the “dialectic” of farce to function, clarifying that no matter how serious the characters onstage may act within a given situation, audiences may safely understand that such characters function within a playful world, and they may justifiably laugh at the base and sometimes violent behavior presented. Without this type of raucous, romping opening number to set the stage, audiences inevitably looked for elements of traditional musical comedy – and they were confused or disappointed when the remainder of the musical failed to provide these. Thus, the musical/lyrical/gestural language of “Comedy Tonight” described above offers to audience members a clear paradigmatic setup for emotional response surrounding the concept of play and its inherent relationship to farce.

We could say, then, that “Comedy Tonight,” establishes a master paradigm scenario – one revolving around an affective understanding of the fun of pretend play – through which audiences were and are invited to experience *Forum*. Given the concept of the play-within-a-play, audiences may also expect to experience visceral reactions in response to various other traditional paradigm scenarios – scenarios involving the relationship between slave and master, pursuit in love, adultery, and death to name a few -- inspiring audience affective responses akin to those described by Bentley as key visceral reactions to the farcical shenanigans presented.

SCENARIOS IN SONG

One of the main aspects of farce described above is the presentation of paradigm scenarios that have served to exhibit the farcical dialectic between seriousness and play since the

establishment of the genre as an ancient theatrical tradition. Thus, in this section, we will examine the scenarios presented by the players introduced in “Comedy Tonight.” For the most part, as we will see, Sondheim’s music, lyrics, and accompanying gestural patterns for *Forum* remain consistent with the farcical tradition. Even in instances where Sondheim subtly “plays” with farcical paradigms, however, such play itself can easily be understood as functioning in keeping with the playful nature of the farcical dialectic. Thus, as long as audiences found themselves comfortably aware on some level that they were enjoying a farce, not a traditional musical, they could tailor their expectations accordingly – and on the whole, *Forum* did not disappoint.

Significantly, the exploration of farcical scenarios represented a key departure from Sondheim’s instincts as a writer of musical theatre. A quick examination of the challenges Sondheim faced during the creation of his farcical fare will lay the foundation for further understanding how the composer’s creative development of *Forum* moved toward embodying farce even in the face of a musical theatre culture that sought a more intricate development of narrative and character within its musical numbers in response to the more recent writing techniques of Sondheim’s own mentors, Rogers and Hammerstein. According to the composer:

I had been trained by Oscar Hammerstein to think of a song as a one-act play which either intensifies a moment or moves the story forward... For Oscar it was first act, second act, third act. He tried to avoid writing lyrics that confined themselves to one idea, the traditional practice of virtually every lyricist in the theatre and the standard function of songs before he came along and revolutionized the way writers thought about musicals. *Show Boat* hadn’t convinced them, but once *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* and *South Pacific* had become enormous hits, most songwriters converted. The success of those shows was not entirely beneficial, however [in the context of creating a musical farce such as *Forum*]. As Larry Gelbart put it in his Introduction to the published libretto of *Forum*, “Broadway, in its development of musical comedy, had improved the quality of the former [the musical] at the expense of a good deal of the latter [the comedy].” The playfulness of musicals had

been dampened by Oscar and his imitators, and here I was, a convert myself, confronted with a musical that was nothing but playful.⁹⁹

Musical comedy, then, in terms of Bergson's observation cited in the introduction to this chapter regarding the comparative "realism" of comedic styles, had evolved from a "low" form to a "high" form in conjunction with the popularity of the work of Rogers and Hammerstein. In 1962, however, Sondheim was faced with the challenge of resurrecting "low" comedy in musical theatre by allowing *Forum* to fully embrace the genre of farce. Thus, once "Comedy Tonight" successfully encouraged audience expectations of a world of play scenarios, Sondheim's following musical numbers had to offer such scenarios in their purest, most basic form, eschewing complex character and narrative development in favor of a more descriptive, situation-based format. Accordingly, gestural patterns in production of the musical tend to recall ancient gestural illustrations of equally ancient scenarios, such as a slave looking to obtain freedom, a slave owner hiding his adultery from his wife, and a "funeral" for a maiden who is not dead. In most cases, then, these gestural patterns serve to further describe a paradigmatic situation set to music, rather than to assist in the advancement of narrative in song. Finally, of course, a second goal of the musical/lyrical/gestural language of these musical numbers is to remind audiences of the context of play defining a farcical world where rules are made to be broken.

The first example of a musical number featuring such descriptive gestural patterns occurs shortly after the Prologue, during which, as we have seen, audiences are prepared for a "comedy tonight." Here we encounter Pseudolus and his young master, Hero, in the street in front of their house. Hero, who embodies the stock character of the young lover,

⁹⁹ Sondheim, Stephen. *Finishing the Hat: Collected Lyrics (1954-1981) with Attendant Comments, Principles, Heresies, Grudges, Whines and Anecdotes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010, pg. 79.

has fallen in love with a beautiful virgin named Philia (the other young lover of the pair) who resides in the neighboring house of Marcus Lycus, a buyer and seller of courtesans. When Hero confides his love to Pseudolus, the slave promises to procure the young woman for his master if Hero will grant Pseudolus his freedom. Hero agrees to this proposition, and Pseudolus sings the song “Free”, accompanying his phrases with pantomime and a series of emblematic poses:

Pseudolus: Free!

Oh, what a word!
Oh, what a word!
(Speaks)
Say it again!

Hero: Free!

Pseudolus *(Sings)*: I’ve often thought,
I’ve often dreamed
How it would be...
And yet I never thought I’d be...
(Speaks)
Once more.

Hero: Free!

Pseudolus *(Sings)*: But when you come to think of such things...
A man should have the rights that all others...
Can you imagine
What it will be like when I am...
Can you see me?

Can you see me?

Can you see me as a poet writing poetry? *[Pantomiming writing]*
All my verse will be...

Hero: Free!

Pseudolus: A museum will have me pickled for posterity! *[Crossing arms over chest]*

Can you see me?

Hero (*with a grimace*): I can see you!¹⁰⁰

The music and lyrics here suggest a number of gestures shown to be common among these two character types in master-slave interactions on the ancient Roman stage. First, the patter-based rhythmic style of Pseudolus's lyrical list of libertarian fantasies inspires a gestural style reflective of Dodwell's description of a stock physical character to whom he refers as the "running slave", depicted in plates carved to represent theatrical performances. Explaining the physicality of the "running slave", Dodwell describes a high rate of gestural activity among slaves when compared to that of their masters, who, of course, represent the more refined upper class:

"Now we see just this in our pictures where the more important characters stand and move with decorum while unworthy persons are shown at times in an over-energetic state, twisting their bodies unnecessarily about, and pulling and tugging at their mantels... One aspect of this over-activity was to show [the slave] at times in a great hurry, and it is an accepted fact that this idea of the running slave, the 'seruus currens', was an entrenched theme in classical comedy."¹⁰¹

Thus, the "running slave" did more than simply run – his physical habits also included a number of extraneous gestures typically associated with a rather frazzled, unpredictable nature. Further, he apparently garnered through the years an association with paradigm scenarios involving fear or embarrassment in the face of authority, or at least a clear subservience to social classes deemed more refined. As such, the "running slave" is likely to display the type of base aggression and primitively violent inclinations Bentley describes as contributing to the serious half of the dialectic upon which the genre of farce functions. Based on the musical number quoted above, Pseudolus is an incarnation of such a "running

¹⁰⁰ Sondheim, et. al. 32-35.

¹⁰¹ Dodwell 28.

slave,” and Sondheim’s basic rhythmic style and ever-changing lyrics suggest the accompanying frantic gestural tendencies. Within the musical and lyrical context provided, Pseudolus runs back and forth, utilizing wide-open, uninhibited (i.e., “free”) gestures while his young master, Hero, maintains a more reserved quality. Specifically, Pseudolus sporadically switches from one pose or pantomime to another, physically describing what he will look like engaging in the various activities of a free man, activities that include not only writing, but also voting, seducing women, baking, and buying his own slave.

There are, in addition, more subtle parallels between Sondheim’s musical and lyrical choices and the gestural tendencies they inherently suggest in order to illustrate traditional paradigm scenarios of ancient farce. For example, in “Free”, Sondheim presents, both musically and lyrically, an underlying reversal of roles between master and slave, thus effecting a manner of “playing” with the traditional paradigm scenario of the running slave cowering or humiliating himself before his master and suggesting a scenario also common as part of the play-based nature of ancient farce – that of role play. As Stephen Banfield notes, the song is structured such that Pseudolus, the slave, is the driving force and Hero, the master, must follow: “The slave leads, the master follows, though only he can authorize the vital act of freedom. Thus, Pseudolus leads the melody first to a cadence on the dominant note (B), which nonetheless has to be supplied by Hero...”¹⁰² This relationship is reflected lyrically through Pseudolus’ continued instructions to Hero regarding the inflection Hero should utilize to sing the word “free” and Hero’s obedient, but necessary, repetitions of the word.

¹⁰² Banfield 107.

Thus, in this manner, Pseudolus and Hero are play-acting (yet another level of play-within-the-play?) – each temporarily taking on the role of the other and setting the stage for an exchange of gestural style as well. Although Pseudolus is still the frantic, “running slave” described above, he pantomimes the refined gestures of the “free” class as he describes his various potential stances and actions as a citizen. So strong is the reversal of roles during this number that in the 1996 production, Pseudolus pushes Hero backward at one point in the course of demonstrating his freedom, emphasizing the concept of reversal of power, yet illustrating at the same time the base aggression more characteristic of the lower classes.

Functioning as part of Pseudolus’s unbridled excitement associated with this role reversal, Pseudolus’s efforts to extend the duration of his pantomimic fantasy in song are evident in Sondheim’s musical and lyrical choices and thus reflected in Pseudolus’s accompanying gestures. Banfield explains that “the real goal for the word [‘free’] must be the upper tonic (a sort of symbolization of the exclamation mark), eventually reached with a fair amount of Beethoven-like repetition and cadential augmentation, the verbal equivalent of which is Pseudolus’s insistence that Hero spell it out ‘the long way’.”¹⁰³ Banfield is referring to Pseudolus’s instruction to Hero to spell “free” and Hero’s response of “F-R-double-ee”, to which Pseudolus replies “no, the long way...”¹⁰⁴ The musical repetition and augmentation to which Banfield refers thus effectively draws out the exploration of Pseudolus’s fantasy, while the lyrical bandying and spelling of the word “free” supports this extension. Both musically and lyrically, then, Pseudolus chooses the “long way” toward achieving his goal of freedom, so that he may savor every moment.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Sondheim, et. al. 36.

Meanwhile, his gestures subsequently mirror this tendency as he repeats them with ever-increasing gusto and largesse, moving more slowly and pausing for effect – and thus continuing to act as though to eschew his current existence as “running slave”, but going about it so impulsively and sporadically that he actually calls attention to the base qualities of his behavior.

Pseudolus’ physical identity then, is impulsive, base, and frantic, and he demonstrates the uninhibited passion of the ancient Roman “running slave” finding himself in a scenario typifying traditional farce – one in which he must beg his master for his freedom. He then pursues this goal through an approach typically utilized within the “play” world of farce – that of role-reversal – effectively pointing to the ridiculousness of master and slave exchanging places. Thus, the musical, lyrical, and gestural role-reversal featured in “Free” not only demonstrates Pseudolus’ basic qualities, but it also reminds audiences of the context of play in which the scenario is presented, allowing the communication of the second half of Bentley’s farcical dialectic, that of the “gaity” associated with “wild fantasies.” For, in the world of farce, as Sondheim’s aural and visual language demonstrates, rules -- including the rules of musical theatre -- are made to be broken, slave and master can exchange places, and “life-long” slaves may earn their freedom.

Other musical numbers in *Forum* feature similar scenarios found to be indicative of the farcical dialectic and the resulting implications for audience affective response. For example, the “running slave”, this time threatened by the possibility of grave punishment at the hands of his master if his part in Pseudolus’ deceitful plans is discovered, again makes an appearance in the persona of Hysterium in the song “I’m Calm”, a sample of which is provided below:

I'm calm, I'm calm,
I'm perfectly calm,
I'm utterly under control.
I haven't a worry –
Where others would hurry,
I stroll.
*(He runs frantically around the stage.) [Waving arms, tugging at clothing]*¹⁰⁵

Here, again, Sondheim plays upon his audience's musical expectations, offering what begins as a rhythmically balanced poetic phrase, as Banfield explains:

...we expect the expanding melody to come up with an eight-measure phrase, full of quarter notes...; verbally the parallel expectation is for the following, with its increased momentum of poetic feet.

I'm clam, I'm calm/I'm perfectly calm,
I'm utterly under control.
I haven't a worry,/[I'm not in a flurry]
Where others would hurry, I stroll.¹⁰⁶

Based upon the musical set-up, then, audiences naturally expect a phrase such as the one Banfield has suggested (I'm not in a flurry), in order to balance the rhythmic quality of the piece. Sondheim provides no such phrase, musically or lyrically, however; and the result is what Banfield terms a "foreshortening" of the verse – a sort of musical hiccup that betrays Hysterium's underlying hysteria. The physical interpretation of this abrupt betrayal of musical expectancy is a similar change in gestural quality, from Hysterium's play-acting of the composed and collected slave-in-charge to the frantic "running slave" described in the stage direction and gestural note above. Thus, audiences are presented with a set-up that, on a basic level, might elicit concern for an obviously agitated Hysterium who is attempting to talk himself into remaining calm – all the while, however, he exists in a world where his situation is described within a more encompassing context of play previously established

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 62.

¹⁰⁶ Banfield 112.

as we have seen. Thus, audiences do not ultimately take from this image a feeling of pity for Hysterium because they are aware of this playful context and are awaiting the moment when Hysterium's forced façade of calmness will crumble to belie his innate (and comic) hysteria.

Through the lens of pretend play as a master paradigm scenario, Sondheim's presentation of Hysterium's frantic scenario demonstrates the potential to elicit the building and release of tension known to result in laughter. Since audiences are aware that Hysterium is merely pretending to remain calm, they may also experience a building of suspenseful tension associated with the character's continued efforts to hide his anxiety, knowing he will slip and reveal his true hysterical state at any moment – a moment that will also allow the release of the audience's sense of mounting tension. Recall McConachie's citation of Robert Latta's analysis of laughter in terms of a "cognitive shift" resulting in the release of such tension. In his description, McConachie cites one of Latta's examples from a Woody Allen joke that proves particularly relevant with regard to audience tendencies to laugh in response to Hysterium's tension-ridden musical number: "Weinstein lay under the covers, staring at the ceiling in a depressed torpor. Outside, sheets of humid air rose from the pavement in stifling waves. The sound of traffic was deafening at this hour, and in addition to all this, his bed was on fire."¹⁰⁷ This short joke demonstrates the slow building of tension for audiences (or readers) until a cognitive shift and release of this tension in the form of the outrageous image of the burning bed occurs – likely prompting audience laughter. It offers a model by which we might understand how Hysterium's scenario may potentially elicit the same type of response from audiences – the

¹⁰⁷ McConachie 107.

slave's continuing insistence on his calm state builds a sense of tension that inevitably gives way when he can no longer contain himself. Significantly, after Hysterium sings the verse quoted above, in which Sondheim provides the musical hiccup signifying the slave's near loss of composure, Hysterium, as indicated by the stage directions, does proceed to break his "calm" and resort to "running frantically around the stage."¹⁰⁸ "I'm Calm" subsequently allows for the building and release of this type of tension two more times as Hysterium sings and gestures his way through Sondheim's verses. This approach to the musical number again embraces Bentley's farcical dialectic, repeatedly juxtaposing nervous tension and play, and potentially leading audiences to ultimately react as they often do to farce -- with unrestrained laughter.

Three other musical numbers deserve mention for their significance to the current study in the manners in which they present to audiences elements of the farcical dialectic through Sondheim's musical, lyrical, and gestural language. In "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid," Pseudolus elicits the commitment of his senior master, Senex, to the idea that Philia (with whom Senex is quite taken) is the new maid and, in such a guise, will create the perfect live-in diversion for Senex. The number is repeated as Hysterium, and finally, Lycus, is made privy to the plan, forming a vaudevillian homage to lying and deceit. This number, musically and lyrically, is an example of what Banfield refers to as a "trick number," a term he attests to having discovered in Sondheim's original notes for *Forum*.¹⁰⁹ Such numbers, like "Free", feature character types being compared and contrasted in manners that playfully question our traditional associations as audience members. Thus, "Free", as discussed above, explores the role reversal of young master and mature slave in a

¹⁰⁸ Sondheim, et. al. 62.

¹⁰⁹ Banfield 93-98.

piece that suggests a conglomeration and juxtaposition of the physicalities of both. In “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid,” we see two slaves and two citizens; once again, Senex, the citizen and owner of the central house on the block, is clearly at the mercy of his cunning slave, Pseudolus. After slave convinces master, the audience is shown four men of varying class essentially brought to the same level by their need to deceive those around them in order to obtain what they desire – this forms the playful role-reversal – or rather, role-eschewing – “trick” of the number. Musically, this “trick” is communicated through the use of vaudevillian-style repeated vamping as each of the four characters, determined to serve his own interests, considers the personal implications of parading Philia as the new maid before approving of the situation – all acting in manners that defy their traditional statuses in society, and each simply repeating the behavior, lyrics, and gestural patterns of the others.

In the 1996 production of *Forum*, such relegating of characters from varying classes to the same level according their base impulses and desires is represented gesturally through the repeated utilization of an emblematic gesture known as the “thinker’s pose.” Dodwell describes its ancient application in the work of Plautus to achieve just the type of comic effect elicited in *Forum* by the “trick” song:

In the *Miles gloriosus*, which he wrote about 206 BC, Plautus records the amusement of an old gentleman, Periplectomenus, at the antics of the slave Palaestrio in trying to advertise to the world that he is deep in thought by various actions: by tapping his chest, smacking his thigh, shaking his head, and so on. Included in the charade of meditation presented by the slave was a gesture which Plautus later particularly fastens on; it is where the slave uses his arm as a pillar for his chin... The resting of the chin on the fist, or hand, had of course been used by artists as an indicator of pondering over the centuries. However, they had usually associated it with divine thinkers... [B]ut the idea of it[s] being adopted by a slave – one of the lowest class aping the ways of the highest – was clearly a subject of derision.¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Dodwell 30-31.

In this passage, Dodwell proposes that this ancient emblematic pose was applied for the very purpose of eliciting humor through the suggestion of the scenario of playful role reversal or the eschewing of certain societal roles in favor of others, as in “Everybody Ought to Have a Maid.”

The “thinker’s pose” is suggested again in Act II by the music and lyrics in another of Sondheim’s “trick” numbers, “Impossible,” during which father (Senex) and son (Hero) evaluate each other as possible rivals for the affections of the virgin Philia. Here, music and lyrics rely once again upon repetition to create a vaudevillian atmosphere against which these two characters of contrasting status are brought to the same level in the eyes of audiences as each sums up the other as falling short of possessing the qualities he deems necessary to win the favor of Philia:

Senex: She’s a lovely blooming flower,
He’s just a sprout – impossible!

Hero: She’s a lovely blooming flower,
He’s all worn out – impossible!¹¹¹

Here, the emblematic thinker’s pose is executed frequently by both characters in the 1996 Broadway production – this time for the purpose of allowing the audience a look at each character through the derisive eyes of the other.

One other musical number features a specific emblematic gesture that effectively embodies *Forum’s* music and lyrics to communicate the execution of farcical role-play, suggesting the juxtaposition of the serious with the playful within the theme of Bentley’s dialectic. This is the crossing of the arms over the chest for the purpose of representing death, first encountered in the 1996 production during the song “Free”, as Pseudolus

¹¹¹ Sondheim, et. al. 68.

pantomimically describes being “pickled for posterity”, shown in the earlier quote from the song. This pose appears again when it is directly referred to in the lyrics of Sondheim’s “Funeral” sequence. Here, Hysterium, dressed in drag, impersonates a dead Philia in order to convince Miles Gloriosus that his bride-to-be is unattainable, while Miles Gloriosus mourns the loss of his supposedly dead virgin:

Miles: Speak the spells,
Chant the charms,
Toll the bells –

Pseudolus (*To Hysterium*): Fold the arms!
(*Hysterium slowly folds his arms*)¹¹²

In this case, Sondheim’s ritualistic, chant-like melody is supported by lyrics describing the ancient rituals of mourning and illustrated by the folding of the arms over the chest, traditionally representing the Christian cross, and allowing gestural ritual to parallel musical and lyrical ritual. Of course, the fact that Philia isn’t really dead and that the person on the funeral bier is actually Hysterium in drag places these particular ritualistic practices squarely within the already established paradigm scenario of pretend play, once again fulfilling the farcical requirement for the presentation of seemingly serious situations within a context that ultimately proves anything but serious.

An additional element of play functioning within the music and lyrics of *Forum*, and thus often reflected in the gestural quality of the characters, is that of anachronism. Gelbart and Shevelove, who composed the musical’s libretto, were careful not to assign the characters lines that obviously referred to objects and concepts originating from a time period later than that of Ancient Rome. Sondheim, however, working in the less directly representational medium of music, could and did assign such anachronistic references,

¹¹² Ibid. 121.

hence appealing to audiences' emotional memories surrounding specific musical and lyrical references -- and "playing" with musical references in a manner subtle enough to likely limit its effect for many audiences to that which functions on a subconscious level. Thus, Banfield examines a number of Latin American, African/Caribbean, and even French classical musical references to be found within the score of *Forum*.¹¹³ In this vein, the musicologist notes that Domina's song "Farewell" features elements of tango, that there is a "hint" of cha-cha in the title phrase of "Comedy Tonight," and that calypso "informs" "Pretty Little Picture."¹¹⁴ Hints of Milhaud and Copeland also function within Sondheim's score, according to Banfield, illustrating Sondheim's willingness to allow these "ancient Roman" musical numbers to engage in role play, much like the characters who sing them. In the same vein, Sondheim includes an occasional anachronistic lyric; for example, Pseudolus states during "Free" that as a Roman citizen he might become a poet – hence, all of his verse will be "free." Though the concept of free verse is not said to have originated until many centuries after the time of ancient Rome, it fits within the context of the song, allows Sondheim to create a comic play on words, and provides audiences with a recognizable term that is only subtly anachronistic. Through choices such as this, Sondheim also opens the door for directors and choreographers to include gestures that are also subtly anachronistic. For example, in the preserved 1996 production, during the vaudevillian "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid," the actors playing the four participating roles engaged in the disco-style arm movement popular in American culture during the 1970s.

Through such subtle anachronism, Sondheim is able to design a musical that not only embraces role-play on the structural levels examined above, but also establishes a

¹¹³ Banfield 103-106.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 106

foundation that can accommodate parallel role-play on other levels, varying from one production to another. For example, when the contemporary popular comedienne and actress Whoopi Goldberg replaced Nathan Lane as Pseudolus on Broadway in 1997, she was able to utilize the presentational style of “Comedy Tonight” to “play” herself in addition to playing the roles of Prologus and Pseudolus. According to New York Times reviewer Ben Brantley, Goldberg was “a time-traveling Manhattan Yankee in Plautus’s forum.”¹¹⁵ Playing the role of a time-traveling Goldberg, the comedienne engaged her audiences directly during her antics: “‘What am I going to do with that old white man?’ asks Whoopi Goldberg, sounding disgusted. Then adds the tag line, with throwaway slyness: ‘I got one at home.’”¹¹⁶ Here, Goldberg referred first to an actor on stage in drag, and then to her real-life partner at the time, Frank Langella, building on the concept of play already being presented by the structure, format, and other inherent communicative elements of the number itself. Though such blatant anachronism was not what *Forum’s* authors, including Sondheim, originally intended, it successfully built upon the foundation of play Sondheim established for the number through music, lyrics and corresponding gestural patterns.

Thus, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, through the primary communicative elements examined, embodies the affective identity resulting from a dialectic featuring an overriding sense of pretend play. Examining and questioning the roles of stock characters through emblematic poses and pantomimic gestures originating from the time of ancient comedy, Sondheim allows audiences to journey, with consistent reliance on the farcical dialectic, along with these characters through their world of play. Even when Sondheim works with anachronistic elements on musical and lyrical levels as

¹¹⁵ Brantley, Ben. “Goldberg Variations on Fun in ‘Forum.’” *New York Times*, March 7, 1997.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

noted above, he offers his audiences such associations within the parameters of the tendency of farce itself to present a world without predictable rules. Consequently, the composer suggests a corresponding gestural world that appeals to audiences in a way that is presumably not unlike the way in which Plautus's work appealed to the crowds of ancient Rome – through a dialectic between seriousness and play often resulting in laughter at the various paradigm scenarios, antics, and references presented.

Finally, the manner in which *Forum* lends itself to featuring various well-known actors and actresses such as Whoopi Goldberg in the playful roles of the show have afforded the potential for a form of showcase for these contemporary performers to lend personalized comedic gestural life to the characters and to Sondheim's words and music, offering audiences continually changing approaches to relating emotionally to antics that still function within the tradition of pure farce.

Thus, closer to the 1920s and '30s vaudevillian style than to the dominant style of the book musical, Sondheim's musical farce expanded contemporary notions of what was known as "musical comedy." For the most part, critics seemed positively impressed by the introduction of farcical fare to the musical format, as reflected by Brooks Atkinson's observation that "In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*... Mr. Mostel [Pseudolus], Dave Burns [Senex], and Jack Gilford [Hysterium] have restored the era of good feeling by restoring low comedy to the stage."¹¹⁷

Thus, critics and audiences alike willingly accepted *Forum* for the most part; for though it challenged reigning expectations regarding musical theatre, it unwaveringly offered a playful context that invited audiences to engage emotionally in the fun presented

¹¹⁷ Atkinson, Brooks. "Critic at Large: Zero Mostel and His Gang of Buffoons Restore Low Comedy to Broadway." *New York Times*, July 6, 1962, pg. 22.

onstage. Most critics, unaccustomed to the notion of farce in the format of musical theatre, took more extensive note of the farcical antics than of the featured songs, reflecting a perspective expressed by Howard Taubman: “Mr. Sondheim’s songs were accessories to the premeditated offense.”¹¹⁸ Since *Forum* as a whole conformed more to audience expectations surrounding farce than to those surrounding musical comedy, critics emphasized *Forum*’s farcical elements (the physical comedy and raucous jokes that form the “premeditated offense” to which Taubman refers) than to the musical ones. Reviews indicate the ease with which audience members enjoyed the elements of farce, placing less emphasis on *Forum*’s songs – songs that, since they existed within the framework of the farcical style, failed to conform to audience expectations of musical numbers on Broadway. As we have seen, however, though audiences were not conditioned to embrace songs written for a Broadway musical as farcical, Sondheim’s songs themselves initiated the production of many of the farcical elements of *Forum*, rather than functioning as mere accessories. Music/lyrics/gesture introduce, sustain, and accommodate the world of farce – offering audiences, not what they expected from musical theatre at the time, but a flashback to a playful genre that, once established in the face of expectations, did not disappoint.

¹¹⁸ Taubman, Howard. “Theatre: ‘A Funny Thing Happened...’ Musical at the Alvin Stars Zero Mostel.” *New York Times*, May 9, 1962, pg. 47. Taubman applies the word “offense” in a positive sense, indicating a delightful “offense” to propriety offered by the raucous jokes that conformed to the farcical style.

CHAPTER THREE: GESTURE IN MUSICAL MELODRAMA -- *SWEENEY TODD*

While *Forum* invited audiences to embark on what was generally understood to be a refreshingly playful foray into the world of farce, *Sweeney Todd* (1979) offered audiences a challenge of a more emotionally layered nature. Though the Rogers and Hammerstein book musical remained the dominant standard against which most new musicals were evaluated, audiences by this time were more accustomed to encountering musicals that sought to challenge the dominant form. *Hair* (1967), Sondheim's own *Company* (1970), and *A Chorus Line* (1975) are three such landmark musicals, all of which relied more on the exploration of a concept rather than the telling of a narrative to communicate with audiences. All of these musicals also challenged the notion of the Broadway "musical comedy" as a form functioning within the accepted comedic tradition described in Chapter One, since Nettle's "mating oriented goal with a positive outcome" fails to comprehensively describe any of these musicals' featured scenarios. Thus, most audiences in 1979 were aware of trends in musical theatre that served to challenge the status quo. Nothing, however, offered a precedent that quite prepared audiences for the themes, narratives, and characters that defined the world of *Sweeney Todd*.

Like the musicals named above, *Sweeney Todd* eschews the primary elements of dominant musical comedy, including the central focus of a love story with a positive outcome. Rather, *Sweeney*'s narrative concept best situates it under Nettle's category of

tragedy, featuring an attempted status change with negative results, as well as the accompanying suggestion of basic tragic concerns revolving around pity, fear, and despair. Further, within these larger parameters, *Sweeney Todd* is most often more specifically examined as melodrama, evolving as it did from such sources as the centuries-old melodrama *String of Pearls* and the exaggerated tales that burgeoned from stories of Jack the Ripper. Indeed, elements of exaggeration featured throughout *Sweeney Todd* coupled with the stock qualities of most of the featured characters place the musical easily within the realm of traditional descriptions of melodrama, as we will see. Yet, Sondheim's music, lyrics, and accompanying gestural patterns contribute to the fabrication of characters and suggestion of concerns that also serve to challenge audience expectations revolving around traditional notions of melodrama. In this chapter, we will explore Sondheim's tendency to "play" with notions of melodrama through the juxtaposition of such opposing concepts as melodramatic villain and tragic hero, comic relief and venal immorality, and vengeance and tenderness.

Melodrama has traditionally been associated with the type of emotional engagement that stimulates passionate audience response in the form of loud and vocal support of heroes and rejection of villains within the context of deceit, disguise, and intricate plot complications. Offering an extended list of common plot machinations and character types, Robert Bechtold Heilman writes of what he calls "conventional" melodrama in terms of:

pursuit and capture, imprisonment and escape, false accusation, cold-blooded villain, innocence beleaguered, virtue triumphant, eternal fidelity, mysterious identity, lovers reconciled, fraudulence revealed, threats survived, enemies foiled, the whole realm of adventure..., the whole realm of mystery..., the whole realm of vice and crime...¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Heilman, Robert Bechtold. *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968, pg. 76.

Despite the encompassing nature of this description with regard to subject matter, Heilman asserts that the genre, as it has been traditionally perceived, has had little more to offer. Regarding conventional melodrama, Heilman concurs with Eric Bentley that while formulaic components such as those listed above have served to help define melodrama as a genre, they have also contributed to a common derogatory and over-simplified association of melodrama as an inferior art form, one that demonstrates only superficial levels of meaning and promotes excess exaggeration and “bad” writing in general. In Heilman’s words, “what we call ‘popular melodrama’ has reduced to stereotypes and thus has trivialized the basic structural characteristics of a literary form that can be managed soberly and reputably.”¹²⁰ Thus, Heilman argues that melodrama, like other literary forms, may be well done; it is not simply bad due to its plot machinations and exaggerated nature. Bentley expands on this idea, explaining that an evaluation of effectiveness in engaging audiences in melodrama relies not on whether the author has over-exaggerated, but whether the author has exaggerated well and exaggerated enough:

Of a melodramatist [of] whom we disapprove, we must not say: “You have exaggerated too much,” but: “You have exaggerated awkwardly, mechanically.” We might even have to say: “You have exaggerated too little, ...”¹²¹

Thus, within the context of critical evaluation of genre, the idea of melodrama as a genre of excess is not refuted. Rather, the concept of excess is revered as a goal to be effectively achieved by the more talented artists working within the genre. Thus, “good” melodrama challenges what has evolved as a melodramatic stereotype, and, as we will see, Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* proceeds a step further by challenging audience expectations associated with even the more sophisticated or advanced incarnations of the genre.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 75-76.

¹²¹ Bentley 204.

In this chapter I will explore the means through which *Sweeney Todd* pushes the envelope regarding “good” melodrama, often challenging audience expectations in terms of their understanding of the melodramatic form itself. First, however, I will address the question of what comprises good melodrama in contemporary criticism with reference to the genre’s potential to promote a visceral experience for audiences that both engages them affectively and elicits an overall positive impression of the piece, enticing them to return to the theatre for more.

With regard to engaging audiences affectively during the performance of a melodrama, Eric Bentley, who deals most comprehensively with the affective nature of the genre, describes melodrama in terms of its power to elicit Aristotelian pity and fear. Citing Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, Bentley explains that pity and fear occur hand-in-hand in response to terrifying situations portrayed within a literary or staged context: “An enemy or object of terror is presupposed in both cases... We are identified with those who are threatened; the pity we feel for them is pity for ourselves; and by the same token, we share their fears.”¹²² Though Bentley described the nature of melodrama in this way long before scholars began addressing the audience experience in terms of cognitive studies, his description of the pity and fear most often felt in response to the genre invokes in many ways the contemporary and more detailed analyses of the audience emotional experience proposed by Carl Plantinga and others. Through their experience of the theatrical event, audiences simulate the type of fear the characters onstage feel in response to terrifying construals of situations. Responding to their understanding of concerns based in fear, audience

¹²² Ibid. 200.

members then begin to pity the characters involved, imagining themselves in a similar situation and thus eliciting an element of self-pity as well.

Related to this concept, an important element of melodrama, according to many scholars, is that of social commentary. Peter Brooks emphasizes this aspect, describing melodrama as:

an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the manichaeistic struggle of good and evil, a world where what one lives for and by is seen in terms of, and as determined by, the most fundamental psychic relations and cosmic ethical forces... Their conflict suggests the need to recognize and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order.¹²³

Clearly, the ethical questions posed in a work of melodrama require cognitive processing beyond the level of basic concern-based engagement functioning around the experience of pity and fear described above. However, such processing, since it follows basic-level concern-based engagement, is highly influenced by the characteristic pity and fear elicited by most works of melodrama. For example, audience members who fear the villain and pity the hero of a melodrama will naturally find themselves engaged in the moral struggle between good and evil. Thus, questions of moral concern, especially when presented within the simple context of good versus evil as they are in traditional melodrama, tend to function hand-in-hand with Plantinga's concept of concern-based construals in response to affective elements associated with genre.

This topic of emotional and ethical response to a work of melodrama as a whole now leads us to the second aspect of the melodramatic experience mentioned above – that of how good melodrama, which elicits the generally unpleasant emotions of pity and fear for spectators in the moment, results in a pleasant experience causing fans of the genre to

¹²³ Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 12-13.

return to the theatre for more. Carl Plantinga, drawing upon Aristotle, Noel Carroll, and David Hume, addresses this topic in terms of what he refers to as the “paradox of melodrama”, or more generally, the “paradox of negative emotion.”¹²⁴ Explaining the paradox, Plantinga emphasizes two key functions of cognitive processing: (1) reframing and (2) artifact emotions. Regarding the first of these functions, Plantinga explains:

The process of dealing with negative emotions..., I argue, is not a purgation, but a “working through,” a “dealing with,” a “reconceptualization” – in short, the development of a construal that takes into account the negative circumstances of the narrative and frames them in such a way that their overall impact is both cognitively and emotionally satisfying, comforting, and pleasurable.¹²⁵

Such cognitive reframing relies upon the spectator’s ability to “step back” from a sorrowful or terrifying narrative situation and to see that situation within the context of the entire narrative. Thus, in the case of Plantinga’s example of the film *Titanic*, many spectators, when faced with sadness and pity associated with the death of the central character Jack, are able to deduce pleasure from imagery of the transcendence of Jack’s soul, his lasting romantic impression on Rose’s memory, and the idea of Jack as one in a long line of self-sacrificing heroes throughout history. Through this type of processing, audience members’ reactions to sorrowful occurrences with the context of a melodramatic piece as a whole are likely to be predominantly positive in valence.

Addressing the second cognitive function named above, Plantinga explains that “artifact emotions” are “all of the emotional responses that can be solicited directly by the artificial status of film [or theatre] as opposed to the content of the fiction.”¹²⁶ Thus, artifact emotions rely on a spectator’s awareness of the “non-reality” of the theatrical

¹²⁴ Plantinga 172-184.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 179.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 74.

event, and they stem from his or her understanding of how “well done” a production is – i.e., whether or not the production’s technical elements, acting, direction, and overall mood contribute to the emotional intensity of experiencing the fictional narrative as a whole. In the case of *Titanic*, Plantinga points out, artifact emotions would include “fascination with the tremendous cost of the production, admiration for what is taken to be the skill and/or sensitivity with which the filmmakers have presented the details of the ship’s sinking, the rescue efforts, and Jack’s death...”¹²⁷ Artifact emotions, then, concern the spectators’ reaction to a theatrical presentation as a work of fiction. Thus, this type of emotion functions with reframing to play a role in the detailed cognitive processing that allows audience members to view melodrama in a positive light, despite its propensity for eliciting pity and fear.

Sondheim, speaking about melodrama within the context of his work on *Sweeney Todd*, has exhibited an awareness of the primary emotional effects of the genre as well as its associations throughout theatre history and the necessity of taking “good” melodrama more seriously. For example, aware of the genre’s traditional association with superficiality and poor writing, Sondheim chose to call his musical melodrama a “musical thriller,” in order to avoid the stigma linked to the genre. Paralleling Heilman’s argument that melodrama can be achieved “soberly and reputably,” Sondheim contends:

Now, if we called *Sweeney Todd* a musical melodrama, it would have unfairly suggested making fun of the genre, with villains galloping across the stage, the heroine tied to the railroad tracks, and the audience cheering and clapping. Starting with the subtitle, “A Musical Thriller,” then going on to the set and the music, we have made sure that by the end of the opening number the audience will know what they are in for... Thriller is one of those words that people take more seriously; it has all the implications of the colorful part

¹²⁷ Ibid. 183.

of melodrama without any of the comic inferences that contemporary audiences would draw from the word.¹²⁸

Thus, Sondheim, discussing *Sweeney Todd*, explains that he sought to prepare his audiences for something more “colorful” than stereotypical melodrama, maintaining the exaggeration and visceral qualities connected therein without the superficial elements often associated with the genre. Challenging generic associations even further, Sondheim has also discussed his choice to introduce critical elements of the tragic hero into the portrayal of his main character in order to lend Sweeney a richness beyond that afforded to characters of what Bentley, Heilman, and Brooks would term “good” melodrama and even references the style of Shakespearean tragedies, as he explains:

Shakespeare, who had to write plays that would entertain everybody, created melodrama in the form of *Hamlet* and *Othello* and *Macbeth* – all of which are blood-and-thunder melodramas... I do not think there was any difference in intention between Shakespeare’s writing *Hamlet* and our writing *Sweeney Todd*. That is not to say that I thought we were writing a tragedy; rather, I think that Shakespeare thought he was writing a melodrama.¹²⁹

Whether or not Sondheim can be considered correct in his evaluation of Shakespeare’s work as melodrama, the composer establishes here his intent to work at a level beyond a strictly traditional understanding of the genre. Indeed, though the composer expresses a desire to “scare an audience out of its wits,”¹³⁰ he also emphasizes his intent to offer rich character expression in order to engage contemporary audiences.

“Good” melodrama, then, elicits specific kinds of audience empathetic engagement, namely the pity and fear discussed above, resulting in higher level thought processes and emotions concerning moral questions within the context of the fictional narrative and

¹²⁸ Sondheim, Stephen. “Larger than Life: Reflections on Melodrama and Sweeney Todd,” pp. 7-8.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 6-7.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 6.

overall evaluation of the theatrical experience of melodrama. In the pages to follow, we will discover the ways in which *Sweeney Todd* functions to achieve these goals and also to challenge audience expectations centering on the basic qualities associated with melodrama. We will approach this analysis through a study of the most basic level of audience engagement – concern for the characters – and the ways in which Sondheim’s music and lyrics suggest a gestural world that elicits the type of pity and fear so relevant to melodrama, then proceeds to challenge and complexify audience understanding of those very feelings. As we address the world of the characters in Sondheim’s musical thriller, we will examine layers of understanding and recognition of ambivalence that “plays” with traditional notions of the melodramatic form.

As noted in the Introduction, the process of understanding concern-based construals allows audiences the ability to experience on some level a response paralleling the emotional experience of the fictional characters and also mimicking affect suggested by musical cues. In addition to listening and responding to music, then, audiences watch and respond to visual cues offered by the actors embodying the fictional characters onstage. As Bruce McConachie explains in *Engaging Audiences*,

[A]udience members ascribe beliefs, desires, intentions, and emotions to them [the characters]; they must be able to “read their minds.” To do this, spectators simulate the experiences of the actor/characters in their own minds... In brief, people watch and listen to others for facial, postural, and vocal clues and process this information through their bodies and minds.¹³¹

Audience awareness of characterization of those onstage and subsequent audience engagement with these fictional characters, then, is the result of perception and processing of both visual and aural stimuli – stimuli presented, as we have seen, in the form of music,

¹³¹ McConachie 66.

lyrics, and gesture. Sondheim, in the development of his music and lyrics, creates a lens through which the gestural qualities of the characters in *Sweeney Todd* become especially prominent as keys to the emotional life of the piece and its subsequent exploration and challenging of the key tenets of melodrama. Focusing most extensively on Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, then more briefly on the minor characters, this discussion will come full circle to examine the ways in which gestural elements operate both literally and symbolically as communicative tools functioning along with Sondheim's music and lyrics to illuminate the features that allow *Sweeney Todd* to both demonstrate and challenge the critical elements of "good" melodrama.

SWEENEY TODD

As stated above, Sondheim desired to create characters that elicited basic visceral responses from audience members, at the same time featuring a layered quality that allowed serious evaluation of and response to *Sweeney Todd* as a work of melodrama that defied traditional notions of the genre functioning only on a superficial level. As a result, Sweeney Todd is one of the more intricately woven "stock" characters to be found on the American musical stage.¹³² Indeed, as we will see, he is simultaneously a singular-minded villain and a tragic hero, an unwavering lunatic and a man displaying a gamut of human feelings and identifiable motivations. Through an analysis of gestural life as it functions on multiple levels to accommodate, support, and enhance Sondheim's musical and lyrical

¹³² Sondheim has stated that the characters in *Sweeney Todd* are not "complex," but he does assert that they possess a "richness." See Gerould, page 12. Sondheim discusses this distinction throughout his comments in Gerould's *Melodrama*.

elements, we will discover how this title character is revealed to elicit increasingly layered visceral responses from audiences of this melodrama.

Beginning early in the musical, the groundwork is laid for the development of a gestural life for Todd that symbolizes his epic rise to villainy of diabolical proportions and his subsequent embodiment of the exaggerated villain of melodrama. Before Todd makes his first appearance, a Greek-style chorus of London townspeople introduces the legend of Todd in a musically unsettling prologue entitled “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd.” Here, the chorus instructs the audience to “attend the tale of Sweeney Todd” before launching into a chilling musical theme often referred to as the “Sweeney motif.” This piece of music, recurring several times in various forms throughout the score of *Sweeney Todd*, refers melodically to the *Dies Irae* (Day of Wrath), a famous thirteenth-century hymn traditionally sung in the Catholic tradition in acknowledgement of the Final Judgment Day and the plight of the souls of the dead.¹³³ Musically, then, Sondheim draws upon his audience’s tendencies toward the cognitive processes of evaluative conditioning and episodic memory, both relying upon audience members’ likely previous mental or experiential associations of the *Dies Irae* with death and a related fear of death. In case the music is not enough to conjure grim images, however, Sondheim’s chorus matches chilling lyrics with the motif to chant in shrill harmony:

Swing your razor wide!
Sweeney, hold it to the skies.
Freely flows the blood of those who moralize.¹³⁴

¹³³ For a most in-depth analysis of the extent to which Sondheim draws upon the *Dies Irae* within the score of *Sweeney Todd*, see Banfield’s discussion of the topic in *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, pages 297-300.

¹³⁴ Sondheim and Wheeler 24.

Thus, before Todd even appears on stage, the image of the swift and simple gesture of swinging the barber's deadly razor from one side to the other is iterated in the form of Sondheim's choral lyrics accompanying the already somber "Sweeney Motif," through which the ensemble both advances and comments upon the "tale" of Sweeney Todd. This lyrical commentary accompanying varying forms of musical exploration of the *Dies Irae* is repeated numerous times throughout the score of *Sweeney Todd* as Sweeney's victims fall. It thus effectively punctuates the characterization of the title character and solidifies the association of Todd with the primary gesture he repeatedly performs – that of the slitting of the throat – and all the fear of death and pity for Todd's victims implied by such a gesture.

At this point, though these references establish a mood that is no less than chilling, the throat-slitting gesture represents death merely by association, setting up audience anticipation for further exploration on this theme. After the choral Prologue, Todd himself appears as a passenger in a boat, returning to London from a fifteen-year incarceration, with his traveling companion, the sailor Anthony Hope. Anthony proclaims his joy upon returning to his favorite city as he sings "There's No Place Like London," and, although Todd vocalizes the same observation, his assertion of London's uniqueness takes a more cynical turn. While Anthony celebrates his return to his homeland, Todd responds in an unsettling minor key, both characters asserting that "there's no place like London," but with opposite implications --

Anthony: I have sailed the world, beheld its wonders
From the Dardenelles
To the mountains of Peru,
But there's no place like London!
I feel home again.

Todd: I too
Have sailed the world and seen its wonders,
For the cruelty of men is as wondrous as Peru,
But there's no place like London!¹³⁵

Here Sondheim contrasts musical styles and offers parallel but contrasting lyrics in order to emphasize the difference in these two characters' approaches. Accordingly, Anthony gestures in an open fashion, welcoming the sights, smells, and sounds of his hometown, while Todd's stoic demeanor rarely allows for gesture at all. When he does gesture, he does so to illustrate his story of an injustice suffered by himself and his family at the hands of a certain Judge Turpin fifteen years earlier. In "The Barber and His Wife" Todd sings and gestures as follows:

There was a barber and his wife...

She was his reason and his life,
And she was beautiful...

There was another man who saw
That she was beautiful.

A pious vulture of the law,
Who with a gesture of his claw, *[fingers crooked, talon-like]*
Removed the barber from his plate... *[arm makes sweeping motion]*¹³⁶

Here, Sondheim's minor key and unpredictable rhythm suggest the disconcerting finality of the Judge's action and the anger and instability Todd continues to experience even fifteen later. Todd's gesture iconically imitates destruction at the hands of a bird of prey, but its deeper meaning is metaphoric, representing Judge Turpin's ruining of Todd's life with a simple sweep of his hand. It is also no coincidence that Sondheim has chosen the word "gesture" as the noun Todd applies to articulate the destruction of his life at the hands of

¹³⁵ Ibid. 29-32.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 32.

the Judge. From Sweeney's perspective, a simple gesture (a push, a snatch, or more literally, a banging of the gavel), was all it took for Judge Turpin to unjustly send Todd away, rape his wife, and assume custody of his daughter fifteen years prior. Consequently, Todd is all too aware of the effect of a simple gesture on another's life, and it is with a simple gesture (turned into action) – the slitting of the throat -- that he seeks to exact his revenge. This single, sweeping gesture, then, continues to adopt meaning within Todd's world as it burgeons from Sondheim's music and lyrics to foreshadow the bloodshed to come.

At this point in the musical, then, the foundation is laid for the narrative -- the "tale" -- to be told as the musical unfolds. As this foundation is laid, so is the groundwork for audience anticipation of affective stimulation to come. Carl Plantinga explains that within the context of audience spectating:

Emotions... are drawn from scenarios, the very stuff of narrative. Frederick H. Lund writes that "fear, horror, disgust, repulsion, aversion, dislike, annoyance, anger, sadness, sorrow, despair, hopelessness, pity, sympathy... are not descriptive of so many internal or organic states. They are descriptive of objective situations and of accepted modes of handling and dealing with these." Emotions are ways of interpreting the world, constructing and drawing from narrative paradigm scenarios that frame a situation as one for which a particular narrative response – anger, indignation, compassion, jealousy, for example – is appropriate.¹³⁷

Here, Plantinga explains the critical role of narrative in defining audience basic affective and higher-level responses to the characters presented. His term, "paradigm scenarios", as noted in Chapter Two, refers to fictional situations mimicking real-life situations that call for certain types of emotional response – i.e., funerals might elicit tears of sadness, while weddings may elicit tears of joy. In the case of the back-story concerning Sweeney and the Judge, audiences are primed to anticipate a narrative of revenge complete with

¹³⁷ Plantinga 82.

implications of anger, sadness, fear, and pity commonly associated with such scenarios. Framing this knowledge within the context of the overall production as a staged melodrama and not real life, audiences can safely and delightfully anticipate the visceral experience of imminent bloodshed.

Todd cannot, however, eliminate the Judge with a gesture of his empty hand. Upon arriving in London with Anthony, he must discover the instrument that will help him complete his plan, which he conveniently finds in the pie shop located below his former tontorial parlor and run by the opportunist Mrs. Lovett, who, it seems, has saved the set of razors Todd owned fifteen years prior. Todd's reunion with his razors is the second significant gestural event in the expression of his character, and it is here that Sondheim begins to offer a juxtaposition of auditory and visual stimuli that challenges traditional audience expectations regarding the affectively comfortable realm in which they can "safely" experience melodrama. Sondheim punctuates this event with the unconventional choice of a love song entitled "My Friends," which Todd sings adoringly to his razors. In one of the most unsettling music/lyric/gesture integrations in musical theatre, Sweeney caresses the razors, revealing for the first time a capacity for tenderness as he sings and gestures:

Bells and subtle harp introduction *[Todd picks up razor.]*

Mrs. Lovett (spoken): My! Them blades is chaste silver, ain't they? *[Slowly sweeps razor from right to left]*

Sweeney Todd (spoken): Silver, yes. *[Moves razor from left to right hand]*

These are my friends.
See how they glisten,
See this one shine.

*[Holds razor to the light]
[Opening razor to show blade and
returning it to left hand]*

See how he smiles in the light...	<i>[Holding open razor higher]</i>
Speak to me, my friends; Whisper, I'll listen...	<i>[Pulling razor closer to him] [Holding it to his ear]</i>
You've been locked out of sight all these years Like me, my friends...	<i>[Raising razor high] [Raising it higher]</i>
You there, my friend – Come, let me hold you. Now with a sigh You grow warm in my hand...	<i>[Pulling razor toward him as he sits] [Cradling razor in both hands] [Squeezing razor tightly]</i>
Till now your shine was merely silver. Friends, you shall drip rubies; You'll soon drip precious rubies...	<i>[Holding razor to the light] [Slowly sweeping it from left to right] [Slowly sweeping it from right to left]</i>
(Instrumental)	<i>[Slowly standing]</i>

(Yelled) At last -- my arm is complete again! *[Holding razor to the sky]*¹³⁸

Here, Todd is given tender lyrics to accompany a romantic melody; yet there is a disturbing unpredictability in the arrangement of chords underlying Sondheim's otherwise soothingly romantic rhythm. Sondheim explains, "If you look, it's periodicised every seventh beat – after every seven beats it [the chord] occurs. What I did was, I wanted to take the squareness out of it. I didn't want a regular emphasis on the downbeat, so it would keep a little surprise going in the bass."¹³⁹ Sondheim thus manipulates his audience's tendencies toward musical expectancy, setting up a melody in the tradition of a love song only to deny the suggestion of compassionate ease by writing an unpredictable bass beat.

This rhythmic unpredictability, then, invites the grotesque juxtaposition of Sondheim's tender music and lyrics with Todd's simultaneous gestural manipulation of his razor. Although Todd's gestures iconically illustrate Sondheim's romantic melody in the

¹³⁸ Sondheim and Wheeler 41-43.

¹³⁹ Horowitz 132.

gentle, caressing manner in which they are executed, these gestures are double-edged, referring metaphorically to the execution of Todd's deadly revenge and reflecting the unsettled nature of the rhythm of "My Friends." Most audience members have heard similarly romantic melodies, which they likely associate with memories of being affectionate with those they love – yet Sondheim's rhythmic choices forbid audiences to fully identify with these memories, and audiences are further forbidden to indulge in such moments of nostalgia by the presence of Todd's main prop – the barber's razor that is clearly an instrument of death in the hands of Todd.

Theatrical props have been analyzed from several theoretical perspectives in terms of their manipulation and consequent influence on character development. In the 2006 edition of his book *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer poses the idea that a stage property repeatedly manipulated by a character becomes a defining factor in that character's identity from the perspective of the audience.¹⁴⁰ First, it is critical to Sofer that a "prop" be defined as something that is manipulated by someone onstage, as is Yorik's skull in *Hamlet* or Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*: "A prop can be... defined as *a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance*"¹⁴¹ (italics in original). Sofer further states that "props do not just identify; they also *characterize*. The extravagant way that Capitano in the Italian *commedia* handles

¹⁴⁰ Sofer, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. In his book *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre*, Bruce McConachie cites Sofer's approach as one that functions in tandem with cognitive theories in theatre, given Sofer's rejection of a strictly semiotic view and his argument that props exist as material objects serving material functions.

¹⁴¹ Sofer 11.

his sword tells us at once he is a puffed-up braggart; Osric's fussiness over his hat [in *Hamlet*] conveys obsequiousness, and so on."¹⁴²

Sweeney Todd's razors serve such a function; as the above lyrical and gestural breakdown of "My Friends" indicates, the razors become part and parcel of Todd's identity as they fit snugly into his hands and into what has already been established as the foundation of his gestural life. Given this prop, Todd's singular gesture can achieve the goal he has established for himself. Thus, the razor in his hand becomes an extension of the character audiences know as Sweeney Todd – a connection Sondheim invites as he ends the ballad with Todd's proclamation that, "My [right] arm is complete again!"¹⁴³

In addition to giving Todd a song during which the razor can become gradually absorbed into the character's identity, Sondheim writes lyrics, shown above, that suggest gestural references allowing Todd's manipulation of the razor to function on yet another level. Addressing the razor in the second person, Todd personifies it, lending it human qualities that, based upon music and lyrics alone, seem to befit those of a lover. The only other indication of Todd's capacity to love occurs when he speaks of his estranged wife. Thus, the personification of the razors in tandem with his tender gestures serves as the key connection between his past (when he loved his wife, whom he now believes to be dead) and his present and future (his plans to kill the judge for revenge). Sofer explains this idea in terms of the stage life of props, posing that in "*personification*... the prop is treated as a

¹⁴² Ibid. 21.

¹⁴³ Sondheim and Wheeler 43. Sondheim originally included the word "right" in the lyric – "My right arm is complete again." However, both Len Cariou (the original Sweeney Todd) and George Hearn (his replacement) were left-handed and thus held the razor in their left hand, causing the need to drop the word "right" from the lyric. The word remains in the published script. See Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 340.

stand-in for the absent subject.”¹⁴⁴ It is clear that Todd had hoped to find his wife and daughter and become reunited with them upon his return to London; yet the only object from his past with which he is able to reunite is his set of razors, and he holds them close and caresses them, treating them as he would a long-absent loved one.

“My Friends,” then, marks the continued uncovering of Todd’s character through further revelation of his now multi-leveled gestural life, enhanced by the addition of a significant prop, in tandem with catalytic musical and lyrical choices. Significantly, the song is closely followed by the chorus’s reprise of the “Sweeney Motif” discussed above, reinforcing the newly enhanced significance of Todd’s thematic razor-swinging gesture.

Thus, at this point audience expectations relating to the framing of traditional melodrama as a genre that is amusingly creepy – not to mention expectations relating to musical theatre in general – become the victim of the choices Sondheim makes regarding the character of Sweeney Todd. Given Todd’s new demonstration of his capacity to feel tenderness, coupled with an understanding of the target of, and motivations for, that tenderness, most audiences become aware of a scenario that is significantly less amusing, and more creepy. Related to this, it is also at this point that Sondheim begins to allow a complexification of his audiences’ reaction to and understanding of Todd as the primary focus of his melodrama. Todd, though clearly a deranged villain and not a sympathetic character, demonstrates through his musical, lyrical, and gestural life during “My Friends” a human emotion – seemingly some form of love, dedication, or compassion – that, though misguided, is not inherently negative. In allowing this, Sondheim initiates a significant departure from melodrama, lending his villain just enough complexity to hint at the plight

¹⁴⁴ Sofer 27.

of the tragic hero. In doing so, Sondheim lays the groundwork for an impending dilemma concerning his audiences' allegiance – for it is not unlikely that members of a theatrical audience will find themselves at any given moment during “My Friends” experiencing some glimmer of sympathetic engagement with Todd, lulled by music and lyrics, knowing that he has lost his family unfairly, and forgetting just for the moment that his gestural life is actually portraying the personification of lethal weapons.

Plantinga addresses the concept of audience allegiance in a context applicable to the current discussion, offering a distinction between character alignment and character allegiance based on the writing of Murray Smith.¹⁴⁵ Essentially, Plantinga asserts that audience alignment with a particular character reveals a primary focus on what that character does, says, and thinks; that is, audience members are privy to the thoughts, concerns, and actions of that character more than those of other characters. Allegiance, however, suggests yet another level of identification, implying a sympathetic response to the character on the part of audience members. In the case of Sweeney Todd, audiences are undeniably aligned with Todd, since he is the main character in this melodrama and most activity revolves around his intentions and actions. However, Todd does not elicit sympathy from his audiences as a rule, and he is thus highly unlikely to possess audience members allegiance overall. It is for this very reason, then, that individual audience members may experience surprise, fear, and self-pity within the context of a momentary sympathetic identification with Todd during a musical number such as “My Friends.” I do not argue that such an experience causes audiences to assert allegiance for Todd, but it does imply a questioning of allegiance that is likely to conjure affective responses that are

¹⁴⁵ Plantinga 106-111.

at best disconcerting. Given an awareness of this sort of questioning, we can begin to understand the comparatively passionate nature of most audience emotional response to Todd and the world in which he exists – most audiences find themselves emotionally moved by such challenging of expectations, whether the end result is based in anger, repulsion, or delight.

The next time audiences are offered alignment with Todd as a character, he again adopts new gestural qualities, as he believes himself to be closer to obtaining his goal and to the cathartic release he anticipates in accomplishing his revenge. As it turns out, he does experience a cathartic release, though not the one he anticipated.

During the opening phrases of “Pretty Women,” Todd’s master plan is nearly complete – Todd, razor in hand, is alone in his tonsorial parlor with his rival, Judge Turpin, who sits in Todd’s barber’s chair awaiting the service of a shave from the obliging Todd – “The closest I ever gave!”¹⁴⁶ The Judge announces that he is in love, which initiates a sensual, rhythmic duet commenting upon the inspiration of love and the joys of women:

Judge (seated in chair): Ba-boom-boom-ba-ba-boom-boom-boom... *[Tapping his fingers on his knee]*

Todd (standing): (Whistles in rhythm with Judge’s cheerful humming)
[Whips open barber’s apron, ties it around the Judge’s neck.]

Judge (spoken): You’re in a merry mood today, Mr. Todd.

Todd: ‘Tis your delight, sir, catching fire from one man to the next.
[Pointing to the Judge, then to himself]

Judge: It’s true, sir, love can still inspire
The blood to pound the hearty pyre. *[Tapping his chest]*

Judge and Todd: What more can that require –

¹⁴⁶ Sondheim and Wheeler 95.

Judge: Than love, sir?

Todd (spoken): More than love, sir.

Judge (spoken): What, sir?

Todd (spoken): Women.

Judge (spoken): Ah, yes – women!

Todd: Pretty women.

Judge: Ba-boom-boom-ba-ba-boom-boom-boom... *[Tapping his fingers on his knee]*

Todd: (Whistles again in rhythm with the Judge's humming.) *[Prepares bowl of water, swishes it, hands it to the Judge, prepares cup and brush, dips, waits for the Judge to remove his collar, brushes lather onto the Judge's face and neck in rhythm]¹⁴⁷*

Here, Sondheim establishes a rhythm, carefully set up to allow Todd and his potential victim to work toward singing (and gesturing) in sync. Todd's gestures here are primarily beat gestures, intended on the surface to keep time with the music and with the Judge's humming, as he whips open the apron, prepares the water bowl, lathers the Judge, etc... These gestures are also metaphors for the rapport he is establishing with his long-awaited customer -- thus, the Judge taps his fingers while Todd joins in his own rhythmic movement while preparing for his vengeance. In this fashion, Todd lulls the Judge to sleep in his barber's chair.

As occurred earlier during "My Friends," there is a sound of bells (serving the purpose of a razor motif) as Todd takes the razor into his hand, and Todd sings a short reprise of "My Friends," during which he calls the instrument to its duty. The nature of Todd's rhythmic gestures, calculated and carefully timed with those of the Judge, is critical

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 95-96.

to illustrating his restraint and the control of his temper as he slowly and deliberately sets up his vengeance. As he explains in *Finishing the Hat*, Sondheim musically and lyrically sets up this sustained and calculated preparation through the soothing ballad Mrs. Lovett has just sung to Todd in her effort to relax Todd and turn his attention temporarily from murder to more domestic concerns. “Easy now. Hush, love, hush. Don’t distress yourself, what’s your rush?”¹⁴⁸ Lovett sings to Todd in the song “Wait.” Sondheim explains, “That is the reason for ‘Wait’, the apparent purpose of which seems to be to calm Sweeney down, the real purpose being to establish his motive to ‘wait’ on the proverbial grounds that revenge is a dish best served cold, and that he enjoys playing with the Judge the way a cat does with a mouse.”¹⁴⁹ Thus, when Todd carefully executes the beat gestures described above, he is heading Mrs. Lovett’s advice, previously offered to the accompaniment of a lilting ballad rhythm.

When the Judge announces his intention to marry his own ward (Todd’s daughter Joanna), however, Todd nearly gives himself away when he screams, “[Is she] as pretty as her mother?”¹⁵⁰ He is able to hide himself behind the chair, however, avoiding the Judge’s recognition of him from 15 years prior, and gesturing to the Judge to turn to face forward once again in his chair as Todd announces his intension to proceed with the shave. As Todd and the Judge sing “Pretty Women,” one standing behind the other, Todd shaves and wipes the lather with calculated pleasure, precision, and increasing focus on the Judge’s throat as the music builds:

Judge: Pretty women –

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 74.

¹⁴⁹ Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, 354.

¹⁵⁰ Sondheim and Wheeler 97.

Todd: At their mirrors,

Judge: In their gardens,

Todd: Letter-writing,

Judge: Flower-picking,

Todd: Weather-watching

Judge and Todd: How they make a man sing!

Proof of heaven as you're living.

Pretty women, Sir, pretty women!

*[Todd raises the razor high
in his left hand with right hand
gripping his victim's head and
pulling it back.]¹⁵¹*

Here, Todd's and the Judge's alternating lyrics indicate that they are perfectly in synch, and remaining in rhythm, Todd prepares to execute the throat-slitting gesture he has rehearsed so much. He is interrupted at the last minute, however, by the sailor, Anthony, who arrives to seek help in finding Joanna. The Judge then realizes Todd has been plotting to assist Joanna's young suitor and angrily leaves Todd's barbershop, narrowly escaping Todd's razor.

During "Pretty Women," Sondheim continues to challenge his audiences' propensity for allegiance to his characters. The main conflict in this scene exists between Sweeney and Judge Turpin, and given a choice between the two, it is difficult to know whom to root for as an audience member – the insane Sweeney or the lecherous Judge. Chances are, most audience members won't actually "root for" either one, but in offering this song and its accompanying gestural life, Sondheim once again invites his audiences to perhaps feel pity for, if not momentarily sympathize with, Sweeney Todd – feelings for which audience

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 98-99.

members may subsequently judge themselves, resulting in either joy or disgust once considered within the context of expectations relating to the experience of melodrama.

Shortly, though, such questions of allegiance to Todd are likely to fade as Todd's rage rises to an unprecedented level and as he launches into "Epiphany." Here, his throat-slitting gesture adopts universal meaning that extends beyond his personal vendetta against the Judge. Embodying the exaggerated and diabolical identity of the melodramatic villain, Todd reprises his earlier appraisal of London and expands as follows:

There's a hole in the world like a great black pit
And it's filled with people who are filled with shit
And the vermin of the world inhabit it --

But not for long!!

They all deserve to die. *[Sweeping gesture across the audience]*

Tell you why, Mrs. Lovett, tell you why – *[Pointing at Mrs. Lovett]*
Because in all of the whole human race, Mrs. Lovett, *[Holding his arms out]*
There are two kinds of men and only two. *[Holding up two fingers]*

There's the one they put in his proper place, *[Miming placing something in front of him]*
And the one with his foot in the other one's face. *[Gesture of his head to the side]*
Look at me, Mrs. Lovett, look at you...

(Spoken) Finished! *[Parting the air before him]*

All right, you Sir! How about a shave? *[Pointing to the audience]*
Come and visit your good friend, Sweeney!
You, Sir? You, Sir? *[Pointing to the audience]*
Welcome to the grave – *[Picking up razor]*
I will have vengeance!¹⁵²

To accompany Todd's discovery, Sondheim searched for a rhythm that would accelerate, train-like, giving the feeling of an unavoidable advancement to doom:

¹⁵² Ibid. 101-102.

I thought: All right, what is the climax? It's his determining that he's going to kill everybody. And it should be a passionate declaration – like *Love* or something like that. But for the anger, I wanted to use a chugging sound... And then I got the idea of using the Dies Irae here, so that you get the Dies Irae in the accompaniment...¹⁵³

Thus, Sondheim reprises references to the Dies Irae-based “Sweeney theme,” this time in the form of Todd’s own lyrics rather than choral commentary, drawing upon the musical process of evaluative conditioning to recall and compound for audiences the sense of pain and despair associated with earlier incarnations of the motif. Indeed, Todd has now evolved from a vindictive man to a self-proclaimed mass murderer – a villain for the ages and an icon who now comments on himself, on the world, and on his place in it.

Significantly, when asked if the music drives Sweeney mad or is a reflection of his madness, Sondheim responds definitively, “Reflection. It has never occurred to me that music affects the character... In a scene, the character does not get affected by the words, the words get affected by the character.”¹⁵⁴ Todd’s gestures as he succumbs to complete insanity, then, derive from music and lyrics that are intensely character-driven. As a result, he evolves from a featured character possessing some of the elements of the tragic hero into a universal melodramatic villain. Given the more human – and humane – character traits, such as tenderness, Todd has exhibited earlier, however, audiences are likely to see Todd’s ultimate diabolical characterization as even more disconcerting than it would be if he had simply embodied the character of a mass-murderer from the start.

All communicative elements, then – the music, the lyrics, the gestures, etc... -- originate and develop within Todd, and as Todd becomes a universal figure, so do his methods of communication. The throat-slitting gesture, along with its perpetrator, now

¹⁵³ Horowitz 140.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

functions in the musical on a level of mass murder, symbolizing the death of humanity, the “cutting” of all people down to size and drawing audience attention to the social commentary implied by such mass elimination. Todd concludes “Epiphany” by mourning the loss of his wife and daughter, then exclaiming:

But the work waits!	<i>[Throat-slitting gesture back and forth]</i>
I’m alive at last,	<i>[Raising razor to the sky]</i>
And I’m full of joy!	<i>[Holding razor high]¹⁵⁵</i>

Sondheim explains this lyrical choice as follows:

...I’ve written “The work...” because I thought his insanity would be wonderful if I could somehow make it so that Sweeney thought that he now knew what he should do in the world – which is to kill everybody – and that, in his mind, it was work. Like Michaelangelo painting the Sistine Chapel, it was his calling.”¹⁵⁶

Here, Sondheim again calls on his audiences’ senses of association and the grotesque to suggest imagery of Todd as an object of admiration -- one inspired to a higher calling – a prospect that is unarguably disconcerting given the context. Significantly, Todd ends this number in the same position (holding the razor high) in which he ends “My Friends,” -- yet, here the stakes are significantly higher, since his hatred of the Judge has now turned against the world.

Todd’s “Epiphany”, then, leads to his ultimate disengagement from the world around him, so obsessed is he now with his “work.” In a sequence during which Todd tries to envision each precious detail of the daughter he does not know, Todd sings “Joanna,” another love song, this time to his absent daughter instead of his razors. All the while, however, he is slitting throats. Sondheim describes this chilling juxtaposition of gestural execution with lyrics and music as follows:

¹⁵⁵ Sondheim and Wheeler 102-103.

¹⁵⁶ Horowitz 139.

...Sweeney is detached; the only interest from which he is not detached is his obsession: his revenge. The only time this detachment is dramatized on-stage, although Len Cariou used it quite often in his acting performance, is in the second-act sequence called Joanna, where a succession of victims comes into the barber shop; Sweeney sings dreamily and in a detached way while doing the most bloody things with his hands. That kind of schizoid split can be called detachment, and in fact that is the word I used to describe to the actor how to play the scene.¹⁵⁷

It should be noted here that when Todd utilizes his razor to commit murder, his throat slitting movement technically shifts from gesture to action; for he is no longer iconically illustrating an idea, but he is committing an act. It is an act, however, that began as a simple gesture – an iconic illustration and metaphor of the swift judgment Judge Turpin had leveled upon Todd fifteen years before the events of the musical took place and a representation of what Todd will do for revenge. Like Todd, however, this gesture expands into something larger than itself. It can even be argued that, during the scene Sondheim describes above, Todd is so detached from his murderous actions as he thinks about his daughter that in his mind these actions revert once again to mere gestures – simple gestures serving as metaphors for what he plans to do with the world as a whole, if he could get the world as a whole into his barbershop.

Ultimately, Todd's "work" ends after he has killed the Judge, but not before he also kills the wayward beggar woman who has frequented the shop throughout the musical. Surveying the slew of bodies, Todd discovers that the dead beggar woman is actually his estranged wife, driven insane, but very much alive until Todd murdered her to get to the Judge. Furious at Mrs. Lovett for not telling him his wife lived, he pushes Mrs. Lovett into her own pie oven, then falls to the ground to grieve his wife. We do not know if Todd will

¹⁵⁷ Gerould 13-14.

have a change of heart or resolve to continue his killing spree because Mrs. Lovett's assistant, Tobias, off-handedly picks up Todd's razor and slits Todd's own throat.

The audience is thus left with the unsettling concept that what began as Todd's characteristic throat-slitting gesture has indeed found a life of its own as an action that does not even require motivation. Indeed, Tobias is mentally challenged, traumatized, and unaware of the consequences of his actions at this point, and he slits Todd's throat because he is merely repeating what he now knows to have been Todd's actions. Unlike Todd, Tobias has no vendetta against the Judge, against mankind, or even against Todd; like a child, he is using the razor as he knows it has been used in the past. In the end, the legacy of Todd's throat-slitting gesture, like the legend of Sweeney Todd, lives on.

Todd's gestural life, then, proves to be much like Todd himself – simultaneously simple and complex and growing to iconic proportion as music and lyrics support the sustention and advancement of his character and gestural life as a whole. Regarding Todd as the main character of this melodrama, audience members are likely to experience a highly concern-based affective journey – one beginning with fear, pity, anger, and perhaps even glimmers of sympathy, and concluding with terror, repulsion, and possible fear of their own human tendencies toward having ever felt any form of pity for such a diabolical villain as Todd in the first place. Placing all these visceral responses within the context of fictional melodrama and our awareness of artifact emotions as Plantinga describes them, we can observe the process by which audience members derive reactions ranging from revulsion to pleasure from such engagement. Contributing further to both the assertion and denial of what are common expectations concerning the melodramatic experience, the

characters surrounding Todd also communicate in ways that stimulate audience concern through music, lyrics, and gesture.

MRS. LOVETT

We meet Mrs. Lovett in her pie shop, located below Todd's old tonsorial parlor, where Todd first chooses to reappear after returning to London from his incarceration. Like Todd, Lovett possesses on the surface a basic stock-character quality, being as consumed by opportunism as Todd is consumed by his desire for revenge. Unlike Todd's obsession, Lovett's obsession does not evolve in level and intensity from the personal to the universal. It does, however, demonstrate affective levels that contribute to challenging basic notions regarding the stock quality of melodramatic characters. As we will see, her gestural life is very different – nearly opposite -- from that of Sweeney Todd, a fact that often highlights the primary foci of both characters during their interaction and offers a reprieve from Todd's increasing intensity as the musical moves forward. In this sense, Lovett offers a bit of comic relief for audiences of *Sweeney Todd*, as Sondheim explains:

As Alfred Hitchcock made millions of dollars proving, there is a very thin line between melodrama and comedy, between being scared and laughing... The kind of comedy that is most effective and valid on the stage is character comedy, and there are many possibilities for such comedy when the characters are as rich, though two-dimensional, as those in melodrama... In *Sweeney*, Mrs. Lovett's venality can be treated in a comic way because that is what she is: a venal character. Certainly there are a few shadows and lights here and there, but primarily Mrs. Lovett is defined by her practicality combined with her greed.¹⁵⁸

Thus, Sondheim's brand of melodrama allows for comedy in characterization. Within the traditional melodramatic battle between good and evil, of course, evil does not generally

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 12.

elicit laughter, unless the laughter emerges in response to a particularly superficial presentation style often associated with more stereotypical melodramatic presentations. Unlike the humorous elements of such stereotypical melodrama, the type of comedy featured here elicits laughter at the ironic quirkiness of the character herself, not at the presentation as a whole, as we will see. The existence of such comic relief in the form of Lovett’s musical, lyrical, and gestural language, then, further contributes to the separation of *Sweeney Todd* from the more traditional world of melodrama.

In “The Worst Pies in London,” Mrs. Lovett enters from the back of her pie shop with her bowl of dough and measuring cups as follows:

(musical beat)	<i>[Opens door and goes to wooden counter]</i>
(musical beat)	<i>[Plunks bowl of dough on counter]</i>
(musical beat)	<i>[Puts two measuring cups on shelf under counter]</i>
(musical beat)	<i>[Plops dough into tin bucket on counter]</i>
(musical beat)	<i>[Sharpens knives double time to beat of music]</i>
(musical pause)	<i>[Todd taps Mrs. Lovett’s arm and she turns, surprised.]</i>
(Spoken): Ah! A Customer!	
Wait!	<i>[Points at Todd]</i>
What’s your rush? What’s your hurry?	<i>[Moves knife back and forth]</i>
(beat)	<i>[Jams knife into tin bucket]</i>
You gave me such a –	
(beat)	<i>[Takes towel from shoulder and snaps it]</i>
Fright! I thought you was a ghost.	<i>[Picks up stool]</i>
Half a minute, can’t you sit!	<i>[Plunks stool on floor behind Todd]</i>
Sit you down, sit.	<i>[Pushes Todd onto stool]¹⁵⁹</i>

¹⁵⁹ Sondheim and Wheeler 34.

To musicalize this busy character, Sondheim has written a patter song with an over-emphasized downbeat, into which Mrs. Lovett's gestures fit like an intricately choreographed dance. During the introduction and first few phrases described above (a time frame of approximately twelve seconds), Lovett executes more than twelve separate gestures, utilizes at least six props, and interacts with Todd as well. Given Sondheim's assertion that character gives rise to music rather than vice versa, we can approach the rhythmic whirligig of music and movement that becomes "The Worst Pies in London" as originating within this character – Mrs. Lovett "marches to the beat" of her own music, and hardly ever is a beat missed or left unaccompanied by some element of gestural life. Further, Mrs. Lovett is a materialist, passionate about making a shilling wherever possible and ready to take advantage of any opportunity, as Sondheim's lyrics (continually punctuated with gestures in the same manner as above) tell us:

Mrs. Mooney has a pie shop.
Does a business, but I notice something weird –
Lately all her neighbor's cats have disappeared.

Have to hand it to her --
Wot I calls
Enterprise!
Poppin' pussies into pies.

Wouldn't do in my shop.
Just the thought of it's enough to make you sick!
And I'm tellin' you those pussycats is quick!¹⁶⁰

Unlike Todd, whose sparseness of overall movement and calculated simplicity of gesture mirrors his detachment and aloofness toward the world around him, especially following his "Epiphany", Mrs. Lovett is a fertile breeding ground of gestural activity – and she is completely connected and engaged in every moment and does not dwell on the past. Thus,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 36.

Mrs. Lovett is a quintessential opportunist, fully participatory to any extreme for material gain, yet possessing a lack of morals utterly unconnected with any lasting dourness, bitterness, or other negativity toward the world. In this sense, she exists in striking contrast to Todd, and it is her lack of negativity – indeed, her unwavering optimism – existing in tandem with her diabolical thoughts and actions that offers audiences a release of tension allowing what Sondheim refers to as her “venality” to become humorous.

Referencing McConachie’s application of Robert Latta’s theory of laughter described in Chapter 2, we can understand the process through which Mrs. Lovett elicits audience laughter. Tension is built through Lovett’s repeated pattering references to imagery that is no less than horrifying (cats in pies), then released as she finishes her phrase with a cheerful reference to the ultimately mundane and practical side of the situation – “those pussycats is quick!”

Thus, in the case of *Sweeney Todd*, Todd himself elicits pity and fear, as explained above, while Mrs. Lovett’s venal enthusiasm provides the cognitive shift that allows the release of such emotional tension through laughter. Audiences’ emotional responses in the form of pity and fear are then allowed to rebuild in response to Todd, and this process continues, contributing to the experience of a visceral roller coaster that takes audience members on an affective ride ultimately resulting in intense concern-based response – whether positive or negative – to the piece as a whole.

Though Mrs. Lovett’s gestural life primarily illustrates her unbridled chutzpah and uninhibited materialism, Sondheim allows this character to sing (and therefore also to move) with occasional tenderness, thereby illustrating another jarring juxtaposition – that of Lovett’s devotion to Todd with Todd’s devotion to his razors. During the second half of

Todd's love song, "My Friends," throughout which he talks to his razors, Mrs. Lovett mirrors his gestures, not toward the razors, but toward Todd himself. Regardless of her penchant for material gain, Mrs. Lovett is a lonely woman, as her lyrics and gestures below indicate:

Todd: You there, my friend

Lovett: I'm your friend, too, Mr. Todd *[Gingerly stroking his hair]*

Todd: Come let me hold you

Lovett: If you only knew, Mr. Todd

Todd: Now with a sigh Lovett: Ooh, Mr. Todd *[Placing her hand on his shoulders]*

Todd/Lovett: You grow/you're warm in my hand! *[Massaging his shoulders]*

Todd: My friend!

Lovett: You've come home!

Todd: My clever friend!

Lovett: Always had fondness for you, I did! *[Leaning toward him]*¹⁶¹

Mrs. Lovett cannot be sure at this point if Todd will become a successful barber (and based upon his pale and sullen appearance it does not seem likely); yet she caresses him as he caresses the razors, and in her final lyric of "My Friends" she tells him that he can live with her. The gingeriness and hesitance characterizing her gestures may speak to her inexperience with expressing such affection, but she clearly makes use of Todd's "love song" to express her feelings toward him, adding yet another chilling element to this already emotionally ambivalent musical number.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 42.

From Todd's perspective, she might just as well not exist; yet this does not dissuade her, as we see during Mrs. Lovett's second solo number, "By the Sea." Here, Mrs. Lovett, reveling in the profits they have made from the sale of the gruesome meat pies, proposes to Todd that they move together to the seashore, live in a cottage, and even get married. Since Sondheim provides for her another quick-paced patter song, her excited gestures at this point return to the flurry of movement that defines her character in "The Worst Pies in London." With his lyrics to this song, Sondheim lays the foundation for Mrs. Lovett to execute pantomimic gestures (such as "dipping" her toe in the ocean and imitating a seagull) that not only continue to set her apart from Todd, but also again provide much-needed comic relief. Indeed, despite her penchant for profiteering cannibalism, Mrs. Lovett dreams of a "respectable" future with Todd.

For the most part, Todd ignores Mrs. Lovett's advances (he often ignores Mrs. Lovett in general); however, there is one number during which their goals as well as their music, lyrics, and gestures coincide. During "A Little Priest," Mrs. Lovett proposes to Todd the idea of cooking his victims into her meat pies, offering a single solution to both the problem of body disposal and the problem of her slow pie business. Todd, who has just experienced his "Epiphany," finds this opportunistic plan to be a perfect reflection of his expanded world view, and he and Mrs. Lovett exchange imaginary meat pies (including a "shepherd's pie peppered with actual shepherd on top") in perfect synchrony as they sing in a farcical lilt: "The history of the world, my sweet/is who gets eaten and who gets to eat!"¹⁶² Here, audiences are allowed a glimpse of the overlap of the two brands of insanity boiling over on

¹⁶² Ibid. 110.

stage, experiencing again the element of comic relief often inherent in Mrs. Lovett's active gestural life.

In addition, this type of comedy allows further audience consideration of the moral themes often addressed in melodrama, yet through the introduction of layered concerns not commonly associated with expectations related to melodrama. The idea of one man literally eating another not only references the theme of Todd's unfair treatment at the hands of Judge Turpin, but it also reinforces the social significance of Mrs. Lovett's amoral philosophical approach operating around her ambitions to get ahead regardless of who is destroyed (or eaten) in the process. Meanwhile, the "tender" side of Lovett, juxtaposed with the "tender" side of Todd, introduces layers of concern not readily associable with traditional melodrama.

As a "venal" optimist, then, Lovett is another prime example of Sondheim's work as a "playwright in song" – a character fully embodied at every musical beat – and her optimism contrasts with Todd's bitterness, emphasizing the exaggerated and viscerally engaging nature of both and offering comic relief for audiences of this melodrama. Finally, Mrs. Lovett serves also to offer yet another perspective on the dog-eat-dog world of nineteenth century London, challenging audiences to engage in the moral conflict presented even in the face of conflicting concerns associated with these multi-layered incarnations of the stock character form.

THE MINOR CHARACTERS

In contrast to the more complexly layered, or “richer”, characters of Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, the characters functioning around them are conceived primarily within the stock style of traditional melodrama. Each displays one defining characteristic that is expressed musically, lyrically, and gesturally, allowing him or her to contribute to the creation of a stereotypical melodramatic backdrop against which Todd and Lovett function to add visceral dimension. Regarding the character of Johanna and her song “Green Finch and Linnet Bird,” for example, Sondheim discusses his intent to write music that structurally reflects her character – that of the overemotional, yearning female lover. In this particular piece, the accompaniment often consists of a single chord repeated seven times per measure, with just one eighth note changed in the final repetition – this changes the tone of the chord slightly as each measure ends, causing the listener to continually expect something more, as Sondheim notes:

If you don't change the chord, you're not yearning for anything, because you're not looking for resolution... [B]ut it's knowing that this is a girl who's yearning for something. So this is characterizing by music... When people talk about characterizing in song, they're really talking about lyrics most of the time. It's rare – I mean, we could sit down with a Puccini score, and I swear he knows how to characterize musically – but there are not many composers who know how to characterize musically.¹⁶³

Given the current theories regarding the connection of music and gesture explored in the Introduction and Chapter One, one can comprehend how Sondheim easily suggests a stock character's primary movement – the foundation for a gestural life – through the movement of the music itself. Corresponding to the yearning feeling induced by her music, Johanna longs for freedom from the Judge's clutches in the same way we might imagine the caged

¹⁶³ Horowitz 133-134.

birds outside her window long for freedom from their cages. She thus reaches for the birds as though she is trying to escape, in the same manner (although less impulsive and frightened) in which she reaches for Anthony later. True to stereotype as the female half of the commedia-based “silly young lovers,” her physicality lacks complexity beyond this, in the same manner as that of her lover, Anthony.

In “Ah, Miss,” Anthony comments that throughout his travels he has never encountered anyone as beautiful as Johanna, and he begs her to:

Look at me,
Look at me,
Miss, oh, look at me!
Please, oh --
Favour me,
Favour me,
With your glance!¹⁶⁴

Moving like a puppy in anticipation, Anthony is an idealist (a true reflection of his surname, “Hope”), and he reaches for Johanna with all the starry-eyed determination befitting of his smitten demeanor. Their gestural lives, featuring their respective iconic and metaphoric reaching for each other, literally and comically collide during the patter song “Kiss Me”, when the lovers alternate between impulsively making plans to elope and embracing each other with exaggerated gusto. Here, comedy leading to laughter functions on a much simpler – and more comfortable -- level than that associated with Mrs. Lovett’s venal brand of comic relief, thus serving the purpose of pointing once again to the affectively challenging complexity of the development of Lovett and Todd.

The final two characters to be discussed, Judge Turpin and the Beggar Woman, are stock characters as well; however, they hold unique weight within the context of the

¹⁶⁴ Sondheim and Wheeler 45.

melodrama as a whole and have thus been the focus of extensive analysis as controversial figures – the Judge for his masochistic behavior and the Beggar Woman for her mysterious link to Sweeney Todd within the narrative. In a controversial scene that was cut from the original Broadway production but reinstated for the original Broadway cast recording and the New York City Opera production, Judge Turpin stares at his young ward through a keyhole, obviously sexually aroused by what he sees, as he periodically whips himself (or pantomimes whipping himself) for his sinful behavior. Sondheim’s repeated chords are staccato, mirroring the Judge’s gestural self-flagellation in a manner clearly intended to characterize Judge Turpin as one who cannot tame his lecherous feelings for Johanna. The number is still often cut from productions of *Sweeney Todd*, despite Sondheim’s insistence on its significance in displaying the Judge’s lecherous character; and when it is performed, the whipping gesture is often omitted entirely. Thus, the stock character of Judge Turpin possesses the unique quality of functioning as an offensive character both inside and outside the fictional world of the musical, challenging the traditional concept of framing the melodrama within a “safe”, or relatively benign, affective context.

Finally, the Beggar Woman is a stock beggar – crazy, poor, and desperate – but her music, lyrics, and gestures hint at her true identity throughout the musical. More than once, she encounters Todd face to face (though he does not look her in the eyes until the end) such as in the following exchange, which takes place upon Todd’s arrival in London after his extended absence:

Beggar Woman: Alms, Alms!
For a pitiful woman
Wot’s got wanderin’ wits –

Hey!
Don’t know you, mister?

Todd (spoken): Must you glare at me, woman?
Off with you!¹⁶⁵

Todd's estranged wife recognizes him, despite her insanity, as a possible figure from her past, even as he turns away. Besides such lyrical hints, Sondheim provides significant musical links between the Beggar Woman and Lucy, as he explains:

The Beggar Woman is in disguise... A few very alert people caught on right away, though, and knew that the Beggar Woman was Sweeney's wife, because when the young wife appears and is raped, the minuet they're playing is the Beggar Woman's theme in a different guise. The justification for this is that the lady's gone crazy because of the rape, and the symbol of that rape is the music which is always playing in her mind.¹⁶⁶

Indeed, early in Act I, when Todd first meets Mrs. Lovett, she tells him of Lucy's abduction and rape at the hands of the Judge while the ensemble pantomimes the incident, as though Todd is envisioning it all. It is here that Sondheim weaves a reference to the Beggar Woman's theme (her repeated cry for "alms") into the minuet that is supposedly accompanying the masked ball at the Judge's house during the rape that occurred fifteen years ago. Because Sondheim has chosen to include this music as a diegetic theme, that is, existing within the dramatic world of the characters themselves (at the masked ball) as well as part of the performance, he is able to reinforce the idea of a link between the Beggar Woman and Lucy at the ball. According to Sondheim, Lucy (the Beggar Woman) well remembers this theme, and she repeats variations on it as she cries for alms. Therefore, the pantomime, which involves gesture unaccompanied by speech or lyrics, offers a gestural telling of Todd's story of his past, performed to music that parallels that of the Beggar Woman's motif. In addition, Todd tells us that he and his wife had an infant daughter (Joanna) at the time of the rape, a key narrative element that is often recalled by

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 30.

¹⁶⁶ Zadan, Craig. *Sondheim and Company*. New York: Da Capo Press, 1989, pp. 251-252.

the Beggar Woman's motherly gestures toward the doll (or bundle of rags) she cradles and protects as though in were a real child.

The theme of the remaining lyrics belonging to the Beggar Woman is of a crude sexual nature, as are her gestures toward Todd and Anthony when she encounters them. Gesture and lyrics thus function together to hint at her previous sexual abuse, strengthening the suggestion of her perhaps having something in common with Lucy, and emphasizing the controversial nature of the character.

Thus, while the Beggar Woman is a one-dimensional character, she serves the purpose of bringing the central moral conflict of human beings taking advantage of one another (man eating man) from a general level as it exists in the streets of London to a personal level as it represents Todd's struggle. As the object of Todd's affection before his rage reached epic proportions, Lucy is the one existing link to Todd as tragic hero (until Todd himself eliminates her). Finally, Lucy's death elicits one final opportunity for audiences to pity Todd as the victim of his own tragic flaw, thus allowing audience emotional reaction to come full circle by encouraging a return to questions of allegiance with a villainous character.

Through its characters, then, *Sweeney Todd* invites its audiences to engage in an affective experience that both embodies and denies associations typically revolving around the concept of melodrama. Through musical and lyrical choices suggestive of a gestural life that often challenges audience expectations regarding the framing of melodrama, Sondheim makes full use of cognitive communicative tendencies to juxtapose universal moral conflict with the plight of the tragic hero. Sondheim has said:

I believe that there's a little of everything in all of us, and most people can understand and identify with any emotion; the writer simply must draw the audience into

the feelings of the characters that he has created on the stage. *Sweeney Todd*, which after all is a melodrama about revenge, poses a problem for a lot of people who refuse to admit to themselves that they have a capacity for vengeance, but I think it's a universal trait...¹⁶⁷

Within this vein, there is one more deictic gesture that received significant attention from critics, and that is the full cast's action of pointing out "Sweeneys" in the audience, singing "Isn't that Sweeney there beside you?"¹⁶⁸ Some critics expressed the view that this gesture was effectively chilling, while others felt it was simply ridiculous. Others interpreted that this gesture was not meant to infer that there are mass murderers throughout the audience, but rather that there is a little vengeance in all of us. According to Sondheim, "The true terror of melodrama comes from its revelations about the frightening power of what is inside human beings."¹⁶⁹ When this power is analyzed within a context that infers less "safety" than that associated with the fun over-exaggeration of traditional melodrama, audiences often feel exposed to something for which they did not sign up when buying their tickets to the theatre.

¹⁶⁷ Gerould 10.

¹⁶⁸ Sondheim and Wheeler 203.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 6

CHAPTER FOUR: GESTURE IN MUSICAL ROMANCE – *INTO THE WOODS*

Concepts of romance as a genre have acquired numerous and varying implications relating to time period and culture, a fact that complicates the determination of likely audience expectations regarding the experience of a live presentation identified as a “romance” or as “romantic drama.” For example, in 1987, when Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* debuted on Broadway, the term “romance” on the musical theatre stage was associated primarily with the concept of the quest for love and/or spiritual union described in Chapter One as the crux around which most musical comedies played out. Returning to Nettle’s understanding of the evolutionary functioning of genre in terms of the satisfaction of basic human requirements, such concepts of romance satisfied a basic human longing to experience and understand a quest for a loving relationship, with positive results, as we have seen.

With *Into the Woods*, however, Sondheim defied musical theatre audiences’ expectations regarding a central love story, introducing them to a “new” – or rather, more traditional – romantic format. Romance in this new musical was presented as that which satisfies an audience’s desire for storytelling and related concepts of adventure, heroism, and the struggle or quest to improve or maintain earthly status. As Northrop Frye wrote in 1957:

The romance is the nearest of all literary forms to the wish-fulfillment dream... where the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains the threats to their ascendancy. This is the general character of chivalric romance in the

Middle Ages, aristocratic romance in the Renaissance, bourgeois romance since the eighteenth century, and revolutionary romance in contemporary Russia.¹⁷⁰

In this tradition, romance, as it will be applied to Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, works within Nettle's broader generic category of "heroic drama" – a narrative featuring an attempted status change and resulting in a positive outcome. For an understanding of the qualities of such romantic fare, I will continue to turn to the writing of Northrop Frye, who has addressed in detail the key aspects of traditional romance. As the chapter further unfolds, we will discover the ways in which the musical, lyrical, and gestural patterns of *Into the Woods* allow Sondheim's "fairy-tale" musical to embody this traditional, myth-based definition of romance – and to challenge audience expectations regarding this format as well.

According to Northrop Frye, the romantic format primarily elicits concerns surrounding a hero's quest for status and recognition through the defeat of an enemy who has threatened the hero's community as a whole. Though the romance typically takes place in the arena of the earthly world, its environment is one embracing myth and archetype, especially through the portrayal of antagonists such as "giants, ogres, witches, and magicians..."¹⁷¹ The hero's quest, Frye asserts, emphasizes a dialectic between hero and villain on relatively neutral turf:

The central form of romance is dialectical: everything is focused on a conflict between the hero and his enemy, and all the reader's [or audience's] values are bound up with the hero. Hence the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict however, takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, *our* world, which is in the middle...¹⁷² (Emphasis in original.)

¹⁷⁰ Frye 186.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 193.

¹⁷² Ibid. 187.

Further, the plot of the romance is usually simple, as indicated by Frye's example as follows: "A land ruled by a helpless old king is laid waste by a sea-monster, to whom one young person after another is offered to be devoured, until the lot falls on the king's daughter: at that point the hero arrives, kills the dragon, marries the daughter, and succeeds to the kingdom."¹⁷³ In response to traditional romance, then, audiences may expect to experience no doubt regarding their allegiance to the hero of the narrative. *Into the Woods*, however, reveals a tendency to challenge this expectation, since the musical introduces characters whose roles are not as easily delineated as they are in Frye's example, as we will see.

The simplicity of romance as a genre lies not only within its character roles, but also within its traditional three-part structure. Frye describes this structure utilizing the terminology of ancient Greek performance: "We may call these three stages respectively... the *agon* or conflict, the *pathos* or death-struggle, and the *anagorisis* or discovery, the recognition of the hero, who has clearly proved himself to be a hero even if he does not survive the conflict."¹⁷⁴ As we will see, the music, lyrics, and gestural patterns of *Into the Woods* both suggest and deny the facile delineation of narrative events into categories that describe this three-part structure.

Finally, age-old paradigm scenarios involving stock characters and archetypal environments abound in the traditional romance, suggesting associated emotional responses ranging from frustration, despair, and guilt to pride, joy, and devotion. Frye describes oft-repeated imagery such as cyclical patterns found in nature, event occurrences

¹⁷³ Ibid. 189.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 187.

in sets of three, repeated appearances of a “wise old man”¹⁷⁵, the “search for a child”¹⁷⁶, and images of attaining height, including climbing and ladders. Most of these scenarios relate directly to feelings of longing associated with quest-related goals, leading to related and more complex emotions and inviting audiences to experience similar concerns as they follow the romantic characters on their journeys. We find all of these references in *Into the Woods*, as shown in the synopsis to follow, reinforcing audience expectations with regard to the mythical imagery often associated with romantic fairy tales.

Since specific circumstances, character relationships, and related paradigm scenarios play a critical role in illustrating the affective journey of characters and audiences in response to *Into the Woods*, an understanding of the narrative details of the musical will be relevant to understanding the experience of the musical. The authors meld in a unique way the traditional narratives of the fairy tale characters they study. Thus, I will preface the analysis of Sondheim’s language of music/lyrics/gesture with a short synopsis of *Into the Woods*.

As the musical opens, a narrator who speaks directly to the audience introduces three main households existing “once upon a time” in “a far-off kingdom”¹⁷⁷ – (1) Cinderella, living with her father, stepmother, and two bossy stepsisters; (2) Jack (of “Jack and the Beanstalk” fame), his mother, and their cow; and (3) the Baker and his Wife. Cinderella wants to go to the King’s festival, the Baker and his Wife desire a child, and Jack would be happy if his cow, Milky-White, would give a little milk. When Red Ridinghood appears at the Baker’s door looking for baked goods to bring to her granny’s house in the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 195.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 199.

¹⁷⁷ Sondheim, Stephen and James Lapine. *Into the Woods*. New York: TCG, 1987, pg. 3.

woods, she eats more than she packs in her basket. The Baker and his Wife are relieved to be rid of her but disturbed once more when the Witch from next door appears to set straight the details of a long-standing vendetta.

It seems that, long ago, the Witch caught the Baker's father (apparently, now dead) stealing greens from her prized garden, and in exchange she took the baby his mother bore (the Baker's younger sister). In addition, because the Baker's father had also secretly stolen some of the Witch's coveted beans, she placed a spell upon his family (including the Baker), preventing them from bearing any more children to extend the family tree. Finally, she now offers the Baker and his Wife a method of reversing the spell, in the form of the following proposition: If they will bring her "(1) the cow as white as milk, (2) the cape as red as blood, (3) the hair as yellow as corn, and (4) the slipper as pure as gold," she will reverse the spell of barrenness placed upon them so many years before. The Baker locates the stolen beans in his father's old coat pocket, and he and his Wife set off into the woods to find the items the witch demands, while Cinderella heads into the woods to find her way to the festival and Jack also goes into the woods to sell his milk-less cow at the urging of his mother.

The characters interact in the woods as their various motives bring them into contact with each other, and along the way we meet the Witch's adopted daughter (the Baker's sister) -- Rapunzel, Rapunzel's prince, Cinderella's prince, Red Ridinghood's granny and the Wolf, and finally a Mysterious Man who appears and disappears at seemingly random intervals. Eventually, all the characters find what they are looking for, including the Witch, who concocts and drinks a potion from the ingredients gathered by the Baker

and his Wife, causing her to transform into a beautiful young woman, and all head toward an apparent happy ending at the close of Act One.

As Act Two begins, it seems that a giant is ravaging the kingdom, since some of the Witch's (apparently magic) beans were strewn on the ground and grew into a large beanstalk complete with angry giant. In response to the destruction, the characters once again go into the woods, this time with the common purpose of disposing of the Giant. During the ensuing searches, several characters are killed, and it becomes evident that they will not save their kingdom without unifying their efforts and working as a team. Eventually, Cinderella, Jack, Red Riding Hood, and the Baker succeed in defeating the Giant, though not before their loved ones are sacrificed. Significantly, one of the characters sacrificed is the Narrator, whose omniscient role is eliminated after the fairy tale characters pull him center stage and throw him to the Giant.

This narrative, containing detailed twists, turns, and interactions among the featured characters from each of the fairy tales represented, forms the romantic plot of *Into the Woods*; thus, it is through this narrative that the musical communicates and challenges elements of romance as illustrated by the language of music, lyrics, and gesture.

ACT ONE: QUESTS AND CONFLICT

As *Into the Woods* begins, the Narrator introduces the main characters of the musical residing in the three households listed above. We have, of course, encountered the concept of a character such as this narrator speaking directly to the audience within the context of farce in the person of Prologus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The

primary effect here, as in *Forum*, is to allow the audience to more comfortably frame the characters and events in the musical within the context of fiction. Here, the Narrator specifically functions as a “storyteller”, reminding audiences that these characters exist within a fairy-tale world. In contrast to this type of direct address in *Forum*, the Narrator’s commentary in *Into the Woods*, is, of course, a set-up. In Act II, as noted above, the Narrator himself is pulled into the story and sacrificed to the Giant. When this occurs, the audience’s anchor in the world of fairy tales is also sacrificed, as we will see. For the moment, however, the Narrator is allowed omniscient awareness of the characters’ thoughts and the narrative, and he presents them to the audience in the form of the “Prologue: Into the Woods.”

Throughout this number, Sondheim’s choice of intervals and suggestion of overlapping keys serve to musically illustrate these characters’ common sense of longing for their respective goals, suggesting the traditionally romantic theme of the quest that will apparently guide the narrative to come. Yet, denying expectations related to the traditional romantic formula described above, these characters’ quests, at least as presented in the opening number, are selfish ones, and unrelated to the attainment of the common good within the kingdom as a whole. Further, no single possible hero -- or even a clear main protagonist -- is introduced. Thus, though most of the characters are recognizable from fairy-tales told through the ages, their roles in *Into the Woods* lack the clear delineation expected of the type of simple romantic narrative described above. Consequently, as with *Sweeney Todd*, audiences of *Into the Woods* are presented with often disconcerting questions regarding allegiance to characters that embody atypical incarnations of the stock

characters associated with the genre at hand. Sondheim emphasizes this through the characters' song and associated gestural patterns as follows:

Narrator: Once upon a time

Cinderella: I wish...

[Scrubbing the floor in a repetitive motion]

Narrator: in a far-off kingdom

Cinderella: More than anything...

[Wringing her towel, and scrubbing more]

Narrator: lived a fair maiden,

Cinderella: More than jewels...

Narrator: a sad young lad,

Jack: I wish...

[Sitting listlessly with cow, occasionally trying to milk it]

Narrator: and a childless baker

Jack: More than life...

Cinderella and Baker: I wish...

Narrator: with his wife.

[Baker and Wife purposefully complete household chores]¹⁷⁸

Musically, Sondheim repeats a major second interval to introduce this motif, accompanied by the phrase "I wish", explaining that, "wishing is the key character. Of course the Baker's the key character, but *wishing* is the key character."¹⁷⁹ In allowing such a short interval that repeatedly seems on the verge of expanding but never does so, the composer relies on denial of musical expectancy to emphasize his characters' parallel longing to embark upon

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 3-4.

¹⁷⁹ Horowitz 83-84.

quests that will ultimately expand their present circumstances.¹⁸⁰ Their concurrent verbal wishing is critical because its repetition establishes the determination with which each character will pursue his or her personal quest. The overriding quality of romance, then, is quickly introduced via the myth-based origin of the fairy-tale characters, their humble mid-forest living quarters, and their passionate sense of longing.

These elements are, however, the extent of their common ground for the moment, for as noted above, their goals are quite varied, with each goal focusing on something each character desires for himself or herself. This concept of numerous goals coexisting is also reflected musically through Sondheim's application of a selection of pitches that ambiguously suggest the overlapping of musical keys. Banfield discusses this choice in depth, noting that in the opening number quoted above, "scale degrees are not that cut-and-dried..."¹⁸¹ The musicologist goes on to compare the construction of this number stylistically with that of the traditional mocking chant of children's games – "nah-nah-nah-nah-nah" – observing the shared lack of a definite tonic. Thus, these characters express their mutual sense of longing – "I wish..." – through the articulation of pitches that regularly invert in order to throw off any sense of foundational key. Correspondingly, their disparate motives suggest the semi-organized chaos of children on the playground.

Such lack of musical foundation opens the door for a parallel scarcity of common gestural foundation as well. Thus, each of the main characters develops a unique gestural life befitting his or her character as expressed by Sondheim's choice of lyrics. For example, Cinderella's gestural patterns, manifesting most often in the beginning in the form of cleaning and tidying, tend to be repetitive and deliberate, as is her approach to making her

¹⁸⁰ Zadan 337.

¹⁸¹ Banfield 402.

way to the festival. Cinderella is analytical, as further revealed by her subsequent analysis of her plight and the repeated application of the terms “nice” and “good” (while yanking her stepsister’s head back and forth in an ironically violent metaphorical placement of these thought categories that embodies the downbeat).¹⁸² Her analysis here introduces a moral dilemma regarding the real meaning of these words that eventually faces all the characters as their individual quests lose significance in the face of larger concerns.

Thus, the majority of Cinderella’s gestures, from her back-and-forth motions to her repetitive circular motions intended to conjure her feathered friends to assist her in picking lentils out of the fireplace, reflect her thoughtful, deliberative tendencies as she seeks to make her way to the festival. This style of gestural pattern continues to characterize her approach to developing her narrative as she “conjures” the image of her mother in a tree, discusses with the Baker’s Wife the attributes and drawbacks of time spent with the Prince (“A Very Nice Prince”), and weighs the pros and cons of her plight as a lover and all possible responses to it later in the musical (“On the Steps of the Palace”). Throughout these events, Cinderella’s gestures remain deliberate and reflective, foreshadowing her careful contemplation of larger moral questions and perhaps even foreshadowing her staying power in a musical in which conscientiousness ultimately triumphs.

Meanwhile, the Baker and his Wife, as indicated above, also pursue household chores while articulating their desire for a child; however, the quality of their gestural patterns is quite different from that of Cinderella’s. In the 1990 DVD, featuring the original cast, we see the Baker drying a bowl while his Wife holds a broom – in this production, the

¹⁸² Sondheim and Lapine 11.

brisk and efficient manner in which the Baker rhythmically switches his towel from one hand to the other in accompaniment of the “I wish” motif offers a clue to both the impulsiveness and the practicality with which these characters will pursue their goals. Throughout the opening sequence, the Baker and his Wife remain quite active, dusting, sweeping, and later (when Red Ridinghood arrives) counting and wrapping baked goods, all gesturally emphasizing the beat of the music. The briskness of their gestures describes what Sondheim sees as an urban quality that characterizes the Baker and his Wife as anti-heroes:

The Baker and his Wife may live in a medieval forest in a fairy-tale medieval time, but they are at heart a contemporary urban American couple who find themselves living among witches and princes and eventually giants... Their concerns are quotidian, their attitudes prototypically urban: impatient, sarcastic, bickering, resigned... this makes them funny and actable characters, and their contemporaneity makes them people the audience can recognize.¹⁸³

Thus, the gestural life demonstrated by the Baker and his Wife embodies a type of brashly earthy quality – one that may challenge audience expectations regarding their potential to become the transcendental heroes of the traditional romance. Accordingly, the Baker and his Wife continue to exhibit this impulsive style of gesture as they buy Jack’s cow with the beans from the Witch’s garden and attempt to attain each item on the list the Witch has given them in order to break her spell of barrenness.

Only in the case of Jack does relative sparseness of gesture define his approach, as he simply expresses his devotion to his friend, the cow. Jack, it appears, desires milk from his cow, but he is patient and comfortable waiting for circumstances to change on their own. Therefore, his gestural quality is slow and gentle as he caresses the cow in time to the

¹⁸³ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes, and Miscellany*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011, pg. 58.

music and attempts to milk it from time to time. As we will see, his gestural quality is destined to change as he begins to interact with others and learn the temptations in store for him in the woods. For now, however, Jack, like the other characters presented thus far, is likely to seem decidedly un-heroic in the traditional romantic sense.

In stark contrast to Jack, Jack's mother, entering during the opening musical number shortly after the segment quoted above, displays an active approach by telling Jack he must sell the cow, while she desperately grasps a handful of carrots. This grasping, in tandem with gestures and lyrics of desperation aimed deictically at her house, her son, and her cow, metaphorically demonstrates her need to "hold on" literally and figuratively to her current, rather meager, means, and to pursue whatever action is necessary to do so.

Thus, each character in this introductory sequence lyrically expresses unique motives and stylistic approaches to obtaining his or her goals, eliciting personifying gestures that illustrate characterization, and foreshadowing a conflict of goals and personalities to come. Though the characters themselves originate from a romantic context, then, their goals and manners as portrayed musically, lyrically, and gesturally, lay a groundwork that begins to challenge typical audience expectations of romance as the musical unfolds.

The next character to continue this process, still within the extensive opening sequence, is Red Ridinghood. During her visit to the Baker and his Wife to obtain baked goods to take to her grandmother in the woods, Red Ridinghood's tendency to grab and take what is available for herself reveals her to be a decidedly unheroic character in the traditional sense:

Little Red Ridinghood: I wish...
It's not for me,

It's for my granny in the woods.
A loaf of bread, please –

[*Presenting a coin*]

And perhaps a sticky bun?...
Or four?...

[*Grabbing as many baked goods as she can*]
[*Stuffing buns into her mouth*] ¹⁸⁴

Though Red Ridinghood insists the baked goods are for her granny, she eats as many as she can fit into her mouth, her unbridled gluttony reflected through her uninhibited rhythmic gestural quality as she grabs and munches. Her swift movement style indicates her forwardness as she, like the other characters, pursues the goals that pertain solely to her. As the musical number continues, her gestures remain numerous and quick, involving turning and skipping to the music in an effort to hide the baked goods she steals before running out of the Baker's cottage on her quest for Granny and adventure in the woods.

Finally, the cantankerous Witch from next door appears to the Baker and his Wife to perform her "Witch's Rap", accompanied by angry lyrics and her repeated "spell" gesture as follows:

The Witch enters, music resumes.

Wife, Baker: We have no bread.

Witch: Of course you have no bread!

Baker: What do you wish?

Witch: It's not what I wish. It's what *you* wish.
Nothing cooking in there now, is there?

[*Points to Wife's belly with cane as Wife jumps back.*]

Narrator: The old enchantress went on to tell the couple that she had placed a spell on their house.

¹⁸⁴ Sondheim and Lapine 7.

Baker: What spell?

Witch: In the past, when you were no more than a babe...

Witch: ...He was robbing me,

[Gesturing wildly, with arms stretched]

Raping me,
Rooting through my rutabaga,
Raiding my arugula and
Ripping up the rampion
(My champion! My favorite!)
I should have laid a spell on him
("Spell" chord)
Right there...

[Flinging arms out and in]

[Pointing with cane]

Witch: ...I thought I had been more than reasonable,
and that we all might live happily ever after-
er-er-er-er

[Magically pulling Baker and Wife closer to her with each repetition, then letting them go with a thud]

Witch: ...And I laid a little spell on them --
("Spell" chord)

[Sudden magic gesture with cane to Baker's groin; Baker doubles over in pain]

You too, son –
That your family tree
Would always be
A barren one...

*[Holding pose with arm outstretched]*¹⁸⁵

Significantly, the Witch is the first truly archetypal character to appear in *Into the Woods*, meaning that, in contrast to the characters belonging to specific stories, she embodies an entity that has traditionally appeared in romantic tales through the ages. As such a character, the Witch implies a social paradigm suggesting mythical associations with magic,

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 12-14.

spells, and evil.¹⁸⁶ Here, her appearance is made more sinister through Sondheim's "Spell" chord, which, Banfield tells us, is complex to say the least, offering a cacophonous clatter befitting of the Witch's propensity to elicit fear:

The "spell" chords, pertaining primarily to the Witch, are highly infused with chromaticism. Their basic formula is a five-pitch collection... perhaps most simply envisaged as a diminished triad erected above a tonic or pivot note... plus a first inversion major triad hanging below it, with doubling of the upper E-flat an octave lower to produce the cluster of seconds at the bottom of the chord.¹⁸⁷

The effect of this diminishing, inversion, and doubling of intervals and pitches is the creation of a clamor emphasizing the jarring musical embodiment of the Witch's magic. Subsequently, through repetition of the chord and the cognitive effect of evaluative conditioning, audiences tend to associate the "Spell" chord with the Witch's magic.

Further, throughout this encounter, the Witch's gestures and their effect upon the Baker and his Wife physically demonstrate her power as a purveyor of magical mayhem. She does, after all, possess the magical ability to "zap" and "pull" the Baker and his Wife by engaging in simple arm gestures.

However, even as he introduces the Witch, Sondheim offers clues that this archetypal character also possesses qualities that dissociate her from the typical romantic paradigm of the evil witch. First, this is a Witch who gardens – a decidedly non-mystical and mundane activity for a character who possesses the force of magic – and whose lyrics reveal her obsession with rampion and rutabaga. In addition, her "rap" and cacophonous

¹⁸⁶ Witches have, of course, historically represented both sides of the battle between good and evil. "Good" witches, however, are more often identified by names such as "sprite" or "fairy." The identification of this character as simply "the Witch", coupled with her rather unsavory appearance, indicates, at this point, an evil connotation.

¹⁸⁷ Banfield 395. Banfield also notes on page 397 a discrepancy between the construction of this chord as shown in the published vocal score and its construction as shown in the rehearsal score. Both, however, support Banfield's argument for the jarring nature and level of complexity of the "spell" chord.

“spell chord” elicit a gestural life characterized by the unpredictable building and release of tension. Significantly, she does not apply her magic with every “spell chord” gesture, often making the effects of her rather frequent and spastic arm gestures simply humorous. As indicated in the above passages, the Baker and his Wife fear the Witch’s magic, but neither they nor the audience can tell when her “zaps” will carry the force of magic with them or merely punctuate her speech as anti-climactic beat gestures that suggest the subsequent release of the tension previously created by her violent magic. By the time the Witch exits, then, her nontraditional tendency to provide her own comic relief is likely to leave audiences with a lack of clarity regarding the Witch’s potential to ultimately proffer a serious threat to these characters.

As Act One continues, the multiple quests begin in the secluded and mysterious setting of the woods, where Sondheim’s anti-romantic characters find themselves challenged by the intertwining of their narratives and goals. Sondheim notes the paradigmatic implications of “the woods” in his analysis of the musical in *Look, I Made a Hat*: “[A]h, the woods. The all-purpose symbol of the unconscious, the womb, the past, the dark place where we face our trials and emerge wiser or destroyed...”¹⁸⁸ And indeed, that is what eventually happens to these characters in this archetypal setting.

To musicalize these characters’ journeys to either destruction or wisdom within their forested surrounding, Sondheim, true to form, has composed a leitmotif that conditions audiences to expect a certain pattern of concern-based engagement associated with its recurrence throughout the musical. The “beans” motif is a five-note sequence that, at least in the beginning of the musical, remains musically unresolved, that is, not ended on

¹⁸⁸ Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat*, 58.

a satisfying cadence in a predictable or expected rhythm. The “beans” motif occurs when the main characters experience critical turning points regarding their respective quests, in each case eliciting gestural qualities punctuating each character’s process of “working through” the affective elements of his or her journey toward a realization of the true nature of his or her quest and its necessary convergence with the quests of others. Often, gestural qualities that reflect pride and ignorance evolve into those that illustrate newfound knowledge and compassion, as each character embodies his or her incarnation of the “beans” motif in a journey toward a transcendental realization of the universal quest for knowledge and understanding that ultimately defines these characters as – albeit non-traditional – romantic heroes.

Examples of musical variations on the “beans” motif include the scene in which the Baker exchanges five beans for Jack’s cow, Rapunzel’s theme, Red Riding Hood’s song “I Know Things Now”, Jack’s song “Giants in the Sky”, the Witch’s “Stay with Me”, and “No One Is Alone” in Act Two, to name just some of the musical references. In “No One Is Alone”, the “beans” motif does achieve musical resolution, as the characters concurrently demonstrate an emotional resolution in terms of their heroic quests; this will be discussed in the section to follow. When the “beans” motif occurs as part of musical numbers and underscoring in Act One, however, it remains unresolved, serving primarily to notate landmarks in these characters’ journeys toward knowledge and the ultimate convergence of their concerns as members of an what will emerge as an entire group of romantic heroes.

One of the earliest versions of the “beans” motif occurs during the scene in which the Baker buys Jack’s cow for the price of five beans. Here the motif is ceremonious, as defined by the Baker’s pantomiming as he counts the beans into Jack’s hand, each bean

accompanied by a separate note in the “beans” motif. The inherent gestural element here is noted by Banfield, who states that the “beans motif” may be understood to be morphologically developed when it is “spelled out unmistakably and pantomimically on the xylophone as the Baker counts the five beans into Jack’s hand...”¹⁸⁹ This gestural ritual seals the bargain between the Baker and Jack, but its meticulous pantomimic execution also emphasizes the Baker’s calculated approach to attaining his personal goal regardless of the possible impact of his actions on others. The Baker, with the encouragement of his Wife, has decided that Jack is not the brightest boy he has ever met and that he will ensure Jack’s agreement to the deal by leading him to believe the beans are magic (which, as it turns out, they are – but the Baker is not yet aware of the beans’ power to yield beanstalks of epic proportion). Thus, the “beans” motif and its pantomimic embodiment in this instance offer an example of one character’s decidedly unheroic tendency to take advantage of another for personal gain. Significantly, it is now the Baker, who has been a victim of similar manipulation for personal gain at the hands of both Red Ridinghood and the Witch, who now perpetuates this mode of behavior as he seeks to swindle Jack.

In the case of Rapunzel, we see a more minor character seeking a similarly self-oriented goal or quest – that of obtaining freedom from the tower in which her mother, the Witch, has locked her. Rapunzel’s moaning rendition of the “beans” motif is accompanied by her compulsive brushing of her long, yellow hair, the methodical and resigned beat gesture of a woman who has been stripped of her ability to interact with everyone except the Witch, who visits Rapunzel periodically to check up on her. Her seemingly unending repetition of the “beans” motif at intervals throughout Act One and her parallel repetitive

¹⁸⁹ Banfield 395.

hair brushing serve to portray her as an embodiment of compulsive behavior – the type of behavior that characterizes yet another individual approach to a personal quest.

In contrast to Rapunzel, Red Ridinghood is out in the world and actively discovering the consequences of her own quest for adventure in the woods on her way to Granny's house, after being lured from her path and literally consumed by the sexually predatory Wolf. (She is later to be rescued later by the Baker.) In "I Know Things Now", as Red Ridinghood articulates her more fully developed incarnation of the "beans" motif, she musically and gesturally describes her experience:

Red Ridinghood: Mother said,
"Straight ahead,"
Not to delay
Or be misled.
I should have heeded
Her advice...

[Looking down at hands]

But he seemed so nice.

Once his teeth were bared,
Though, I really got scared –
Well, excited and scared --

[Gesturing to either side]

But he drew me close
And he swallowed me down,
Down a dark and slimy path

["Pulling in" gesture]

*[Hands close to each other, forming
a "path"]*

So we wait in the dark
Until someone sets us free
And we're brought into the light...

[Arms wide apart]

[Waving arms, wide apart]¹⁹⁰

Red Ridinghood's lyrical description of her experience is both literal and metaphorical, addressing first the ambivalent scared/excited feeling of meeting the Wolf, then the

¹⁹⁰ Sondheim and Lapine 34-35.

horrifying feeling of being “swallowed” by darkness, and finally the freedom and relief of returning to the light. Accordingly, her gestural activity is both iconic and metaphoric as she demonstrates the Wolf’s behavior toward her and places her ambivalent feelings in the space around her. As she sings, her gestures become more frequent, mirroring her excitement in discovering a newfound understanding of the world around her. During this number, then, she realizes that her earlier, more selfish goal of finding adventure in the woods has given way to a more serious quest for truth and knowledge. Considering the moral implications of these events later in the song, Red Ridinghood goes on to compare the qualities of nice versus good (a comparison hinted at by Cinderella earlier), carefully placing “nice” and “good” physically on either side of her and concluding that, though the wolf was “nice” to her at first, “nice is different than good.”¹⁹¹ Thus, as Red Ridinghood discovers, the Baker, who earlier would not let her take all the sweets and bread she wanted (and who the audience knows has previously swindled Jack), eventually saves her, demonstrating that he may not always be “nice” but he does appear to be a “good” person. Clearly, “good” and “bad” are not nearly as cut and dried in this musical as they are in a more traditional romance, but these characters are certainly learning valuable lessons regarding the moral value, and thus the implied heroic nature, of their quests.

In Banfield’s words then, Red Ridinghood is “the first character to reach a mature awareness”¹⁹², that is, to begin to objectively evaluate the complexity of her environment. For, if “nice is different than good”, the world is not simply a haven of good and evil, but a more complex place in which human beings struggle at various points between the apparent extremes of good and evil.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 35.

¹⁹² Banfield 387.

Meanwhile, Jack also expands his knowledge of his environment. On his own quest for adventure as he climbs a beanstalk that appears to have grown after his mother angrily threw his beans away, Jack meets the Lady Giant who lives there. Jack, however, remains for the moment a victim of his own pride, unbridled curiosity, and naiveté, as well as the Lady Giant's seduction. In "Giants in the Sky", which also features Sondheim's "beans" motif, Jack relates a Freudian sexual awakening at the hands of the Lady Giant, musically and gesturally paralleling Red Ridinghood's sexual awakening at the hands of the Wolf but lacking a mirroring of Red Ridinghood's mature realization:

Jack: ...You're free to do
What pleases you,
Exploring things you'd never dare... [*Grasping his hat*]

And she gives you food
And she gives you rest
And she draws you close
To her giant breast, [*Separating hands as though
holding the breast*]

And you know things now that you never knew before,
Not till the sky...¹⁹³

This piece allows Jack a gestural life that is alternately reserved and explosive. In the 1990 DVD, as he begins to sing, he grasps his hat, which serves as a type of security blanket helping him move beyond his ambivalent sense of fear and excitement at the discovery of the Lady Giant. Eventually, as indicated above, he also iconically demonstrates details of his experience. As the song continues, he metaphorically places the world of the Lady Giant in the space around him and deictically indicates the heights as he refers to the world that is "way up high" in the beanstalk, evoking the romantic paradigm scenario of climbing and height as a metaphor for longing. Like Red Ridinghood's gestures, Jack's gestures become

¹⁹³ Sondheim and Lapine 43.

larger and more frequent as his song progresses. Jack's gestures, however, tend to be rather sudden, reflecting the excitement and explosiveness of the musical number, and illustrating an awkward mid-point in Jack's evolution from a shy boy to a young man with an awareness of the world.

Despite Jack's increased awareness on some levels, he is at this point unable to objectively evaluate the consequences of the Giant's intentions in the same way that Red Ridinghood has evaluated the consequences of the Wolf's intentions. He has been simultaneously stimulated and frightened and thus feels as though he has gained a new awareness of the world around him. Yet, his restrained but explosive gestural life signifies a lack of full understanding -- and, indeed, Jack has a lot to learn.

In addition to these songs, ditties, and samples of underscoring, the Witch's song, "Stay with Me", reprises the "beans" motif yet again, in a musical embodiment of the Witch's realization that her own quest for ultimate control over her environment and those around her – especially her daughter – is futile. During this song, the Witch must begin to realize that Rapunzel (who has left her tower for a handsome prince) has a mind of her own:

Witch: What did I clearly say? Children must listen.	[<i>Throwing Rapunzel to the ground</i>] [<i>Berating her with extended finger</i>]
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Don't you know what's out there in the world? Someone has to shield you from the world. Stay with me.	[<i>Arms wide</i>] [<i>Bringing arms in to chest</i>] [<i>Cradling arms tightly to chest</i>] ¹⁹⁴
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The Witch begins this number with the same gestural violence she demonstrated toward the Baker and his Wife, as shown above. However, her "spell" gestures are ineffective here,

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 59-60.

foreshadowing her complete loss of magical power in Act Two, and eliminating her possibility of fulfilling any expectations surrounding her possible role as romantic villain. Rather, as she learns to see Rapunzel's point of view, the Witch becomes tender, and her gestures iconically reflect this painful realization and resulting vulnerability as she tightly holds her hands to her chest as if she is holding Rapunzel. The gestural display of humanness encouraged by Sondheim's slow, lilting musical choices here indicates the Witch's newfound understanding of her daughter, occurring once again to an incarnation of the beans motif as the Witch becomes the second major character to actively explore and evaluate the significance of another's affective complexity and the value of that complexity in a world the Witch cannot ultimately control with or without romantic mysticism.

The numerous incarnations of the bean theme, then, recurring in Act One, are accompanied by widely varying lyrics and gestures that share the critical characteristic of defining these characters' journeys on individual quests that ultimately prove as futile as they are un-heroic in the traditional romantic sense. Thus, despite elements of romantic setting, paradigm scenarios, and the pursuit of quests, Act One of *Into the Woods* fails to fully live up to expectations of the romantic narrative concerning heroic endeavors and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. Rather, these characters raise questions regarding the roles of hero versus villain, hope versus despair, and the complexity of the surrounding social environment and audience allegiance. As we will see, the characters and narrative progression of Act Two continue this process and propose answers to these questions in Sondheim's reconfiguration of the traditional romance.

ACT TWO: STRUGGLE AND DISCOVERY

As noted above, several of the main characters in *Into the Woods* have, by the end of Act One, significantly challenged audience expectations regarding the honorable nature of their motives and their potential as romantic heroes and villains. Though all these characters have achieved, at least to some extent, the goals that motivated their selfish quests in Act One, no single character has yet emerged as romantic hero. In addition, though there has been much moral deliberation concerning the concepts of “good” and “nice,” there has not occurred any indication of an evil force from which the kingdom must be saved. The beginning of Act Two marks the emergence of such a force, since, it seems, the Lady Giant from Act One has aggressively invaded the kingdom, seeking revenge for the death of her husband who suffered a fatal fall when Jack cut down the beanstalk. The Lady Giant, then, functioning in the tradition of the evil ogre, dragon, and other archetypical monsters of traditional romance, now serves as a common enemy, killing several of the characters, including Jack’s mother. In short, if a romantic hero is to emerge, now is the time for him (or her, though traditionally the hero was male) to do so.

In *Into the Woods*, however, Sondheim and Lapine have taken a more democratic approach to the concept of romantic hero, allowing the emergence of several heroes who must work together to save the kingdom from the common threat of the Giant’s wrath. In Act Two, then, the characters and their audience discover heroic qualities within the characters themselves – the anti-heroes of earthly origin whose quests in Act One proved decidedly un-heroic in terms of the traditional romance. Through the musical, lyrical, and gestural language of Act Two, Sondheim emphasizes both the emergence of the heroic

presence and the challenging of audience expectations regarding the traditional romantic hero.

In Act Two, the characters that have thus far survived the Giant's rage proceed to embark on a quest holding the survival of the kingdom in its balance – a quest more worthy of the traditional romance than the self-centered quests of Act One – beginning with an attempt to discern how this enemy arrived in their midst. Before they achieve heroic status, however, these characters must transcend their more base – and human – affective inclinations toward fear and panic resulting from the threat of despair and destruction at the hands of the Giant. During this process, pride, anger, guilt, and blame resurface, reaching climactic heights as each character attempts to blame each of the others in “Your Fault.” Composed in 2/4 time to capture the back-and-forth conversational rhythm of an argument, the number depicts the Baker, Cinderella, Jack, Red Ridinghood, and the Witch as they attempt to place blame on one another for their common troubled plight:

Little Red Ridinghood (To Jack): See it's your fault.

Jack: No!

Baker: So it's your fault...

Jack: No!

Little Red Ridinghood: Yes, it is!

Jack: It's not!

Baker: It's true.

Jack: Wait a minute, though –
I only stole the gold
To get my cow back
From you!

Little Red Ridinghood (To Baker): So it's your fault!¹⁹⁵

“Your Fault” features iconic gestures describing the events of the story thus far as each character views them, but the most significant gesture here is the repeated accusatory deictic pointing gesture through which each character attempts to place blame on each of the others. The number continues for several minutes as these five characters desperately point fingers in an effort to determine who is most responsible for the presence of the enemy in their midst, with the significant effect of reiterating these characters’ attempts to isolate, not a hero, but a culprit. Of course, by the time “Your Fault” ends, the characters discover that no one person shoulders the responsibility for creating the situation in which they find themselves. Thus, the quest to determine a culprit is also futile. Rather, the ways in which they have pursued quests of a selfish nature have contributed to their collective plight.

Significantly, by this point in Act Two the characters have also attempted to blame the Narrator for their plight, pulling him into their fictional narrative and sacrificing him to the Giant, eliminating the possibility of any continued audience reframing of the narrative as one presented by a storyteller who consistently situates the characters at a level of Brechtian emotional distance from the audience. This, as noted above, allows audiences a more direct affective connection with the characters and one that is unaffected by any contextualization or judgment of these characters expressed by the Narrator. Similarly, the Witch – the only other character who has displayed powers of a mystical nature (if only in Act One) – is also sacrificed, eliminating the possibility that her mystical abilities will somehow offer relief from the chaos.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 115.

There exists an additional notable connection between the Narrator and the fictional narrative he relates, a connection that serves to emphasize the Narrator's seemingly dual existence inside and outside the characters' world, thus further manipulating the level at which audiences are likely to experience concern for the characters in *Into the Woods*. Near the end of Act One, the plot reveals that the Baker's Father is not dead, as the Narrator had inferred previously during the opening musical sequence of Act One. Rather, the Baker's father proves to be none other than the Mysterious Man, who has appeared at several intervals to offer advice to the Baker. Later, at the conclusion of Act One, the Mysterious Man appears to die, collapsing to the ground after assisting the Baker and his Wife in obtaining the ingredients they need to break the Witch's spell and have a child. He rises again, though, to show audiences that he is also the Narrator:¹⁹⁶

Stage Directions: *Music under. The Mysterious Man removes elements of his costume, revealing that he is also the Narrator. He tosses the Mysterious Man's clothing away.*¹⁹⁷

This overlap of narrator and character thus supports the questioning of the convention of the narrator as purveyor of objective information regarding the fictional narrative, again encouraging the audience to relate more directly to the characters in *Into the Woods*. After the audience is shown at the conclusion of Act One that the Narrator has also played the role of the Mysterious Man, thus interacting directly with the characters, audiences may be left to wonder if the Narrator will somehow reenter the narrative in Act Two, perhaps

¹⁹⁶ This transformation is not featured in the DVD. However, it exists in the published script at the beginning of Act I, Scene 6. Major productions of *Into the Woods* differ in their portrayals of the overlap between these two characters. Most past productions have featured the same actor playing both roles; however, in the 2012 production for the Public Theatre's Shakespeare in the Park, the two characters are played by two actors.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 70.

ultimately serving as hero and saving the characters from the Giant, in the style of *deus ex machina*. Any thought of that possibility is of course eliminated, however, when the characters sacrifice the Narrator to the Giant. Thus, audience expectations regarding this piece as a “narrated” romantic fairy-tale are not fulfilled. Rather, by the time the events of the second act occur, audiences are asked to view these “romantic” characters, their struggles, and their emotional reactions as being much like their own.

Related to this concept, the Mysterious Man does reappear in Act Two, though he does not magically save the remaining characters. Rather, he appears as a vision to his son, the Baker, who has just realized he has lost his wife. Through the song “No More,” sung by the Baker and his father during this brief reunion, Sondheim musically and lyrically expresses the final step in the Baker’s journey of transcendence – this character’s realization of his potential to embrace his own heroism by facing the challenge at hand. This transcendence occurs in the form of these characters’ realization and their audience’s simultaneous understanding of their inherent spiritual closeness, coupled with emotional and metaphysical distance, experienced by father and son:

Mysterious Man: ...We disappoint,
 We leave a mess,
 We die but we don’t.

Baker: We disappoint
 In turn, I guess.
 Forget, though, we won’t.

Both: Like father, like son.¹⁹⁸

The Mysterious Man encourages his son not to run away from his circumstances – a valuable lesson from this character, whose alter-ego, the Narrator, has ultimately been

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 124.

unable to maintain distance from the devastating events occurring onstage and has thus been swallowed by his own narrative. In this song, through Sondheim's application of dissonance and blending of tonic and dominant sounds¹⁹⁹, the composer musically supports the father's and the son's lyrical discovery of himself in the other, albeit at a moment when so much time and love has already been lost. Analyzing the uneasy lilt of the harmonies and rhythms in "No More", Banfield observes:

The sense of paralysis is expressed very early in the music by the rhythmically isolated dissonance at the end of measure 2. This mixes tonic and dominant elements, the latter clarified and released two measures later... Significantly, this motive is moving beyond the inhibitions and restraints of verbal communication while highlighting them... It is as though the Baker cannot communicate with his father in words, yet does so precisely by acknowledging this in his stutterings and silences.²⁰⁰

True to music that suggests such a "sense of paralysis," the gestures of these two characters are sparse to none, reflecting their inability to physically express feelings that are only expressed musically through stutterings, silences, and tension that is released too late. This lack of gesture, of course, contrasts significantly with the Baker's busy, impulsive, controlling gestural life in Act One, during which his pride drove him to embark on his own quests and fight his own battles, convinced of his ability to win. In addition, through such an extended example of *inaction*, Sondheim presents the flip-side of the traditional romantic hero in battle.

In this instance, then, Sondheim's music and lyrics suggest an inhibition of gesture, supporting the authors' overall goal of allowing these characters – and their audiences – to quietly begin to understand the meaning of true heroism. Though the Mysterious Man returns to his son in a removed form, he is able to "rescue" the Baker, not through the

¹⁹⁹ Banfield 391-392.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 392.

contrived convention of *deus ex machina*, but by proffering strength in a time of need, a deed made all the more poignant by his inability to connect physically.

While the identification of a “lack of gesture” through a musical “sense of paralysis” and a lyrical declaration of the relative non-finality of death may seem an odd way of offering audiences a romantic hero, this is precisely what Sondheim accomplishes in “No More.” Through musical, lyrical, and gestural paralysis, Sondheim illustrates his characters’ vulnerability for their audiences, encouraging audience members to also understand their own feelings of vulnerability in a world that features, not giants, but other enemies and corresponding emotional conflicts.

Finally, during “No One Is Alone” in Act Two, Sondheim’s romantic musical delivers to its audiences the heroes who will ultimately defeat their common enemy. At this point in the narrative, only the Baker, Cinderella, Red Ridinghood, and Jack remain alive, and they work together to defeat the Giant who threatens their lives and the kingdom. Musically, in “No One Is Alone”, the missing cadence in the heretofore incomplete “beans motif” is resolved, as Mark Eden Horowitz confirms in conversation with Sondheim: “You go on to explain [on a recorded interview for MTI], that the story is, to some degree, about how the bean theme evolves through the course of the show, and that in ‘No One is Alone’ the bean theme finally becomes calm.”²⁰¹ This is also the point in the narrative when each fairy-tale character demonstrates true understanding and identification with each of the others, as shown by the following lyrics, which the Baker and Cinderella sing to Jack and Red Riding Hood:

Baker: No one is alone,
Believe me.

²⁰¹ Horowitz 84.

Cinderella: Truly...

Baker/Cinderella: You move just a finger,
Say the slightest word,
Something's bound to linger,
Be heard.

Baker/Cinderella: People make mistakes,
Holding to their own,
Thinking they're alone.

Cinderella: Honor their mistakes –

Baker: Fight for their mistakes –

Cinderella: Everybody makes –

Baker/Cinderella: -- one another's
Terrible mistakes...²⁰²

The gestures here are tender and subtle as the bean theme and most difficult questions regarding transcendence above pride and anger are resolved as best they can be for these characters, who will shortly end the immediate threat of destruction and despair by implementing a successful plan to kill the Giant. Thus, as the bean theme “becomes calm,” as Sondheim says, the characters’ gestural lives become calm as well, while their lyrics indicate their heroism through collaboration and patience for the thoughts and actions of others. This “calmness” on musical, lyrical, and gestural levels, encountered in the face of narrative chaos and calamity at the hands of the Giant, allows both characters and audience members a powerful release from the tension built through what ultimately reveals itself as a quest for understanding.

²⁰² Sondheim and Lapine 130-131

These characters' journeys through a world of conflict with one another and with a common enemy thus leads them on an affective journey in a romantic narrative with a democratic twist that challenges audience expectations related to the tradition of romance. Though these characters exist in a world of myth, magic, giants, witches, and other paradigmatic imagery and characters, their journey emphasizes the lessons of the everyday world and lacks the emergence of a traditional romantic hero. Much like their audiences in the contemporary world, Sondheim's fairy-tale characters struggle through a decidedly unheroic emotional connection with selfishness, pride, and blame, encouraging them to rebel against each other as well as against their own principles in an effort to attain their goals. Thus, in the sense of the transcendence of good over evil, romance prevails in *Into the Woods*, even as its heroes challenge traditional definitions of the genre.

CONCLUSION

Within the past several decades, cognitive-based experimentation and conclusions have formed the foundation for numerous and varied studies in arts and humanities fields. Though such application of cognitive science has been the target of controversy due to its multidisciplinary approach, many scholars have made strong cases for its validity in allowing readers and practitioners new methods of asking and answering relevant questions regarding our tendencies to observe and understand the world around us. With reference to staged performance in particular, much has recently been written on the topic of audience reception of plays and musical concerts. Yet, little in-depth cognitive-based material has been produced concerning the presentation and reception of musical theatre. It has been my intention to contribute to the inception of such a dialogue through the ideas and questions posed in this dissertation.

As we have seen, many common threads found to be inherent in the processing of audio and visual stimuli within the context of music and movement produced for theatrical audiences support the integration of theoretical approaches for the purpose of studying the integrated medium of musical theatre. Beginning with the work of David McNeill and others, we have examined experimental evidence for the common origin and receptive processing of audio and visual stimuli in the brain. This evidence has led scientists to advocate the conflation of speech and gesture into a single language, laying the

groundwork for scholars in the arts and humanities to examine concepts of artist/audience communication in terms of such cognitive processing. Further evidence supports the idea of gestural tendencies inherent in musical notation as well, indicating the existence of a music/gesture language paralleling the speech/gesture amalgamation and inspiring studies such as the present one.

Emphasizing the conflation of the communicative elements described above, Stephen Sondheim has discussed his creative process as a composer/lyricist in terms of his tendency to make musical and lyrical choices in tandem with mental imagery formed from his anticipated movement of actors on stage. Thus, Sondheim's work has lent itself as an ideal topic for the preceding study. Significantly, as we have seen, the specific ways in which music, lyrics, and gesture function together as a language in Sondheim's work have repeatedly challenged audience expectations with regard to musical theatre in general, while both indulging and challenging expectations in terms of the genres in which the composer/lyricist most enjoys writing. In the preceding three chapters, then, we discovered some significant ways in which Sondheim has worked within the basic parameters of farce, melodrama, and romance to challenge the inherent and culture-based concerns most commonly associated with those genres.

In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, we discovered a work that challenged 1960s audiences' impressions of musical theatre while revisiting some of the most ancient traditions long associated with the genre of farce. Through the musical and lyrical suggestion of such ancient techniques of presenting scenarios associated with the building and release of tension leading to laughter, coupled with the occasional inclusion of anachronistic references, *Forum* re-introduced the genre of farce to audiences of musical

theatre. In 1979, *Sweeney Todd* went a step further by challenging not only the tradition of musical theatre but also the tradition of melodrama as it raised questions relating to the possible tragic plight of its villain/hero and consequent audience allegiance. Finally, in 1987, *Into the Woods* offered a romance of contemporary quality, challenging audiences of musical theatre to engage in a fairy-tale heroic narrative with a most democratic moral.

With regard to Sondheim's work as a composer/lyricist, several musicologists have also examined these musicals within the context of both their emotional and thought-provoking qualities; and the current study has sought to expand upon these analyses by offering examination of the composer/lyricist's work in terms of genre and the relationship between the auditory and visual aspects of the composer's work. It is my hope that future studies of musical theatre in performance will further expand such approaches to the experience of musical theatre through an understanding of complimentary cognitive processes.

One way in which this exploration can be accomplished, of course, is through analyses of the work of other composers and lyricists, approaching their writing from the perspective of the language of music, lyrics, and gesture in performance. In addition, I believe there is potential for more to be said about Sondheim's work as well, though from a slightly different perspective than that covered in this dissertation.

In 2005 and 2006 respectively, director John Doyle's interpretations of *Sweeney Todd* and *Company* appeared on Broadway. The director's unique choice of introducing musical instruments into the hands of the actors onstage, thus allowing the actors to function as their own orchestra, caused a critical sensation. Cognitive musicologists have completed significant work relating to the influence of musicians' gestural movements on

the emotional experience of audience members present at a musical event. In *Deepening Musical Performance through Movement: The Theory and Practice of Embodied Interpretation*, for example, Alexandra Pierce argues for what she views as the significantly enhanced cognitive effects of understanding a musician's arm, head, and body movements during musical production. In addition, Marcelo M. Wanderley, working with several other scientists, has completed studies indicating variation of audience members' emotional experiences according to the varied gestural tendencies of different musicians playing the same piece of music on the same instrument.²⁰³ Given these studies, it seems, one might say more regarding audience experience of gestural elements in Sondheim's work by considering Doyle's interpretations of *Sweeney Todd* and *Company* in terms of the featured actor/musicians.

Such a discussion would, of course, require the application of McNeill's ideas regarding the connection between speech and gesture in the human brain within the context of the connection between music and gesture explored more recently by cognitive musicologists. Yet, this seems quite possible given current views on musical gesture as inherently linked to the communicative intent of individual musicians and the idea of such gesture as suggesting concerns and meaning well beyond the simple production of musical sounds.

Further, it seems possible that through such a study of the communicative function of Doyle's actor/musicians in terms of the combined effects of the auditory and visual elements of musical language, scholars may achieve an extended understanding of the ways

²⁰³ See Nusseck, Manfred, and Marcelo M. Wanderley. "Music and Motion – How Music-Related Ancillary Body Movements Contribute to the Experience of Music." *Music Perception* 26.4, pp. 335-353.

in which significant elements of genre may be utilized to enhance audience members' experiences of productions such as these. Indeed, reviewers of Doyle's productions of *Sweeney Todd* and *Company* discussed unique responses to these productions, citing the influence of both the visual and the auditory elements of the actor/musicians' work as mutually defining factors in the theatrical experience. According to *New York Times* reviewer Ben Brantley, regarding *Sweeney Todd*,

[B]ecause the performers are the musicians, they possess total control of those watching them in a way seldom afforded actors in musicals. They own the story they tell, and their instruments become narrative tools. It is to Mr. Doyle's infinite credit that while he ingeniously incorporates the physical presence of, say, a bass fiddle into his *mis-en-scene*, 10 minutes into the show you're no longer aware of this doubling...²⁰⁴

Thus, in Brantley's experience, the instruments and the actors melded together – these elements co-existed in the world of the narrative presented, and both served to enhance an audience member's understanding of the characters' roles in the narrative. Critic Robert Brustein, writing for *The New Republic*, reported a similar response, emphasizing the actor/musicians' heightened ability to embody their characters:

Patti LuPone as Mrs. Lovett, the cheerful baker of meat pies, burps her tuba... and warbles her songs through a mouth resembling a cruel red wound... Lauren Molina, playing Sweeney's blonde daughter, Johanna, enhances her ingénue innocence with her cello. Diana DiMarzio is as mournful as her clarinet in the part of the Beggar Woman.²⁰⁵

Meanwhile, referring to Doyle's production of *Company* opening in Cincinnati, the *New York Times* critic Charles Isherwood observed methods through which the featured auditory and visual elements of the actor/musicians' performances functioned in unison to reflect the emphasis on the nature of romantic relationships in New York culture:

The new metaphor that Mr. Doyle's modus operandi brings to "Company" modestly amplifies the central themes of the musical. As they march along the stage's periphery or

²⁰⁴ Brantley, Ben. "Grand Guignol: Spare and Stark." *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 2005, E.1.

²⁰⁵ Brustein, Robert. "Making the Familiar Strange." *The New Republic*, 19 Dec. 2005.

sit silently on stools at the side in cool contemplation, the married characters are making music with – or at least at – each other.²⁰⁶

Thus, it seems that more contemporary interpretations of Sondheim's work have lived up to their potential to challenge and expand audience awareness of what is presented on Broadway in musical form. It is my hope that this dissertation will accomplish a similar goal within the realm of the academic analysis of audience reception of musical theatre and the expansion of such analysis in terms of cognitive studies. It is also my hope that this dissertation will encourage other scholars to participate in an ongoing dialogue covering the relevance of musical theatre to the overall experience of spectating. Sondheim and others have created works of complexity in terms of melding music, lyrics, and the inherent suggestion of gestural life to challenge audience expectations based in musical theatre and generic tradition, and it is the job of scholarly writers to investigate such innovation.

²⁰⁶ Isherwood, Charles. "Revisiting Sondheim's *Odd Man Out*." *The New York Times*, 24 March 2006, E.1.

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