STEPHEN SONDHEIM AND HIS FILMIC INFLUENCES

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While the work of Stephen Sondheim has been studied by scholars, frequently with examinations of his musical and dramatic influences, his filmic influences have remained relatively overlooked. I want to consider the many ways in which Sondheim’s work in musical theatre and in film has been influenced by his admiration for and interest in cinema. First, I want to look at the work Sondheim did in film, from script writing to composing songs for film scores, helped expand his knowledge and appreciation of film. Second, I want to examine how the work of Sondheim and his collaborators furthered the larger aesthetic movement in which filmic techniques became implemented in the structure, staging, and choreography of American musical theatre. Next, I want to consider how Sondheim’s interest in certain types of films and industry figures aligns with his collaborations on musicals. Finally, I then analyze the influence film composers such as Bernard Herrmann had on Sondheim’s scores. After studying Sondheim’s film experiences, links between staging practices in Hollywood and on Broadway, shared aesthetic choices in certain film and musical theatre narratives, and connections between aesthetic practices in Sondheim’s compositions and those of significant Hollywood film composers, I determined that there are a wide range of connections between mainstream film and Sondheim’s work in musical theatre. My argument is that a careful look at these connections fosters a greater understanding of Sondheim’s work, his contributions to musical theatre, and the complex relationship between film and musical theatre in the twentieth century.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Working on this thesis has been a truly remarkable experience. I went into it excited and scared and am walking away from it feeling accomplished and hungry to dig through more studies such as this one. I chose my subject carefully, knowing if I chose something I loved, it would become a project I wanted to work on as opposed to something I would tire of in time. I am glad I chose what I did because I have found the project that much more rewarding, being something I have wanted to study for some time but never had the reason to do such an in-depth look. I can’t thank those who have helped and supported this project enough; you have truly made this one of my proudest experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

As Steve Swayne explains in *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (2007), “[Stephen] Sondheim’s shows continue to succeed (or, at minimum, fascinate) because of his manner of addressing the drama in words and music” (194). As Swayne’s observation suggests, Stephen Sondheim’s music and lyrics have subtle nuances and dramatic depth as they develop the characters in the musicals on which he has worked. These are some of the key reasons he has emerged as a major figure in twentieth-century musical theatre. Examining the history of musical theatre, as Scott Miller points out, Sondheim differs from the writers of the “Golden Age” of musicals from the 1930s to the 1970s, because he tends to deal “honestly with the complexity, the difficulty, [and] the messiness of human relationships” (3). Scholars have often examined the sources of inspiration for Sondheim’s work, with musical compositions, theatrical works, and his family life being influences that have been considered quite completely. These sources occasionally touch on Sondheim and his love of film, but do not delve deeply into filmic influences.

Many books on Sondheim’s career and work tend to merely survey all the musicals he has written by providing synopses and brief examinations of each work. These compilations, including Stephen Banfield’s *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals* (1993) and Martin Gottfried’s *Sondheim* (1993) offer clear and informed overviews of Sondheim’s career, up to their point of publication, but they skim the surface of each work in order to cover a great deal of material in one book. Craig Zadan’s *Sondheim & Company* (1994) has overviews of each work with additional anecdotes and quotes from people involved in their creation. These give some insight into the decisions made in the creation of the musicals, how the collaborators worked together, and what led the writers to make their aesthetic choices. However, they do not provide a detailed
picture of the relationship between film and theatre or the way particular types of film influenced Sondheim’s work in theatre.

The three other major works about Sondheim’s career are Meryle Secrest’s biography, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life* (1998), Mark Eden Horowitz’s *Sondheim on Music: Minor Details and Major Decisions* (2003), and Steve Swayne’s *How Sondheim Found His Sound* (2007). Secrest’s book explores Sondheim’s personal life in great detail, with anecdotal references to Sondheim’s taste and inspiration from films. Horowitz’s book studies Sondheim’s scores and is comprised of transcripts from interviews with Sondheim that Horowitz conducted. These interviews occurred while they were looking at Sondheim’s drafts and original scores considering what initial attempts at musicalizing ideas were trying to achieve and considered why the final choices in the processes were made. Finally, Swayne’s book considers the major art forms that influenced Sondheim, focusing mainly on musical influences that range from Sergei Rachmaninoff to Harold Arlen. In his examination, Swayne devotes a chapter to Sondheim’s dramatic influences and his love of film, and he briefly covers some of Sondheim’s filmic influences. These studies survey a wide range of influences but Swayne’s work is the only one that begins to consider film as a major influence in Sondheim’s work.

It is odd that these scholars do not give more weight to Sondheim’s filmic influences, for Sondheim has frequently described his love of film in articles and interviews. A review of his work reveals that many directors, actors, actresses, and cinematic movements have impacted his work. These influences have ranged from Hollywood films and figures to foreign films; some of these are well known in popular culture, while others are more obscure. Their influence is present not only in the scores and lyrics Sondheim has created but also in the general tone or structure of the musicals and works where he was a collaborator. Given that connection, the lack
of scholarly examination of film as an influence and resource is surprising. As Swayne notes in
the opening of his chapter “Sondheim the Cinéaste,” “[W]hile Sondheim did not propose most of
the stories that he and collaborators set to music, the stories bear striking similarities to films that
he knew and loved. This suggests that Sondheim as a collaborator favored stories that were
familiar to him and helped to shape these stories in ways that were familiar to him” (159).
Sondheim’s influences from film are apparent in the characters and structures of productions
such as Company (1970) Sunday in the Park with George (1984). Additionally, as Swayne also
explains, “Sondheim as composer borrowed concepts from the language of film and translated
these concepts into the music” (159, emphasis in original). Examining the ways that cinema has
influenced Sondheim’s work proves that filmic influences deserve as much recognition as the
musical and theatrical influences identified by Swayne and others. By looking at Sondheim’s
work in film, the films he has identified as influences, and the “filmic” strategies that appear in
his work, it becomes apparent that cinema has played a central role throughout his career.

My objective in this thesis is to show that in order to more fully appreciate Sondheim’s
work, a more complete understanding of his filmic influences and work is necessary. I plan to
use multiple critical approaches to conduct research in my study. To examine his scores and the
books of productions he has worked on, I will utilize close textual analysis by examining how
Sondheim gives voice to a character or scores a section of a musical. In applying film studies
methodologies, I will utilize formalist, auteur, and genre approaches in the various chapters as
appropriate. Using a formalist approach to study patterns in narrative structure, I will consider
parallels between his works in film and theatre. While using an auteur approach, I will discuss
stylistic and thematic constants in Sondheim’s work. Drawing on film genre studies, I will
examine stylistic parallels between Hollywood melodrama, film noir, French poetic realism, and
stylistic and thematic constants in Sondheim’s works. Finally, returning to a formalist approach, I will look at stylistic parallels between film and theatre productions from the early to mid-twentieth century. By utilizing these different methodologies, I hope to illuminate several ways in which Sondheim’s work connects with cinema. Finally, while I cannot examine all of Sondheim’s works exhaustively, a thorough knowledge of his entire canon will inform the study so that there will be strong, clear examples throughout.

was a collaborator.

The first chapter of the thesis, “Sondheim’s Work on Films,” will discuss Sondheim’s experiences working on films and their influence on him and his work. Throughout his life, Sondheim had opportunities to observe or be a part of various film productions. I would argue that these experiences undoubtedly influenced his work in theatre. These projects gave him a deeper insight into film production and also introduced him to alternative approaches to storytelling than what he knew from work in theatre. By providing an overview of his film work and his experiences in the medium, I will lay the foundation for drawing parallels between his theatrical work and his film experiences.

The second chapter, “Filmic Strategies Applied to American Musical Theatre,” will examine how filmic strategies have been carried over into the structure and staging of musical theatre works. By first examining Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1947 musical *Allegro*, the chapter will show that this musical influenced the future of the genre of musical theatre with its inclusion of filmic concepts in its staging. The chapter will then turn to examining how Sondheim composes for musical theatre and how the songs are influenced by the freedom of cinematically-influenced staging. Finally, the chapter will discuss how other artists Sondheim has collaborated with have been influenced by cinematic staging. After working with the concept in their collaborations with Sondheim, be it in the libretto scenes or the staging, they have utilized the concept in other works in their career.

The third chapter, “Filmic Influences on Sondheim’s Storytelling,” will examine Sondheim’s strong affinity for Hollywood melodrama and the French movement of poetic realism, and how this carries over into his theatrical work. By examining works that Sondheim discusses and praises in interviews and public forums, trends emerge. Melodrama (women’s
pictures) and the work of actresses including Bette Davis, film noir (male melodrama) and the poetic realism of French directors such as Julien Duvivier, have been consistently noted as some of Sondheim’s favorite types of films. The chapter will identify parallels between these types of films and Sondheim’s body of work to discuss their influence on his approach to character and telling a story is strong. Additionally, this chapter will address unique projects that were direct film-to-stage adaptations of Sondheim’s: *A Little Night Music* (1973), which is an adaptation of Ingmar Bergman’s 1955 film *Smiles of a Summer Night*, and *Passion* (1994), which is an adaptation of Ettore Scola’s 1981 film *Passione D’Amore*. Differences between the characters and story structure show the logic for the changes as they were made in the stage adaptations.

While my discussion of these adaptations will be very brief, I will illustrate the type of analysis that warrants further research by focusing on *Smiles of a Summer Night* and *A Little Night Music*.

The fourth chapter, “Sondheim’s Influence from Hollywood Composers,” will delve into musical influences from film, particularly the influence of Bernard Herrmann’s scores. He has admired other film composers besides Herrmann that have also been influential including Erich Korngold, Max Steiner and Franz Waxman. Herrmann as well as these other film composers influenced not only Sondheim’s harmonic and rhythmic language but his ideas of how music can enhance and help tell a story. By comparing their respective bodies of work, I will draw parallels to show their influence on Sondheim’s work.

The conclusion will tie together the evidence presented in the preceding chapters that show the many ways that cinema has influenced Sondheim’s work. Beginning in his childhood with his love of cinema and his awareness of such a wide range of films and figures in the industry, the seed was planted. As his career and work in twentieth-century American musical theatre grew, filmic concepts continually influenced his work. Examining the many facets of the
ways cinema has influenced Sondheim’s work, it has been a strong influence. My objective with this thesis is to help broaden and increase the acknowledgement of how large an influence cinema has been on Sondheim’s career.

While film has not been the only influence on Sondheim’s work, it has been a major source of influence that has been overlooked. By considering the various paths of influence, which include Sondheim’s work with the film industry, his practice as a filmmaker, his collaborations with others involved with film and theatre, and his personal interests in films, directors, and movements, I want to examine how the various aspects connect to his work. The influences manifest themselves in many ways, including plot structure and elements, character construction and development, staging that employs filmic strategies, musical and compositional styles, and aesthetic choices that reflect Hollywood imagery and film scores. By considering these paths of influence and their manifestations, I hope to consider the many facets of how film has influenced Sondheim’s work throughout his career.
CHAPTER 1: SONDHEIM’S WORK ON FILMS

Describing Sondheim’s early adolescence, from roughly 1936 to 1946, Secrest notes, “During the summer months [of Sondheim’s adolescence] Jimmy Hammerstein and Stephen Sondheim saw every movie that came to Doylestown—the program changed twice a week—and Stephen would be taken to see a film at Radio City Music Hall whenever he visited his father” (56). Since he would see the majority of movies that came out, he was exposed to a wide array of films, filmic movements, actors, and actresses. Being interested in the creative and production aspects of filmmaking, Sondheim’s life and career has included a number of film projects. These filmic endeavors range from home-movies that he filmed and edited with his friends and family to professional script and score writing. The filmic projects provided the foundation for his later musical works where he gets into the mind of his characters and gives them the words to express themselves as he writes the lyrics or scores. These are in addition to the other films bearing Sondheim’s name; filmic adaptations of his stage musicals such as *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd* which were adapted for the screen in 1977 and 2007 respectively.

Sondheim has also spent time contributing to the creative-writing aspects of films, both in terms of dialogue and music. As he explored writing dialogue, Sondheim worked in Hollywood for a period of time, co-writing the scripts for the television series *Topper* (1953) (Secrest 96-97). This experience provided him with a strong opportunity and allowed him to better understand how writers approach a script and reveal character. Later, in 1973, Sondheim worked with Anthony Perkins to write the script for a murder-mystery film *The Last of Sheila* (1973). The two men, coming from such varied backgrounds, worked well together and as Sondheim notes, “It was a very good and easy collaboration” (Secrest 237). Sondheim also contributed to the scores, either in full scores or particular songs, to a number of films. These gave him
opportunities to try voicing these cinematic characters and explore writing for this different medium. In his scores, they gave him an opportunity to contribute to the atmosphere of the film by writing music to underscore scenes and having to convey the emotion of the scene without words. Sondheim’s work with Alain Resnais on his 1974 film *Stavisky* was Sondheim’s first film score and has been his only full film score, outside of his musicals that were adapted to film (Swayne 181). Sondheim also contributed songs to films such as *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976), Warren Beatty’s film *Reds* (1981), Warren Beatty’s *Dick Tracy* (1990), and *The Birdcage* (1996). His songs in these films have aesthetic parallels with the score he wrote for *Stavisky* and the scripts he wrote for *Topper* and *The Last of Sheila*. The observable connections suggest that Sondheim’s musical theatre work is best understood by considering it in relation to his work in film.

In the spring of 1953, when he was twenty three, Sondheim took advantage of an incredible opportunity, which was to be the first of a handful of times cinematography played a major role in his life. This opportunity provided insight that undoubtedly fostered both his high regard for film as well as his awareness of the process of making a film. “Johnnie” Ryan was hired to assist director John Huston on the film in Italy titled *Beat the Devil* (Secrest 92). The film had a luminous cast that included Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Robert Morley, Gina Lollobrigida, and Jennifer Jones. Ryan invited Sondheim to accompany him on the project and Sondheim seized the opportunity. Up to this point, “Sondheim…, along with pals…, had been making short horror movies and thoroughly enjoyed the editing process” (Secrest 92). As films and filmmaking had already been such a major part of his life, this adventure must have seemed like an exciting chance to see a major feature film in production. Being around professionals of this caliber, Sondheim learned a great deal about film techniques and the challenges of film
production. He also became a fan of Bogart’s (Secrest 94). This venture expanded Sondheim’s awareness of the many aspects that go into creating a film of that magnitude. It is logical, then, with Sondheim’s admiration for all aspects of filmmaking, that he also tried his hand at script writing.

After his experiences on the set of Beat the Devil, Sondheim wrote a spy script in the manner of a Hitchcock film to attempt script writing. He wrote it specifically with Jack Lemmon in mind and titled it The Man with the Squeaky Shoes (Secrest 96). Sondheim then met script writer George Oppenheimer at a dinner party at the Hammerstein’s home and showed him this script. Oppenheimer had just sold a pilot film for a television series and was looking for a co-author. He saw talent in Sondheim’s script and in 1953, Sondheim was hired for the job and moved to Hollywood to be a writer for the television series Topper based on a film of the same name (Secrest 96-97). This phase of his life gave him an even greater appreciation for and understanding of the world of cinema.

Topper gave Sondheim a chance to venture into the world of professional screen-writing. It also gave him an opportunity to write scripts that would appeal to his own taste. In one episode of Topper, “George’s Old Flame,” Sondheim drew inspiration from his love of cinema and wrote a secondary character that is a movie star and is looked down on by a matron who snidely comments that the last film she bothered to see was Birth of a Nation (1915), thirty five years earlier (Swayne 160). The collaboration went well; however, as he worked with Oppenheimer, Sondheim discovered that scriptwriting was not the career he wanted. He had originally planned to stay in Hollywood for six months but stayed for five, finding he was bored with the work. Having penned only eleven scripts for the show, he moved back to New York (Secrest 100). After Sondheim left the film industry and began his professional theatre career, he wrote some of
the lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957).

The challenges and puzzle-like aspects of filmmaking continued to intrigue Sondheim, and he persistently studied and experimented with the art form. After working on *West Side Story*, with Leonard Bernstein as the composer, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Sondheim would visit the Bernsteins each summer on Martha’s Vineyard; during the course of these visits, they often filmed their own adaptations of major films. The first of these was based on *Golden Boy* and *Humoresque*, another was based on the last ten minutes of Puccini’s *Tosca* (Secrest 94). These plots show an awareness of major art pieces as well as an appreciation for lesser dramatic works like the camp film *Humoresque* starring Joan Crawford.

Thirteen years after *Topper*, in 1966, once Sondheim had began working as a composer and lyricist, he and James Goldman, a librettist, were “invited to contribute an original work for a new, experimental television series called *ABC Stage 67*” (Secrest 186). *ABC Stage 67* commissioned works by composers such as Betty Comden, Adolph Green, and Jule Styne (Gottfried 74). The Sondheim and Goldman piece was broadcast November 16, 1966, and was an opportunity for Sondheim to utilize his screenwriting background and help write a musical for television. Since Sondheim and Goldman both admired John Collier’s writing, they chose to adapt his short story “Evening Primrose” (Secrest 186). Collier’s work tells the story of a young poet who gets himself locked in a department store after closing so that he can work in peace and quiet. Once there, he discovers that the store is inhabited by a world of people who have also sought refuge there. A girl who got lost in the hat section of the store when she was six now serves as a maid in this world. The poet falls in love with her and tries to teach her about the outside world that she barely remembers. He decides to rescue her; they attempt to escape but are captured by the forces that keep the people trapped in this world. The final shot of the film shows
the poet and the girl as mannequins in the store window, portraying a bride and groom. The endeavor allowed him to utilize his compositional skills as he created musical means for conveying the characters’ psychological experiences. Unfortunately, neither the Sondheim and Goldman piece, nor the television series was a major success. As Gottfried notes, “The American Broadcasting Company [(ABC)] was, in those days, the runt of the network litter, and these original musicals…did nothing to increase its stature” (76).

The score is considered to be comprised of strong numbers, showing Sondheim adapted well to writing for television. His song “When,” for instance, is written to be sung as a voice-over, allowing the characters to be in a scene while it is being sung, a device not frequently used in theatre (Gottfried 76). One of the most striking aspects of the score is a ballad, “I Remember,” where the girl sings of longing for the world outside and her distant memories of it. As Sondheim explains, “Jim [Goldman] started out with this lovely phrase, ‘I remember snow,’ and I kept trying to work with it, and I knew at the end I wanted to use the word ‘die.’ After some hours…I thought, ‘It’s called ‘I Remember Sky,’ and then I can repeat it at the end and rhyme it with ‘die’” (Secrest 187). The end result of “I Remember” was the ballad that describes some of the overlooked aspects of life in lyrics such as:

\[
\begin{align*}
& I \text{ remember snow,} \\
& \text{Soft as feathers,} \\
& \text{Sharp as thumbtacks,} \\
& \text{Coming down like lint,} \\
& \text{And it made you squint} \\
& \text{When the wind would blow. (80-81)}
\end{align*}
\]

This poetic approach to the characters reminiscing in Sondheim’s lyrics blended well with
Goldman’s characterization in his short story. The project allowed Sondheim to apply his theatrical and emotional approach to characterization in his score to a film as well as gain experience in writing for the cinematic medium.

Turning to another film project, Anthony Perkins, who was one of Sondheim’s close friends during the latter half of the 1960s and into the 1970s, had starred as the poet in *Evening Primrose*. His love of intricate games and insight into dramatic development aligned with Sondheim’s interests and abilities (Secrest 235). Their mutual friend Herbert Ross was a successful director in Hollywood and, knowing his affinity for mysteries, asked Sondheim if he would like to write a murder mystery movie. After outlining a plot, Sondheim knew he needed someone more familiar with the genre to help him. He asked Perkins to collaborate with him on the script for *The Last of Sheila* (Secrest 236). Their mutual love for puzzles and games influenced the complexity of the clues they wrote into the script. Years earlier, they acted as co-hosts in a treasure hunt on Halloween in 1968 where they set up friends on teams and had them solve riddles and clues in a race to the end (Secrest 236). While this initial collaboration on mysteries was a live game for their guests to solve, their second would be one of Sondheim’s biggest forays into the world of film. The two men, approaching the material from such varied backgrounds, worked well together and as Sondheim notes, “It was a very good and easy collaboration” (Secrest 237). A bevy of Hollywood stars were cast including Raquel Welch, Ian McShane, and James Mason. The project showed the two men’s ability to create an intricate mystery that could share their love of mysteries and film with a wider audience.

In *The Last of Sheila*, the wife of a Hollywood producer is killed in a hit and run accident after a party at the couple’s home. The producer then decides to invite all the guests from that party to an evening on his yacht; having information with which to blackmail each of the guests,
he hopes to expose the murderer. The producer knows some of the following secrets: one man secretly molests children, another is a compulsive shoplifter, and another guest, though seemingly happily married, has had a homosexual affair (Secrest 237). One of the guests murders the producer so that the previous murder of the wife will not be unveiled. As the film continues, there are clues strewn throughout so that the audience can try to figure out the mystery as it unfolds. The plot eventually resolves itself in a last-minute confession with, as Secrest describes it, “the unlikeliest person in the group being, naturally, the most calculating and cold-blooded of them all” (237). The film received lukewarm reviews with critics’ opinions ranging from finding it too complicated to others who praised its ingenuity. The New York Times stated, “For as long as it runs, ‘The Last of Sheila’ is also a good deal of fun, like one of those tricky, after-dinner party games that always seem dreary in advance but then somehow turn out to be more amusing than one had any right to expect” (Canby 24). Sondheim, however, loved the experience and reminisces on the project realistically in Secrest’s biography saying, “It is boys’ work, not mans’ work, I’m sorry to say. But it was a wonderful time” (239). This film being his largest input and control on a Hollywood film, it is very characteristic of him with the carefully devised and intricately designed puzzle of the murder mystery.

After The Last of Sheila, Sondheim’s work on film has been focused on composing musical scores. The first of these was Alain Resnais’ Stavisky (1974). Resnais was a prolific director of French New Wave films—to be discussed later—and the two men had similar notions of how to tell stories. Their compatible approaches led the two men to admire each other’s work. Resnais enlisted the help of Sondheim to compose the score for Stavisky. The film tells the story of Serge Alexandre Stavisky, the French financier and embezzler. It examines his life from July 23, 1933, when he was 47, to the time of his death or suicide (it is unknown which) on January 8,
1934 (Wilson 123). Resnais’s telling of his story is a politically charged one. As scholars have noted, “[It] offers reflections in particular on French anti-semitism … [and] also attempts a broader perspective on Stavisky’s era through the inclusion of a parallel narrative of Trotsky in political exile in France” (Wilson 124).

Resnais sought out Sondheim thinking his style and musical approach to composition would fit well with his visions of the film. As Resnais noted in an interview with Richard Seaver, “I knew all Sondheim’s music, but the deeper I got into Stavisky, the more I knew [Sondheim’s] music was perfect” (Swayne 182). After seeing John McMartin play Ben in *Follies*, Resnais realized that Ben’s song “Live, Laugh, Love,” was similar to the story of Stavisky. In the song, Ben breaks down because he cannot continue to cope with reality. Once Sondheim was a part of the project, the two men worked well together, resulting in a film that combined the two artists’ approaches to storytelling. As Resnais described the importance of the music with the script, he noted, “When writing the shooting script I conceived certain key scenes rhythmically, in terms of [Sondheim’s] music. And on the first day of shooting, I had my tape recorder handy, with key passages of *A Little Night Music* constantly in my ear, to make sure that the rhythm of the scene coincided with Sondheim’s music” (Swayne 182). While this was not unique to Resnais’s work, it shows the importance of Sondheim’s music in the film. It is interesting that Sondheim influenced Resnais’s work, for Resnais’s influence on Sondheim’s work will be discussed later.

In addition to *Stavisky*, Sondheim has composed music for a wide range of other films. Expanding on what he specifically composed for each film, the scores include one song for the film *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution* (1976) which is directed by Herbert Ross, one song for Warren Beatty’s film *Reds* (1981), five songs for Warren Beatty’s *Dick Tracy* (1990), and two songs for the film *The Birdcage* (1996). In addition to these, there have been two movie
adaptations of his works *A Little Night Music* and *Sweeney Todd*, the films of which are from 1977 and 2007 respectively. Similarly to the score for *Stavisky*, his other scores are characteristic of his musical work. In the song “Goodbye for Now” from *Reds*, for instance, the melody unfolds in the middle section as a song by Jerome Kern would. This homage to Kern is fitting, with the setting of the film being Kern’s era, after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 (Swayne 54). These songs are characteristically like Sondheim’s canon of scores with their complex structure both musically and lyrically.

Some of the other songs Sondheim composed for films show aspects of his musical theatre writing as well. His song “What Can You Lose” from Beatty’s *Dick Tracy* reveals some of these compositional Sondheim elements. The song is sung by Mandy Patinkin who played “88 Keys” and Madonna who played “Breathless Mahoney.” The musical elements convey the challenging decisions the characters are having to make in the film. As Swayne notes, “The melodic contrasts of flights of fancy and moments of despair, the way the song returns to the beginning midway through as if to make a second attempt at realizing its own potential, the second half’s failure to achieve the climax reached in the first half…all these underscore the message of the lyrics” (100). The song, sung by the two lovers, is also written with almost every vocal line being comprised of a step and a leap figure in the structure of the intervals. This structure makes the melody as fleeting as the lyrics that convey the characters failed attempt at coming together which, while not unique to Sondheim’s work, demonstrates the detail in the structure of the music.

His song for *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, “The Madam’s Song,” which is also known as “I Never Do Anything Twice,” is full of scandalous lyrics. The setting for the song is a Viennese brothel in the late 1800s where the proprietress regales her clientele with three bawdy tales of her
sexual exploits: the first, with a captain of the guard and his St. Bernard; the second, with a baron who enjoyed sadomasochism; the third, with an abbot with a fondness for entwining religious imagery and sex (Swayne 192). The madam brushes them off stating she never does anything twice, as the title implies. Using witty pairings of words and homonyms, the song contains Sondheim’s trademark intelligent lyricism.

Through observing film productions to working on them, Sondheim has been exposed to the production end of film in many different experiences. These assumedly gave him a deeper appreciation for the work that goes into creating a film as well as allowed him to have input in that process. Contributing to films with scripts and scores, Sondheim gained experience in writing for a different medium other than theatre. The connections between his work in film and theatre are a reminder that in both art forms, melody and musical structure are used to convey character emotions.
CHAPTER 2: FILMIC STRATEGIES APPLIED TO AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE

Throughout Sondheim’s theatrical works, there are pieces so heavily influenced by film that they are songs that must be staged utilizing filmic techniques. Closely examining and comparing films with scores and librettos using a formalist approach, parallels in the narrative structures arise. While this reflects a larger movement than just Sondheim’s works, he has played a major role in supporting the notion of filmic techniques being applied to theatre. As Foster Hirsch has noted, “Although Sondheim insists that he does not want to direct …his instincts about how to stage a song are surely those of a director” (76). For example in *Sweeney Todd* (1979), it was Sondheim’s idea to have Mrs. Lovett interrupt her first song “The Worst Pies in London” with swats and smacks at bugs that are around her shop as shown below in Example 1.
Ex. 1. Stephen Sondheim, “The Worst Pies in London” from *Sweeney Todd*

To structure the song accordingly, her lines are cut short and the musical rests are filled with rhythmic dialogue as shown in Example 1. Thus, while not the director, Sondheim structures and composes the music and lyrics to facilitate the staging of the scene. As he has stated, “I think cinematically when I’m writing songs and I stage them…in my head. And I realize that I stage them like a movie” (Swayne 165).

The idea of staging scenes like films is present earlier in Sondheim’s life as well. When he wrote a short story as a college freshman, “The Brass Goddess,” he described the main character’s daughter as, “[Someone thinking of herself as] in a perpetual movie, as if there were some unseen cameraman making the story of her life and showing it, scene for scene, in a small theatre somewhere, to a small, interested audience, who would live there and see everything through her eyes” (Secrest 56). Sondheim’s ideas, even at that young age, show the beginnings of his combining techniques and framing of films with the live energy and emotion of theatre. As evident in his music, Sondheim’s characters can convey the deep complexity of their emotions either in subtext or solos, when no one else is present, and convey their true feelings about their lives, regardless of what they have said in the scenes previously. For instance, Desirée Armfeldt in *A Little Night Music* (1973) admits her romantic feelings for Fredrik that she has been fighting the entire musical. After he rejects her, she sings “Send in the Clowns” where she seems to try to laugh off the issue. In reality, there is a sense of loss and regret that permeates the song with lyrics such as:

Isn’t it rich?

Are we a pair?

Me here at last on the ground,
You in mid-air.

Send in the clowns. (Applause 303)

It is important to examine the foundation of the concept of incorporating filmic techniques in theatre before more specifically studying how Sondheim and his work with his collaborators furthered these ideas in part of the larger theatrical movement. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1947 musical Allegro had a tremendous influence on Sondheim as far as the idea of blending theatre and film techniques. Sondheim was a gopher for the show which was directed by Agnes de Mille, and he was impacted by observing its groundbreaking elements influenced from the cinema. One of these major elements was the inclusion of an S-shaped curtain that could slide in the track on the floor to allow for several scenes at once, like cinematic split-screen scenes (Secrest 54). As Sondheim has stated, “Right away I accepted the idea of telling stories in space, of skipping time and using gimmicks like the Greek chorus” (Secrest 56). As Sondheim explains the staging of Allegro: “It was a set of dissolves, a series of dissolves. Nobody ever thought of doing it before [in musical theatre]” (Swayne 165). While staging like this had been applied to plays, musical theatre had always been rather showy and everything had either played in front of one setting or had lengthy scenic changes that involved bringing curtains down to mask the changes. As Sondheim has noted, “Now, [Elia] Kazan had done it in straight plays—he did it in Death of a Salesman. The staging of Death of a Salesman was very cinematic. But not in musicals…” (149). The staging for Allegro influenced others as well. Allegro’s groundbreaking use of cinematic framing techniques was also used in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s next show in 1949, South Pacific, which was highly successful. As Sondheim explains, “Hal Prince says that [, the staging utilizing dissolves in South Pacific,] was the turning point in his life. That’s when he realized you can stage a show like a movie” (Swayne 165). While Allegro was ultimately
unsuccessful critically, it planted the idea in Sondheim’s mind that theatre could adopt filmic techniques.

The plot of *Allegro* concerns the life of Joseph Taylor Jr. and follows him through his thirty-fifth birthday in a series of vignettes. After growing from infancy to adolescence, Joe begins to develop feelings for his childhood friend Jennie. Joe goes to college to become a doctor to follow in his father’s footsteps, planning to work with him. While there, Joe tries to disguise his loneliness and longing for Jennie by enjoying college and focusing on life there. His friend at college Charlie, the popular guy on campus, sets him up on a double date. While the girl he is out with can envision a future together, Joe is still in love with Jennie and he is a lackluster date. When he goes home before graduation to propose, Jennie wants to accept but also sees that her life lies outside of the limits of being a small-town doctor’s wife. She wants him to work with her father, who is a doctor in the city where he could earn more money. When Joe’s mother goes to confront her and discuss her son’s future, Jennie holds fast to her beliefs. Joe’s mother suffers a sudden heart attack and dies trying to make Jennie change her mind. The first act ends with the wedding of Jennie and Joe where the entire town celebrates and those closest to them reveal their innermost thoughts about the couple. Joe’s recently deceased mother, separate from the living townspeople and the only one who can see what the future holds, weeps as everyone celebrates the ceremony. In the second act, the Great Depression has squelched dreams of Joe entering a joint partnership with Jennie’s father. She now believes that moving Joe’s practice to the city is the only way to get the success she wants. When Charlie’s uncle who is the head of a hospital in the city offers Joe a paying internship, Jennie ferociously fights to get Joe to take it. Confused about accepting, Joe leaves his father’s practice, breaking up the father/son team. Once in the big city, Jennie sets her sights for success even higher. Meanwhile, Joe’s longtime nurse Emily tells
him that his focus has gone and instead of the patients who need him he treats pill-popping socialites. After the wife of the chairman of the board of the hospital reveals to Joe that Jennie has been having an affair with her husband, a fact commonly known except for Joe, he realizes how disillusioned he has become by big-city life. When he is at a banquet to announce him as the successor to Charlie’s uncle, he turns down the position, shocking the crowd, and announces he will return his father’s practice and the town he loves to do what he is meant to. Once again, all those who have mattered in his life, including his deceased mother and grandmother reappear and see him on his way.

As the sets are described in the script, they become more symbolic than realistic. “There are no stage ‘sets’ in the conventional sense, but backgrounds for action are achieved by small scenic pieces on a moving stage, by light projections, and by drops” (Rodgers and Hammerstein 185). As the musical begins, the stage directions explain that each location is framed by concentrated lighting that lights only the playing space needed for that scene. These allow the scenes, particularly the opening montage of Joe’s birth and childhood to be staged in a montage fashion. In the sequence, the protagonist is “whirled through the swift adventures of his infancy of childhood” with tightly-focused framing for each scene (Rodgers 191). The changing projections can convey montages, such as when Joe grows up in the opening sequence. As Sondheim describes the sets in the liner notes of the first complete recording of Allegro, “One set could be placed behind the curtain on Stage Left while a scene was being played on Stage Right and subsequently revealed when the curtain slid across in the other direction. This movie-wipe technique satisfied Oscar [Hammerstein] enough to use it in his next show, South Pacific, where wipes and dissolves were used throughout” (16). The set and the overall structure of the show were groundbreaking and impacted many musical theatre practitioners. As Sondheim noted
about the approach to *Allegro* in comparison to previous musicals, especially Hammerstein’s, “Oscar [Hammerstein] used theatre convention frankly as theatre convention [by using approaches possible in the theatre, stretching these ideas to new limits]…these techniques have had a large influence on Hal’s work and mine” (Hirsch 21). The creative team of *Allegro* utilized the conventions and techniques of theatre and adapted them by applying filmic techniques. By taking ideas of how the theatrical medium could be expanded and even further used to tell a story with these new concepts, Rodgers and Hammerstein began inspiring artists of the future to carry them to new levels.

*South Pacific*, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s next show in 1949, also utilized filmic techniques in its staging. The plot of *South Pacific* tells a story of some of the sailors and officers who are stationed in the South Pacific during the Second World War. It focuses on Ensign Nellie Forbush, who meets and falls in love with Emile De Becque, a wealthy plantation owner. After Emile admits to her that he left France because he killed a man and Nellie hears rumors from some officers that Emile could be trouble, she begins not to trust him. She then resolves to rid herself of him before she gets too attached. This resolve is quickly broken when he comes to see her and explains the murder. Meanwhile, a lieutenant, Joseph Cable, falls in love with Liat, the daughter of Bloody Mary, a local merchant. The first act ends with Nellie visiting Emile and being introduced to his children who had been born to an islander. Shaken by this surprise, she flees back to base to get away from the situation. As the second act opens, Nellie and the sailors perform in the Thanksgiving Follies to bring levity to the camp. When Emile comes backstage to see Nellie, Cable tells him not to see her as she is upset. After he leaves, Bloody Mary comes to convince Cable to marry Liat. When he refuses, as he knows he cannot give up his life in the service and therefore cannot provide Liat the life she deserves, Mary leaves enraged. Emile and
Cable then bond over their situations. Emile cannot understand Nellie’s racist response to Emile’s children while Cable cannot understand his own decision to reject the girl he loves. The two men are then teamed together as Emile decides to work for the American forces and volunteers to assist Cable in one of the most dangerous areas of the islands. Nellie hears of Emile’s departure and fears for his safety. While on the mission, Cable dies from war injuries. Nellie then has to comfort Liat and tell her of her love’s death. When she is spending time with Emile’s children and becoming closer to them, Emile returns and the two embrace, looking toward a happy future together amidst the societal tensions.

Staged by Joshua Logan, scene changes in South Pacific were the most common moments where filmic techniques were utilized. As the scene change from the first scene to the second is described in the script, “The lights fade out and a transparent curtain closes in on [the actors]. Before they are out of sight, the characters of the next scene have entered downstage in front of the curtain. All transitions from one scene to another in the play are achieved in this manner so that the effect is of one picture dissolving into the next” (Rodgers and Hammerstein 281). As the next scene begins, the first is ending; it is staged as a lap dissolve in film where one shot begins to fade out as the next fades in. The staging also utilized crosscutting, going from one scene, to another, then back to the first and so on. For instance, in the first act, the fourth and sixth scenes occur on a company street while the fifth scene takes place in the Island Commander’s office. As the stage directions leading into the sixth scene read, “As the lights are fading on the captain’s hut, the company-street curtain closes in and the activity seen here before is resumed” (Rodgers and Hammerstein 307). These ideas, seamlessly incorporated into the structure of the musical were striking to younger artists of the time. Hal Prince has praised the direction of South Pacific saying, “Joshua Logan led the way to the modern style in 1949, when
he directed *South Pacific* without any breaks between scenes. He was the innovator of *continuous action*” (Hirsch 2, emphasis in original). The utilization of this filmic transitioning between scenes in musical theatre paved the way for future theatre artists to carry the ideas further. As Sondheim comments on the impact in his liner notes to *Allegro*, “*Allegro* initiated that [cinematic] approach, but because it was a failure few people paid attention. With *South Pacific*, a gigantic hit, everyone jumped on the bandwagon and the cinematic approach to staging became a standardized technique in musicals” (16).²

While musicals began incorporating these types of ideas, the musicals Sondheim collaborated on later in his career are no exception. They have many examples of ways their staging has been influenced by filmic strategies. These instances are present in video recordings of productions as well as being embedded in the book scenes or musical numbers. While Sondheim did not direct his shows or write the book for them, he collaborated with others who also worked on the creative team. He had input on the overall creative aspects of the musicals in addition to having creative control over the musical scores. Working on *Sweeney Todd*, for instance, Sondheim’s vision of the show was a story of obsession and how that turns Todd into a tragic hero in the classical sense. (Zadan 245) Between his influence in the structure of the musical overall and the structure of his songs, the idea of staging musical theatre productions cinematically was definitely supported, if not initiated by Sondheim.

Two of Sondheim’s major works that were influenced by the concept of utilizing filmic techniques are *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971). In both of these, the filmic techniques were implemented in the staging of the musical numbers and the book scenes. Hal Prince, who directed both, was a major collaborative force who helped filmic techniques cross-over into theatrical staging. As Prince explains, “I purposely requested that the rehearsal script of *Follies*
and Company read like screenplays. I had a sense that you could do close-ups and dissolves and wipes on the stage which had really been left to cinema prior to both those shows” (Zadan 141).

From the start of rehearsals, Prince wanted the actors to be aware of these concepts. Michael Bennett, who choreographed both shows, also contributed to the filmic character of their staging. As he noted, “One of the most boring holdovers from the traditional musical is the use of rideouts or blackouts. In Company and Follies we discovered ways of using dissolves…of never stopping the action. In Follies there was a place for your eye to go every minute” (Zadan 141).

Bennett’s explanation seems to note that one way filmic ideas aid their theatrical staging is by focusing the audience’s gaze and deciding what they see. Prince and Bennett collaborated especially well together in staging the shows. As Prince has said of their collaboration, he knew he had found a partner capable of extending his directing work and enhancing it with choreography. Additionally, he had found someone also interested in cinematic staging, a concept that they would contribute to in Company and expand on in Follies (Mandelbaum 60).

Company concerns Robert, an inveterate bachelor, his three girlfriends, and the married couples in his life. The musical is set in New York City to examine the need for commitment in life and the challenges of coexisting with other people in that setting. Using the range of New York City inhabitants and situations to embody these themes, Robert observes his friends around him in various stages of their relationships as he struggles through his own. The couples include Paul and Amy, who are about to be married and are terrified at the prospect of how that will radically change their lives. He also observes the older couple Joanne and Larry. In that pairing, Joanne is looking to have an affair with Robert as she has outgrown the freshness of her marriage with Larry. Robert is often seen as a cipher who merely observes everything around him, watching the world pass him by. However, he can also be seen as a much more active figure. He
is the central focus who sees the spectrum of what commitment could do to his life, and he must decide whether he wants any of what would come along with a committed relationship. He ultimately chooses to escape the overwhelming chaos of his friends’ well-intended advice, and he decides for himself to go and find commitment and rejoin society. Choosing to live life to the fullest and ready to commit to something, he sings in “Being Alive”:

Make me confused,
Mock me with praise,
Let me be used,
Vary my days.

But alone is alone not alive. (126-7)

Directed by Hal Prince and choreographed by Michael Bennett, the staging of the scenes and musical numbers frequently utilized filmic techniques. As Prince has noted, “If you read Company, you’ll see that it uses close-ups, cross fades, dissolves—all the techniques of film and none of the technique of the stage” (Mandelbaum 60). In both “The Little Things You Do Together” and “Another Hundred People,” for instance, the songs are interspersed with vignette-like scenes creating cutaways and cross-fades in the staging and structure of the show. For instance, after the first scene where Robert visits his first set of married friends, the sequence intercuts their scene with a scene of Joanne. As Robert is talking to Harry and Sarah, Joanne appears above them in a scene of her own. The sequence then alternates the scene with Robert and the couple with verses of Joanne’s song “The Little Things You Do Together.” Prince notes that another way this song utilized filmic techniques was when Elaine Stritch, who played Joanne, began the song. He explains, “What you’ve done there [as a director] is you’ve brought a camera in to a lady, and quick cut to her face” (Mandelbaum 60). Later in the musical, “Another
Hundred People,” a song examining the difficulties of urban relationships, is sung by Marta. Robert then has three separate vignette-like scenes where he goes on dates with three different girls: Kathy, Marta, and April. Between each date scene the audience hears a part of “Another Hundred People” as the themes of each scene tie into the song and the overall song and subsequent scenes are intercut.

A year later, Sondheim and Prince had another show on Broadway with *Follies*. This next musical also utilized filmic techniques in its staging and choreography. *Follies* tells the story of a reunion of the Weismann chorus girls, a version of the Ziegfeld girls, on the now dilapidated stage of the Weismann theatre that is soon to be demolished. Among the former stars who attend are Sally Durant Plummer and Phyllis Rogers Stone with their respective husbands Buddy and Ben. Throughout the musical, ghosts of the younger versions of the girls and men are present, at times dancing with them or at times singing with them. This highlights the drastic difference between what once was and what they have become. As the night progresses, the characters confront their past and what led them to where they are. The girls had been roommates and the men were best friends who would wait to go out with the dancers after their shows. Sally tries to convince herself and Ben that she is happy in her marriage to Buddy. She tries to appear as though it did not devastate her when Young Ben married Young Phyllis. His choosing of Phyllis revealed that he merely used Young Sally for sexual satisfaction. Ben later confides to Sally that he is unhappy in his now loveless marriage to Phyllis. The respective couples want their relationships to end, and so chaos ensues with the older and younger counterparts all yelling at each other. This is suddenly broken by the theatre being restored to its former glory as the younger versions of the characters sing optimistically looking to the future. As their younger selves are looking to the future, the older counterparts perform old follies numbers of their own.
When Ben gets to his, preaching his positive philosophy to get through life, he breaks down and cannot continue. The illusion vanishes and the couples leave the theatre as their younger selves imitate the past once more with the men calling to the girls above in their dressing rooms above.

It is fitting that much of Follies’ staging is influenced by cinematic strategies. An inspiration for the show came from an old black-and-white photograph Hal Prince saw in a book about old movie houses. This Hollywood imagery led to the production of the show. There was a picture of the actress “Gloria Swanson standing amidst the rubble of the half-demolished grand foyer of the Roxy Theater, looking upward, with her arms outstretched, dressed in black, but dressed to the nines” (Chapin 7-8). Prince was struck by this image and the thoughts and questions it sparked. These include considering, is she conveying triumph over her accomplishments or heartbreak over the loss of the past? Whatever the intended emotion, the photograph laid the groundwork for what would become Follies. It inspired the poster for Follies and shaped the idea of reflecting on former glory lost. Sondheim compared Follies to Company in that they both required an unusual structure. Commenting on Follies, he noted, “It’s Chekhovian, everything happens underneath the surface” (Hirsch 93). This Chekhovian structure of the plot and characters requires staging that conveys the strong emotion under the surface. As Hirsch comments, “And like Company too the action unfolds cinematically, with the theatrical equivalents of fades, parallel editing, deep focus, and shock cuts” (93). All those involved creatively with the show worked to make Follies unlike anything musical theatre had seen before, with its juxtaposition and collision of the past and present. Taking techniques that had began in Allegro and South Pacific, the creative team took the concepts further in Follies. The filmic techniques utilized helped the creators shape this musical in new ways.

For Follies, Hal Prince and Michael Bennett were co-directing as well as carrying out
additional tasks, with Prince as the sole producer and Bennett as the chorographer. Both men approached their staging, as Sondheim did with the score, from a very different manner than was usual for musicals and instead was akin to the work done on *Allegro* and *South Pacific*. As librettist James Goldman notes of the creative team’s work together, the song “Who’s That Woman?” was a clear example of the production’s filmic influence. “Who’s That Woman?” is a song where the older women decide to do a dance from their younger days. Working off of an idea Sondheim suggested to him, Bennett staged it with the older women dancing in the present day. Suddenly behind them, the ghosts of their younger selves join the dancing, juxtaposing the past with the present (Zadan 139-40). As the number ends, the past and present generations of these characters have danced together and the older women end in the same formation they began, only this time with their former selves right behind them. As Goldman noted, “To see the decay of the flesh—all those bright, young beautiful girls…and the promise of what’s to come contrasted against what actually became of it. That’s devastating…very disturbing and very movielike” (Zadan 141, emphasis in original). The overlapping of the past and present is like a filmic superimposition that shows the two eras existing at one time. Commenting on the number, Martin Gottfried observes, “As the song, like the staging, vacillates between past and present, the eerie effect gives way to the ongoing soap opera of the book” (95). This effect helped smoothly convey the thematic ideas of the musical. One use of filmic techniques that was cut because of time was the staging of the montage that includes “Rain on the Roof,” “Ah Paris!,” and “Broadway Baby.” Initially, Bennett wanted to stage them in silhouettes to get the effect of a movie montage (Zadan 143). In the end, it became a montage in which the songs are glimpses of the women’s past lives but without the added elements of the silhouettes. Even without using this technique, Bennett, Prince, and Sondheim worked together to utilize many filmic techniques to
Goldman notes that, “The theater rarely utilizes visuals to make important statements, but films do. It’s putting the picture in front of you and there was a lot of that in Follies” (Zadan 141-2). Many of the numbers in Follies were written and/or staged in filmic terms because of the continual juxtaposition of the past and the present. To show characters in different locations or in different times, they were often isolated by a spotlight to frame the scenes (Hirsch 101). The opening, where each of the four main characters enters and delivers a monologue, was staged in this manner. Writing about the rehearsals, Ted Chapin notes that Hal Prince “kept on rehearsing the party vignettes all week, devising almost cinematic cross-fades as a waiter, a guest, or one of the black-and-white showgirl ghosts wandered in front of a scene as it ended” (41).

The filmic concepts used in Company and Follies influenced other works by Michael Bennett after these collaborations. Two of his other major works, A Chorus Line (1975) and Dreamgirls (1981), contain “echoes of the scenic abstractions, the scaffolds and platforms, the filmic handling of time, the continuous kinetic movement, and the love of physical metaphors” (Hirsch 105). While Bennett had also utilized filmic concepts in his work before his collaborations with Prince and Sondheim, Bennett’s staging choices after Company and Follies showed an increased application of filmic techniques.

Looking at his work before collaborating with Prince and Sondheim, Coco (1969) was the show where Bennett began to experiment with cinematic staging. He used a mannequin that revolved across the stage, going offstage on one side and reappeared in a new outfit on the other as a time-lapse effect. His work was heavily influenced by Bob Fosse and he used Coco as an opportunity to expand concepts he had been introduced to when working with Fosse. For instance, as Ann Reinking, a dancer from Coco, explained “Fosse had already introduced the
idea of the cinematic segue in *Sweet Charity* [(1966)], and Michael [Bennett] used the turntable in *Coco* for cinematic segues, like a ‘bleed’ in film” (Mandelbaum 52). These techniques helped the show flow smoothly without the clunky interruptions of set changes and helped tell the story better. As Bennett has stated about his experience on *Coco*, “The best thing I can say about *Coco* is that it helped me do better on *Follies*” (Mandelbaum 56).

Bennett had opportunities to develop his use of filmic techniques in staging and choreography when he went on to work after his collaborations with Prince and Sondheim. When he worked on *Seesaw* (1973), for instance, he used these techniques to shape the overall feel for the show. As Ken Mandelbaum notes of Bennett’s work on the structure of *Seesaw*, “He created a show that moved with enormous fluidity and assurance” (87). Bennett also utilized these techniques in his biggest musical theatre accomplishment of his career in with *A Chorus Line* (1975).

*A Chorus Line* tells the story of a group of hopeful dancers baring their souls and dancing for their lives in the hopes of making the cut and securing a role in the chorus of an upcoming show. Conceived by Michael Bennett to tell the story of the life of a Broadway dancer, he began creating the show by conducting interviews with dancers and having them tell their life stories. He assembled around twenty-five dancers who talked about their lives in order to explain what led them to where they were. As eventual librettist Nicholas Dante explains, “Very early on, all guards were dropped, because the minute people started talking about their childhood or what they went through, of course you would identify with something…It would just trigger a wealth of memories for yourself” (Turan and Papp 372). By digging through emotional points in these peoples’ lives, Bennett was presented with rich characters that sparked an idea of a show. As Dante further explains, “There was a second session…Then one night I got a telephone call and
it was Michael. He said to me, ‘I definitely think that there’s a show in this material’” (Turan and Papp 372). As they worked and developed the idea, they decided on the idea of having seventeen dancers who would audition for eight roles. The audience learns about each character, their struggles, and the drive that brings them to this audition, until eight dancers are finally chosen for the chorus.

As Ken Mandelbaum observed of Bennett’s staging in *A Chorus Line*, “There is constant ‘jump cutting’ in *A Chorus Line* as the audience’s attention is shifted abruptly from one figure to another, and Bennett’s ability to bring things into sudden, startling focus as in film is what makes so many *Chorus Line* moments spine-tingling” (168). For example, when Diana sings “Nothing,” explaining how her acting teacher failed to be a supportive educator, she is suddenly in a spot light, framed on her own, isolated from the rest of the line. Not all of Bennett’s staging used fast cuts however. In “At the Ballet,” for instance, as the first girl ends her verse, the scene dissolves from Sheila to Bebe, and as Bebe ends her verse, it dissolves to Maggie. In between each girl’s verse is a lap dissolve for a moment as the girls sing together to bridge the verses.

One of the most striking uses of filmic techniques in the staging of the show is the montage sequence. To effectively introduce each of the seventeen dancers on the line and have the audience understand them and where they are coming from, the writers utilize a montage to do so efficiently. As librettist Nicholas Dante has explained, “I went home and I turned my paper sideways, listed the interviewees, and then I started writing just thoughts, random thoughts, not who said them…People started to be interviewed [in the actual show] individually, but then we went into this montage, you grow up with everybody” (Turan and Papp 386). By allowing the audience to see each of the characters reflect on their adolescence, they gained important insights into each of them. As composer Marvin Hamlisch explains, “I remember putting it all [the lines
Dante pulled from the interviews] on the floor at my apartment and practically doing a gluing and pasting job, just to see which dialogue I thought was important enough to put to music. We called it ‘Hello Twelve, Hello Thirteen, Hello Love’” (Turan and Papp 386).

Hal Prince also continued to work with Sondheim, without Michael Bennett, and the two men continued their use of filmic strategies in the structure of their shows. In *A Little Night Music* (1973), for instance, “Complementing the way Sondheim used music to provide quick changes in place and time, […]Prince’s staging] created the effect of terse filmic cuts with moveable, transparent and fanciful screens…which veiled one group of characters while revealing another” (Hirsch 106). The score is written in a way that is similar to “The Worst Pies in London” from *Sweeney Todd* and it calls for comparable staging strategies. In *A Little Night Music*, filmic techniques such as cutaways and cross-fades are needed for Madame Armfeldt’s song “Liaisons” and the trio of “Now”—“Later”—“Soon” near the beginning of the show. “Liaisons” alternates between Madame Armfeldt’s song, which is about her past affair with the Baron de Signac, to Fredrika and Fredrik and Desirée’s scene where they are renewing their sexual affair. In the opening trio of “Now”—“Later”—“Soon”, the characters first sing their respective song as a solo. The three songs then combine and overlap musically. As they begin, Fredrik sings “Now” about wanting to sleep with his wife. Suddenly, the scene cuts to his son Henrik singing about how he is always told he must wait to live life and must live chastely because of his religion. Next, the scene cuts to Anne, who is Fredrik’s wife, singing how she will soon be ready to show him her love for him. Finally, the three songs overlap as the musical number ends. An additional example is the staging of the finale to first act, “A Weekend in the Country,” which also shows groups of characters in different locations at once. As the characters prepare to head off to the Armfeldt’s country house, they all sing of their various plans and the
potential for this weekend escape away from their normal lives. Like the trio near the beginning
of the musical, the song builds by first showing each group individually and concluding with
everyone singing from their respective locations all on stage at once.

Hal Prince also carried these filmic techniques to his work outside of his partnership with
Sondheim. In *Evita* (1979), for instance, filmic techniques shaped Prince’s entire vision of the
show. Prince drew from various major Hollywood and foreign films and directors such as Orson
Welles, who directed *Citizen Kane* (1941), and F.W. Murnau who was a significant German
director of silent films in the 1920s. Prince shaped the story of Eva Peron, the former First Lady
of Argentina who worked her way out of severe poverty to her position. *Citizen Kane* was
directed by Orson Welles and told the story of Charles Foster Kane, a character based on
American newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst. (With a score by Bernard Herrmann, this
landmark film was also influential on Sondheim’s work.) As Prince explains, “[Citizen Kane]
had an enormous influence on the look I worked for in *Evita*: the sense of size which Welles
understood so well; the sense of shadow, with much of the action in a kind of fake perspective.
And Murnau’s *Sunrise* and *The Last Laugh*, which influenced Welles’s design for *Citizen Kane*,
also had a profound impact” (Hirsch 165-6). In the opening sequence of *Evita*, for instance,
Prince had to stage the announcement of Eva Peron’s death to a crowded theatre and then follow
that immediately with her funeral sequence. To do so, he utilized media and projected images to
create depth and a false sense of perspective on the stage to give the appearance of throngs of
people mourning her passing in a vast space. Thus the set design aspects from films like *Citizen
Kane* influenced Prince’s vision of the show, and helped create the scope of the impact Eva
Peron had on the nation of Argentina.

Later in his career, Prince directed Jason Robert Brown’s *Parade* (1998) and used more
filmic techniques in his staging. *Parade* examines the rape and murder of a girl in Georgia in 1913 and the accusation and attempted acquittal of Leo Frank. The opening number begins with a young confederate soldier singing, going off to fight in the Civil War. The action then shifts to the same soldier, now in 1913 reflecting back on the war. This transition is achieved by a fade-out, fade-in technique where the initial scene fades out and then the second is brought into focus. Impacting his overall transitions and vision, Prince relied on film noir elements in his staging. As he explains, “I wanted [the staging] to look like film noir, and all the film noir techniques, of lighting, mood, and atmosphere, are compatible on such a stage [as the production was mounted on]. I put in traps and actors would sprout [up] in the middle of crowds” (Hirsch 223). Prince proved the value and effect of utilizing filmic concepts in staging. While the technology and the ideas had come a long way from *Allegro* and *South Pacific*, they have matured from the original ideas sparked by those productions.

In addition to productions such as these, Sondheim collaboration’s with people other than Bennett and Prince utilize filmic techniques or show the influence from film. For instance, in one of his first musicals, *Saturday Night* (1954) for which he collaborated with librettists Julius J. Epstein and Phillip G. Epstein, Sondheim has a nod to the cinema with the song “In the Movies” that contrasts the elite lives of Hollywood stars with the dull, banal life of New York, and does so utilizing crosscutting to alternate between the two social groups (Swayne 160). This crosscutting, as Swayne describes it, is a frequent structural device that Sondheim uses in his music, as is evident in the songs “Epiphany” from *Sweeney Todd* (1979), “Unworthy of Your Love” from *Assassins* (1990), and “Someone in a Tree” from *Pacific Overtures* (1976). Sondheim frequently uses this split-screen device, staging multiple scenes at once, such as in songs like the opening of *Into the Woods* (1987) and the second act version of “Johanna” in
*Sweeney Todd.* Many of Sondheim’s songs have cinematic staging embedded in them, so that no matter how the shows are directed, these moments must utilize filmic techniques to be staged at all. In the opening of *Into the Woods,* the way the beginning musical number is written—with scenes occurring in Cinderella’s house, Jack and his mother’s house, and the Baker and his wife’s house—the staging has to have multiple scenes occurring at once. The second act version of “Johanna” has Sweeney Todd singing in his barbershop, Johanna singing from an asylum, and Anthony singing from another part of London. Like the opening of *Into the Woods,* this must be staged using a multi-screen approach showing the different characters in different parts of London at once and also uses lap dissolves, where one scene ends and fades out as the next begins.

By examining the work of Sondheim, as well as that of his major collaborators, it is clear that the practice of incorporating filmic techniques in musical theatre has grown considerably since *Allegro* and *South Pacific.* Having been influenced by those initial works, Sondheim and collaborators such as Hal Prince and Michael Bennett continually searched for ways to use these techniques in ways that helped them better connect to the audience coming from a society infused with filmic images. *Company* and *Follies* were major advances in this approach and expanded the concept for future artists. Incorporating techniques from film such as continuous action, multiple images onstage at once, and non-linear plot structure, Sondheim and his collaborators worked to tell their stories in ways that would engage contemporary audiences.
CHAPTER 3: FILMIC INFLUENCES ON SONDHEIM’S STORYTELLING

Beginning with Sondheim’s younger years, major filmic influences were present in his life. As Sondheim has stated, “During my formative years movies really molded my entire view of the world” (56). Growing up in New York City and the surrounding areas, he was drawn to the cinema and saw an extensive amount of films (as I discussed in the first chapter). When surveying the range of films that he has noted in interviews or other public forums that he particularly admires or was influenced by, trends can be seen in his tastes. The cinematic movements of Hollywood melodrama, including women’s pictures and film noir, and foreign film movements, such as French poetic realism emerge as favorites. Drawing on the recognition that film genres feature stylistic and thematic constants, it is possible to see parallels between women’s pictures, film noir, poetic realism, and Sondheim’s work. Examining these developments in film shows that, in his music and lyrics as well as in his work as a collaborator on his musicals, Sondheim shaped his work in ways that were similar to these filmic movements.

One of the first films that Sondheim has stated made an impression on him is the 1945 American film made in England: *Hangover Square* directed by John Brahm. What struck the fifteen year old Sondheim was the film’s melodramatic plot as well its score composed by Bernard Herrmann (Secrest 57). The film tells the story of a struggling composer, George Harvey Bone, who suffers from an extreme psychological disorder. Every time he hears a certain high-pitched frequency he is overcome by a powerful urge to strangle one of the next people with whom he comes in contact. He eventually falls in love with a scheming dance hall performer, Netta, who wants to use his music for her own acts. Bone is sent into one of his episodes when he realizes her real motives; she then accidentally strikes a discordant sound and he strangles her. As Bone continues with his work, unaware of the crime he has committed, he
goes on to debut his latest work in a concert hall. At the same time he is about to debut the new piano concerto, a psychiatrist comes to take him away because he is unfit to be in society. In the middle of the debut, memories of Netta’s murder overwhelm Bone and he puts the pieces together, realizing he murdered her. Insisting he complete the piece before being taken away, and at this point entirely mad, Bone sets fire to the concert hall. He then continues the performance, playing on amidst the flames of the burning hall. The striking final moments of the film show the room as it is being engulfed in smoke and flames as we hear the final chords of Bone’s concerto.

Brahm’s film was a precursor to the standard Hollywood melodrama films of the 1950s. In the 1950s, melodrama came to be defined as, “a film genre that … involves extremes of emotion and often but not always privileges a feminine point of view” (Lev 58). *Hangover Square* has the intense emotion but focuses on a male point of view. By focusing on the male point of view, Brahms’s film is an early example of a male form of Hollywood melodrama, film noir. Elements of noir present in the film include the mystery around Bone’s condition as well as the repression occurring with him mentally. Melodramas are the films that shaped Sondheim’s worldviews of society as well as influenced his notions of how to tell a story and give voice to characters.

An early effect of the influence of *Hangover Square* came a few years after Sondheim first saw it, when he was attending Williams College. He began writing a novel, *Bequest*, where the protagonist Edward Gold is a composer and pianist, like George Harvey Bone from Brahms’s film. At the novel’s opening, Gold is debuting a concerto of his own and has a memory lapse and cannot continue for a moment. Although the moment passes and he continues, it is very frightening for him. In his daily life he is plagued by nightmares, erratic mood swings, and headaches (Secrest 57). Gold situation being similar to Bone’s, the novel was an early example
of film influencing Sondheim’s interest in psychologically rich characters. While Sondheim attributed *Bequest* to being “the result of watching ‘too many Bette Davis movies,’” its connection to *Hangover Square* is an early example of film influencing Sondheim’s dramatic work (Secrest 57).

The work of actresses like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford exemplified the type of complex psychological characters that appealed to Sondheim. Their work in melodramas secured their places in American cinematic history as two of its greatest actresses. As Peter Lev defines melodrama in addition to frequently privileging a female point of view, “[It is] a film genre that centers on tensions within an immediate group. It involves extremes of emotion and…the protagonist works through conflict and suffering to find her or his place in the world” (58).

Davis’s acting in films such as *The Letter* (1940) and *All About Eve* (1950) was nuanced and layered as she navigated her way through these psychologically-rich characters’ journeys. Davis was also a strong-willed actress who resisted typecasting at a time when it was common for stars to get stuck in certain stereotypical roles (Bingham 7). Her resilience paralleled her character’s strong control over their lives. Crawford, in roles such as Marian Martin in *Possessed* (1931) and Helen Wright in *Humoresque* (1946), also portrayed strong, self-empowered women who try to break from the patriarchal oppression of society.

The characters Davis and Crawford portrayed provided Sondheim with solid examples of strong, psychologically-complex women. Davis’s portrayal of Leslie Crosbie in *The Letter*, for example, provided an example of a calculating woman working to maintain the lie that she shot someone out of self-defense. Someone from this emotionally-complex, isolated position in society provided a model for the character of Gold in *Bequest*, who was plagued by nightmares and experiences mental struggles to lead a normal life. These isolated characters are similar to
characters Sondheim helped to develop in musicals. While not solely of his invention, his work with the librettists to create characters such as Bobby in *Company* and George in *Sunday in the Park with George* are mined from this vein. Both have to work through their isolation in order to attempt to reconnect or continue in society and their characterization could have been influenced by Davis’s Leslie Crosbie. Davis or Crawford’s strong-willed women, especially Crawford’s Helen Wright who uses men as playthings, also could have provided a model for Sondheim shaping Desirée in *A Little Night Music*, for she tries to maintain power over the lives of others. She reflects on when she thought she was the center of her men’s lives in “Send in the Clowns” when she wakes to reality and realizes her missteps. As the regretful and longing lyrics state:

> Don’t you love farce?
> My fault, I fear.
> I thought that you’d want what I want—
> Sorry, my dear (207).

As shown with these examples, Crawford’s and Davis’s strong characters could have influenced Sondheim’s choices in writing and composing for musical theatre. While there is no way to prove that these characters were direct influences on the characters Sondheim helped shape, they certainly parallel characterizations found in his work.

To be sure, there are many parallels in Sondheim’s works with elements of Hollywood melodrama. Hollywood melodrama, as a film movement, emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. Examining Thomas Elsaesser’s essay on melodrama, Cynthia Baron notes that Hollywood melodramatic narration varies from classical narration by complicating the linear trajectory of the narrative through structural parallels, dramatic acceleration, and the tendency to reveal information not related to the main plot (48). As Elsaesser explains, there are “structural changes
from linear externalisation of action to a sublimation of dramatic values into more complex forms of symbolisation” (quoted in Baron 48). This parallels Sondheim’s musicals such as *Company*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984) with their Chekhovian approach to plot. On the surface very little happens but underneath, emotionally, much happens in terms of character development. For instance, Bobby in *Company* is seemingly a cipher, a blank slate that merely observes the action going on around him. Upon closer examination, however, Bobby changes slowly, in minute degrees, to move from an isolated position of loneliness to being willing to accept someone into his life and commit to a relationship. George in *Sunday in the Park with George* is another apparently stationary character. In the first act, he seemingly stays engrossed in his paintings; he neglects his relationship with Dot and this drives her away. Again, with careful study, it is possible to see that he is actually a man torn between the two worlds: his personal life and perfection in his art. As he reveals in the song “Finishing the Hat,” near the end of the first act, by being as invested in his art as he is, the people he wants in his life cannot wait long enough for his attention and he can never give them his undivided attention. As George rationalizes his position, he sings:

> And when the woman that you wanted goes,
> 
> You can say to yourself, “Well, I give what I give.”
> 
> But the woman who won’t wait for you knows
> 
> That, however you live,
> 
> There’s a part of you always standing by,
> 
> Mapping out the sky. (100-1)

Finally, by the end of the first act, as Dot goes to leave for America with their child, seeing George come to a point of closure and accept their going, the audience can see the change he has
gone through. Characters like these and others in musicals Sondheim collaborated on parallel this more subtle action present in Hollywood melodramas.

Raymond Durgnat describes the action of melodramas as action that may be revealing of the inner psychology of the character while it may not advance the plot as quickly as other action could (Baron 50). A well-structured example of this is “Color and Light” from *Sunday in the Park with George*. The song begins with George working on his painting of “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande-Jatte.” As he talks aloud to the painting, obsessing over getting every color and shade exactly as he wants it, Dot is waiting to go out to the follies with him. As she waits and plans to go out, she muses about how her previous lovers who were artists worked only during the day. Therefore, they were making themselves available to see her at night. By comparison, George gets lost in his work and loses track of the world around him. As he works, his awareness of her subconsciously creeps in to his mind as he sings:

Blue blue blue blue
blue still sitting
Red that perfume
Blue all night
Blue-green the window shut
Dut dut dut
Dot Dot sitting
Dot Dot waiting
Dot Dot getting fat fat fat. (37)

The song, while doing little to advance the plot, deepens the characterizations of George and Dot, showing their struggle in their relationship. As he is fighting not to live entirely in his work,
she wonders what she needs or deserves in her life in terms of love. The audience comes to understand them better and is drawn further into the story.

As Baron explains of melodrama and its narrative structure, “Melodramatic narration stimulates audience involvement and investigation by inserting pauses (after throttling character and audience expectations) in the narration” (48-9). The musicals Sondheim has collaborated on frequently stop the forward momentum of plots, and find other ways of playing with linear structure. As Sondheim noted about the complex structure of storytelling in some of his musicals, “I’m attracted to stories that present difficulties in the telling, and I’m often interested in getting away from the linear and naturalistic” (Hirsch 85). In *Passion* (1994), for instance, details of the physically and mentally ill Fosca’s past are scattered throughout the musical rather than being told in opening exposition all at once. Sondheim and director James Lapine make use of a flashback late in the musical to reveal the events that led Fosca to her current state. By waiting to explain how Count Ludovic swindles Fosca into marrying him so he could steal her parents’ money, the writers conceal what caused Fosca to regress into her physical state. After being unmasked and admitting to his deceit, the count leaves her penniless, and this drives her to physical and mental illness. This major revelation adjusts characters’ perceptions of each other and helps propel the show to its climax and conclusion. It also transforms Fosca, from an obsessive creature stalking Giorgio to a sadder, more human character in the audience’s view. This delayed revelation helps the audience care more about her and her relationship with Giorgio.

Another way melodramas work to pull audiences into them emotionally is by sparking interest in characters’ reactions to situations and creating contrasting points of view (Baron 49). For instance, in *Follies*, when Ben tells Phyllis he wants a divorce, she assumes it is due to his
romantic interest in Sally. The audience is sympathetic with her considering to grant his request as she sings “Could I Leave You?.” During the song, after it dawns on her that he has already left her emotionally, she realizes she should leave him. During the song, she goes from an initial state of decision to stay with him to realizing that since he has moved on to another woman, it makes sense for her to find someone else as well. The song builds musically to convey her mounting tension, with increases in tempo and rhythmic complexity. Another example of drawing the audience in with contrasting points of view is in the song “Someone in a Tree” from Pacific Overtures (1976), which is one of Sondheim’s best examples of setting different points of time on stage all at once. Throughout the song, the four characters relay the events of Commodore Perry’s visit to Kanagawa. Occupying three different planes of time, there is the Warrior who was under the treaty house, the boy who was in a nearby tree, the boy as an old man recalling the event, and the Reciter who interjects comments and questions throughout in an attempt to piece together the truth. This Rashomon-like structure explores the concept that the passage of time and distance from an event leaves one’s memory of the actual event hazy and at times unspecific or incorrect, as in the case the Old Man’s memory.

In addition to Hollywood melodrama, film noir is another filmic movement that has influenced Sondheim’s work. Film noir is a term assigned by French film critics in the 1940s to an American film movement. As film scholar James Naremore reasons, “The growing Americanism in postwar French culture and nostalgia for their pre-war cinema predisposed the French to discover or invent American film noir…in particular ways” (Bould 16). Many aspects of film noir are commonly found in the stories and characters that appealed to Sondheim and his collaborators. Film noir also influenced how they structured the telling of these stories. One such aspect of the movement is the thematic motif of entrapment, frequently of wrongly accused men.
Mark Bould lists a range of films throughout the 1940s and 50s that depicted innocent men, who are framed and frequently jailed for crimes that they did not commit, or men who are caught up in conspiracies and then suffer the price of their misfortune (51). This is a theme that is most present, out of the musicals Sondheim collaborated on, in *Sweeney Todd*, the urban legend that Christopher Bond wrote of in a play adaptation. Sondheim and Wheeler decided to musicalize Bond’s version of the tale in 1979. As we learn in the beginning of the musical, Benjamin Barker was wrongly imprisoned and sent away because Judge Turpin wanted Barker’s wife for his own. When Barker, now called Sweeney Todd, returns to his former home on Fleet Street, the new owner, pie-shop-proprietor Nellie Lovett informs him of the events that transpired once he was removed from the Judge’s path. The judge invited Todd’s wife to his estate for a festive gathering once her husband was gone. When she went, he raped her, which caused her to go mad and soon after pass away. This exposition and wrongful imprisonment ignite Todd’s vengeful nature that drives the story.

Naremore notes noir’s sense of discontinuity and its melding of realism and dreamlike states as he summarizes Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton’s *Panorama du film noir américain* (1955), a major work on film noir (Naremore 22). “Someone in a Tree,” from *Pacific Overtures*, is an example of these aspects of noir, for the juxtaposition of the multiple time eras on stage at once creates a dreamlike space in which the characters tell their versions of the story. The song also shows the discontinuity that comes with remembering an event from many years before. The use of dreamlike states blended with realism is a trend in noir that aligns with many works on which Sondheim collaborated.

Another characteristic of film noir, as Naremore notes, is the reversal of the common cinematic elements of clear definitions of good and evil, logical action, and scenes that are more
spectacular than they are brutal. As Naremore explains, “The ‘vocation’ of film noir is to reverse these norms and thereby create a specific tension that results from the disruption of order and ‘the disappearance of psychological bearings or guideposts’” (21, emphasis in original). Certain aspects of this are also present in Sondheim’s and Wheeler’s adaptation of *Sweeney Todd*. After returning to London, Barker has changed his name to Sweeney Todd to avoid not being recognized. While his anger and desire for revenge is justified and clear, it pushes him to murder many people in his venture to kill Judge Turpin. While his anger is reasonable, the act of murder does not leave him in the realm of “good.” The structure of the show makes the murders more dream-like and stylized than brutal and vicious. The second act contains the song “Johanna” where, in this reprise of the song, Todd sings dreamily to his daughter he believes he will never see. Also in the song, her suitor, Anthony, sing longingly for her and Johanna herself sings as she is locked in an asylum. As Todd sings in a legato, smooth musical line, he slits the throats of many customers who come for a shave. As shown in Example 2 below, Anthony and Todd’s flowing melodic lines contrasting with the brutal action of Todd murdering the customers makes for an enticingly chaotic moment.
Ex. 2. Stephen Sondheim, “Johanna (Todd)” from *Sweeney Todd*

Determinism is another common element of film noir that is present in stories that Sondheim chose to musicalize. Mark Bould examines noir films that combine flashback and voice-over narration, describing determinism as “a continually collapsing wavefront simultaneous with rather than anterior to the moment” (58-9). When telling a story and adjusting the narrative structure of the film, making it non-linear helps engage the audience and leave them with questions about causes to be answered later in the film. Flashbacks can be used to help make the plot non-linear. The example of the flashback in *Passion* that reveals Fosca’s failed marriage, for example, parallels this aspect of film noir. Another example from *Passion* is Giorgio and Clara’s relationship. When we initially see them, and through the majority of the piece, they appear to be deeply in love, continuously sending each other love letters after he has been called away to duty. The first hint that something is not as it seems is in the song “Forty Days” when Clara sings her letter she is writing to Giorgio. Expressing her excitement that he has gotten another leave from the military to see her, she sings:

Imagine that, a whole forty days—

Well, forty matinees.

And once we’re in our room,

Our secret room,

Where I’ll be able to care for you,

Kiss you, embrace you,

Be there for you… (150-2)

Her acknowledgement of a “secret room” they go to serves as an early sign that their relationship is secret for some reason. Soon after, in “Scene 12,” in another letter, Clara writes:
Something even better,

A surprise here at home:

In a week, my husband goes to Rome. (162)

By waiting until late in the overall story, but revealing hints throughout that the relationship was not as perfect as it seemed, the narrative structure draws the audience in to Giorgio’s dilemma where he must choose between his affair with Clara or the obsessive love of Fosca. He eventually chooses Fosca after realizing the love her supposedly felt with Clara was more lust than love. This example of the narrative structure Sondheim and Lapine chose to utilize parallels the deterministic aspect of film noir and conveys a somewhat deterministic view of Clara and Giorgio’s relationship.

Other filmic movements that have influenced Sondheim’s works are more obscure. In 2003, Sondheim was chosen to serve as guest director of the Telluride Film Festival. Doing so allowed him to share his love of film with another audience and, as he discussed film’s role in his life when he was an adolescent, he explained his tastes from that time. As he clarified, “The only kind of movie that held no interest for me whatsoever was [the Arthur Freed MGM unit] musical. …What I loved were westerns. Melodramas, even romantic comedies. High drama” (Mitchell). Being able to draw from his wide range of filmic tastes, Sondheim hoped to expose the attending audience to directors with which they might not be as familiar. One particular director he initially hoped to showcase was the Polish producer and director Krzysztof Zanussi, but his work had been shown at the festival a few years prior.³ Though the Telluride Festival had shown his work previously, his film The Contract (1980) was still shown, being Sondheim’s favorite of Zanussi’s work (Mitchell). Sondheim also decided to show a major French director of the 1930s: Julien Duvivier. Sondheim was enthusiastic about the selections the
festival was showed, “They found an English-subtitled ‘Un Carnet de Bal,’ …And they also
found the English-subtitled ‘La Belle Équipe,’ which is a movie that really knocked me out in
my early-20’s, and I want to make a musical out of it, too” (Mitchell). It is fitting that he ended
up selecting these directors; Zanussi and Duvivier’s films also show a strong parallel to
Sondheim’s stories and characters for which he chooses to write.

Julien Duvivier’s films are frequently characterized by characters that almost have
aspects of film noir. As Alan William’s notes of Duvivier’s films, “Duvivier was drawn to ‘the
often tragic plights of isolated individuals’ and to ‘the failure of an embattled individual trying to
break out of some sort of trap…virtually all of his French sound films, even those that end
happily, are bathed in a pervasive, ultimately nihilistic pessimism” (164). His films have been
recognized for their narrative style, strong scenes and confrontations, and heightened sense of
drama. As Sondheim noted of his work: “I love Duvivier’s stuff; it’s always one inch short of
opera. It’s romantic melodrama, which is exactly what ‘Sweeney Todd’ is” (Mitchell). This
allusion to Sweeney Todd helps illuminate how Duvivier’s work appealed to Sondheim. Being
one of the closest things to the dramatic intensity and height of grand opera, Sweeney Todd is
heavily influenced by Duvivier’s films. As Todd tries to break through the impasses Judge
Turpin laid in his path, he battles, both inwardly and outwardly, to get the revenge he deserves.

Duvivier’s work greatly aligns with the types of stories Sondheim chooses to musicalize
and how he collaborates to do so. Examining Duvivier’s films, such as Pépé le Moko (1937), the
differences from film noir emerge. In Pépé le Moko, a Parisian gangster is hiding out in the
Casbah in the Algiers. In the end, the police gun him down after his desire to see the woman he
loves draws him out of hiding. While the film is reminiscent of a Hollywood gangster film, its
muted violence and fatalism make it more representative of the darker side of poetic realism
In *Sweeney Todd*, the violence is also muted, and while the musical as a whole is a gothic-thriller of sorts; the deaths are more poetic than gruesome. For instance, in the second act, when Todd is slashing customers’ throats while singing “Johanna,” the murders, while violent, are juxtaposed against the calm beauty of the music as previously shown in Example 2. The calm, legato composition of the song diminishes the horror of the acts he is committing. The scene can be seen more as poetic realism than violence.

Alain Resnais is another director who influenced Sondheim’s work. He is a director whose early works are representative of the French New Wave. As David A. Cook explains, “When [the creators of the New Wave] finally came to practice cinema, they knew more about the medium as an art form and less about the practical aspects of production” (445-6). These filmmakers’ approach to cinema had unique repercussions. Cook explains the movement by noting, “New Wave films constantly remind us that we are watching a film, and not the reality that a film inevitably resembles” (446, emphasis in original).

This type of narrative is present in Sondheim’s *Assassins* (1990) as it comments on the vignettes of the historical figures and examines the motivation behind their actions. Using the Balladeer as a narrator or Greek Chorus type of character who removes the audience from the action they are seeing, Sondheim wrote songs for him that allowed him to be part of the action at times and to comment on the scenes in others. While not as severe as Brechtian concepts, this reminds the audience they are watching a play, not reality. With Charles Guiteau’s assassination of President James A. Garfield, for instance, the Balladeer narrates the account and acts as a bystander who interacts and sings a duet with Guiteau before he is hanged. The Balladeer is forced out his position of authority near the end of the musical. As Scott McMillin notes, “As he tries to moralize about America as a country…the gathered Assassins advance upon him and
drive him from the stage. Then they are free to sing ‘another national anthem’ without hinderance” (155). As a figure, his commentary on the action invites the audience to think about what they are seeing and remember they are watching a play.

Resnais’ work focuses on the relationship between human memory and the passage of time and he examines this by “exploding the conventional boundaries of narrative form” (Cook 456). As Emma Wilson describes his work, “Resnais rejects the chronological representation of events in order to reflect on film form…and to represent the complexity of the human process of imagination and recall” (3-4). The concept of observing the impact of the passage of time is very present in two stories Sondheim chose to collaborate on. In Merrily We Roll Along (1981), an adaptation of George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart’s play of the same name, the entire story is told in reverse chronological order. This unique approach to storytelling, used first in the Kaufman and Hart play, was retained by Sondheim and his collaborators to show how humans, through their decisions and opportunities, work to get where their lives lead them. Another Sondheim collaboration that played with chronology, to an extreme, is Follies. By juxtaposing the past and present, events are continuously shifting from one era to the other. “Who’s That Woman,” for instance, sets the past and present Follies’ girls against each other by showing the girls as they once were and how they have changed throughout their lives.

Further considering films of the New Wave, they show more similarities to film noir. Naremore notes in his book that directors such as Resnais “saw noir as a dying form that could …retain its psychological and social edge, but it could also be treated at a distance, in the interests of a critical and self-reflexive analysis of contemporary life” (38). Like Duvivier’s examination of social issues, both of these artists’ work as well as Sondheim’s examines social issues. Whether they are class and power issues or general issues of neglected minorities, these
artists all examined contemporary life in their works. Resnais and Sondheim had similar ideas in
how they worked on their art and eventually worked together on Resnais’ film Stavisky, as I
previously discussed when exploring Sondheim’s work on films.

Being as influenced as he has been by film, it is logical that Sondheim would choose to
work on adaptations of films for the stage. A Little Night Music (1973) and Passion (1994) are
musicals that Sondheim and his collaborators created by adapting the stories and characters from
cinematic works. A Little Night Music is based on Swedish film director Ingmar Bergman’s film
Smiles of a Summer Night (1955). Similarly, Passion is adapted from Italian director Ettore
decided to alter when adapting these work for the stage can reveal how their choices changed the
tone and narrative of the musical theatre result from the original film. While I will address
Scola’s film, I will focus more on Bergman’s Smiles of a Summer Night and A Little Night
Music, for the purposes of time.

Ettore Scola’s film Passione d’amore tells the story of Captain Giorgio Bachetti who is
sent off to be stationed at an isolated frontier outpost. This sudden assignment breaks up his
affair with Clara. At the outpost, Giorgio is obsessively pursued by Fosca, the half-mad and ill
daughter of the station’s commander. Eventually he comes to fall in love with her. Sondheim and
his collaborators were fascinated by Scola’s film. As Sondheim recalls on the commentary to the
film of Passion, Fosca’s entrance in Scola’s film is what led to his wanting to adapt the work. As
he recalls, “The staircase in the movie, behind those glass bricks, is what I think… really hooked
me into the movie. Seeing Fosca come down and not quite see her because you just saw the
shadow behind the bricks” (Passion). This character in the film is full of mystery as well as
being so repulsive, it is unusual that Giorgio falls in love with her in the end after realizing he
has found true love. This seeming paradox is what makes the film so compelling. Her striking entrance sets the tone for the film ahead.

Scola’s *Passione d’amore* is already an adaptation of a novel of the same name by Igino Tarchetti. The creative team for *Passion* made sure they were familiar with both sources, though they drew more from Scola’s film. In Tarchetti’s novel, many characters converse through letters. Working to adapt the piece, Sondheim and librettist James Lapine drew from this concept of communicating through letters. Doing so, they created an epistolary musical in which the characters are almost continuously singing letters they are receiving or writing to each other. Drawing from both preexisting works, Sondheim and Lapine were able to create a new narrative of the story.

Ingmar Bergman’s film *Smiles of a Summer Night* is a tragicomedy film that shows the story of couples becoming entwined, and it plays somewhat like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Bergman’s film tells the story of the lawyer Fredrik Egerman who is torn between his much younger wife Anne and his former lover, the actress Desirée Armfeldt. Like the plot of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the couples in *A Little Night Music* get continually mixed and switched showing the folly and fickleness of love and romance. Desirée decides to host a weekend at her family’s country estate where her current lover, Carl-Magnus, and her former lover, Fredrik will attend with their families. She hopes that by doing so, that she can lure Fredrik to fall in love with her again. In Sondheim, Hugh Wheeler, and Hal Prince’s adaptation, there are minor changes in the plot and characterizations that alter the shape of the story; however, they retain the lighthearted mood of Bergman’s film.

As Prince, the director of *A Little Night Music*, said of taking on the task of adapting Bergman’s film, “It was something we always wanted to do…a musical that dealt with love and
lovers and mismatched partners…love and foolishness, tying it all together with age” (Zadan 181). This romantic comedy of a musical was challenging for the creative team to unify their approach to retelling the story. A major difference between Bergman’s film and *A Little Night Music* is the overall tone. Bergman’s film is much darker than the stage adaptation. In Bergman’s film, Desirée seems to create drama for the sake of watching it all unfold, whereas in Sondheim and Wheeler’s musical she is trying to get what she wants and does not need to intentionally create drama in other peoples’ lives. Initially, Sondheim was composing songs in Bergman’s darker, more Chekhovian vein. As Sondheim describes Prince’s vision of their adaptation, to which he adjusted his writing, he explains it as “whipped cream with knives” (Zadan 182). This approach would allow the darkness to creep in occasionally but to retain the overall feel of a much lighter musical.

There are a few major changes to plot points or characterization that aide in this lightening of the story. The humor in Bergman’s look at love lies in the shifting pairings and ridiculousness of the wealthier characters, with the servants being the wisest and most grounded characters of the film. In Wheeler’s libretto to the musical, Madame Armfeldt, Desirée’s elderly mother, is the wisest character of the musical. Wheeler gives her many pearls of wisdom that she frequently bequeaths to her granddaughter Fredrika, which includes the notion that the summer night smiles three times. This concept is told by Frid the servant in Bergman’s film who is reduced to a much lesser role in the stage adaptation. As Madame Armfeldt explains, the summer night smiles “at the follies of human beings…The first smile smiles at the young, who know nothing. The second, at the fools who know too little, like Desirée…And the third at the old who know too much—like me” (1.Prologue.28-33). Assigning this knowledge to Madame Armfeldt makes her a more central figure in the story. Therefore, her death at the end of the musical is
more powerful. It also completes the pattern of the summer night smiling once on each age group. The first “smile” is when Henrik and Anne decide to run off together. The second is when Desirée and Fredrik finally decide to be together. The final “smile of the night” is when Madame Armfeldt has recounted the story of her one true love and then dies.

Two other noticeable changes are somewhat major to the adaptation. First, instead of Desirée having a young four-year-old son, she has a slightly older thirteen-year-old daughter. This provides someone who can be the receive Madame Armfeldt’s knowledge and anecdotes and be someone with whom Desirée can discuss her plans for the future. Fredrika functions as a device that allows the audience to hear characters such as Madame Armfeldt’s inner thoughts that would normally go unheard. The other major plot change that affects characterization concerns Desirée and her weekend gathering at her family’s country estate. In the film, she invites Fredrick and his family as well as Count Carl-Magnus and his wife. In the musical, she only invites Fredrick, while Carl-Magnus hears of the gathering and decides to show up uninvited. This shifts the characterization of Desirée from a woman plotting to create drama to amuse herself to a woman simply trying to get what she wants. Additionally, this takes the entire second act, the weekend gathering in the country, to a state of even further chaos than in Bergman’s film. As Sondheim collaborator from A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum Burt Shevelove observed, “Hal and Steve never said they were going to retell the story of Smiles of a Summer Night. They decided to lyricize the various aspects of love” (Zadan 183).

Looking at the film movements and directors that have been an influence on Sondheim’s musical theatre work, it is possible to see that there are a range of parallel aspects. One common similarity is the characterization. For example, Bobby in Company and George in Sunday in the Park with George, are very similar to isolated men in film noir. Another parallel lies in
Sondheim and his collaborators utilizing non-linear narrative structure. By delaying information from the audience, for instance, the characters are not fully drawn and it is the filling in of missing information that makes them fuller, richer characters for the audience. Non-linear narratives, from small flashback moments to *Merrily We Roll Along* where the entire story is told in reverse, are common in the musicals Sondheim has collaborated on. Another recurring similarity is work that thematically concerns social or humanistic issues and examines them intensely. While not all of the musicals Sondheim collaborated on deal with major social issues, the ones that do look at these issues echo the approach these filmic movements or directors have taken also similarly to Rodgers and Hammerstein’s works. These influences show the range of style and level of influence Sondheim has felt from cinematic concepts in his collaborations as far as plot structure and staging elements.
CHAPTER 4: SONDHEIM’S INFLUENCE FROM HOLLYWOOD COMPOSERS

In addition to seeing the ways in which filmic techniques and aspects of film movements could be adapted and transferred to the stage, Sondheim was also heavily influenced musically by Hollywood composers. These compositional influences come mostly from earlier films and their studio era composers. As Sondheim once explained, “The film scores of the forties were my true literature; I know every note of every score of every Bette Davis and Joan Crawford movie” (Hirsch 75). There were many film composers from this era who influenced Sondheim’s work. Examining their works through formalist and textual approaches, parallels between their scores and Sondheim’s scores for musical theatre emerge. As previously discussed, John Brahms’s film *Hangover Square* was influential in its plot and characterization of the protagonist Harvey Bone. Additionally, the film’s score by Bernard Herrmann had a lasting effect on the young Sondheim. Besides his work on *Hangover Square*, Herrmann’s work with Alfred Hitchcock to create suspenseful and horrific moments greatly influenced Sondheim’s approach to composing his version of *Sweeney Todd*.

Sondheim has also discussed being influenced by composers such as Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Max Steiner, and Franz Waxman. He explains that they were “the people who took all this drama out of middle Europe and squashed it on the screen” (Stryker). These celebrated film composers worked in the vein of Romantic composers such as Richard Wagner. Additionally, these composers knew and were influenced by each other throughout their careers. They also provided a bridge for Sondheim to Romantic music. As he explained to Steve Swayne, “All the movie scores were Strauss-influenced and influenced by late nineteenth-century Romanticism. I got into that kind of symphonic music, I think, unconsciously through listening to [Erich Wolfgang] Korngold and [Max] Steiner and [Franz] Waxman” (10). Sondheim also credits John
Williams’ work as a contemporary of the studio era composers having been an influence on his writing for *Sweeney Todd*. After reflecting on how John Williams’ score for *Jaws* (1975) creates the suspense, with the musical theme being almost more famous than Steven Spielberg’s direction, Sondheim commented on Herrman’s work. He explains, “From Bernard Herrmann, I picked up how to create suspense, …when you use skittering music to create nervousness and that sort of thing” (Horowitz 73). This effect, also utilized by Williams, led to both Herrmann and Williams being influences on Sondheim’s compositional style.

While the combination of Herrmann’s score and the psychological depth of *Hangover Square* taught him how to enhance Hugh Wheeler’s book for the musical-thriller *Sweeney Todd*, the Wagner-esque qualities of the studio era composers also influenced Sondheim’s work. Sondheim explains however, that, “For me, Wagner's music is both too thick and too long. On the other hand, the Korngolds and Waxmans gave you nuggets of Wagner transformed. So does John Williams” (Stryker). Examining the influence of Steiner, Korngold, Waxman, Williams, and particularly Herrmann on *Sweeney Todd*, the overall influence film composers have had on Sondheim’s work is immense and greatly underappreciated.

The score to *Hangover Square* was striking to Sondheim and it anticipates his musical influences. Secrest describes the memorable opening measures of the piano concerto by noting, “Herrmann’s bleak and percussive opening bars had the guise of Sergei Rachmaninoff as revisited by Charles Ives” (56). It is interesting that Secrest uses these composers to describe Herrmann’s score, for they were both composers who influenced Sondheim in his musical career. Ives in particular, had a strong influence on Herrmann’s work. Herrmann has described Ives’s compositions and their relation to his reliance on American themes and complex anticipation of twentieth-century dissonance in his own compositions. As Herrmann has stated of
Ives’s use of American folk songs and themes, “Mr. Ives puts cowboy themes and hillbilly songs and camp-meeting hymns into his symphonies. Those are the tunes of our country…America will know [his importance] when it can appreciate the meaning of a new American tone, a new dissonance” (Smith 33). The leaping piano line of Herrmann’s score for *Hangover Square* with its penchant for dissonant intervals is harmonically powerful and striking. It is not surprising that Sondheim stayed for a second showing of the film, primarily to memorize the first five or six bars of the score (Secrest 57). As Graham Bruce examines the opening of the film, “ Appropriately … *Hangover Square* begins with a dissonant interval, a falling diminished fifth (G, C#), hammered out by the piano” (88). The opening figure as illustrated by Graham Bruce in Example 3 shows the initial descent of a minor fifth or a tritone.

Ex. 3. Graham Bruce, dictation; Bernard Herrmann, Opening of *Hangover Square*

As Swayne analyzes the opening of the concerto, he notes, “A harmonic analysis reveals that the [overall] opening of the composer’s concerto is firmly in the key of D minor, although our ears tell us that the music (Herrmann’s) resides somewhere between the lush late Romanticism of Rachmaninoff and the stentorian early Modernism of the enfant terrible Prokofiev” (41). This analysis shows the influence these lyrical composers had on Herrmann’s work, which then influenced Sondheim’s work as well.

*Hangover Square* was a groundbreaking moment in Herrmann’s career. The ten-minute piano concerto, as Herrmann titled the finished work “Concerto Macabre,” was a complex work unlike any other film concerto of the time, in part because it is an amalgamation of themes heard
throughout the film. As Smith examines the work, he describes it as utilizing “the romantic idiom as commentary, employing nineteenth-century harmonies to explore the tragic and solitary aspects of Romanticism and to depict the film’s doomed Romantic, George Bone” (117). Smith’s analysis points out that the influence from the Romantic era accounts for the lush, rich emotion that imbues the harmonic complexity of Herrmann’s concerto. “Concerto Macabre” also reflects the emotional state of the protagonist at this point in the story. As the piano continues throughout the piece, it is propelled by the rest of the orchestra which plays in rhythms opposed to the piano line that thus exists as an isolated piece of the concerto. In the film, Bone has isolated himself from everyone who is trying to aide or condemn him. In the middle of the concerto’s premiere, Bone cannot continue the piece and momentarily rushes out of the room. Once alone, he realizes the horrible crimes he has committed; all the while the scene is underscored by the concerto which is growing in intensity as well as rhythmic and harmonic complexity. As Bone rushes back in to finish the piece, amidst the concert hall burning down, the concerto reaches its climax and he triumphantly finishes the work’s premiere. As orchestrator Christopher Palmer analyzes the work, “[The concerto] not only reflects the distempered state of Bone’s mind but is in a sense an apology for it and for his whole life, a logical summation and outcome of all that has preceded” (Smith 117).

The compositional structure of the work is multilayered and complex. Herrmann makes use of thematic motifs that recur throughout the film, and that finally build throughout the concerto to create a sense of unity to the score. After the violent piano introduction that opens the film—fittingly a tritone, which was once associated with the devil and suggests a symbolic representation of the evil of Bone’s mental condition—Herrmann then makes use of one of his most recurring semitone patterns. This figure was often given to muted horns in the score and is
shown below in Example 4 as transcribed by Graham. This passage also functioned as another leitmotif of evil throughout the film.

Ex. 4. Bruce Graham, dictation; Bernard Herrmann, Leitmotif of Evil

The concerto’s interlude for piano and strings has been heard earlier in the film as the piece Bone composes for Netta, the dance hall performer who tries to swindle him and who he later kills. As Smith describes the gentle movement, “[The interlude is] wistful and poignant, it mirrors Bone’s romanticized vision of Netta [before realizing she is using him] and is especially ironic at the finale, since Bone has murdered the girl in a psychotic fit” (118). The climactic section of the concerto has been heard earlier as Herrmann’s “fire” motif and during the murders in the film. Fittingly, the theme is first heard near the film’s opening as Bone murders a pawnbroker and sets his store on fire. It is also heard when he tosses Netta’s body onto the Guy Fawkes Night fire (bonfires built to burn effigies of Guy Fawkes who helped plan an attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament in 1605). Finally, it is heard in the concerto as Bone plays the end of the piece, surrounded by the flames that he started and that will be his own demise.

*Hangover Square* was one of the most influential films in Sondheim’s life, as I discussed earlier, and Herrmann’s score was a major influence on Sondheim in his career. When composing the opening music for *Sweeney Todd* in 1979, Sondheim thought back to the snippet of the Herrmann score that he had memorized in his younger years. As he explains, “It’s an open secret that the music for *Sweeney* is in homage to Herrmann’s language. [His harmonic style] was just right for *Sweeney*. I didn’t consciously copy him but it was *Hangover Square* that started that kind of thought process in my head” (Secrest 295). It is interesting to note how
powerful that film’s influence had been; in the story of the psychotic barber of Fleet Street, the score from the film of the psychologically troubled Bone would be a major influence.

Sondheim also attributes the underscoring in *Sweeney Todd* to Herrmann’s score. The traces of *Hangover Square* evident in *Sweeney Todd* are scattered and stylistic, but they retain the sense of the epic thriller that Herrmann’s score helped create. Explaining his approach to *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim states, “What I wanted to write was a horror movie. All those chords, and that whole kind of harmonic structure… It had to be unsettling, scary, and very romantic. In fact, there’s a chord I kept using throughout, which is sort of a personal joke, because it’s a chord that occurred in every Bernard Herrmann score.” (Zadan 246). The Herrmann chord Sondheim refers to is a seventh chord inverted so the seventh is in the bass of the chord (Horowitz 128). For instance, in Example 5, below, of the “Organ Prelude,” it is the chord in the 3/2 measure (measure 7) in the treble staff of the organ.
Ex. 5. Stephen Sondheim, “Prelude” to *Sweeney Todd*

The opening organ Prelude, albeit optional for productions and frequently not performed, was played in the original Broadway production. Sondheim wanted it to provide an air of terror and mystery for the audience. This would set the tone for the evening and, as shown, it also makes use of the descending semitone figure that Herrmann used so frequently in the first six measures. When Herrmann utilized the figure, he would usually assign it to muted horns so it provided an ominous tone to the score. While Sondheim did not orchestrate his scores, he did write this to be a piece for organ. As Sondheim explained to Mark Horowitz when he asked about the piece, “We (Prince and he) wanted some kind of non-overture music, the way, again, a horror film would have—just to get the audience into the mood” (127). Still functioning as a leitmotif that representing the evil that will surface throughout the musical, the figure reminiscent of Herrmann’s is to be played shockingly and suddenly, at fortissimo, jolting the listening audience into the start of the evening.

The descending thematic motif recurs throughout the show. Its most notable occurrence is the melody that the Beggar Woman sings, shown in Example 6. It is also underscores the scene after she leaves. Her “theme” is of great importance musically to the plot for a number of reasons. First, it is yet another example of the descending semitone figure that functions as an ominous foreshadowing of the evil to come. Second, it suggests that she will play a role in the story’s tragic elements. At the end of the musical, Todd, hurrying to enact his revenge on Judge Turpin, quickly slashes the Beggar Woman’s throat and disposes of her body after she again asks if she knows him from somewhere previous in life. After committing this murder, Todd realizes she was his beloved wife Lucy, who was in fact alive even though he had been told she had died. Todd was sent away because the judge wanted Lucy for himself; with Todd gone, Turpin could
court her for himself. This descending motif as sung by Lucy represents a number of evil events. First, it represents Todd’s wrongful punishment being sent away for committing no crime. Second, it echoes the wickedness of Turpin’s desire for her and how that ruined her life. Third, it foreshadows Lucy’s demise that occurs since Mrs. Lovett declares her deceased and Todd then believes her to be gone for good.

Ex. 6. Stephen Sondheim, “No Place Like London” from Sweeney Todd

This passage also contains the demonic tritone which additionally signifies evil. The range of her vocal line, until the sailor Anthony gives the the monetary compensation she seeks, covers a tritone from D# down to the A. The theme is used again, this time slightly varied but still noticeable when Todd finally goes over the brink of madness. In “Epiphany,” shown in Example 7, Todd has just failed to kill the Judge and blames it on Mrs. Lovett’s poor planning of a plan and his own misfortune. Todd laments the loss of both his wife and daughter and he sings:
And my Lucy lies in ashes
And I’ll never see my girl again. (178)

This melodic line, shown below, utilizes the descending semitones of the Beggar Woman’s “Alms, Alms” and establishes the connection between the two characters musically. The passage from “Epiphany” can visually as well as aurally represent descent into madness, first by the mad Beggar Woman and later by Todd when he truly goes mad as well.

Ex. 7. Stephen Sondheim, “Epiphany” from Sweeney Todd

Sondheim also acknowledges one of Herrmann’s major collaborators, Alfred Hitchcock, as an influence on the score to Sweeney Todd. Sondheim explains, “Horror movies and suspense movies are very much co-created. Bernard Herrmann is Alfred Hitchcock; that’s why Hitchcock used him all the time. What happens in Psycho in the orchestra is just as frightening as what
happens on the screen” (Horowitz 72, emphasis in original). The suspense of the film’s action emphasized by the film’s score enhances the overall suspense the audience feels. As Steven C. Smith explains in his book on Herrmann, *A Heart at Fire’s Center* (1991), “[Herrmann’s] musical idiom was the perfect complement to Hitchcock’s often detached images, giving them an emotional center and reinforcing thematic purpose” (192). The suspense of the action of the film, combining with the suspense of the score, enhances the overall suspense the audience feels.

Examining Herrmann’s score for *Vertigo* (1958), Kathryn Kalinak examines how Herrmann masks a clear perception of rhythm. As she explains, “In measures 12 to 15, for instance, he begins a restatement of the arpeggiated chord in the flutes on the second beat of the measure, instead of the first [where it had been], which disturbs the pattern” (9). Kalinak also observes that this disturbance of a clear meter creates a disturbing effect for the audience. As shown in Example 8 below, the shifting of the start of the pattern to the traditionally weaker beat of the measure creates an unsettled feeling for the listener. Normally the stress falls at the beginning of a measure. Abiding to that structure, the arpeggiated (broken chord) pattern would begin in the start of each measure, not the second half. By shifting the emphasis to the second half of the measure, Herrmann creates a sense of discomfort in the listener.
Playing with a steady beat by shifting rhythms and meters was common in Sondheim’s work and used frequently to create tension in *Sweeney Todd*. For instance, this can be seen and heard by examining the opening musical number, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd,” which falls immediately after the organ prelude (if used). Sondheim immediately creates tension for the audience by emphasizing the fourth, as opposed to the first, beat out of the six in each measure. Typically the stress falls on the downbeat of each measure. This opposition to the normal structure takes away any sense of stability for the listener. By stressing the second half of the measure, Sondheim sets the tone for the entire musical: one of general unease and mystery.

Example 9, shown below, starts softly at pianissimo so that the song can build as it progresses. However, from the start, comes an air of discomfort that permeates the song.

Ex. 9. Stephen Sondheim, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” from *Sweeney Todd*
Looking at more of Herrman’s work with Hitchcock, other trends in his compositional style emerge as well. His use of the seventh chord to induce tension is common, particularly in his score for *Vertigo*. For example, in an excerpt from the opening of the film, shown in Example 10, the opening notes of Eb and D form an interval of a seventh. This creates a sense of tension from the start of the film. Additionally, it is interesting to note that the keys of Eb and D are the two keys used throughout the film to indicate Scottie’s vertigo. The opening of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd” also creates tension using the seventh of the chord. Beginning in f♯-minor, the emphasized note tends to be the fifth, the C♯, on the second half of each measure. However, in the fourth measure of each four measure phrase, the E, which is the seventh of the chord, is what is brought out. This creates even more tension. Additionally, the prelude is composed in a minor key, which can be more discomforting than a major key, and it creates tension by emphasizing the second half of the measure.

*Vertigo*: Prelude, Broken Sevenths. Copyright ©1958 Ensign Music Corporation

Ex. 10. Graham Bruce, dictation; Bernard Herrmann, Broken Sevenths in the “Prelude” from *Vertigo*

Sondheim’s score to *Sweeney Todd* also features leitmotifs, a concept used by other composers Sondheim has said influenced his work. One such composer was Max Steiner who noted that, “Music aids audiences in keeping characters straight in their minds” (Kalinak 105). Sondheim created motifs in *Sweeney Todd* and explains:
The notion of using motifs is to pique the audience’s memory, to remind them that this theme represents that idea or emotion. They’re guideposts along the way. In a sustained piece you have to do that. Most audiences are used to it in movies. Most movie scores use a few motifs over and over again. When the motif comes on, no matter what the guise, the audience has a subconscious—and sometimes a conscious—emotional response. Most audiences are more comfortable with music that is more familiar. In Sweeney Todd, instead of using reprises of whole songs, I use reprise motifs. By the time the second act rolls around, the audience is familiar with almost all the musical material. There is some new musical material in the second act but there is nothing in the show that is not reused at least once.

(Zadan 250-1)

In the same way that Sondheim used leitmotifs to subtly reveal that the Beggar Woman is Lucy, the recurring theme of “Alms, Alms…” functions as a theme for her character.

Max Steiner, a major figure in the development of the classical Hollywood film scores, also influenced Sondheim. The godson of the composer Richard Strauss, music had played a major role in Steiner’s life. Famous for assigning specific themes for characters, Steiner once said of the film The Informer (1935), “Every character should have a theme. In The Informer we used a theme to identify Victor McLaglen. A blind man could have sat in a theater and known when Gypo [McLaglen’s character] was on the screen” (Kalinak 113). While this statement is perhaps a bit of an exaggeration, Gypo’s theme is very specific, as shown below in Example 11. Steiner composed music for several scenes prior to filming, and McLaglen was directed to walk in the lumbering gait that the musical line suggests (Kalinak 115). This example is similar to Sondheim’s motif for the Beggar Woman in Sweeney Todd, because both motifs color audience
interpretations of the character and create the atmosphere created for the stories.

Ex. 11. Kathryn Kalinak, dictation; Max Steiner, “The Informer” (Gypo’s Theme) from The Informer

Another major film composer of the first half of the twentieth century who influenced Sondheim’s work was Erich Wolfgang Korngold; he is often discussed in conjunction with Steiner. As Gary Marmorstein notes, “Much had been written about Steiner and Korngold occupying the twin towers of Warners music, with Steiner seeing all music as filmic and Korngold seeing all film as music” (76). Though the two men had their differences, they were very similar composers. Initially a composer of opera, Korngold turned to composing for film when Max Reinhardt invited him to orchestrate Mendelssohn for a film version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream (1935). Once there, he fell in love with the rapid pace of film production that contrasted with composing operas on massive year-long schedules (Marmorstein 77).

As a composer, Korngold had a talent for “interpreting and filling out stories with character, atmosphere, and sympathy” (Duchen 28). His compositional style features many traits that parallel Sondheim’s. A major aspect of Korngold’s works is an awareness of thematic structure. As Ben Winters notes, “Korngold was…completely at ease with complex thematic structures to support and enhance a narrative’s dramatic construction” (33). Korngold utilized leitmotifs in Captain Blood (1935) for Peter Blood, King James, and King William as well as for
important locations (Kalinak 105). In the film, he separates and combines the motives throughout the film, layering the score.

Studying Korngold’s score for the film *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) another example of carefully structured motifs emerges. As shown below in Examples 12 and 13, the love motif Korngold composed for the film shares similar intervals to Robin’s theme. The intervallic links (similarities in intervals), broken down in the second part of Example 13 by Winters, show the parallels in the musical themes. These connect the passages musically to each other, which makes sense as they are character-related; it is Robin who falls in love with Marian. Both themes being used for the same character, at different points in his story, their parallels help the audience understand the character’s growth throughout the film.

![Example 4.6. Robin’s Theme](image)

Ex. 12. Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Robin’s Theme from *The Adventures of Robin Hood*
Example 4.9. The Love Theme

Example 4.10. Intervallic Links between Robin’s Theme and the Love Theme

Ex. 13. Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Love Theme and the Intervallic Links Between Robin’s Theme and Love Theme

Like Korngold, Sondheim often worked with overarching thematic structures. In *A Little Night Music*, for instance, Sondheim wrote the entire score in meters that were multiples of three to thematically link the characters “switching partners,” that is switching lovers, as they danced through their lives. Below are Examples 14 and 15, excerpts from two numbers that show two similar, yet contrasting, meters used in the score. Both excerpts are from “A Weekend in the Country” where the characters prepare to go off to the Armfeldt estate for the weekend. The
lighter 6/8 meter is used for the more love (or lust) driven characters, while when Henrik, who is studying to become a pastor, sings, the meter is a simpler, more austere 3/4 and the accompaniment more subdued.

Ex. 14. Stephen Sondheim, “A Weekend in the Country” 6/8 Figure
Ex. 15. Stephen Sondheim, “A Weekend in the Country” 3/4 Figure

Another major composer for Hollywood films was Franz Waxman. He was a refugee from Berlin during the Second World War who worked in film music after being the music director for the film version of *Music in the Air* (1934). Waxman’s score for *Humoresque* had been known to Sondheim since he was young, and he adapted it when making home movies with the Bernsteins. As a composer, Waxman was adept at composing for all different genres.

Describing Waxman’s work on *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), Marmorstein explains that Waxman “created startling effects by holding the right notes, and by keeping rhythm and orchestral motion in kaleidoscopic motion” (97). This is like the opening of *Sweeney Todd*, where Sondheim emphasized notes of the seventh chord of the tonic (or root of the key).

These connections suggest that Sondheim was heavily influenced by studio era Hollywood film composers. Herrmann’s approach to composition for film, as well as those of Steiner, Korngold, and Waxman resonates in Sondheim’s writing for musical theatre. The examples considered here show how aspects of the Romantic tradition underlying the studio era of film music crossed over into musical theatre and aided Sondheim in telling the stories he has helped to convey. Utilizing devices such as specific chords, leitmotifs, and overarching thematic structure, Sondheim has been able to enhance the music that helps tell stories as his scores to *Sweeney Todd* and *A Little Night Music* demonstrate. In *Sweeney Todd*, Sondheim makes use of seventh chords similarly to how Herrmann used them in scores for Hitchcock films.

Additionally, the character of the Beggar Woman has a leitmotif that is linked to thematic aspects of the story. In *A Little Night Music*, Sondheim structured the entire score using meters built on three. Representing the continuous switching of partners, the score is thematically linked to the plot in a more subtle way. These examples show the strong influence Hollywood film
composers, especially of the studio-era, had on Sondheim’s scores which, like scene design, used these influences from film to connect with audiences in a society in which Hollywood movies provided a common cultural experience.
CONCLUSION

Stephen Sondheim has been heavily influenced in his musical and theatrical career by film. Ranging from conceptual influences, to structural influences, to compositional influences, cinema as an art form has impacted his work in an array of ways. While many scholars have noted other influences on Sondheim’s work such as biographical, compositional, or dramatic influences, his strong influence from film has been largely untouched.

Spending many of his younger years involved in the creation of film and television productions, Sondheim deepened his appreciation for the art form. For instance, writing scripts and composing songs and scores for a number of films led Sondheim to see how music and lyrics could convey characters’ thoughts and feelings. In his work in musical theatre, Sondheim has continually collaborated with colleagues to advance the practice of using filmic techniques to structure and stage musical theatre productions. Utilizing filmic practices to reach audiences in the twentieth century, these artists were drawing on the larger tradition of theatre practitioners using shared techniques and strategies borrowed from film. However, their decision to appeal to audiences familiar with cinematic conventions by employing iconic filmic images and strategies is a reminder that Sondheim’s work is representative of central developments in American musical theatre.

After working as a gopher on Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical *Allegro* and witnessing first-hand how the application of filmic techniques helped them better tell their story, Sondheim realized the potential the approach could have for musical theatre. After Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *South Pacific* was a commercial and critical success and better utilized filmic techniques, more of the theatrical community realized the potential of filmic strategies. Working with Hal Prince, Michael Bennett, and other collaborators, Sondheim and the other members of
the creative teams of *Company* and *Follies* utilized many filmic techniques to tell their stories. They realized the possibilities provided by filmic techniques and the potential they had for enriching musical theatre.

Looking at films that Sondheim has discussed in interviews and other public forums, trends in his tastes emerge. Hollywood melodramas and film noir, in addition to other more obscure works such as French poetic realism surface as favorites of his. Considering characteristics of each cinematic movement, parallels between the films and Sondheim’s approach to musicals emerge. Studying Sondheim’s musical influences, one can see that composers for film have also had a major influence on his compositional work. Arguably the largest influence was Bernard Herrmann, who composed the score to the first film known to have influenced Sondheim’s work, John Brahm’s *Hangover Square*. Herrmann’s dramatic and emotional score and its harmonic structure was a major influence on Sondheim’s work, especially his score to the musical *Sweeney Todd*. Herrmann also worked a great deal with Alfred Hitchcock, composing the scores for his films as well. These influenced Sondheim’s work by teaching him ways to create suspense and thematic motifs. Additionally, the Romantic scores of other major film composers such as Erich von Korngold, Max Steiner, and Franz Waxman influenced Sondheim’s work.

Although this thesis has examined the many ways Stephen Sondheim has been influenced by film, there is still much research to be done. In the first chapter on Sondheim’s work on films, there are many more examples of songs he composed for films that could be considered. A closer analysis of the scripts written for *Topper* might foreshadow Sondheim’s tastes in stories and characters. The second chapter on filmic strategies used in theatre focuses mainly on Sondheim’s mid-career works of *Company* and *Follies*. However, an examination of his other musical theatre
works would reveal a plethora of other examples of filmic techniques embedded in the structure of the musicals. Additionally, to clarify the integration of filmic strategies on a larger scale, one could look beyond Sondheim’s major collaborators Hal Prince and Michael Bennett. A more comprehensive study of theatre professionals’ use of filmic techniques has yet to be taken on, but it would be beneficial to show how musical theatre has been influenced by film. In the third chapter on cinematic movements that have influenced Sondheim’s work, there are many other film examples that would support the examination. In the fourth chapter on Sondheim’s filmic musical influences, there are many other parallels between Sondheim’s theatre scores and the film scores of Herrmann and other composers.

Because he has had a love of the cinema all his life, film has influenced Stephen Sondheim’s career in many ways. Considering that film is an equally expressive performing art form, the idea that film would influence theatre seems more foreign than it should. Scholars have alluded to Sondheim’s influence from film, but none have extensively looked at the many ways these influences have occurred. This thesis has examined those connections in a range of ways. By looking at Sondheim’s work in film production and writing scripts for film and television, an array of influences become visible. Sondheim’s work in the film industry, his work as an amateur filmmaker, his collaborations with others in film and theatre, and his personal tastes in films, directors, and movements has affected his theatre work. Shaping his choices about narrative structure, characters, staging, and scores, these influences affected many facets of the work on which Sondheim collaborated, and these deserve more study than they have been granted up to now.
NOTES

1. An anecdote tells of Sondheim observing Jerome Robbins staging “Maria” in *West Side Story*. While observing Robbins struggling with the scene, Sondheim realized how he felt Bernstein’s song lent itself to a certain manner of staging (Swayne 165).

2. While continuous action had been occurring in opera before this time, the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein incorporating filmic techniques was innovative for American musical theatre.

3. While Krzysztof Zanussi was a representative of Polish cinema whose films Sondheim greatly enjoyed, I have found no conclusive evidence that his films largely impacted any of Sondheim’s work.
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