

Cold Comfort

By David Hlavsa

A century after Georges Seurat's death, Stephen Sondheim would look at the enigmatic painter's orderly yet playful "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" and conjure from it the figure of a vital and passionate artist. In Seurat, the composer saw a man with strengths, concerns and weaknesses very much like his own. Sondheim's daring *Sunday in the Park with George*, a portrait of the artist striving to break free of convention and find new means of expression, is at once historical, modern and timeless. In bridging the gap between Seurat's era and ours, Sondheim simultaneously braves and comments on the hardships of being ahead of one's time.

Seurat (1859-1891) was a pioneer

among painters. Like the Impressionists, Seurat saw and interpreted his surroundings in terms of color and light. But Seurat, always more analytical than his contemporaries, was not interested in capturing the fleeting and subjective "impression" of the moment. Having spent considerable time researching optics and color theory, Seurat began to develop an artistic method based on scientific principles, a method that would later become known as pointillism.

The optical principle behind pointillism (Seurat preferred the term "chromoluminarism") is that, given many divided dots of color, the eye will recombine them into a perception of another single, unified and shimmering color. On close inspection, "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte"

is merely a profusion of dots, divided fragments of spectral color. But as the viewer steps back from the enormous (nearly 7-by-11-foot) canvas, the scene begins to make sense, and its colors become broader and richer. Seurat's work is extraordinarily subtle in its depiction of light, shadow and the tremulous hot summer air.


The painter was not an easy man to know. To make him climb down from the scaffold in his studio, where he worked silently with his eyes half-closed, friends would sometimes deliberately start arguments about artistic principles. To even his closest friends it seemed as though Seurat's only leisure activity was taking long walks around Paris and the surrounding countryside. He was so secretive

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Seurat (left) and Sondheim.



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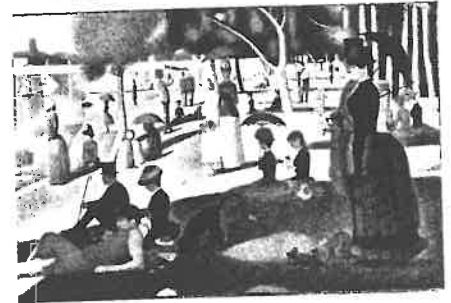
about his personal life that only after his death from a mysterious illness did they find out that he had a mistress who bore him a child.

It took Seurat two years to finish "La Grande Jatte." For the most part, the critics of the time did not appreciate his efforts. Those who took any notice of his work at all called "La Grande Jatte" passionless and contrived, a technical exercise without human feeling. While some defended the painting for its striking use of color, Albert Wolff, the art critic for *Le Figaro*, went so far as to call the pointillists "communards who deserve to be shot."

But, of course, Seurat was a revolutionary and, more often than not, revolutionaries have to accept their laurels posthumously. Seurat never sold a painting.

Though he has certainly fared better than Seurat did in his lifetime, Stephen Sondheim is painfully aware that commerce and art do not mix very well. Sondheim is generally acknowledged as the greatest composer/lyricist writing for the musical theatre today. Still, his shows consistently lose money on the for-profit Broadway stage.

Like Seurat, Sondheim is an innovator, a restless intellectual whose work places unusual demands on his audience. "I don't mind putting my name on a flop," he says, "as long as we've done something that hasn't been tried before." And as Seurat found himself isolated, so Sondheim often finds himself disconnected from the mainstream.



Georges Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte."

In a medium that has traditionally been light, romantic and often superficial, Sondheim's work is unusually dense and sometimes even somber. *Pacific Overtures*, for example, deals with the opening of Japan to western culture in the 19th century, and *Sweeney Todd* is about a homicidal barber whose victims are made into meat pies by his downstairs neighbor. Though visual, intellectual and aural ideas whiz and snap over the audience, there's not a lot of dancing on roller skates in a Sondheim musical.

He is just as often criticized as praised by the press. Some, mistaking Sondheim's intellectual approach for bloodlessness (as Seurat's critics did), fault his work for its "coldness." Others complain that his music (though actually more melodic than many other composers') is not memorable or "hummable." But Sondheim is less concerned with writing hit songs than with creating imaginative theatre; if his music is complex and occasionally dissonant, it serves other ends than supplying the recording industry with Top 40 tunes.

The way to make music memorable is to play it over and over again. But in Sondheim's theatre, songs must not dominate the human beings who sing them. All the elements of production, including music, serve to highlight and amplify the characters and their story. Therefore, Sondheim refuses to write superfluous reprises at the characters' expense. "I find the notion that the same lyric can apply in the first act and the second act *very suspect*," he says. "Most of the time the character has moved beyond, particularly if you're telling a story of any weight or density."

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What sets Sondheim apart from other contemporary songwriters is his theatrical awareness. He is as much a playwright as a composer. For example, rather than leaving the actor to invent stage "business" as filler for the time he or she must sing to the audience, Sondheim actually works with stage movement in mind. Further, his lyrics are never just clever for the sake of cleverness; they are no more and no less than what the character would say under the given circumstances. Instead of inundating the audience with gratuitous lyrics, Sondheim uses each of his highly economical verses to advance and develop the action that is essential to life on stage.

As with his other musicals, Sondheim developed *Sunday in the Park with George* from an intellectual concept rather than a conventional boy-meets-girl scenario. In 1983, Sondheim and playwright/director James Lapine were exploring the notion of creating a new type of musical based not on a linear story but on a series of related images—a kind of visual and dramatic version of a musical theme and variations.

Lapine brought in paintings and photographs of people and scattered them across the floor. Then he and Sondheim began an extended process of shuffling and reshuffling the images, seeing what dramatic situations presented themselves from placing one personality next to another. In the course of their experiments, they came upon Seurat's "La Grande Jatte."

"We realized that the painting was the setting of a play," says Sondheim. "All the people in that painting . . . when you start speculating on why none of them are looking at each other . . . and maybe there's a reason for that . . . maybe someone was having an affair with another one, or one was related to someone else. And then Jim said, 'Of course, the main character's missing.' And I said, 'Who?' And he said, 'The artist.' And once he said that, I knew there was a real play there."

Sondheim was captivated by the idea that Seurat had manipulated all the people in his life into this highly formal

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Red Noses, ACT 1989, Chris Bennion photo

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and gently ironic composition. Clearly, though Seurat himself is absent from the picture, he is omnipresent in its deliberate, precise and even obsessive design.

Sondheim's collaborators describe him as somewhat withdrawn, a man addicted to puzzles and word games, a cantankerous perfectionist who will spend long periods organizing and refining his compositions before letting anyone hear them. Yet, they say, he is plainly a man who values his friendships and is dismayed when his aloofness occasionally drives people away.

"I cannot divide up my feelings as neatly as you," says Sondheim's George to his mistress, Dot, "and I am not hiding behind my canvas - I am living in it . . . I am what I do." For George/Sondheim, art does not imitate life; if anything, art intimidates life.

Sondheim discovered technical as well as emotional analogies between

Seurat's work and his own. "I realized, 'My God, this is all about music,'" he recalls. "Seurat experimented with the color wheel the way one experiments with a scale. He used complementary color exactly the way one uses dominant and tonic harmony."

Sondheim's sudden connection with this artist from another century would eventually become the foundation for the structure of *Sunday in the Park*, with its 19th-century first act and modern second act. As Sondheim discovered his intellectual and artistic ancestor in Seurat, so the modern-day artist George, lost and in despair, finds regeneration in recalling his artistic heritage.

In establishing this connection with the past, he in effect transcends his current difficulties. His problems merge with those of his elders. And these words come to him:

Look at what you want,
Not at where you are,
Not at what you'll be,

Look at all the things you've done
for me.

They come not from anyone in his present life, but from the image of his great-grandmother as she was in her youth. This voice from the past lets George know that though he finds himself estranged from a society which cannot fully appreciate him, he is not completely isolated.

There is some consolation for the artist in knowing that if the present has little to offer, there are always other lifelines: the inspiration of the past and the promise and terror of the blank canvas.

It is cold comfort, but comfort nonetheless.

David Hlavsa heads the theatre department at Saint Martin's College in Lacey, Washington.

Interviews with Sondheim are excerpted chiefly from *Sondheim & Co.* by Craig Zadan.



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