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**New Writing
Reviews
Essays**



PRESIDENT'S NOTE



Since joining the Interact Committee, I'm often asked, Why does Interact exist? In a University full to the brim with extra-curricular drama societies, why should the Theatre Department have a company? Fundamentally, Interact aims to create bold, innovative, ambitious theatre, inspired by the wider industry and connected to the creative pulse of Bristol. University fosters a risk-taking culture – students try new sports, make new friends, reinvent themselves – yet this doesn't always translate to student theatre. Here at Interact, we want to change that. We would rather create a bad piece of theatre that took risks than a dull exhibition piece that is instantly forgotten about.



Indeed, ambitious theatre-making is in our roots. Initially called Studio Space, this is the company where the controversial but brilliant Sarah Kane first attempted writing; it is where Matt Lucas attended play-reading evenings and developed his skill in the arts. We have a rich history of developing theatre makers, and we hope this term to recreate a company that allows this department to thrive with life, buzzing with the potential of thrilling theatre. We have a terrific upcoming season, including a Research and Development Workshop series for a new play, a full-scale production of a Tennessee Williams classic, multiple talks from industry professionals, workshops from local Bristol companies, and theatre trips to various locations in the city. These are remarkable opportunities, available for all theatre students. We ardently believe that students of the Department of Theatre and Performance should have as many opportunities as possible to develop their craft, putting into practice theory learned on the course. Interact was fantastically re-invigorated last year by Lewis and Ava and a hard-working committee, who wonderfully created a culture where more experimental theatre, in a safe space, was possible. We hope we can continue this new era for Interact – we are not merely a sideshow in the department or university culture, but instead a prospering, central component of the Bristol theatre scene. We urge all Theatre Students to get involved.

– James Hattan



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10 THINGS I LIKE TO DO IN THE WICKHAM!

— Ava Kate Brierley

I spend pretty much all day every weekday in the Wickham building. Seriously. I LOVE it here. I love being a part of a community, knowing everything about the building and feeling like I really belong – I'd even go as far as to say it's my second home! People often ask me what I actually do all day if I'm not in class or doing assessment work so... here are 10 things I like to do in the Wickham!

01 Spend time in the design room:



I spend the majority of my time in the Wickham in the design room sitting in the exact same place every day. It's right at the heart of the building, it's near where people tend to rehearse or at least pass by, and it has everything I need to be creative. Fun fact, it is now sometimes jokingly referred to as my "office" by both students and tutors because of how often I'm there!

02 Help people:



I LOVE helping people. This includes talking to people about their work (and consequently throwing 5031 academic articles at them if it's even vaguely related to my topics of interest), giving people unsolicited advice and showing people where tutors and rooms are. Alternatively, I also distract people from said work (I'm really good at that one!)

03 Use the disability sofa:



For the days where I need a lie down, when I'm in excruciating pain or just feeling dizzy, the disability sofa is my favourite space to rest, especially if I'm in need of a recharge before a rehearsal or class.

04 Sit in the courtyard when it's sunny:



When it's warm outside and the sun hits the benches in the courtyard between RR3 and the laundry room, I don't even care that it's inaccessible. I will battle any and all steps in my wheelchair to get into that sun!

05 Find warm spots:



I am perpetually cold and being in the coldest room ever most of the time (the design room) doesn't help. This is why when I'm in the corridor and there's a beam of light, I'm stopping by it. In the winter, I spend copious amounts of time by the radiators, especially the one outside the design room. They're so warm.

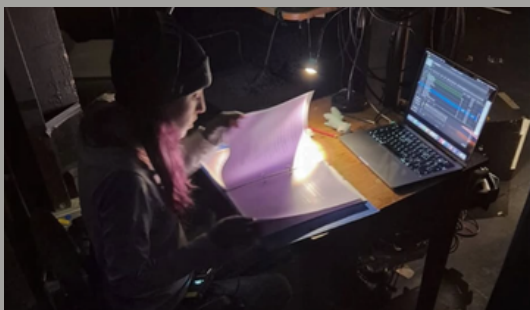
06 Use every mirror available:



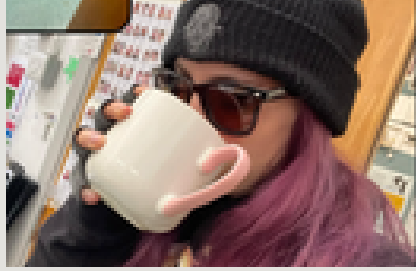
Look... sometimes I need to do my makeup or do my hair or check out my outfit, or do a selfie or or pluck my eyebrows or watch myself dance or check my facial expressions. Luckily for me, the mirrors are a fabulous space to do this. (Favourite mirror = the one in the corridor between the project spaces.)

Honourable mentions:

Ushering and operating shows. I'm a trained usher and I love seeing shows for free- especially if it's something in the Wickham. So if you need an usher, DSM or operator, sign me up! (But do ask first)



07 Drink all the tea I can:



Again, I'm always cold and tea is often warm (and also caffeine). So every time anyone offers anyone tea, I am THERE asking for one too (even if I still have tea I brought in from home!). No milk, 2 sugars!

08 Adopt any of the costume bits lying around into my current outfit:



I spend quite a bit of time tidying up communal spaces to make them all neat and tidy (aren't I good?!). So if I find any costume bits lying around, it's only right to call it the costume tax and wear them until the end of the day (when I then return them 'cause I'm a good person like that).

09 Be creative instead of doing what I should be:



Making puppets, videos, cards, decorations for people's offices, updating the Interact wall, dancing, playing the piano, you name it. If I'm contributing to my creative development then I can't be procrastinating, right? (Wrong.)

10 Stay until closing time:

I NEVER have class until 7:30 pm. No one does! And yet I spend more days staying this late than not. What can I say? I love being here. (In holidays the building closes at 5:30pm instead and I never fail to be baffled by the extra two hours in my evenings.)



Hug the mannequins: I love hugs, what can I say. The first photo I have of the Wickham is just me hugging a mannequin.

Go to the Theatre Collection archives: This would be SO much higher on my list if I actually went there more often. I've been meaning to see quite a few things for ages so maybe this will prompt me to actually go again.



Notes on Aristotle's 'Poetics'

[Translation by A. Kenny. 2013. Oxford University Press]

Article by Gwyneth Williams

Aristotle's Poetics, written around 335 BCE, is the earliest surviving work of Greek dramatic theory. Describing what makes good Poetry, and often specifically Tragedy, Poetics is still used as a fundamental handbook for creating impactful drama. Below, I have summarised some of the key points Aristotle discusses.

On defining tragedies:

- Tragedy encompasses six core elements, 'the story, the moral element, the style, the ideas, the staging, and the music' (p.24)
- It is not specifically about people, but about their actions. Character is derived by morality, 'but it is their actions that make them happy or unhappy' (p.24). What is most important to tragedy is the events and story.
- Tragedy must be 'complex'; 'fearsome and pitiful' (p.31). Then consequently comes the purification of such emotions - catharsis for the audience.
- The division of the parts must be as follows: 'prologue, episode, finale, and chorus parts' (p. 31)
- What makes a tragedy truly pitiful is when a monstrous deed is committed between friends or relations rather than enemies as enemies are less sympathetic.
- Tragedy is most impactful when the deed is planned rather than done in ignorance, and when it is carried out to fruition.
- Tragedy is a representation of people who are familiar to us. It must not be a good man seeing bad fortune or vice versa as this constitutes outrage, not pity. It must be someone like ourselves who undergoes undeserved misfortune. 'a man not outstanding in virtue or justice, brought down through vice or depravity, who falls into adversity not by vice or depravity but because he errs in some way' (p. 32). Someone who falls from good fortune to bad by not depravity, but a serious error on the part of the character.
- The most important device for tragedies to evict emotion is recognition and reversal, reversal and discovery. 'Reversal is the change of direction of events [...] in accord with probability or necessity', and 'discovery is from ignorance to knowledge' (p.30) and thus to a change of feeling or objective. Together it evokes either pity or fear which brings about the happy or unhappy ending.



WAITING FOR VERONICA

A monologue from a work-in-progress play

Deniz; To say goodbye to a friend, a lover, a brother. I suppose the hardest of the goodbyes are declaring farewell to the people you are connected to by soul. Not many would know the feeling, or maybe they would, or who could possibly know the truth of your soul except yourself? Just like that, goodbyes sit heavy on my heart. Do you know that feeling? When you know that you are not going to see someone again. You say maybe, maybe we will meet again in that distant coast, and then you sit down with only a glass of red in one hand and you gaze at the stars drawing a portrait of them in your head. See, this tends to be an awful, unbearable situation, people who suffer from the illness of longing can usually be found by the end of finished vodka bottles, or by the river being accompanied by a cigarette, and depending on the severity of the situation; in a church, looking for redemption from a stranger they barely know. However, the worse of these situations are those who sit by a notebook after midnight, with a pen in one hand, the poems that get written, the songs that are cried out loud. At the end of the day, people cannot articulate or put into writing what they haven't felt or experienced. That's why this story is my last gift to you Veronica. Wherever you are.

– Written by Yusuf Topcu

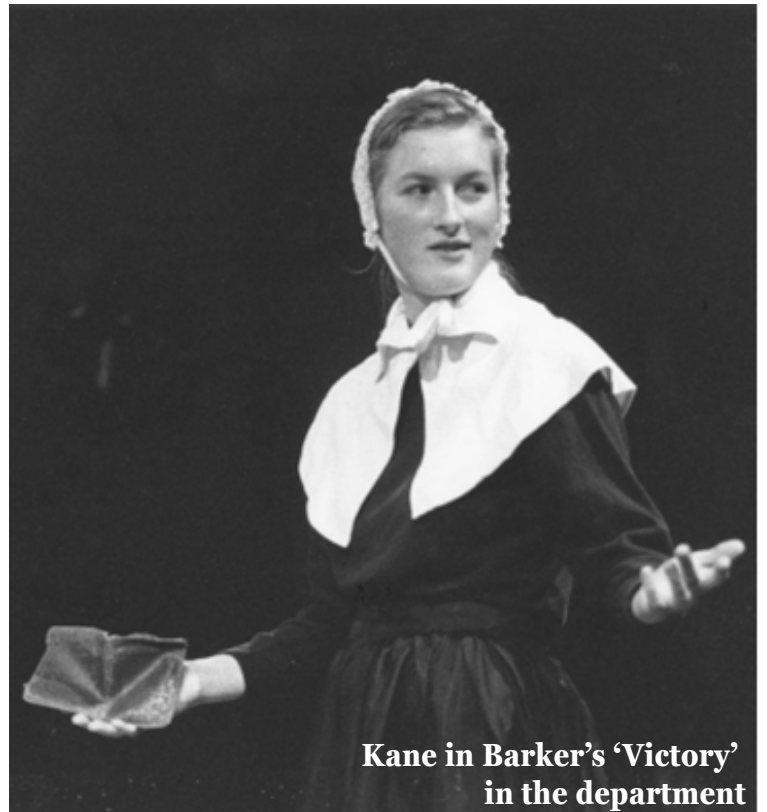
FAMOUS ALUMNI OF BRISTOL UNI THEATRE DEPARTMENT

Words from James Hattan

Our theatre department has an outstanding tradition of generating hugely successful playwrights, directors, actors and more. Here are just a few of my favourite successful graduates. Who knows - maybe you'll be next?!

One of my all-time favourite playwrights, **Sarah Kane** is perhaps the most controversial contemporary British dramatist. Her plays are undeniably brutal, often presenting cannibalism, infantilism, rape, and murder, yet somehow still beautifully poetic. Kane tragically committed suicide aged just 29. It was at Bristol where Kane first tried her hand at writing, performing and making work with Studiospace – Interact's old name.

SARAH KANE
Playwright, Studied 1989-1992



**Kane in Barker's 'Victory'
in the department**

Her first three short plays – *Starved*, *What She Said*, and *Comic Monologue* – are unavailable for publication or performance but still stored below the department in the Bristol Theatre Collection. I made the trip downstairs to read them and was taken aback by the repulsive nature of the events described. *Comic Monologue* describes an oral rape in graphic detail, and the irrecoverable impact that it triggers; *What She Said* explores a narrator's attempt to try and remain sexually fluid in a world where female submission is the norm; *Starved*, in my opinion the most impactful of the three, is about a teenager suffering from a severe eating disorder, her entire identity revolving around her weight. Kane's brutal style is certainly obvious from these early plays.

Some critics refute Kane for her feasts of filth, yet it is staggering, even from her earliest works, just how Kane uses shock-factor to explore such broad themes. A play like *Blasted* is so much more sophisticated than merely the gruesome image of Ian eating a baby, and a soldier raping a man – it explores whether domestic space can ever truly be safe; and it awoke distant British audiences to the brutality of the preceding Bosnian war. Indeed, the entire dramatic form of that play is exploded by the bomb that punctuates the half-way point – yet Kane's critics will rarely explore this, merely focusing on visual disgust.

Kane admitted that, during her time in Bristol, 'I got into a lot of trouble with university authorities' and created work that was 'more interesting than anything I was actually meant to be doing.' Though of course I don't suggest going entirely rogue, Kane's work and experience should surely inspire students to not barter for marks and grades in their work, but instead create theatre that is exciting and impactful to them.

Sarah Kane broke pretty much every rule in the book – she got rid of conventional character names, wrote consistently obscene acts, and filled her pieces with a kind of liminal time and location rarely before seen. Kane stated that she wanted to create pieces not determined by previous theatrical movements – she initiated her very own movement whilst doing so.

Fun fact: A tutor once accused Kane of writing a 'pornographic essay'. In response, Kane attended the next seminar armed with porn magazines, hurling them at her professor and declaring that if he wanted to masturbate he could use them.

MATT LUCAS, ACTOR AND WRITER STUDIED 1993-1995

The famed actor and writer of hits such as *Little Britain* and *Come Fly With Me* had a far from breezy time studying at Bristol, admitting that 'I was utterly bamboozled by my course.' Not all was despair though – it was here that he connected with his famous writing partner, the now universally disliked David Walliams. 'We based one of our earliest characters on one of our lecturers', Lucas recalls. Such was the professional success that soon came his way, Lucas decided to take a sabbatical from Bristol mid-way through his second year. He never returned.

Fun fact: Lucas' 2nd year house was once burgled whilst he was inside – he 'barricaded himself... and called the police as he watched the burglars leaving with his housemates' things.'



MARK RAVENHILL, PLAYWRIGHT, STUDIED 1984-87

Perhaps most famous for his revolutionary in-er-face play *Shopping and Fucking*, Mark Ravenhill recalls little academic success from his Bristol days. He states, 'I avoided the academic stuff... [I spent] half the time practically putting on plays with my peers.' It is undeniably wholesome though that Ravenhill still regularly meets with his old uni theatre friends over zoom to read new shows. Yet Ravenhill's time at Bristol was not just defined by joyful student theatre – he remembers grappling with his homosexuality at a university where 'there were literally 10 people in the gay society'. Despite this tough experience, Ravenhill does point out that overall he 'had a great time... in Bristol.'

Fun fact: Ravenhill remembers how halls of residence used to be able to issue a morality fine of £50 if you had a member of the opposite sex in your room after 10pm.

SIMON PEGG, ACTOR AND WRITER, STUDIED 1988-1991

Co-writer and star of the hilarious *Cornetto Trilogy*, Pegg recently returned to the University to open the new studio theatre named after him – The Pegg Studio. Pegg remembers having ridiculous amounts of fun in Bristol, including his 'friend Barney doing a Heimlich manoeuvre on me... to make me throw up so that we could go get some chips.' It was at Bristol where Pegg first tried Stand-up, eventually getting an agent through his routines, and forming a comedy club with some of his mates. He wrote a somewhat unique dissertation, exploring how Marxist modes of critical theory could be applied to *Star Wars*. Iconic.

Fun fact = Pegg still owes the DVD shop 20th Century Flicks a £4.50 fee, for returning a DVD of *Crimes and Misdemeanours* late.



GREGORY DORAN, DIRECTOR, STUDIED 1977-1980

The former Artistic Director of the RSC admits that 'Bristol shaped my life and my career immeasurably.' He threw himself into making theatre, touring one of his pieces around the country. He specifically remembers putting on Shakespeare's *The Book of Sir Thomas More* 'in the University's Vandyck Theatre' (now the Wickham), responding to riots at the end of his road. He remembers even now how 'Shakespeare.... addressed that moment in Bristol 400 years before.'

THE STATE OF BRITISH THEATRE

ARTICLE BY WICKHAM GRADUATE LEWIS BURLEY

The centre piece of British theatre awards season, the Oliviers, enjoyed prime time boost thanks to a 7pm slot on BBC Two for its 50th anniversary. The celebration of Britain's best board-treaders awarded Rosamund Pike for her performance in the National Theatre's *Inter Alia*, James Graham's *Punch* for Best New Play, and *Paddington: The Musical*'s sweeping seven awards including Best new musical, Best costume design, the Sir Peter Hall award for Best Director, has cemented it as a West End giant. However, beneath the shine and glamour of theatre awards season the plights of the industry and the arts more broadly continue to grow. Despite honouring world leading theatre, the Oliviers are organised by the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and eligible only to member theatres in London, leaving regional productions and creatives outside the biggest theatre award ceremony in the country purely due geography. Yet the Oliviers and this year's theatre award season highlighted another issue facing the theatre industry, and that is the growing divide between commercial and subsidised theatre.

Unsurprisingly the biggest discrepancy between the two is funding. According to BusinessLive, in 2024 Nimax Theatre made pre-tax profit of £10 million up from £7.5 million the previous year. The Stage reported that ATG's parent company had returned its largest annual operating profit of £160.9 million in the financial year ending March 2025. Sonia Friedman Productions, producers of *Paddington: The Musical*, announced in 2024 that their Broadway production of *Merrily We Roll Along* recouped its \$12 million capitalisation (the budget/costs of a production before the first performance) in six months. The astronomical costs of Broadway musicals aside, commercial theatre is financially thriving and continues to grow. The biggest productions in the current British theatre ether are *Dracula* starring Cynthia Erivo and Robert Icke's *Romeo and Juliet*, both commercial ventures. Commercial theatre drives the West End and therefore the wider industry in the UK, either through legacy productions like *Phantom*, *Hamilton*, *The Lion King* and *The Mousetrap*. Or through revivals of classics or adaptations of existing intellectual property (IP), such as Jamie Lloyd's *Evita* or *Much Ado, Into the Woods*, *Paddington* and *The Greatest Showman* which opened here in Bristol at the Hippodrome. Commercial theatre needs the mass appeal of big titles, big names or big IP because the productions are inherently produced to generate profit. It's the nature of business and doesn't diminish the artistic credibility of commercial theatre (generally speaking). Many of the productions listed above are decade-defining pieces of theatre, evidenced through other recent award nominations and wins.

However, two things can be true at the same time. Commercial theatre is run to generate money, but because of its financial strength can attract A-list performers and directors who produce incredible award-nominated or winning works, boosting its profile with the public, increasing ticket venue, in turn increasing profits. This model affords commercial companies to absorb shocks and flops much more comfortably than the subsidised sector. Wessex Grove, Gavin Kalin Productions, and Playful Productions have the resources and pull of director Ivo Van Hove to pivot from the flop of *Opening Night* in 2024, to the critically acclaimed production of *All My Sons* just a year later. Both however, was an adaption of existing IP or a classic. Pure original works is still within domain of the subsidised theatres. However, that is under threat.

Across the road and down King Street from the Hippodrome where *The Greatest Showman* sold out in ten-minutes, the picture at Bristol Old Vic (BOV) is very different. After years of losses BOV will only stage two productions produced in-house in 2026. These shows are *Lanny* adapted from novel by Max Porter, and their Christmas show *Cinderella*. The other productions in this year's programme are visiting and touring companies along with two co-productions. With its Arts Council England (ACE) grant of £1.25 million not increasing since 2018, BOV and many regional theatres have been forced to weather covid and ever-increasing inflation. This has led to subsidised theatres having to find savings and work together, hence the trend of co-productions. The Almeida, which for me along with the Royal Court are programming the best contemporary works in the country with productions like *Romans*, *1536* and *Guess How Much I Love You?*, only cover 40% of their costs through ticket venue when sold out. £2 million needs to be raised through donations and philanthropy for the theatre to run after its ACE grant.

All subsidised venues are affected by the lack of funding; at the end of last year the RSC looked to cut 11% of its workforce including scrapping its whole music department. The National, which enjoyed Olivier nominations and a West End transfer for *Inter Alia*, plan to cut its production team by 70% after a £9 million decrease in income between 23/24 and 24/25. The lack of funding has also impacted the costly practise of touring, with ACE reporting the number of plays touring has dropped 64% since 2019. In March this year The Stage reported that theatres are becoming increasingly reliant on Theatre Tax Relief (TTR), the tax mechanism which enables theatres to claim back a percentage of the capitalisation costs per production. TTR enables 73% of theatre companies to employ more people and is now a vital mechanism to support theatre and the live arts since its introduction in 2014.

Despite the miracle of TTR successive governments have neglected the arts, with the BBC reporting in 2025 'core funding for UK arts and cultural organisations fell by 18% between 2010 and 2023'. The current Labour government have announced a series of funding packages which are welcome but do little to relieve the quotidian struggles of subsidised organisations, and come from an even smaller Department for Culture, Media and Sport budget thanks to the 2025 spending review. Political parties of all colours have failed the arts, highlighted by an Equity report this year that local council funding for the arts has fallen by 55% in Britain since 2010. That number rises to 61% when focused on councils in England. Speaking to the Gurdian in April Nadia Fall, Artistic Director of the Young Vic, said that struggling theatres can thrive by 'programming their way out of it'. Fall is speaking from experience, arriving as Artistic Director amid a '£500,000 deficit' and staff cuts. She brought *Punch* to London after a run in Nottingham, making it eligible for Olivier success. Fall suggests that theatres need to programme 'unmissable productions in order to balance the books', but despite the Young Vic success with *Punch*, the trend is going away from new works and towards staging familiar titles to attract audiences. Speaking on the WhatsOnStage Podcast about programming work critic Sarah Crompton said, 'it's about the names that sell'. Given the desperate state of arts funding, it's not surprising then that the four productions BOV are producing or co-producing are following the commercial sectors model of popular appeal through adaptations of existing IP with *Lanny* and *Kiss of A Spider Woman*, and stagings of classics with *Ideal Husband* and *Cinderella*.



So, what can be done - is it as simple as more government funding? Well yes, but not entirely. A doubling of the governments Grant-In-Aid funding to ACE would cost the taxpayer £500 million, a massive amount of money but pocket change in comparison to day-to-day government spending. A doubling of the core ACE fund is unfortunately a utopia we will probably never see, but an increase of £150-£200 million would do much to boost the capacity of ACE funded organisations to produce works. Energy costs are the silent killer of arts venues, and we are unfortunately all too aware of the financial pressure caused by energy shocks. A government commitment to cover a percentage of arts venues for a fixed set of time would provide much needed relief to venues across the country, freeing up funds for increased productions or pay rises.

Boosted funding to ACE, an arts venue energy policy, along with an increase to TTR rates could be an effective start to improve the state of regional and subsidised theatres. Despite the tightness of the public finances these three measures could be funded through increasing the bank surcharge to 6% (currently at 3% but used to be 8%) raising £1.2 billion according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), or by abolishing the business asset disposal relief raising £900 million (IFS), or by raising the general betting duty on bookmakers' profits by 10% which could generate £350-£450 million according to former Chancellor and Prime Minister Gordon Brown. These are not massive tax increases, affecting very few people and would provide critical support to the arts. SOLT reported in 2025 that every pound of public investment returns more than £11 to the Treasury, and that for every one pound spent on a ticket an 'additional £1.40 is spent in the local economy'. Investing in the arts and having strong regional and subsidised theatres is a net positive financially, sold-out theatres support local businesses like bars, restaurants and cafes, thus further boosting the economy. What is holding the arts back is the lack of political will for it to thrive.

Exploring What Could Have Been: Robert Icke's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Harold Pinter Theatre

In March 2026, I went to see Robert Icke's production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Harold Pinter Theatre. The production stars *Stranger Things*' Sadie Sink and *Hamnet*'s Noah Jupe. The modern and sleek star-studded marketing campaign drew me in - and I was not disappointed.

Icke's production is all about time. He uses a digital clock projection and rewinds and replays pivotal moments in the script to encourage his audiences to understand that the lovers' fate is not fixed. Destiny is changeable. By the tragic end, we have hoped for and been offered glimpses into many different versions of the story.

Noah Jupe delivers a brilliant performance as Romeo. He commands our attention whilst retaining a likeable, yet aggravating, naivety as is key to the role. His friends, in particular Tybalt, deliver just as striking performances – all surely inspired by the sun-soaked boyish performances of the Montagues in Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film.

Tybalt, played by Aruna Jalloh, wears a Hawaiian shirt as he masterfully impersonates a cat to aggravate the Capulets. Jalloh stood out in this clan, perfectly balancing being humorous and likable.

Sadie Sink holds her own. She takes a more measured approach as an emotionally restrained Juliet but nonetheless had the audience in the palm of her hand. Eden Epstein, Juliet's mother, also delivered a striking performance, commanding authority and showing vulnerability. Clare Perkins plays a brilliant nurse with perfect comic timing and a likable confidence.

The set design was simple yet effective. A bed is often centre stage bringing to the fore Juliet's calamitous slumber and rather obviously the lovers' lust. Sliding gauze screens allowed for multiple scenes to occur at once and built dynamic visual interest. The neutral tones of the set were cohesive and allowed for pops of colour in the costume and props to stand out. The costume was modern and stylish, fulfilling the promise the marketing had made. Juliet wears a beautiful ivory corset to bed, a tight red dress to the masquerade ball, and a gorgeous nude tight linen dress for her death – one which has since been plastered all over social media. Romeo is just as fashionable. His final black sleeveless jumper and baggy trousers are just as memorable as Sink's dress.

Of particular interest were the 'replay' moments in the production which helped hone in on the importance of chance and split decisions. Each time the moment 'replayed', we all wished for a different ending and Icke did not grant us one. By the tragic end, the audience had all hoped for something different. I do think the tragic moment was slightly undermined when Adrienne Lenker's 'not a lot, just forever' began to play and a young Juliet and older version of Romeo and Juliet entered the stage for a movement sequence before Juliet met her tragic end. Maybe I am too chronically online, but the song choice (which is beautiful and yet very embedded in TikTok) undermined the powerful emotion of this moment. It felt like they were trying to force us to feel sadness with the song, which is a shame because the tragic ending had been just about to land. The tragic ending did return again as Sink looks to the audience and plunges a dagger into her heart. She delivered this moment elegantly.

Overall, Robert Icke's production was brilliant. He presents his own take on the canonical text and beautifully showed the teenage romance and tragedy of the play.

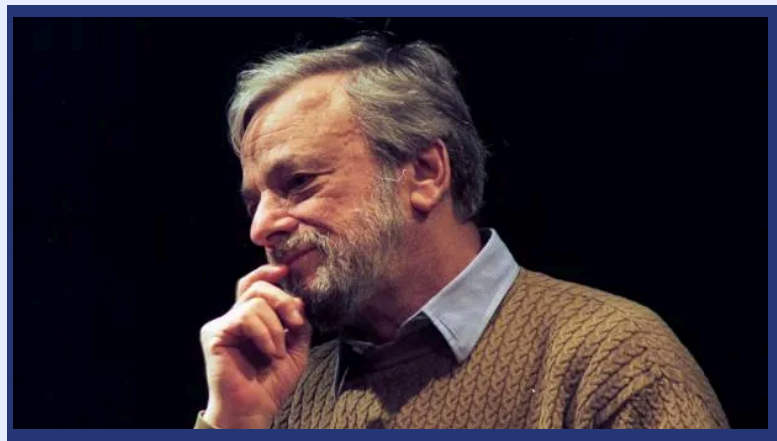


– Written by Matilda Penfold

Stephen Sondheim's Secret Self-Consciousness

Deservedly hailed as the greatest musical theatre composer of all time, less discussed is how Sondheim's self-consciousness, insecurities and venom towards his critics and contemporaries came out in his work, especially towards the end of his career.

Very few bodies of work feel as deeply personal as that of Stephen Sondheim. While he always claimed his shows never to be autobiographical, trying to separate Sondheim's own psyche from his work would be almost as difficult and pointless an endeavour as trying to take the songs out. Daniel Okrent's new book, *Stephen Sondheim: Art Isn't Easy*, acts as a vehicle with which to shed light on the connections between Sondheim's life and his work so I thought the time was ripe to do a little dissection on Sondheim's most openly personal works - *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) and *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984). By looking closely at these two shows, we can see a clear reflection of a man who had become entirely disillusioned with his own industry and had more than a few axes to grind as far as his more vocal critics were concerned.



While starting out as a lyricist-for-hire with classic musicals such as *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959), Sondheim soon branched out into composing as well, writing the music and lyrics for *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Pacific Overtures* (1976) and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979). However, this streak of hits ended with the catastrophic failure of *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), which was massacred by the critics and closed after only 16 performances and 44 previews.

Yet *Merrily's* failure is hardly surprising when you consider the open distaste Sondheim and director Hal Prince expressed towards the Broadway community. As the adage goes, don't bite the hand that feeds you, and *Merrily's* financial and critical failure is largely down to Sondheim chomping down on whoever rattled his cage.

In the show, Sondheim directs his ire at two bases. First, the Broadway financiers and critics that ostensibly hated his last five shows (but not enough to stop financing them). Second, Hollywood. The lead character, Franklin Shepherd, starts as a talented and idealistic young composer who just wants to make musical theatre with his best friends Charley Kringas and Mary Flynn. However, as the years wear on and the profit-driven incentives of the theatre industry grind him down, he grows apart from his friends and ends up as a greedy film producer. Can you see that Sondheim might have something to get off his chest? Frank can easily be read as a self-insert for Sondheim himself and an incredibly flattering one at that, at least when it comes to the first half of Frank's story. The analogue is pretty one to one, even when it comes to the way a major Broadway producer criticises his songs. During the song, "Opening Doors", he sings:

"It's not a tune you can hum
It's not a tune you go bum-bum-bum-di-dum
You need a tune you go bum-bum-bum-di-dum
Give me a melody!"

Now this is completely indistinguishable from the way many of Sondheim's harsher critics claimed that his scores lacked "humable" songs, calling him a great lyricist but a clunky composer. These jibes clearly got to Sondheim in a way that prompted him to lash out at his critics in his own space. And his own tempo. The side characters constantly push Frank to write more commercial music rather than his long-term passion projects that he's having difficulty financing. However, this is where Frank as Sondheim-surrogate starts to get a little hard to swallow. You see, Sondheim never really had any trouble shepherding his weirder projects to the stage. In the 70s, he could walk into the office of a major Broadway producer, pitch a show about the forced opening of Japan in the 19th century and walk out of there with a green light. This makes Sondheim's deliberately cynical view of producers ring a little false. Sondheim doesn't even give the Broadway community the dignity of a name, instead referring to them as "the Blob". They are vapid, insincere and trend-following while Frank and his friends are intelligent, genuine and thoughtful.

Then Sondheim turns his crosshairs onto Hollywood. Sondheim himself was potentially being 'lured' to Hollywood at this point in his career, having written the screenplay for the murder mystery *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and the score for Warren Beatty's historical epic *Reds* (1981). In fact, it's easy to see the slick, sleazy egomaniac that Frank turns into as a direct avatar for Beatty, especially his reputation for having on-set affairs with his co-stars. The script lampoons Shepherd's creative bankruptcy with one character claiming that he makes films that "aren't remembered by audiences by the time they reach the parking lot". The Frank at the end of the show (or technically the beginning, as Merrily's narrative is told backwards) becomes a sort of Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come for Sondheim – a spectre of the kind of man he could become if he allowed himself to be sucked into the cynical Hollywood bubble any further.

In contrast to this, the character of Charley, who writes the lyrics for Frank's music and ends up a respected playwright, is presented to the audience as the gold standard for artistic integrity and the character they are supposed to root for the most. In his song "Franklin Shepherd, Inc", he perforates Frank for prioritising financial goals over creative ones, claiming that the contract always seems to come before the music and lyrics. However, Charley is often equally as arrogant and frustrating to watch as Frank but Sondheim doesn't seem to have nearly as much ire for him. In the song "Old Friends", Frank says to Charley "There's only your way and the wrong way!", which is an entirely valid criticism of Charley's dogmatism over what he thinks Frank should be doing with his career. However, this jab seems to be entirely lost on the very man who wrote it, considering Sondheim otherwise defends Charley to the hilt every time Frank kicks back at his behaviour. Sondheim wants to identify with Charley's alleged moral uprightness but seems unwilling to grapple with the more unsavoury aspects of that character.

Merrily is a show made by a man completely burned out on the industry he's found himself in who would sooner throw rocks at the very people who are paying his bills than do some self-reflection and realise that he may embody his more unlikeable characters more than he'd care to admit. Based on *Merrily* alone, you might think that he's some shameless narcissist who can't help but valorise himself onstage even as he uses the same platform to take toothless, below-the-belt swipes at his critics. However, just three short years later, Sondheim made a much more intelligent and sophisticated show that was a lot more clear-eyed and ambivalent about his own approach to making art. This was *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Sunday in the Park with George tells the story of French pointillist painter George Seurat and his model Dot, focusing on the creation of Seurat's most enduring work - *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. After the interval, the show moves forward 100 years to centre around Seurat's great-grandson (also called George) and his struggle to balance art and commerce. Both Seurat and his great-grandson (both of whom are played by the same actor) can be very easily read as surrogates for Sondheim in ways that range from heavily explicit to very much subtextual.

The first act of *Sunday* serves as a peek behind the curtain at Sondheim's own artistic process even more than *Merrily*'s more overt depiction of a struggling composer. The audience is let in on the sheer, staggering volume of time it takes to construct a sprawling piece of art. In particular, the song "Finishing the Hat" sees Seurat describing how, to create beautiful art, you must devote your entire life to it, often as the expense of familial or romantic obligations. This pleading with the audience for them to understand the titanic level of effort Sondheim invests in his work continues into the second act with the character of George, his great-grandson. The song "Putting it Together" is an astonishing, virtuosic showcase of how difficult it is to get art financed, especially in the Reagan era where public funding for the arts was being forcibly drained from every reservoir at an alarming rate. If the first half of *Sunday* exposes the amount of work that goes into making art, the second half shows how an equal level of graft must be invested in making sure that art gets seen. In the song, George repeatedly emphasises art's nature as an inherently exhibitiv art form and one that cannot achieve its full potential if it is kept sitting on the artist's desk for the rest of their life. He sings:

"A vision's just a vision if it's only in your head.
If no one gets to see it, it's as good as dead.
It has to come to light!"

This remains just as true for Sondheim's medium of musical theatre. It's all very well and good if you've written the next *Cabaret* or *Les Mis* but if you never get it in the hands of actors, what good is it? The song also dives into how much of making art, especially expensive art like George's 'Chromolumines' (essentially laser machines) or Broadway musicals, essentially comes down to sweet-talking investors. George sings:

“Say cheese, George
And put them at their ease, George.
You're up on the trapeze, George.
Machines don't grow on trees, George.”

“Every time I start to feel defensive,
I remember lasers are expensive.
What's a little cocktail conversation
If it's going to get you your foundation,
Leading to a prominent commission
And an exhibition in addition?”



The amount of financial capital and the number of rich investors that must go into funding any Broadway show is immense and this song invites the audience to consider this. For my money, “Putting it Together” is the single best song Sondheim ever wrote. If you have a spare 10 minutes, listen to the 2017 cast recording with Jake Gyllenhaal - it's spectacular.

What is most interesting to Sondheim's self-portrait here is the Georges in either half of the musical are far from the same character. The Seurat of the first half is a difficult, abrasive introvert who has no interest in interacting with the other characters in the play (outside of drawing them, of course) and doesn't care about what other people might have to say about his art. He is steadfast in his approach to art, even as others mock and reject it, and he never falters in his pursuit of artistic greatness. The George of the second half is entirely different. While still a workaholic consumed by his art, he is charming and charismatic, smiling along with critics and investors even while they malign his work. But he's also stuck in a rut. Unlike Seurat, who is leading up to his seminal work, George seems to be re-emulating the work that made him famous in the first place without bringing anything new to the table with each successive Chromolume. Like so many latter-day artists who were once the hot new flavour of the month, George has since been left behind by changing trends. George is fully aware of his increasing artistic irrelevance yet is entirely at sea when it comes to finding his way back towards being back at the centre of the artistic conversation. In the climactic 11 o'clock number of the show, “Move On”, George confides in the ghost of his great-grandmother Dot about his struggles and she reassures him to, as the title of song suggests, move on and stop worrying about whether his choices are right and just to keep making art. It's a simple message but one that is refreshingly ambivalent and ambiguous when compared to the didactically cut-and-dry morals of most major musicals.

This ending represents Sondheim taking himself off an unreachable artistic pedestal for the very first time and admitting to the audience that doesn't always know what he's doing. This defies the reductive, patriarchal myth of the male genius that dominates far too much of our public discourse regarding popular art, especially figures who were seemingly blessed with perfect artistic judgement yet who remain much of a mystery to the public. While many artists seek to actively construct and re-construct their own mythic reputation as a unique genius, here Sondheim actively demystifies his own reputation - a brave and selfless act rarely seen in mainstream, auteur-driven art. By placing Seurat first and then handing the story off to George, the musical could possibly be interpreted as first depicting Sondheim (and thus the general archetype of the male genius) as they are seen in most mainstream discourse - cold, unknowable, touched by divine genius - and then revealing him for what he really is - human, fallible and constantly second guessing himself. And it is this, more than any of the fantastic songs or gorgeous staging, that makes *Sunday in the Park with George* not only my favourite work of Sondheim's career but my favourite musical in general.

In conclusion, despite what the man would have you believe, Sondheim's characters are not separated from the man himself by the thick black line of fiction but rather representations of both how Sondheim views the world and how he views himself. Sondheim's self-inserts are also not limited to the two examples I have discussed here. The male leads of *Company* and *Into the Woods* (1987) could also very easily be read as avatars for Sondheim himself. His work is undeniably introspective and provides as clear a glimpse into one man's psyche as most memoirs. To watch a Sondheim show is to see a man constantly struggling with his own demons live onstage and cutting himself open for a paying audience to see.

A Word from 3.24



(That's the Staff Room, btw. Tardis-like, it is!)

The reader will be aware that Theatre is low-key the best artform: it can be profoundly moving, it can be mesmerising, riotous and everything in between. Inside or outside of those special theatre buildings, it changes people who do it and it changes people who see it. Theatre makes the world different.

As members of staff here it easy to forget sometimes just what a privilege it is to work alongside a community of motivated, committed and thoughtful young people who share the appreciation of what a vital and precious thing Theatre is. Young people who understand how important it is to think about theatre seriously, to explore its history, to explore what it means in different places and to different communities, in the UK and beyond.

It is easy to forget but, as I'm sure every colleague does, every now and then we will see, read or hear something a student or group of students does that reminds us of the beauty and simplicity of what Theatre fundamentally is: people in a communal space taking time to share thoughts, experiences and stories. Whether they do it skilfully or plainly, surrounded by panels of buttons and gizmos, or just doing the Peter Brook thing, those moments remind us why we high-key love being around this.

If there's one thing that can be frustrating, though, it's that most of the time we are charged with measuring the quality of the work. That's important, of course, and setting structured targets and offering feedback (and grades) is central to how we support your development as autonomous practitioners, lifelong learners and citizens. At some level, though, that can make it less easy to talk about things as fellow lovers of theatre and performance. A common question early on is "How do I get a good grade?". The answer that a lot of us long to give is "Make some performance about, or write something about what is good and important to you; let's talk about what that might be." That may sound naïve and idealistic but it's definitely true that we like it when students talk for no particular reason about the type of work they find interesting and exciting. (You can even do that in office hours!)

One of the things we value about InterAct is the potential it offers for promoting those freer conversations. Where we can, we allow student access to the facilities we have to make work outside of any assessment frameworks and to host speakers, workshops and activities that add to what is in the curriculum. The Wickham Word looks like a great way in which can really move that forward and we really pleased to see this launch issue come together.

We hope that colleagues and postgraduate students will contribute to future issues and introduce to the fascinating range of subjects that they research at a professional level; to let you know what academic life is like.

So, all of us in Room 3.24 wish the Wickham Word every success. We thank all the contributors, and we thank the InterAct Committee who have made Issue 1.1 happen. High-key well done! We hope you readers find the contents interesting and that it inspires some readers to put something together for 1.2!

With very best wishes,
Rod Terry