SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE:

A MUSICAL CURATION BY STEPHEN SONDHEIM

by

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ABSTRACT

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This analysis serves to reveal the strong interconnectedness between museums and theatre (mentioned only briefly by other scholars) as uniquely demonstrated by Stephen Sondheim's musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*. Because Sondheim chose George Seurat's museum-housed painting, *Sunday on the Island La Grande Jatte*, as the foundation for his show, museum practices including labels, titles, ways of seeing, and curatorial authority—to which Seurat's painting has already been subjected—can also be located in Stephen Sondheim's musical. However, in the musical the artist is returned authority over his painting, above museum practice and curator bias. By granting the artist such dominion over the artwork, Sondheim redirects the focus from Seurat's innovative pointillist style (as commonly found in history

books) to a focus on the relationship between artist and artwork, allowing for artist and painting to converse.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The idea that facts or truths make up the fabric of history remains a widely accepted concept taught to students in most class rooms worldwide. History books are obsessed with timelines that track specific dates on which national and individual experiences occurred, holidays mark special days for remembrance or celebration, and memorials stand as constant reminders of remarkable people, places, and events. The term 'history' is a word that, for the average American, is simpler to understand than define. Although 'history' is a weighted word, it is often paired with the equally weighted term 'time.' Yet, this is what history is based upon: the chronological passage of time and the events that occurred within a particular time frame. It is undeniable that history (texts about the past) and truth have an intricate relationship that engages nearly every aspect of a person's daily life.

Although history (texts about the past) is involved in the practice of imparting 'truthful' information, in order for history books to be successful in this mission, historians must relate the information chronologically and accurately. Since many would agree that "the human is an essentially narrative species, a species that tells stories in order to make sense of the world" (Mason 51), much of history is written to engage the reader. Because of the narrative nature of history (the past), it is not surprising that the history books, similar to fiction, often incorporate narrative

techniques. The historian, like the author, must engage with literary practices—such as "emplotment (romantic, tragic, comic, satirical), modes of argument (formist, mechanicist, organicist, contextualist) and modes of ideological implication (anarchist, radical, conservative, liberal)" (Eaglestone 179)—in order to holistically develop the content of historical events. Furthermore, Robert Eaglestone explicates that "the "truth" of history lies not, at first, in its correspondence of its judgment with the object (the work of the historian with its object, the past) but rather with the world view of the historian and the language and modes that he or she uses" (179). These practices can also be found in the roles of a curator who constructs exhibitions that represent a historical event, display a culture, or reconstruct an object's history. The curator, "authenticated by the actualities in the museum," granted allowances for sketchy evidence, unconsciously demonstrates that "the more fragmentary the archaeological evidence, the more virtuosic the recreation" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 193). In this way, the curator must take what is known of the event, culture, or object in order to reconstruct what is unknown or assumed. The risk of utilizing literary techniques to more fully recreate the past is Margaret Anderson's fear of "presenting 'manufactured history'" (184). Although "history writing and fiction writing have different generic rules" (Eaglestone 182), they overlap enough to create difficult questions regarding the 'truth' of history books.

Many of the objects gathered within a museum stand as testaments to particular historic events. The museum's treatment and presentation of its collected objects dictates the connection found between objects and the history they represent.

According to Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, the retelling or recording of history requires a process called 'backtelling' which is "the art of backward construction" (178). This method, used quite often by paleontologists and detectives to solve mysteries, becomes quite useful when applied to museum exhibits and, remarkably, to the creation of history-based musical theatre. In the museum

> new pasts were made visible in the form of *reconstructions based on their artefactual or osteological remains*. It was also in the museum that these new pasts were *organized into a narrative machinery* through which, means of the techniques of backward construction, they linked together sequences leading from the beginnings of time to the present. (italics mine, 179)

Through the practice of backward construction, history is typically 'reconstructed' with what is factually known through a tangible object and then backtracks through time to the original context of the object. In this way, the historian uses 'narrative machinery' to fill in the holes created by accurate data with factually based assumptions in order to create a more fulfilling historical retelling.

Backward construction functions equally well within history-based drama, allowing the playwright to insert additional plot building events and character developing aspects to enhance already existing records. Historical data joins theatrical renditions of history by infusing the 'facts' with representations of life that are positioned on a stage. This union allows "for current-day comment and insight, and explicitly connect[ing] [the past's] relevance to the modern day" (Hughes 37), which

has become a serious concern within most museums. This is why museums as a discipline have, throughout history, incorporated living history museums, live displays, folkloric performances, and plays performed within the exhibit. However, the danger of mixing museum and theatre is located in the audience's confusion; history-based theatre "is the re-creation of history and not the "real" thing, but it is often difficult for the visitor [unfamiliar with the subject matter] to separate the two. Authenticity is important to its integrity, but this same need can also be an impediment to full understanding, as when visitors mistake authenticity for reality" (37). Herein lies the fuel for an analysis of Stephen Sondheim's history-based/museum-based musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*.

1.1 Seurat & Sondheim: Fixed Laws for Color, Like Music

George Seurat, nineteenth century innovative painter who developed the pointillist technique, lived an extremely private life. Historically, Seurat was born in Paris, December 2, 1859, and died semi-mysteriously in Paris, March 29, 1891, at the age of 31. His some five hundred large and smaller paintings, drawings, and sketches are well documented and have been meticulously organized in chronological order. His mural-sized masterpiece, *Dimanche, Après-Midi à l'Ile de la Grande Jatte* (Sunday on the Island La Grande Jatte), took two years to complete but met only with displeasure from the public, critics, and artists when displayed in 1886. In Stephen Sondheim's musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*, the character George engulfs himself with his masterpiece, often asking the opinion of a local artist who easily vocalizes his distaste. While working on his masterpiece, George's mistress, Dot, becomes his muse and he

exhibits her as the central woman figure of the painting. Dot becomes pregnant with a girl, but hurt by George's obsession with his art, she leaves him for a baker. The history books report that George Seurat did have an uneducated mistress, he did paint portraits of her, and he did have a child with her. But did she act as his muse and did she truly understand the misunderstood painter as Sondheim's Dot seems to? By filling in the holes left behind by historical data, Sondheim recreates George Seurat in the flesh; however, if Seurat's history is being retold in the format of a musical, does Sondheim sacrifice chronological authenticity for narrative or are they effectively married? Does Sondheim risk sacrificing plot in order to fully represent George Seurat's *Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*? And, if history and a museum-housed object are being represented in Sondheim's musical, is the musical also inadvertently subjected to museum practices of which Seurat's painting is already a part?

Producing artwork within the flexible realm of musical composition and performance preoccupied many artists in the time between George Seurat's death in 1859 and Stephen Sondheim's 1984 *Sunday in the Park with George*. In the 1930s musicians as well as artists "began to grow ever more aware of the fact that colors, like musical notes, possess their own intrinsic tone quality, and that, quite apart from their use as local colors, they could be employed by analogy with the rules of musical harmony to release their full, intrinsic power" (Maur 38). During the 30s, a few artists concentrated on projecting their colors into the continually changing "tone-space" that already existed in music (43). In this space "tone corresponds with an eye to arrive at coloristic principles analogous to those of the musical theory of harmony" (38). Painter

Robert Delaunay in France, based on George Seurat's research concerning the relationship between color and light, attempted to overcome the boundaries between painting and music by applying paint "with a musical sense of time, and with simultaneous perception" (51). Delaunay accomplished this feat by applying "complimentary color contrasts to release the dynamic effects of color and elicit a sense of optical motion" (53), and it was the discovery of this technique that led him to "speak of *light* as the ordering force in life, the foundation of *harmony* and *rhythm*" (italics mine, 53). This method of applying paint not only musicalized a painter's canvas, but the concepts can be reversed to depict color and light in music's harmony and rhythm.

Sondheim draws extensively on this fusion of light, harmony, and rhythm to form the basis of the character George's ordered, artistic obsession. The opening song of Act One emphasizes this lyrically, theatrically, and musically. Accompanied by arpeggiated chords (chords played one note at a time), George directs the entrance and exit of trees and conducts the sun's course while saying,

> White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: bring order to whole.
>
> Through design.
>
> Composition.
>
> Balance.
>
> Light.
>
> And Harmony.
>
> (Sondheim and Lapine 3-4)

Here, notes and text link with pointillist concepts "so that none of the chords feels like a cadence [point of rest] until we get to "harmony""—colors and music are juxtaposed until the artist starts to sing (Horowitz 113-14). Prior to Sondheim's musicalization of Seurat's painting, composers of program music blurred boundaries between painting and music with orchestral depictions; however, the equal mixture of visual, musical, and textual characteristics to display a famous painting had yet to be attempted.

Before 1980 most musicals were based on excerpts from an original text-based form (novels, poetry, short stories, etc.); however, in the 1980s composers and lyricists began to explore and experiment with other art forms in hopes of creating a musical to reflect society's technological movement and contemporary fascination with the visual. For example, Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* is a transformation of visual art, and "when transformation of a work of visual art is brought onto the theatrical stage and wedded with the miming aspect of that genre," the musical is enacting "the visual to the verbal mimed" (Bruhn 45). On stage, paintings can be brought to life with words, emotion-charged music, and action, transformed to recreate "through the other means that is expressed in the primary art work" (58). However, even though artwork can be brought onto a stage through the verbal mime, Sondheim takes this transformation one step further. Rather then fully converting the painting into a musical theatre format, Sondheim preserves the original painting by transforming his musical's set and characters into the original painting on three separate occasions: the end of Act One and the beginning and end of Act Two. Each transformation from dramatic characters and scenes to framed painting is a demonstration of the artist's authority to control and order

his surroundings as well as bring harmony to chaotic life. However, the displayed painting does more then reiterate the artist's control over the painting's development. I believe that by recreating the painting on stage, Sondheim essentially interweaves two diverse disciplines, inserting the art gallery (and the critiques associated with the museum's methods of display) into the staged performance.

Sondheim saw the possibilities of this "pictorial source text relat[ing] to—and transmut[ing] into—a musical composition" (Bruhn 35), and he did this through the pointillist principle. The painting depicts people gathered on an island enjoying the outdoors, and it is from this scene that Sondheim creates a historical narrative that tracks the artist's life and the creation of his art. Inspired by Seurat's artistry, Sondheim cued the entire foundation of the musical on the painting principle created by the painter. The collection of dots Seurat utilizes to create the color for the images in his painting are transported onto the stage and transformed into three-dimensional costumes, clipped lyrics, and staccato music. The costume fabrics were "handpainted with tiny dots of color," and Sondheim "used quick staccato passages—the musical equivalent of pointillist dots—while his lyrics consisted of clipped, often disassociated monosyllables" (Jones 295-96). Through multiple techniques only available in theatre, Sondheim superbly recreates the painting on stage, infusing the painting with text as well as music without sacrificing the original painting.

In his early brainstorming, Sondheim discovered that the pointillist technique and music relate even more closely than he demonstrates in the finished musical. History books report that Seurat painted in an extremely organized and structured

fashion, keeping all eleven primary colors and white on a square palate that never allowed the colors to mix. Colors could only be mixed if they were next to each other on the color wheel—"so he would never mix yellow with blue; he would mix yellow with yellow-orange, or he would mix blue with blue-violet, but he would never mix yellow and blue" (Horowitz 91). Instead, Seurat relied on the eye to mix the colors when viewing the canvas. Interestingly, there are twelve notes in the musical scale, which Sondheim initially equated to the eleven colors and white on Seurat's palate. Sondheim quickly discarded this application due to the limitations it would place on the music since it would mean that the entire score would be made up of major and minor seconds. Yet, in the score Sondheim does attempt to musically express the pointillist technique by often juxtaposing "two notes right next to each other… [so that] the ear would blend them into one note" (93), which "is exactly like juxtaposing yellow with yellow-orange, or red with red-orange" (93). He also imitates the pointillist technique through rhythmic structures and arpeggiated chords that reoccur throughout the musical, giving the musical connectivity without using a traditional plotline. Hence, the musical equivalent of pointillism produces art through music and generates a further connection to Seurat's famous painting. By applying the pointillist painting technique to all aspects of the musical, Sondheim not only recreates the painting visually but aurally as well.

Transforming the painting into a new art form and consequently new museum collection is not a new occurrence. The tableau vivant, historically an opportunity at parties for noble men and women to dress in costume and pose in "representation of a famous scene or work of art" (Gänzl 409), first comes alive at the end of the musical's

first act when all the actors pose in the likeness of Seurat's painting. Sondheim took Seurat's painting out of its original art collection and transformed it into a collection of images, verbalized and mimed on the theatrical stage. The collection of Seurat's dots melts together to form a collection of images, whereas Sondheim's collection of characters group together in order to recreate the collected images found in a painting located at the Art Institute of Chicago. As Sondheim's characters embody Seurat's painting, the transforming musical becomes the transformed original medium. The irony is subtle, yet Sondheim shows that although the musical transforms, this "recreation can happen on any point of the scale" and often the musical is recreated as it transforms (Bruhn 58). Sondheim also inserts two other of Seurat's paintings in tableau vivant format into the beginning of the musical: *Une Baignade Asniéres* (Bathing at Asniéres) and *La Poudreuse* (Woman Powdering). *Une Baignade Asniéres* is tracked onto stage as if in a gallery for the critique of artist, Jules, and his wife, Yvonne. Dot embodies *La Poudreuse* as she sits at her vanity readying herself for a promised trip to the Follies. Sondheim's characters inhabit both Seurat's canvas and the musical stage, further blurring the line between art forms: are the characters of the painting, of the theatrical stage, or of history (the past)? When Act One ends and Act Two opens with Seurat's masterpiece—populated by Sondheim's characters—'hanging' in an art gallery, it is clear that the transformation is complete and the musical is recreated into a new hybrid art form.

Although examining the correlation between museums and theatres is important to interdisciplinary studies due in part to the unique connection created through the

interweaving of history (the past) with musical theatre, how should the scholar treat a play or musical theatre production that bases its narrative structure on an already established museum display such as *Sunday on the Island La Grande Jatte*? It is widely agreed that all theatre exudes from and relies upon the imagination. Therefore (using Boston's Museum of Science's Science Theatre program as an example) even though a play is written by a museum employed playwright, produced for a specific exhibit, and guided by the curator's detailed knowledge, how can it be argued that theatre in any form (museum-based or otherwise) can present exhibits to visitors without confusing what is 'real' with what is fiction? How can it be argued that Sondheim's presentation of history is any more or less 'real' then a museum's; where does the 'real' end and the interpretation begin? The viewer in either situation remains caught between the object (cognitive knowledge) and the theatrical presentation of the object (emotive understanding). Furthermore, could it not be argued that theatrically presenting an exhibit further solidifies the object's transformation from 'object in original context' to 'object as objectified spectacle,' making the stage recreation no less manipulative than the art gallery's display?

The objective of this study is to analyze the unique relationship between the museum, the construction of history, and Stephen Sondheim's musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. I believe that this relationship extends past the obvious similarities in presentation (specifically the lighting, placement, and backdrops of exhibits, the theatrical reenactments of history in living history museums, and the establishment of actors and playwrights within museums to aid interpretation). Instead, these two

institutions are not in relation to one another but rather have been using and benefiting from each other's techniques without fully recognizing their union. Stephen Sondheim's musical is perfect for this type of examination because of its intimate retelling of George Seurat's history and its vivid recreation of Seurat's museum-housed masterpiece. *Sunday in the Park with George* also demonstrates Sondheim's belief "that all significance is achieved through the *interpretation* of discrete units. By focusing on *the scraps* and *tangible remnants of history*, one can perhaps gain some comprehension of the fabric of the past" (italics mine, Gordon, *Art* 192-93). By employing (perhaps unknowingly) practices exercised in museums, Sondheim 'interprets' 'the scraps' and 'tangible remnants of history' and builds an amazingly complex musical. This analysis serves to reveal the strong interconnectedness between museums and theatre—mentioned only briefly by other scholars—as demonstrated by Sondheim's musical. Because Sondheim chose a museum-housed painting as the foundation for his show, museum practices including labels, titles, ways of seeing, and curatorial authority—to which George Seurat's *Sunday on the Island of la Grande Jatte* had already been subjected—can also be located in Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. Consequently, these practices result in a musical that as a whole is not only a historical interpretation of George Seurat's life and work, but creates a unique way to display artwork and demonstrates a new method for applying museum practices. In Sondheim's musical, the artist is returned authority over his painting, above museum practice and curator bias. By granting the artist such dominion over the artwork, Sondheim redirects the focus from Seurat's innovative pointillist style—as

commonly found in history books—to a focus on the relationship between artist and artwork, allowing for artist and painting to converse.

Chapter two, American Musical Theatre: That is the State of the Art, is the paper's first chapter of analysis in which I briefly relate the history of American musical theatre, noting the development of musicals directly before Stephen Sondheim made his entrance. Sondheim's childhood, education, and a few awards are also described. Chapter three, Museum History and Scholarship, takes a look at the history of museums as they began in Europe, their configuration in America, and both European and American museums' failure to represent the diverse public. I briefly detail museum scholarship and critique, taking note of museums' refocus on education, visitor services, and creating an experience as encouraged by New Museology. Chapter four, Opposites Attract: The Theatre/Museum Relationship, examines the relationship between theatre and museum practices as well as the integration of each discipline into the other, for example, living history museums and live displays. Taking a closer look at theatre in museums and how that space and process are controlled is the focus of chapter five, The Theatrical Museum's Controlled Space. Here I explain the process of backward construction which allows historians, curators, authors, and playwrights to fill in the gaps left by historical data with factually based assumptions. In chapter six, Controlling the Museum Space, I take an even closer look at museum practices, analyzing the use of labels, titles, and time as factors in a viewer's interpretative ability. Examples from Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George* are given whenever possible to show how these practices influence the viewer. Chapter seven, Controlling the Theatre

Space, applies the museum's controlling processes as well as the processes unique to theatre to Sondheim's musical, which results in a deeper look at both the musical and George Seurat's *Sunday on the Island of la Grande Jatte*. The paper ends with chapter eight, Art Isn't Easy. Here I briefly examine museum and theatre's transforming into economy-driven institutions (the major statement made throughout the musical) as well as the artist's fascination with history before summarizing my conclusions.

CHAPTER 2

AMERICAN MUSICAL THEATRE:

THAT IS THE STATE OF THE ART

Although Broadway enthusiasts and awestruck tourists enjoy musical theatre, the vast majority of musical theatre scholarship has been written by pop culture critics and rarely studied by serious analysts. Earlier schools of thought rejected the possibility that musicals could contain composition worthy of study due to the musical theatre's use of popular music. This is not terribly surprising due in part to two distinct, although interrelated, aspects. First, Broadway needs to please contemporary audiences in order to sell tickets, and second, musicals typically reflect cultural tastes rather than classical forms demonstrated by composers such as Mozart, Bach, and Listz. According to Joseph P. Swain, the author of *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey*, musical theatre is "often dismissed [by serious music critics] because the music seems to be rooted in popular style rather than "serious" or "cultivated" or "classical" styles"" (8). However, it is because a musical's success depends on pleasing the public that composers were "free to draw on the newer popular styles of jazz and rock" (10) and create unique musical styles to which the public could relate. Since "every [social] code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them" (Attali 19), musicals visually and aurally illustrate "the multiplicity of links and relations between [contemporary] music and all the other

elements of culture" (Foucault 6), demonstrating distinctive uses of popular music, styles, movements, and ideologies. Because of the musical's ability to draw on popular music and contemporary ideologies, American musical theatre was able to divorce itself from its earlier European connections and develop into the art form that is practiced on Broadway today.

Since most theatre in the nineteenth century was imported from Europe, American musical theatre developed out of the European theatre tradition. During this time, American theatre consisted of European operettas—a little opera that dealt with less serious topics than a full opera—that "were more European than American in flavor" (Reichers). Around 1905 Jerome Kern, a Broadway rehearsal pianist, began "Americanizing" European shows to make them seem less imported and more 'American grown.' Although theatre, like all art, is constantly reinventing itself to discover and create new and innovative ways in which to present its medium, American theatre completely broke away from Europe and created its own style during World War I. It was during this time that "German operettas were no longer popular" and instead "a patriotic spirit made people want American music" (Reichers). America took its first major steps towards creating its greatest original contribution to theatre, the musical.

In 1914 Jerome Kern's career took a new direction when he revolutionized the entire concept of musical theatre. The 1927 musical *Show Boat*, collaboration between Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II based on the popular novel by Edna Ferber, represents an important landmark. Prior to *Show Boat*, the vast majority of lyricists and

composers tended to "borrow" and "use" sections or whole works from other texts, adapting "romantic novels, frame stories, Shakespearean plays, and classical myths" into musical theatre and rarely creating new material (Swain 12). Musicals retained a level of naïvete that failed to engage with life issues and complicated situations; plots focused on love relationships and were fashioned after the novel's narrative structure. However, *Show Boat* changed that practice by heralding in what are now considered classic American musical theatre characteristics: "the quality of the music, the lyrics, the realism of the plot, [and] the unabashed American character" integrated "into a credible drama" (Swain 15). In other words, an American musical connects the songs and music to all other dramatic aspects of the show, essentially creating a unified hybrid of music and theatre. *Show Boat* also "dealt with social and racial themes that American songwriters hadn't previously aspired to touch. It thereby served notice that musicals could be a serious art form and could tell serious stories" (Zinsser 13). Sadly, after successfully producing *Show Boat*, Kern returned to the old ways, leaving the development of the new format to a new breed of songwriters to take up where he left off. What followed were daring composers such as Porter, Gershwin, Berlin, and Rodgers who individually continued to push the musical theatre envelope until they pioneered a new age of musical theater with Rodgers & Hammerstein's creation of *Oklahoma!* in 1943. Fourteen years after *Oklahoma!* made its appearance, Stephen Sondheim entered the musical theatre scene by writing lyrics for *West Side Story*, beginning the next march towards a new era in American musical theater history.

Stephen Sondheim was born March 22, 1930, to Foxy and Herbert Sondheim. Although both of Sondheim's parents were a little artistic (Foxy was a designer and Herbert enjoyed the piano), neither one exhibited the amazing musical and lyrical qualities for which Sondheim is so well known. Because Foxy and Herbert were both successful in their chosen fields, Sondheim spent very little time with them. In fact he referred to himself as "an institutionalized child, meaning one who has no contact with any kind of family" (Secrest 21). This separation did not, however, keep Sondheim protected from change when in 1942 his father left his mother for a younger woman. Devastated, Foxy moved to Doyleston, Pennsylvania which enabled Sondheim to live near his friend who happened to be the son of Oscar Hammerstein II. At the age of fifteen Sondheim wrote his first musical, proudly presented it to Hammerstein, and insisted that Hammerstein judge the musical fairly, comparing it to the current successes on Broadway. Although Hammerstein told the young Sondheim that his first musical was awful, the constructive criticism spurred a relationship that later shaped Sondheim's early musical theatre style. Sondheim attended Williams College still undecided on his future path, considering mathematics for a time (not an unusual choice since music is highly mathematical) before settling on music composition. After winning the Hutchinson Prize, he was able to study musical composition at Princeton University with Milton Babbitt, yet Sondheim dismissed current contemporary styles and adamantly insisted that Babbitt teach him strictly classical music. Hence, scholars argue that his early classical training directly attributes to the complexity of his later work.

Even though Stephen Sondheim's career is most notable for his intricate weaving of music and text, his first opportunities were with television scripts and the lyrics for the extremely popular *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959). Before 1970 Sondheim's influence by Oscar Hammerstein II and collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, although positive career accelerators, kept him from fully developing his own unique style and instead restricted him within musical theatre prerequisites long established by Hammerstein and Bernstein. Having an insider's knowledge of the current musical theater techniques, however, allowed Sondheim to more efficiently develop what at that time was considered to be the American musical theatre standard. From 1971 to 1973 Sondheim with director/producer Hal Prince won the Tony for Best Musical Score for three consecutive years and in 1985 with writer/director James Lapine won the Pulitzer Prize for *Sunday in the Park with George*. Finally, in July 2000 Sondheim received the Praeminum Imperiale award from the Japan Art Association.

With all this success, one may think that this remarkable composer/lyricist achieved rave reviews from music critics and audiences alike, "but commercial success, though obviously important for survival, has never been the raison d'être for any of Sondheim's work" (Gordon, *Art* 4). Before Sondheim hit Broadway, "musicals were almost exclusively viewed as escapist entertainment for the middle classes" (Gordon, Introduction 3), but Sondheim challenged the traditional system of escapism and replaced it with more complex narrative structures, difficult plots, intricate musical composition, sophisticated lyrics, and multi-dimensional characters. For the vast

majority of his work, audiences "are coaxed to see Sondheim as a thinker and the musical as a statement" (Lahr 289); none of Sondheim's shows are opinion free but rather entice the audience to contemplate the issues set before them. Sondheim's musicals assault the audience with current issues, offering 'real life' responses and solutions for those problems, and rarely (if never) provide the audience with an unchallenging, unintelligent experience. This type of musical theatre, however, unsettles the average audience member who still goes to musicals to escape his or her daily life for fictional entertainment. Because of Sondheim's fervent erosion of the "glistening surface of musical theater" (Gordon, *Art* 2), many critics and enthusiasts respect "the shows but [tend] not to like them very much" (Zinsser 214).

CHAPTER 3

MUSEUM HISTORY & SCHOLARSHIP

Museums range so widely in types, objectives, and practices that they have always been difficult to accurately define. In fact it is so complex a task that Edward P. Alexander, author of *Museums in Motion: An Instruction to The History and Functions of Museums*, reports that the American Association of Museums in the early 80s worked to develop a "nationwide museum accreditation program" that defined museums as "an organized and permanent non-profit institution, essentially educational or aesthetic in purpose, with professional staff, which owns and utilizes tangible objects, cares for them, and exhibits them to the public on some regular schedule" (5). Although this is a pretty general, contemporary definition, museums did not begin with such clear objectives. The most famous museum during classical times could be found in Alexandria and was primarily a university or academy; however, museums were barely alive in Europe during the Middle Ages. Treasures brought back during the Crusades often became fabulous additions to palace collections for royalty or nobles. The true development of the modern museum took place during the Renaissance, eighteenth century, and nineteenth century, yet these new 'gallery' (exhibition of art and sculpture) and 'cabinet' (exhibition of stuffed animals, plants, and curious objects) type museums were rarely open to the public and remained private collections (8). Museums finally opened their doors to the public in the late seventeenth century, heralding in the first

university museum that "supposedly…would help educate humankind and abet its steady progress toward perfection" (8). Or at least, this was the theory.

Many critics argue that from its early beginnings, clearly the museum deemed itself a cultivator of the public but not necessarily a representation of the people it sought to attract and improve. For example, Alexander presents June Jordan, a black poet, as being a part of a militant minority group advocating the museum's destruction. At a museum seminar in Brooklyn, Jordan declared, " Take me into the museum and show me myself, show me my people, show me soul American" (Alexander 6). Minority groups, however, have not been the only marginalized peoples shown to not be represented in American museums. Scholars such as Tony Bennett believe "museums, and especially art galleries, have often been effectively appropriated by social elites…they have continued to play a significant role in differentiating elite from popular social classes" (28). In 1873 the Smithsonian's George Brown Goode enthusiastically integrated labels into the exhibit in order to help heal this fracture and attract the 'popular social class' to the museum. In 1841, similar reasoning was used by a House of Commons Select Committee who decided that not only should all exhibits be clearly labeled but the museum should also provide cheap instructional booklets. Today, in addition to labels and booklets, audio-commentary has also been integrated a vehicle of learning. Although the original argument to use such guides stemmed from the museum's desire to help the public more accurately 'see' the exhibition, what essentially occurred was "a distinction between those who can and those who cannot see" (Bennett, T. 164), distancing the public rather then drawing them closer.

Furthermore, it has been argued that instructional devices all present the museum's 'way of seeing' the exhibition and do not allow the visitor to form their own interpretation.

From its earliest beginnings to the present, the primary objectives of the museum are collection, conservation, and research—although these three are currently being debated as museums seek to be entertaining institutions of learning. American museums—the first one founded in 1773 in Charles Willson Peale's home—have worked to establish strong relationships with schools significantly due to George Brown Goode whose focus was on the educational museum and instructive labels. Regardless of this devotion to education, most museum scholars would agree that "the objects themselves are the heart of a museum, and their collection according to a logical over-all plan is of great importance" (Alexander 15).

Prior to the twentieth century, most museums endorsed a dual arrangement of their collections, displaying them for public exhibition and for study. However, since museums now rely heavily on tourism to attract enough visitors, many museums—encouraged by New Museology—have self-consciously shifted their orientation away from being artifact-driven to visitor-driven, away "from creating an experience based on seeing to one based on doing" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 137). Critics of New Museology argue that this concentrated focus on education, visitor services, and producing an 'experience' is "at the expense of curatorial research based on museum collections" (138). Shay Sayre and Cynthia King, in *Entertainment & Society: Audiences, Trends, and Impacts*, explain that "like money, attention has *instrumental* value" (19). Based on

museums' recent shift, I believe that museums are attempting to compete in the current attention-driven economy, creating an 'experience' that hovers closer to entertainment then education. Curtailed by government regulations and bowing to corporate sponsorship and wealthy donors, many scholars (myself included) fear that museums have all but lost sight of their original objectives; however, according to New Museologists, museums are merely adjusting with popular interests.

CHAPTER 4

OPPOSITES ATTRACT: THE THEATRE/MUSEUM RELATIONSHIP

Interestingly, the relationship between museum procedures and theatrical techniques is not a new one, and this comparative study reveals several remarkable similarities not commonly discussed. Both rely on attracting and retaining audiences in order to subsist; yet unfortunately, this has led to the recognition that "as long as you keep people entertained, you will have their attention" (Sayre and King 19). More often than not, both disciplines have turned to the entertainment factor in order to appeal to a wide range of audiences. Another similarity lies in the text found in both museums and theatres. Many scholars have equated the curator's writing of labels to the playwright's creation of the script. In both cases, the audience's way of seeing the displayed object/performance is dictated by an authoritative figure: curator or writer/composer. Theatrical techniques such as lighting, staging (placement), and backdrops can also be found in the museum's exhibition, often applying dramatic or artistic aspects to an otherwise 'ordinary' object. Analogous to labels and scripts, these same theatrical techniques also direct ways of seeing the displayed object/performance.

Representing history, heritage, and culture is also a commonality between these two disciplines. More playwrights and playhouses are dedicated to accurately representing the heritage and culture of historically "marginalized" groups, which compares to the museum's presenting of heritage as "a mode of cultural production in

the present that has recourse to the past" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 7). Museums, through the act of display, "give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves" (7). Theatrical techniques remain the foundation for these 'exhibitions of themselves' to effectively present living replicas of a departed site. Reenactments and recreations of past sites and events (otherwise known as living history museums, live displays, and folkloric performances) rely on not only museum authority and authenticity but also actors, directors, props, staging, and scenes. Similarly, theatre based on historical events can be found not only on and off Broadway but currently museum employed playwrights compose customized plays to be performed within specific exhibits. Instead of embodying historic caricatures as found in living history museums, actors perform short plays that weave the data presented in the exhibit with a fictitious storyline. However, all these similarities, although exposing exciting opportunities for both museums and theatres, can pose problems when examining possible effects of combining the techniques of otherwise conflicting disciplines: cognitive/factual versus emotive/imagination.

The intersection of these two disciplines occurred perhaps from an early recognition of the advantages each discipline brought to the other. The early museums of the 1800s—often containing private collections not made available to the general public—housed numerous objects gathered during colonizing expeditions from around the world. Since "ethical standards and regulatory law usually follow public demand" (Boyd) and the general public were not welcomed to these early private museums, collectors engaged in unfettered collecting without "regard for the detrimental aspects

of movement from the point of view of others" (Boyd). This freedom of collecting, although currently deemed detrimental, allowed collectors to acquire objects that otherwise would never have been preserved and may have been lost.

On the other hand, although currently considered limitless, uncensored, controversial, and uninhibited, theatre cannot claim to have come from roots so unregulated. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although "opera composer[s] turned to the structures of social and historical reality" (Zelechow 94), stage theatre "remained bound to aristocratic officially sanctioned ideas of neo-classical Greek tragedy" (94) and were slow to break free of these restraints. In the nineteenth century, however, museums and theatres engaged

> in what might be characterized as a reciprocity of means and complementarity of function, museums used theatrical crafts of scene painting for exhibits and staged performances in their lecture rooms, while theatres used the subjects presented in museums, including live exotic animals and humans, and the technologies demonstrated there in their stage productions. Museums served as surrogate theatres during periods when theaters came under attack for religious reasons.
>
> (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 34)

This example of interconnectivity not only reveals the ease with which these two disciplines can be combined but also demonstrates one of the first examples (excluding the living history museums in the seventeenth century) of their compatibility. Therefore, the correlation between museums and theatre is not limited to a sharing of

lighting techniques or a similarity of staging (placement) but rather, as depicted by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, this is a penetration or overlapping of the disciplines. From this union emerge museum-based theatre and theatrically-steeped museums in which exhibits are theatrically displayed to the public through the use of two different disciplines.

No matter the original intention or the method of display, the exhibition (human or otherwise) reduces the exhibit to pure spectacle by means of display for public judgment. For Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "the inherently performative nature of live specimens veers exhibits of them strongly in the direction of spectacle" (34), and it is through this shift from person to spectacle that live specimens are objectified and made less human. The difference between live displays and living history museums such as Plymouth Plantation and Skansen, near Stockholm, Sweden, is that living history museums can easily be seen as "unscripted ensemble performance[s]" (10), whereas live displays are peopled by natives to "create the illusion that the activities you watch are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the effect of authenticity, or realness" (55). Through the gaze of the viewer, however, living history museums objectify the historical people being represented by actors and live displays objectify the native people being displayed, transforming both of them into nonhuman artifacts. Equally important are folkloric performances, which are performed in various locations from archeology digs to concert halls, and should not be regarded as "any less autonomous as artifacts, for songs, tales, dances, and ritual practices are also

ethnographically excised and presented as self-contained units" (62). Simply, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts that

> the centrality of human actors in performance and the inseparability of process and product are what distinguish performances from things. While an artifact may be viewed as a record of the process of its manufacture, as an indexical sign—process is there in material traces—performance is all process. Through the kind of repetition required by stage appearances, long runs, and extensive tours, performances can become like artifacts. (64)

Therefore, the presence of live performers—displayed to the public for viewing and judgment—recreates the displayed people as artifact and spectacle, yet one cannot dismiss the fact that nonhuman artifacts are also susceptible to being reduced to empty, performative spectacle. Objects are presented through scenes built using backdrops, lighting, and staging (placement) of the object in relation to the other objects in the exhibit and surrounding exhibitions. Artifacts contain their own drama by way of their presentation; "exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical…Their script is a series of labels. Scenes are built around processes of manufacture and use" (3). All of these characteristics can be found in theatre and remain the fundamentals for almost all productions but also design the backbone of many successful museum exhibits.

According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, human and non-human exhibitions are objectified by means of display through the viewers gaze, however, W.B Worthen, author of *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, contends that the same result can

be found in theatre. Although more specific to realistic theatre, the stage works to arouse a person's "desire to view others as theater from a position of unstaged freedom" (Worthen 15). When viewing realistic theatre, the audience member is free within the controlled space of the theatre to openly objectify 'the other' while remaining in a safe position of observation (21). Unlike museum exhibits, the audience responds to the play as individuals and as a whole due in part to the attracting of diverse people to all the same location to view the same performance. Theatre provides the audience member with a unique opportunity to view, interpret, and judge another's life without also being on display. Whereas living history museums, live displays, and folkloric performances all provide relatively the same environment for interpretation by often requiring viewer and performer to intermingle, audience members view the stage as a pictorial environment separated by a 'safe' distance between audience and stage. Because there is little fear that the actor/character will "emerge from the "picture," the [audience's safe zone] becomes a decisive factor in the audience's interpretive activity, especially in its reading of "character"" (18). Analogous to museum artifacts, theatre is subject to the "objectifying gaze of the spectator" (66); however, the distinct difference between the gaze of the museum visitor and the gaze of the theatre audience member is not a question of aesthetics or history versus entertainment. Instead, it is a question of different genres or disciplines. Although the objectifying gaze of the spectator has similar consequences, there are separate constructional considerations for each discipline.

CHAPTER 5

THE THEATRICAL MUSEUM'S CONTROLLED SPACE

Even though living history museums were created with good intention, Catherine Hughes, a museum actor at the Museum of Science in Boston and author of *Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors Through Drama*, believes that where living history museums tend to fail, productions actually embedded within the museum's exhibits succeed. Hughes drew on Freeman Tilden's book *Interpreting Our Heritage* when explaining the interpretation differences between the two types of museum-based theatre. In his book, Tilden states that "information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information" (Hughes 39-40). In other words, the interpretation of the past should never be considered to be the past, or mistaken as 'real.' Rather, the interpretation includes factual evidence/information that supports the interpretation. Therefore, the back construction used to develop living history museums, live displays, and folkloric performances is an incorporation of Tilden's "interpretation includes information;" yet, problems arise when audiences mistake living history museums for 'real' representations instead of theatre. Although these peopled displays remain closely connected to archeological findings, they ultimately are the accumulation of historians' assumptions or rather

interpretations. Performances embedded within exhibits and performed in playhouses, however, are clearly theatre and cannot be easily assumed to be otherwise.

In living history museums, twentieth century actors embody characters assumed to have populated a specific historic period. Whereas traditional theatre actors can embody a role, a developed character, and a completed script, "to re-create 1627, the actors have to "forget" everything that happened thereafter" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 199) because they are not restricted to a script and must create and maintain the character completely of their own skill. These actors mingle with visitors, answer questions, and demonstrate what is thought to have been everyday life; living history museums are "an imaginary space into which the visitor enters. Gone is the fourth wall. Immersed in a total environment, the visitor negotiates a path through the site, both physically and conceptually" (192). Within this one place "the history of archaeology and the history of theatrical commemoration" converge (192); however, as exciting as this may be to the fascinated visitor, Catherine Hughes' concern is for the visitor's understanding of authentic history. What can occur is that the interpretation, infused with factual information, is mistaken for reality and not recognized as an authentic interpretation. Because living history museums must build on what has already been acquired and defined in the museum's collection, they are able to create authenticity in living history museums but at the risk of visitors labeling what they see as 'real' and not a backward construction. Hughes, believing that "museums *are* theatres, rich with stories of human spirit and activity and the natural forces of life" (10), seems to me to be advocating that theatre and museums effectively work together when they support

each other but do not become completely entwined. Instead, she suggests that theatre aid in interpretation through performance, but not embody the interpretation as historic characters. For example, a play written for an exhibition displaying the animals and people preserved in bogs helps viewers understand the exhibit but, according to Hughes, it does not embody the display for the viewer. This reasoning is debatable; however, it demonstrates the complexities associated with the combining of these two disciplines.

CHAPTER 6

CONTROLLING THE MUSEUM SPACE

Organizing museums and producing musical theatre is a controlled process, one that develops from authoritative control in the form of curator and writer/composer and into a controlled (and sometimes manipulating) space such as an exhibition or theatrical stage. Because museums and theaters are created by people, no matter how neutral the creators attempt to be, their outside lives will always be a source of influence when creating exhibits, plays, and explanatory text. Therefore, curators and writers/composers will draw on their prior knowledge (often unconsciously) when creating or arranging exhibitions or theatre. Before any audience member believes themselves to be unjustly manipulated by these invisible authorities, viewers must remember that they come to museums and theaters willingly, bringing their own stereotypes and biases. Gaynor Kavanagh, in "Exhibitionist Tendencies," explains this phenomenon in terms of museums, but interestingly draws a comparison between museums and the arts:

> Museums are controlled spaces and are as saturated with the ideologies of our times as are books, drama and journals. And just like authors, critics and editors, museum professionals carry with them and operate through whatever cultural baggage is theirs, within a system that has fundamental political requirements. Of equal importance, museum visitors are not neutral either. We bring with us our life experiences,

> attitudes and interests. Once in the museum, we set our own programmes, provide a great deal of our own interpretation and choose whatever messages we are willing to accept.

Hence, the museum and its visitors as well as theatre and its audiences interact, each manipulating the situation slightly to meet their own specific qualifications. Although neither party is truly neutral when entering a museum or attending a drama, can it honestly be argued, as Kavanagh has, that visitors "provide a great deal of [their] own interpretation and choose whatever messages [they] are willing to accept" or do outside authorities (for example curators and writers/composers) dictate the space and process of interpretation?

Although unconsciously controlling viewers, authorities such as curators and writers/composers are a part and administers of larger institutional practices. Museum curators guide through diverse methods the visitors' way of seeing the object, which in turn unknowingly regulates the visitors' interpretations and conclusions; however, the curator's individual research and opinions can also shape the viewer's way of seeing. Because the researcher in a museum studies objects and information not merely as a job related function but more often as an interested academic and scientist, the researcher "constructs a system of beliefs" from the material studied (Edson 40). These beliefs are transmuted through two related methods: the exhibit and the label. Exhibitions display "artifacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values" (Bennett, T. 6), making it apparent that "the act of preserving culture is indistinct from transmitting it" (Edson 40). What is to be

specifically communicated is, more often then not, left in the hands of the researcher who has through extensive research already formed a 'system of beliefs' concerning the exhibit. In other words, in a narrow way the calculated manner in which exhibitions are produced communicate the curator's view; hence, it is impossible to view an exhibition that is completely free of the curator's beliefs and biases no matter how objective the curator attempts to be.

The exhibit is also subject to displaying 'the past' through the culture of which the curator is presently a member. Based on these methods of presentation, the exhibition is unable to free itself from the present even though it is displaying the past. Tony Bennett suggests that, although the past exists "in a frame which separates it from the present," the past "is entirely the product of the present practices which organize and maintain that frame" (130). For example in the nineteenth century, museum curators went so far as to "arrange their displays so as to simulate the organization of the world—human and natural—outside the museum walls. This dream that the rational ordering of things might mirror the real order of things was soon revealed to be just that" (126); nonetheless, curators did attempt to project their ordering of the world onto the museum's visitor, inadvertently projecting their biases upon the viewer as well. In an era of public challenge, scholars such as Willard L. Boyd believe that museums are no longer viewed by the public as infallible institutions and the curator no longer perceived as the source of expertise but rather the public acknowledges curator bias to be just that. Although museums and curators unconsciously project their biases and manipulate the visitor's ways of seeing, the current conscious focus of many museums

is toward effectively educating the public. In order for the museum to make its self-conscious shift towards education and visitor services, the curator must loosen his authority and shift his role towards assisting the public to use the museum's resources, allowing the viewer to make his own authored statements concerning the exhibition.

6.1 Labels & Their Effects

As discussed earlier, curators use two forms which unconsciously manipulate the visitor's way of seeing. In most museum exhibitions, the exhibitor for the purpose of explanation provides labels for each displayed article. In fact when the label was first implemented, it was considered "a surrogate for the word of an absent lecturer," yet with labels the displayed objects, "rather than appear briefly to illustrate a lecture" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 32), now provide another way for the exhibitor to direct the viewers' gaze. According to Michael Baxandall's article, "Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects," labels

> denote the elements of naming, information, and exposition the exhibitor makes available to the viewer in whatever form: a label is not just a piece of card, but includes the briefing given in the catalogue entry and even selection or lighting that aims to make a point. To attend to the space, it seems to me, is to attend not only to the scene but to the source of the viewer's activity. (37)

Therefore, Baxandall sees labels as more than mere explanations but rather a summation of all aspects (lighting, methods of displaying, etc) that dictate ways of seeing. Because of this direction, the viewer becomes a passive subject for instruction

and not an active subject of discovery. The viewer is directed and led towards every interpretation and is not allowed to come to his own conclusions. Although the exhibitor's actions are deliberate and not sinister, scholars Baxandall and Svetlana Alper both recognize the exhibitor's power over ways the museum object can be seen and interpreted by the viewer. Hence, the process of gathering and arranging objects and the ways the exhibitor displays and labels the objects abstracts the original context of the object and transforms it into a new context.

Regardless of the type of exhibition, public museums proudly display their collected objects in an organized fashion. The exhibitor controls how the audience views the collection, which in effect shapes the conclusions audience members tend to form. In other words, all displayed objects in an exhibition are subjected to Svetlana Alper's "museum effect," which is "the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art" (27). According to her article, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," this effect does little to represent the collected objects as they were in their original state, and instead transforms the object into a piece of artwork to be examined. When this occurs, the collector "establishes certain parameters of visual interest" and directs the viewers' gaze (29). Therefore, although the viewer comes to the exhibition of his own accord and for his own reasons, the exhibitor directs the viewer's way of seeing the displayed object.

Nonetheless, there are arguments supporting the use of explanatory materials such as labels, instruction booklets, and audio-commentary, especially when endorsing the New Museology ideas of education and visitor service. The argument revolves

around arming the inexperienced or unknowledgeable museum visitor with the tools to interpret exhibits, thereby giving a context by which to view the 'foreign' objects. The use of these materials benefit both the museum and the visitor because "whether they guide the physical arrangement of objects or structure the way viewers look at otherwise amorphous accumulations, exhibition classifications create serious interest where it might otherwise be lacking" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 23). Explanatory materials can be another way to generate entertainment for the visitor as well as provide them with the principles for looking. Yet, another advantage of these materials is to offer a buffer zone between the display and the visitor (analogous to the theatre audience's distance from the stage) so that the viewer may textually explore the exhibit without risking an emotional or controversial response. Also, the text imprinted on attractive plaques generates greater authority, supplying the casual museum visitor with new knowledge and therefore the confidence to return to the museum. It would seem a win-win situation; however, this is without considering the obvious manipulations of the viewer's way of seeing the exhibitions.

6.2 Titling—An Artist Reaching Out?

Sondheim forces the audience to see the painting in a highly controversial light, unable to separate the painting from the artist's intention and the viewer's response. Michael Baxandall contends that museums and art galleries invoke "a space between object and label" to allow an "intellectual space in which the third agent, the viewer, establishes contact between the first and second agents, the maker and the exhibitor" (Baxandall 37). The description of roles governing the agents and the boundaries

separating the spaces break down when Sondheim exhibits Seurat's painting because Sondheim does not restrict the painting to an explanatory label posted near the art piece. Instead, Sondheim brings the artist to life on the stage, requiring the viewer to actively engage with the show in order to process the optical and aural blending of color and sound. *Sunday in the Park with George* is not just a way of seeing art but rather a way of experiencing it. Yet, although Sondheim does not restrict the painting to an explanatory label, he has filtered both the artwork and the musical through a title. By titling the musical Sondheim refers the artwork to another domain, one that "evoke[s] associations that provide an interpretative frame" (Franklin 169). This frame rests on a combination of "shared knowledge" and "shared emotive associations" (169), without which the audience member's understanding of Seurat's connection to the musical as well as being able to interpret Sondheim's embedded deeper message would be impossible.

Although rarely are paintings in an art gallery subjected to labels, artwork always has a title, even if that title is 'untitled' or a numeric value. Because of this, a short analysis of titles will prove beneficial when determining the relevance of Seurat's title to Sondheim's musical. Both titles and labels are presented as text on cards or plaques; however, titles serve a slightly different purpose than do labels. Margery B. Franklin, author of "'Museum of the Mind': An Inquiry Into the Titling of Artworks," identifies the various theories surrounding titles, highlighting J. Fisher, E. Gombrich, and A. Danto's work specifically. Fisher in 1984 wrote "Entitling," which suggested that titles function as "guides to interpretation" rather then explanations of that

interpretation (Franklin 157). Gombrich, in his 1985 article "Image and word in twentieth-century art," pointed out that titles for artwork are generally given by the artist and are "not casually given or casually taken" (158). Danto, in his 1981 book *The transfiguration of the commonplace*, suggested that titles could provide a "direction for interpretation" for complicated, abstract, or culturally-centered art (158). Yet, as artists through titles guide and direct viewer interpretation, the act of titling creates a few complications. First, titles can create confusion when the viewer attempts to interpret meaning. Franklin explains M. Black's metaphorical formulation of titles found in his 1979 "More about metaphor" as such: "meanings of the title phrase are "projected upon" the perceived artwork in just the way that "associated implications" of the secondary subject are projected upon the primary subject" (169). Artwork must endure objectification in two ways, both by the title and the viewer. The title's projection of meaning requires the artwork to be perceived only through the title, filtering all other meanings or interpretations. The viewer, then, must first interpret the title before applying that interpretation to the artwork. This explanation of Black's theory shows how titles "more often play a significant role in structuring meaning" (164). But more importantly, titles allow the artist to communicate with the viewer both linguistically and aesthetically in hopes of retaining some control when dictating the viewer's interpretation. Although labels and titles serve different purposes and the curator's influence on the artwork has less significance then the artist's act of titling, both labels and titles impose a 'way of seeing' upon the viewer.

Sondheim's title *Sunday in the Park with George* is amazingly similar to Seurat's title *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. This similarity allows for the question: utilizing Fisher's, Gombrich's, and Danto's arguments, how does Sondheim's enveloping of Seurat's title affect the interpretation of the musical? Assuming titles are not given to artwork casually, titles are argued to affect artwork in two distinct ways: guiding interpretation and directing interpretation. In order to structure meaning, the viewer must filter the artwork through the title; Margery B. Franklin explains this process as the artist's means of communication with the viewer:

> The artist is seen as sending an artwork into the aesthetic space, and the viewer is seen as receiver/interpreter. It is assumed that the artist intends to communicate with an audience and that the viewer regards the artwork with its title as coming from another human being, namely the artist, who made and presented the work with certain intentions in mind. In this frame, titles are messages. (170)

Sondheim's musical could be deemed an interpretation of the painting as filtered through Seurat's title, which would explain why the titles are so similar; however, the play does not reflect the character's leisurely Sunday spent on the island as Seurat's title suggests. Instead, the musical opens a window of communication between the artist and the viewer that escapes the restraints of the textual title and aesthetic space.

The silent, invisible artist is given a voice outside of the painting in Sondheim's musical. Whereas the first half of Sondheim's title connects the play to the painting, the last two words remove the focus from the displayed creation and refocus on the creator.

To illustrate this, I will dissect Sondheim's title, examining how the title reflects aspects of the musical and connects with the painting. The first word in both musical and painting is 'Sunday' but it functions differently for each. In the painting, since the painting is fixed, the viewer can assume that 'Sunday' imprints a time reference to the events in the painting, suggesting that the action of the painting took place on one particular Sunday or is a representation of all Sundays on the island. In the musical, the script sets day, year and place for both Act One and Act Two:

> Act I takes place on a series of Sundays from 1884 to 1886 and alternates between a park on an island in the Seine just outside of Paris and George's studio.
>
> Act II takes place in 1984 at an American art museum and on the island.
>
> (Sondheim and Lapine 1)

Even though specifically notated, the musical's 'Sunday' as a reference to time is not integral because whether the action takes place on a series of Sundays or Wednesdays does not affect the play's action. In addition, outside of the obvious leaps in time from Act One to Act Two, the play does not progress so as to mark the passage of time as traditionally expected but is instead organized more like snapshots. In other words, 'Sunday' in the title of the musical is more of a direct reference to the painting's title than it is a reference to a specific day or time. The difference between the prepositional phrase '*in* the park' and '*on* the island' is slight and merely appears to set the action in

slightly different places; interestingly, when discussing the painting, many scholars discuss the painting as a portrayal of a park found on the island.

At this point, it would seem that all principles associated with titling artwork could be applied to what appears simply a recreation or a musicalized adaptation of Seurat's painting. However, Sondheim situates his musical around the artist rather then the artwork by eliminating the locale offered by Seurat's title (of La Grande Jatte) and reallocating the place to a person. Instead of exploring the island as the painting does, Sondheim's musical reflects more on the artist. The painting's characters are rather underdeveloped in the musical and play minor roles except when being manipulated by the artist; "these characters are George's models and the utility is limited. Once they have been frozen into their perfect static form, their narrative will simply cease. They have no further dramatic purpose" (Gordon, *Art* 284). Fisher and Danto's argument begins precisely at the point when the artist names the painting. After the naming, the viewer, reading the title, understands its textual meaning and then applies it to the painting. This trajectory, however, moves in just one direction—away from the artist. Hypothetically, this system allows the viewer to relate to the painting through the title but to have no other connection with the artist. In the musical, however, Sondheim reverses this motion so that the viewer's interpretation runs through the title to the painting and then on towards the artist. Sondheim illustrates this reverse trajectory many times throughout the musical by repeatedly demonstrating the artist's authority over the canvas and the represented models. Like the viewer of Seurat's painting who begins with a title, so does the musical's audience begin with Sondheim's title but this

title evokes the artist and not the art. This is not to say that the artwork does not play a significant role in the musical, but more prominent is that a voice and presence is given to the artist where traditionally there is none.

6.3 Time as a Factor in Interpretation

Although several ways for directing interpretation have already been discussed, one important function needed in both museums and theatres to aid the viewer with making any type of interpretation is the time in which to contemplate. Ideally "for every word of public curatorial language in the museum there are countless, ephemeral private utterances and wordless thoughts….Part of the museum's responsibility is to create situations for that private language not to disappear, but to be given an articulated voice" (Carr 176). Yet, guided tours, audio-commentary, automated exhibits, and 'helpful' ushers all entangle the visitor in noise and encumber "private utterances and wordless thoughts." Where is the time for contemplation? Because the museum's shift has been towards attracting larger audiences, museums must compete with other forms of entertainment in order to succeed. David Carr, author of "A Museum is an Open Work," sees the museum a bit differently then Tony Bennett or Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. Carr equates the museum to a "library: *a mind-producing system*" which "is the revelation and embodiment of tacit subtexts unspoken, perhaps unspeakable, meanings or feelings" (italics mine, 173). Furthermore, Carr suggests that "in this situation we encounter *objects that engage our attention*, demand our reflection, and *lead us to interpretations*" (italics mine, 174). It seems to me this argument has one fatal flaw. Although libraries house hundreds of varying opinions, styles, and subjects,

museums and individual exhibits are limited to fewer subjects and curator opinions. Also, the library houses an author's writing, but the library as an institution does not actively set out to subject the reader to a "mind-producing system," engage the reader's attention, or lead the reader into an interpretation. Libraries usually offer no time restraints to shorten or lengthen a visit, whereas various commentaries move the museum viewer through the museum and exhibit.

Analogously, playwrights manage the timeframe in which audience members have a break from the active performance and a chance to absorb what has been presented. Within the script, playwrights mange the "strategic breaks in the theatrical performance. Curtains or blackouts [clearly] denote act breaks or scene changes" (Bennett, S. 47). These breaks, however, fail as times for audience interpretation for two reasons: (1) breaks are dictated by the producers and not by the receivers and (2) more often then not, these breaks are not moments of pure silence and inactivity but contain any number of strategies to entertain the audience while scene changes occur. Between major scene breaks, a monologue, short scene, music, or dance could occur and between acts, theatres tend to serve food and drinks, encouraging socializing. Moreover, composers, like Sondheim, often write shows that are continuous, flowing seamlessly from one scene to another with only a single break (intermission) between the long first and second acts. In *Sunday in the Park with George* scene changes are delineated through light fades; however, action does not rest during the change. Instead, for instance, stage directions instruct that "*the set changes back to the park scene around* [George]. *When the change is complete*, HE *moves downstage right with*

the OLD LADY" (Sondheim and Lapine 86). Action moves seamlessly from George's studio to the Park without a true break, not allowing audiences time to contemplate from scene to scene.

The ten to fifteen minute intermission does not even allow the audience to fully apply their reflections from Act One to Act Two because of the vast leap Sondheim asks his audience to make—from seventeenth century to twentieth century, incorporating a whole new list of characters. The first act closes with the recreation of Seurat's painting, and appears in all respects to be an effective ending for the entire play. The curtain rises to display the painting once again in Act Two; however, the audience is aware that the actor portraying the artist is no longer on stage directing the creation of his painting. Soon after the curtain rises, the characters posing in the painting break free from the illusionary canvas and directly address the audience with the artist's eulogy. What began in Act One as a fairly linear plot set in the late 1800s is now catapulted into the twenty first century. The second act seems almost completely disconnected from the first act; however, the "two acts string together because the second act depends on the first act" (Horowitz 101). Although the audience remains marginally aware of the tiny bit of plot holding the action together within and between the two acts, the experimental plot techniques implemented by Sondheim parallel Seurat's experimental painting technique. Sondheim's musical depends very little on the functions of linear plot and instead relies heavily on the musical's deep, interwoven connection with Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Because

of these complexities, audience members are not given much time to access plotline and the timeline leaps diminish the available time spent on reflection.

In addition, museum viewers and theatre audiences share "the inability to take in everything with a single look" (Bennett 78). Theatre audiences are not afforded that second look because performances are ephemeral, unlike the museum viewer who could possibly pause. Whereas the museum visitor could possibly return to the same exhibit for repeated experiences, the theatre audience member can only experience that particular show once because attending again would be a different performance of the same production.

CHAPTER 7

CONTROLLING THE THEATRE SPACE

Unlike the examination of the museum's controlled space, the varying levels of authority found in the controlled space of the theatre complicate this analysis and make the categorizing of authoritative figures difficult. Theatre productions begin with collaborative efforts of primarily the writer and the composer/lyricist; however, once the play reaches the rehearsal stage, the layers of authority thicken. Directors, stage managers, light/sound technicians, set designers, costume designers, actors, and musicians are only a few of the authoritative possibilities able to affect a theatrical performance, which is why so many writers and composers/lyricists insist on actively observing and assisting in the rehearsal process. Because every performance varies drastically with every new rendition of the show, for the purposes of this discussion, the only authoritative figures I will reference will be the writer and composer/lyricist.

Since *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* is displayed in an art gallery, the viewing public must see the painting with the structured gaze of the gallery. But, by viewing Sondheim's version of the painting on a Broadway stage, does the viewer's way of seeing change according to Sondheim's exhibition? Sondheim transforms the Broadway stage into Seurat's painting, straddling the art gallery and forcing "the proscenium" to become "the picture frame" (Worthen 17). In this way, Sondheim creates a new atmosphere by which to view Seurat's artwork. The way to see

Sondheim's version of Seurat's painting cannot be separated from the rest of the musical since the painting is so embedded in the fabric of the show. Even Sondheim's title for the musical is a juxtaposition of the original title bestowed by Seurat. By showing that the George of Act One is a fictionalized version of George Seurat, Sondheim gives the viewer a unique opportunity to see the creator of the artwork and how his public and peers react to his experimental ideas as well as demonstrating the authority the artist commands over his creation. Whereas Act One ends in an art gallery where *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* is being solidly displayed as George directs the creation from the sidelines, Act Two opens in the same gallery but George's painting ceases to hold together without his physical presence on stage. The characters leave the picture frame one by one, symbolizing both the artist's unrepresented intention in a gallery and the disintegration of art into "a commodity, a status symbol" in the twenty first century's gallery, the new setting for Act Two (Gordon, *Art* 289).

Similar to the museum's curator who has a system of beliefs that dictates the viewer's way of seeing an exhibition, the playwright and composer/lyricist also invest their productions with their own biases and beliefs; however, they can also shape the audience's interpretation with dramatic techniques. Viewing labels as does Baxandall—the summation of all aspects that direct ways of seeing—it seems to me that Sondheim both consciously and unconsciously guides the audience's way of seeing his musical as well as how they view Seurat's painting. Consciously, every spoken aspect of the musical makes clear Sondheim's feelings regarding the public's reaction to

artists and their art (interestingly, some scholars have even suggested that Sondheim's interpretation of George Seurat is actually a representation of Sondheim's own struggles as an artist). The local artist, Jules, after viewing Act One George's masterpiece, indignantly asks, "What *is* this?" (Sondheim and Lapine 78) and then later instructs George that he is "a painter, not a scientist" (79). Even Dot's decision to leave George for Louis the baker reflects a larger issue, "the difference between popular and unpopular artists and art" (Gordon, *Art* 278). Sondheim's opinion regarding museum and artist's reliance on sponsorship and funding—converting art into an economic product rather then a priceless work of art—is clearly evident through a comparison of Act One George to Act Two George, which will be investigated further later in this paper.

Although by far the easiest way to blatantly state his opinions is through the spoken script, whether consciously or unconsciously, Sondheim also makes statements by using many of the theatrical techniques available to him. For example, Sondheim uses the pointillist technique in many aspects of the musical but the emphasis is not often on the innovative technique but rather on the people, both models and artist. At the end of Act One, the first time George orders the characters to create his painting on stage, a scrim with Seurat's painting printed on it is dramatically lowered in front of the frozen characters, precisely lining up with the tableau vivant. Instead of refocusing the lighting to hide the characters (models) behind the scrim of Seurat's painting, the characters as well as George kneeling in front remain visible. It is not until the artist is absent from his masterpiece in the beginning of Act Two, that the painting ceases to be

about the people and instead suddenly hangs in a twenty first century art gallery as objectified art. At this time, the characters once frozen in the painting "*break from their poses…Accompanying their exits, pieces of scenery disappear*…[and] *the set is returned to its original white configuration*" (Sondheim and Lapine 115). Although during their exits, the characters speak briefly of Seurat's life and work, they never once remark as to why they are leaving the painting. Based solely on these actions, it seems to me that Sondheim is unconsciously stating that without a connection between the models and artist, the innovative painting fails to fully represent the artist's intention and therefore fails to truly exist. Because this is an unspoken statement, it is debatable whether it was made intentionally or unconsciously; however, Sondheim is such a text-oriented composer that I believe this can be argued to be an example of one of Sondheim's unconscious opinions making itself known through theatrical lighting and a painted scrim.

A writer/composer's conscious and unconscious ways of directing ways of seeing can tamper with the audience's methods of interpretation. In his examination of theatre audiences, W.B Worthen discusses the arguments of William Archer made in *Play-Making: A Manual of Craftsmanship*. According to Worthen, Archer asserts that the method of playwriting he "prescribes shapes the contours of the audience's freedom and necessity" (22). Worthen explains that

> Archer sees a symbiosis between the world offered by the playwright and the composition of the audience, implicitly acknowledging that *the audience's sense of freedom is devised as an effect of the theater*. The

> freedom of the spectator must be read against the substantial ground of necessity, his or her constraint by social opportunity, theatrical manners, and *the playwright's clever manipulation of dramatic form and theatrical perspective*. (italics mine, 22)

It should be no surprise that as a theatrical production brings to life the script on stage that it can also effectively create the audience's presupposed freedom off the stage. Audiences are not free to observe 'the other' in distant safety, but rather (unknowingly or knowingly) the audience becomes a part of the staged spectacle. Upon entering the playhouse, theatre attendees, unbeknownst to them, morph from individual to audience to a construction of the theatre.

Playwrights and composers/lyricists play no small role in the development of this controlled space. According to Archer, the theatrical creators manipulate the audience with two modes of textuality: "words designing the structure of the performance, and words to be spoken on the stage" (Worthen 135). The words dictate not only structure but also the ways the audience sees the show. In this way the playwright and composer/lyricist structure the audience's gaze through theatrical techniques made explicit through the (unspoken) script, often referred to as stage directions. Ideas and interpretations of those ideas are presented to the audience via scripted words and actions, reinforced by stage directions. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, for example, George and Dot have a tense encounter in the middle of Act One when George becomes aware of her new lover Louis, the baker. When the scene

changes, stage directions and not the spoken script refocus the audience's attention from the main characters to the dog, Spot, George is currently painting:

> (*The bench on which* [Dot and Louis] *are sitting tracks offstage as* DOT *continues to look at* GEORGE. GEORGE, *who has been staring at his sketch of* SPOT, *looks over and sees* THEY *have left. Music. Lights change, leaving the dog onstage*. GEORGE *sketches the dog*.) (48)

The above stage direction not only directs a scene change but helps center the audience's attention away from the main character's relationship to a demonstration of how Sondheim sees George connecting with his models. This monologue, sung by George but in the voice of Spot, illustrates what George does to connect with his art; consequently, through George the audience gets the rare opportunity to view the live models behind the masterpiece, the people behind the technique:

> GEORGE
>
> More grass…
>
> Would you like some more grass?
>
> Mmmm…
>
> SPOT (GEORGE)
>
> Ruff! Ruff!
>
> Thanks, the week has been
>
> (*Barks*)
>
> Rough!
>
> When you're stuck for life on a garbage scow— (48)

Moreover, the script can also be invested with a deeper message or a specific statement that the collaborators wish to impart. This can create multifaceted theatre that audiences may or may not recognize. Thus, through spoken and unspoken script, theatrical techniques, and embedded statements, creators of theatre frame the audience's interpretive activity and so frames who each person is as an audience (Worthen 146-47).

7.1 Sondheim's Deeper Statement: The Morphing of Art

Every Sondheim musical is invested with a deeper statement he wishes the theatergoing public to realize. His overarching intent throughout the entire musical can sway an unsuspecting audience similarly to a museum exhibitor who must put "on a good show and [instruct] the audience" without ever actually appearing to do so (Baxandall 37). Sondheim is known for writing complex subjects that challenge his audience; the show's greater significance reveals itself halfway through the second act. Although the musical is firmly connected to interpreting Seurat's past and the creation of his masterpiece, Sondheim uses this connection to make a statement concerning the American public's opinion of artwork and the museums that house it. Act one George struggles to make his artwork understood and included in public showings. But Jules, the local artist George relies on to understand his masterpiece, fails to appreciate the innovative techniques. Soothing himself, George sings to his painting:

> He does not like you. He does not understand or appreciate you. He can only see you as everyone else does. Afraid to take you apart and put you back together again for himself. But we will not let anyone deter us, will we? (Sondheim and Lapine 81)

Yet, no matter his frustration, Act One George's focus is *always* on his artwork—even when it results in the disintegration of his social popularity and personal relationships. Act Two George, the great-grandson of the Act One George, is an artist in a twenty first century art gallery trying to make a living as an artist. As he mingles with the crowd of viewers, attempting to establish a network of connections, George describes "not the creative process, but the necessary financial machinations the artist must now endure in order to be recognized" (Gordon, *Art* 290). Although Act Two's opening song parallels Act One's opening through Sondheim's musical theme (A recognizable tune, rhythmic structure, and/or key that forms the basis for a musical's opening number. The musical theme reoccurs in segments throughout the show's songs, and usually helps connect Act One with Act Two), each opening song differs vastly in context. Whereas Act One George spoke words of creation as he directed the entrance and exit of the trees and conducted the sun's course, Act Two George sings of marketing and financing:

> Link by link,
>
> Making the connections…
>
> Drink by drink,
>
> Fixing and perfecting the design.
>
> Adding just a dab of politician
>
> (Always knowing where to draw the line),
>
> Lining up the funds but in addition
>
> Lining up a prominent commission,
>
> Otherwise your perfect composition

Isn't going to get much exhibition. (139)

In the process of schmoozing the potential sponsorship, George labors to keep his marketing separate from his artistic inspiration, but by the end of the song, he is unable to retain this distance:

If you want your work to reach fruition,

What you need's a link with tradition,

And of course a prominent commission

(*Cut-out #1 starts to sink again;* GEORGE *hastens to fix it*)

Plus a little formal recognition,

So that you can go on exhibit—

(*Getting flustered*)

So that your work can go on exhibition— (145)

Unlike Act One, when the painting held center stage and all other characters were of secondary importance, George—and not his artwork—prominently occupies central importance, emphasizing "the confusion of the artist with the art" (Gordon, *Art* 290).

Act One George appears as an intense man bent on perfecting his new technique at the expense of loved ones and at the ridicule of his peers. This George is not hiding behind his canvas but instead he is living in it (Sondheim and Lapine 83), whereas Act Two George is stuck producing the same tired invention time and again to the point that his colleague, Dennis, opts to move on to more exciting endeavors. The difference between these artists is not lack of inspiration or masterful artistry, but rather one of cultural attitudes towards art. Act One portrays a culture in which "work is what you do

for others" and "art is what you do for yourself" (57), but Act Two reveals an artist that is "up on [a] trapeze" (134), producing art "piece by piece—Only way to make a work of art. Every moment makes a contribution, Every little detail plays a part" (137). As a result, Act One George's focus is on the art whereas Act Two George's focus is on the sponsors; Act One George displays his masterpiece whereas Act Two George is himself on display. As a result, Act Two George's authority as artist is diminished for he never has complete control over the art's creation. This displacement of art and artist is recognized by his repeated reference to himself in the third person, ending every sentence with his own name. This pattern continues several times throughout Act Two as George attempts to market himself and later find and reconnect with himself. While marketing himself, his attention is centered on the smiling card board cutouts of himself he strategically erects within each talking group of viewers rather then actively and proudly displaying his latest art piece:

> All right, George.
>
> As long as it's *your night*, George…
>
> You know what's in the room, George;
>
> *Another Chromolume*, George.
>
> *It's time to get to work*… (italics mine, 133)

The unveiling of George's latest work, Chromolume number seven, is not a night for his art but rather a night focused on George; the room contains the sponsor for "Another Chromolume" and not the inspiration for the next work of art or a room full of impressed viewers; although work is what you do for others, George's shallow

marketing is the only way for him to finance another piece of art. In Act Two's opening number, "George opens a rare window into the inner workings of the modern world, with the result that modern art is ironically and satirically distinguished from true art….Specifically, art is here revealed not as a work of genius produced by an isolated and dedicated artist, but rather as a product, perhaps even a commodity, constructed, mediated and funded by a range of social, institutional and financial forces" (Bonahue 175). No longer is art created for art's sake, but rather art is created for the sake of big business. This issue is resolved within the artist (and not within modern culture) when Act Two George encounters Dot—his great-grandmother—from Act One. By reassembling Seurat's masterpiece in front of the Act Two George, Dot opens a portal between the modern world and hers, allowing George to connect with the passionate artist of Act One. In the end, art bows to artist, reestablishing Act Two George's authority and allowing him to create art rather then promote it.

7.2 Authoritative Control

Although I have already discussed how the curator and writer/composer convey control, an interesting trend in several of Sondheim's musicals is his insertion of a character that actually appears to hold some level of authoritative control over the musical's action. Initially, these characters function in the capacity of a third person omniscient narrator or storyteller, but towards the end of the play this character is suddenly acknowledged by the other characters. In addition to *Sunday in the Park with George*, several of Sondheim's other musicals—*Into the Woods*, *Pacific Overtures*, and *Assassins*—all contain a functioning narrator/storyteller character that begins the play in

third person omniscient but by the end of the show each character is radically inserted into the very action they were previously just commenting on. In the case of the Narrator found in *Into the Woods* and the Balladeer found in *Assassins*, the other characters turn against the narrator, permanently removing him from the action either through death (the Giant eats the Narrator) or intimidation (the assassins force the Balladeer from the stage). In *Pacific Overtures* the Reciter (a character appropriated from Japanese kabuki theatre) begins the show merely commenting on the action, then he begins speaking for some of the characters, and at the end of the show he sheds his gown to reveal he is (or has become) the Emperor who was previously played by a puppet.

However, in *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sondheim creates a completely different authoritative figure in the form of an artist. Act One George's life outside of the canvas appears utterly misshapen and sad: his cranky mother suffers from forgetfulness, his pregnant mistress leaves him for a sociable baker, and his peers dislike his new painting technique. Yet, the instant George is in possession of his authority as artist, he is more then an omniscient character, rather he appears to embody authorial characteristics usually regulated to the musical's collaborators that dictate the development of the show. As an artist, George holds the power to squelch conversation, erase trees, and capture time. When the living characters become art and when art bows to artist, one recognizes "that the artist takes the ordinary and transforms it into the extraordinary, rendering the mortal world immortal" (Gordon, *Art* 299). In fact this is the very reason given by the socially detested Boatman for why George was

so disliked. In Act Two, as the Boatman is the last to leave the painting, he explains that people

> all wanted him and hated him at the same time. They wanted to be painted—splashed on some fancy salon wall. But they hated him, too. Hated him because he only spoke when he absolutely had to. Most of all, they hated him because they knew he would always be around. (118)

However, rather then the people (Seurat's models or even Seurat himself) being remembered, *Sunday on the Island La Grande Jatte* gained attention mostly as a result of the new painting technique it demonstrated. More often then not, Seurat's name is associated with the pointillist technique and not as a living, breathing artist. As demonstrated by the sketchy recording of his personal history, unlike Sondheim's George, Seurat is lost behind his canvas.

7.3 An Interwoven Musical: Audience Confusion or United Music & Text?

Audience members are used to 'singable' lyrics and delight in the independent nature of show tunes to be sung and enjoyed outside the show. Obviously frustrating for the audience member, Sondheim rarely writes music and lyrics that have an independent life of their own, rather "they are so intimately linked to text and so intricately woven into the fabric of the entire work that they cannot easily stand alone" (Gordon, *Art* 6). His marriage of music and text incorporates Kern and Hammerstein's original concept as presented in *Show Boat* but instead of allowing the songs to embellish the action, Sondheim's music provides intricate narrative structure and the

formation of plot. Interestingly, this complex union and the theatre critics that tend to shy away from the weightiness it creates models an operatic argument that has been debated since the seventeenth century. Vocalist and composer Jacopo Peri wanted "to find a kind of speech-song that was halfway between" the ancient Greek theorists' "continuous change of pitch in speech and the intervallic, or "diastematic," motion in song" (Grout 282). Yet, this proposed union did not solve anything but rather created new arguments stemming from the debate that language is the mode of logic and music is the mode of emotion; therefore, language will always dominate music. The indecision over this issue can be seen in the performances themselves; for decades in the Western song tradition "music has periodically dominated and been dominated by text" (Levman 164). However, it seems to me that in Sondheim's music, equalization has occurred in which the music and text rely on each other for a sense of wholeness. By "imitating the rhythms of speech" (Sutcliffe 490) and joining it with calculated music, Sondheim embarks on a new form of song that remotely resembles Peri's 'speech-song' but is not restricted to its Greek inspiration. It is for this reason that casual audiences meet Sondheim's musicals with discontent. Instead of complying with the musical theatre song's simple, traditional format, Sondheim has created a music/text union that is largely unfamiliar and therefore difficult to understand and appreciate.

Although many have argued that Sondheim's compositions are complex and calculated, his music is absolutely essential to the overall understanding of the musical. Most audience members unconsciously view words and music as separate entities, but Sondheim forces the listeners to unite text and music "just as the optic nerve of Seurat's

spectator ultimately helps complete the painter's color schemes" (Jones 2963). In Sondheim's songs, music begets text and text begets music, demonstrating a connection that breaches any argument concerning which is of greater importance. For instance, in Act One Dot sings in frustration *at* (definitely not *to*) George who is totally oblivious to her grievances for modeling in the hot sun:

> Well, there are worse things
> Than staring at the water on a Sunday,
> There are worse things
> Than staring at the water
> As you're posing for a picture
> Being painted by your lover
> In the middle of the summer
> On an island in the river on a Sunday.
> (Sondheim and Lapine 11)

Although the words express her thoughts and the music expresses her feelings of frustration, without the music and meter, the words lack all sense of urgency which is imperative to the text's meaning; and without the words, the music lacks all structure and development. However, Sondheim also incorporates music and text outside of the song. For instance, examine the end of Act One. Earlier, the stage directions explain that "*all hell breaks loose,* EVERYONE *speaking at once, the stage erupting in total chaos*" (99). George and the Old Lady (the character playing his mother) stand and watch the chaos progress. Just when George has had enough and attempts to depart, an

arpeggiated chord—similar to the one played at the beginning of Act One—sounds and everyone freezes:

OLD LADY

Remember, George.

(*Another chord.* GEORGE *turns to the group*)

GEORGE

Order.

(*Another chord.* EVERYONE *turns simultaneously to* GEORGE. *As chords continue under,* HE *nods to them, and* THEY *each take up a position on stage*)

Design.

(*Chord.* GEORGE *nods to* FRIEDA *and* FRANZ, *and* THEY *cross downstage right onto the apron. Chord.* GEORGE *nods to* MR. *and* MRS., *and* THEY *cross upstage*)

Tension.

(*Chord.* GEORGE *nods to* CELESTE #1 *and* CELESTE #2, *and* THEY *cross downstage. Another chord.* JULES *and* YVONNE *cross upstage*)

Balance.

(*Chord.* OLD LADY *crosses right as* DOT *and* LOUIS *cross center.* GEORGE *signals* LOUIS *away from* DOT. *Another chord.* SOLDIER *crosses upstage left;* LOUISE, *upstage right. Chord.* GEORGE *gestures to the* BOATMAN, *who crosses downstage right*)

Harmony.

(*The music becomes calm, stately, triumphant.* GEORGE *turns front. The promenade begins. Throughout the song,* GEORGE *is moving about, setting trees, cut-outs, and figures—making a perfect picture*) (101)

Spoken alone, these words have no context or relation to the current action, but the accompanying arpeggiated chords suggest a meaning for the words outside of their commonplace definitions. Because arpeggios are simply separate notes, when the notes are played together and not as an arpeggio as when George says, "Harmony," the individual notes sound as a completed chord and calm returns to the chaotic stage. The chords create the tonal color (the timbre of each chord) that represent the scientific, pointillist outcome of Seurat's painting on stage—creating the "musical objective correlative of the [painter's] palette" (Gordon, *Art* 267)—whereas the arpeggios symbolize the pointillist colors applied to the canvas. Music or text separately would be meaningless noise, but together they form the very essence of the staged painting.

Sondheim grounds his songs with familiar structures that are acknowledged by scholars to be found in both music and text. In "Comparison Between Language and Music," Mireille Besson and Daniele Schön make this unexpected comparison recognizable by explaining that "many definitions have been (and are still to be) proposed for language and music. The amazing point, however, is that the definition given for music will often apply to language as well, and vice versa" (271). Although both function within a structured environment that is dictated by certain rules, the rules

dictating music are more flexible and ambiguous than those used in language. Whereas "the meaning of words is defined by an arbitrary convention relating sounds to meaning, notes or chords have no extramusical space in which they would acquire meaning" (273). Since most listeners agree that music tends to induce certain emotions, "music is often referred to as the language of emotions" (Trainor and Schmidt 310). It should be noted here that music is referred to as a type of language, which infers that the popular notion of music as only an emotional mode of expression effectively ignores the scholarship that claims music is dictated by structures and rules much like spoken language. Although Sondheim openly admits to being "very text oriented" (Sutcliffe 490), his musical's unity relies on the seamless marriage of text and music throughout the entirety of the production.

CHAPTER 8

ART ISN'T EASY

As demonstrated by Stephen Sondheim in his two act musical, museums and reactions to art and artists have made significant changes. These are due in part to the museum's challenge "to provide an environment in which the visitor feels comfortable and adequate to understand" (Edson 44) and to shift its focus "from the object as separate from people to the object as representative of people's stories" (Hughes 25). In order to increase the museum's popularity as an institution of 'fun' learning, museums cannot dismiss the interpretative ability of theatre to reach the masses. However, artists cannot ignore the attractive literary-nature of history. Evidence supporting history's narrative qualities is in the simple phrase "based on a true story" that graces the openings of much pop entertainment such as novels, plays, television dramas, and movies. So popular is the incorporation of history into fiction that an entire genre is devoted to this topic: historical fiction. But this genre is not limited to literature.

While ethnographic objects are often restaged as art by the curator (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 11), history has often been converted to art by the artist. Why has the past been such a compelling topic for so many artists? The retelling or reenactment of history displays the artist's interpretation of a wide array of historical events, moments, or even famous people; moreover, the narrative quality of the 'real' and the actual hold so many possibilities for the probing artist. In "Truth, Aesthetics,

History," Robert Eaglestone contends that "an artwork fundamentally "opens" the world: it acts as that which foregrounds both itself and the world from which it arises by being the object of a certain sense of attunement. An artwork is, then, an "unforgetting," a bringing to the fore" (174). In other words, artwork has the possibility of revealing the world in ways that only art can—recording, interpreting, and recreating historical moments. Museums, theatre, music, and art all intersect at this point for all four are more then mere objects of study but instead they provide a means "of perceiving the world. A tool of understanding" (Attali 4). For instance, George Seurat's painting, *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, is not only a masterpiece pioneered through new painting techniques, but it is also a social commentary that comments on current class issues and status symbols. In one painting, Seurat manages to record a representation of late 1800s costume, class, and appearance of the island; he presents his interpretation of how costume delineates character and status; he carves out a moment in time of either a typical or untypical Sunday afternoon on the island. With this painting, Seurat successfully puts his stamp on history and the way viewers see seventeenth century France.

In our overly economy driven society, audience members in both theatres and museums tend to shun controversy and strive towards less complex forms of entertainment. According to Shay Sayre and Cynthia King in *Entertainment & Society: Audiences, Trends, and Impacts*, entertainment "has come to refer to a *constructed product designed to stimulate a mass audience in an agreeable way* in exchange for money….entertainment is created on purpose by someone for someone else" (italics

mine, 1). This product must "stimulate" in an "agreeable way" or an audience's expectations will not be met and the product will fail to generate enough income to succeed. Audiences attend museums and musicals with certain levels of expectation, and "audiences continue to attend depending upon how well the performers live up to [their preconceived] expectations" (243). Sayre and King go on to logically reason, that "if you do not hold the interest of your audience—that is, if you do not entertain them—they will stop paying attention" (19); hence, effective entertainment equals meeting audience expectations, which leads to attracting attention and making money. Sadly, many theatres and museums, both reliant on sales and sponsorship, have morphed into an economic commodity. However, with artists like Sondheim who defy audience expectation and fly in the face of tradition, art may remain art and not an item of sponsorship for a little while longer. Museums, such as the Science Museum in Boston, that think outside the box and dare to incorporate theatre into their exhibits may remain institutions of exploration, research, and education.

As shown, combining two disciplines creates many analytic challenges, but not without an equal number of discoveries. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Stephen Sondheim takes the relatively unknown personal history of George Seurat and his masterpiece, *Sunday on the Island of la Grande Jatte,* to write a nontraditional musical that is uniquely subjected to museum practices. It is nearly impossible to ignore the implications the recreated painting bring to the stage. Because Sondheim insisted on recreating the painting on the stage rather then completely transforming the painting into a musical theatre format, the musical is inadvertently prone to critique through

museum theory. Sondheim does not, however, sacrifice his narrative in order to keep Seurat's known history chronologically authentic. Since Sondheim did not use a traditional, chronologic plotline, he weaves known historical data with interpreted personality traits to form a type of concept musical around Seurat's painting. By interpreting Seurat's tangible historical remnants, Sondheim creates a real and believable interpretation of Seurat's life, but as it is in musical theatre format, there is little risk that audience members think the presentation is entirely authentic. Or, at least I would hope. But, in an age where few viewers will take the time to research Seurat's life and works, it is always possible that the lines separating 'real' and 'interpretation' for the audience member may not be clear.

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