Western University
Don Wright Faculty of Music

Music 2708B: Special Topics in Music: Musical Theatre II

Talbot College Room 141          Mondays, 7:00-10:00 p.m.

Instructor: Prof. Kristina Baron-Woods
Office: Talbot College 324
Office hours: Tuesdays 2 - 6 pm, other times by appointment
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Course Description:

This course will examine the musicals of Stephen Sondheim, arguably the most influential theatre composer and librettist of the late 20th century. Focusing on musicals from Company (1970) to Passion (1994), we will explore how the elements of music, lyrics, script, direction cohere in Sondheim's musicals, and how he has pushed the boundaries of theatrical convention. We will see how scholars have perceived Sondheim’s musicals within a cultural, historical, and theatrical milieu. We will study the musicals themselves by reading libretti, listening to music, seeing taped or live performances, and researching production histories. Finally, we will look at how Sondheim’s development of the genre influences composer-lyricists of today.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be expected to achieve a strong knowledge of the works of Sondheim through lectures, listening, and the course readings. Students will be expected to complete writing assignments using creative thinking and written language skills. Students will learn to critically evaluate performance aspects of theatre and apply this knowledge in a review of a live performance, if possible (dependent on local theatre companies’ schedules).

Evaluation:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Attendance/Participation</td>
<td>Throughout the term</td>
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<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Abstract for research paper</td>
<td>January 30</td>
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<tr>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Midterm examination</td>
<td>February 13</td>
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<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Group assignment: Character/Performer Analysis</td>
<td>February 27 and March 6</td>
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<tr>
<td>25%</td>
<td>Research assignment</td>
<td>Due April 3</td>
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There is no textbook for this course. Course readings (journal articles) will be available online through various databases. The musical examples will be on reserve and available for borrowing through the Music Library. You will also need to do some independent research with finding song and performance clips. I will provide a list for additional reading on the course OWL. Books about Sondheim, Schwartz, Brown, Guettel, and other musical theatre of the era will be on reserve in the Music Library. You may also find the following websites helpful: www.sondheimguide.com; www.sondheim.com; and www.sondheim.org

We will attend a live performance of a contemporary musical production at The Grand Theatre in downtown London. Please be sure to budget for a theatre ticket (approximately $40).
Course Schedule

Week 1  January 9  Course Introduction and Sondheim’s life  

Week 2  January 16  Sondheim as Lyricist  
**Watch:** *Gypsy* and clips of various performers in the role of Rose (explanation of Character/Performer Analysis Assignment)

Week 3  January 23  Innovations: The Concept Musical  
**Also read:** Jeff Turner, “Commercial Necessities Reviving Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's *Company* at the Turn of the Millennium,” in *Theatre Symposium*. 2014, Vol. 22, 62-76.  
**Watch:** *Company*

Week 4  January 30  Motivic and Murderous  
**Watch:** *Sweeney Todd* (stage production).  
*Research assignment abstract due*

Week 5  February 7 (note: Tuesday)  Creating a Completely Canadian Musical  
**Attend:** *Vigilante* opening night and Artists’ Talk-Back at The Grand Theatre  
Read: The two *Globe and Mail* articles posted on OWL

Week 6  February 13  Midterm  
**In-class exam:** short response to the Canadian musical *Vigilante*

Week 7  February 27  Presentations of Character/Performer Analyses Part 1

Week 8  March 6  Presentations of Character/Performer Analyses Part 2

Week 9  March 13  Revisioning Fairy Tales  
**Watch:** *Into the Woods* (Original stage production)

Week 10  March 20  Revisioning a Fairy Tale Musical into a Movie  
**Watch:** *Into the Woods* (movie)

Week 11  March 27  Sondheim in the 90s  
**Watch:** *Passion*
Week 12  

April 3  

Passing the Torch (Brown and Guettel)

Posted on OWL. Watch: Songs for a New World (archival video).

*Research assignment due

Written and Oral Assignments

Group assignment: Character/Performer Analysis:

You will be assigned randomly to a group (Groups will be posted on OWL after the course-add deadline. Feel free to make initial contact through your own thread on the OWL forum.) You will need to organize your group and decide if you are meeting in person or virtually. You may find it useful to create a Facebook group.

Choose a character from any Sondheim show and let me know what character you want to do (so we are not all watching six different presentations on Momma Rose!)

Research that character using whatever resources you want to use: the more and varied the resources, the better. Find out what you can about Sondheim’s intentions for the character through radio, television, and print interviews.

Find audio and video clips of various actors performing the role.

Debate and determine who you feel is the “best” representation of that role.

The Presentation Aspect:

Prepare a presentation for the class of your research and findings.

The presentation can take whatever form you would like, but should include your audio or video evidence. Creative presentations are welcome! Strive for informative but entertaining.

All members of the group must be present at the presentation and must participate.

One effective way to set up the presentation might be as a debate: each member of the team chooses an actor as his/her favourite and presents the merits of this performance. You might also assign one person as host or moderator.

Find the same song or scene if possible so we can make strong comparisons. You may conclude that different performers do different aspects of the role better than the others. You might also find that the performers you like best are not necessarily the ones who appear to fit Sondheim’s descriptions best.

The group will be marked as a unit, so it is important to work well together and show equal interest and commitment to the project.

*The only written aspect of this project that needs to be handed in is a list of all your sources: all books, journal articles, blogs, newspaper articles, etc. that are consulted, along with a list of all the different videos or sound
recordings you use - what production they are from, company, year, etc. This should be organized as a Works Cited list. See the helpful handout in the Music Library “How to Cite Sources in Music.”

Research Assignment or Performance Review:

Write a 6-7 page essay on any topic pertinent to the course:

May be about a Sondheim show, or show by any other composer/lyricist team contemporary to Sondheim, or influenced/inspired by Sondheim. No Lloyd Webber please, unless you can convince me there is a good and pertinent reason for it; e.g. you might want to argue that a particular show by Lloyd Webber is his attempt to be Sondheim-esque.

May explore any aspect of Sondheim’s life or career

May be related to music theory, musicology, or textual analysis; e.g. you could explore leitmotif in *Sunday in the Park with George*, or you could do reception history of *Assassins*.

May be a performance review of a live production or filmed production, if you plan to go beyond a basic review of the type we see in Music 2701. However, you may not use the same version of a show that we discuss in class. You could write a comparative study between a staged or movie version, or two different staged versions; e.g. you could review a local production of *Sweeney Todd* and compare it to the Tim Burton film. You could explore parallels between a Sondheim show and another composer’s show of the same time.

An abstract (in the form of a paragraph or two) must be handed in by January 30. Include your working thesis and a short reference list of what you think will be your main sources. You may find this list expanding as you work; do not feel constricted by your original list. Also, your thesis may change somewhat as you work through your research. This is fine and quite usual. The point of the abstract is to get you thinking about your topic early and finding necessary resources. Feel free to make an appointment with me prior to handing in your abstract to discuss the viability of your topic.