

Stephen Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber: The New Musical

Stephen Citron

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The musical theater in England and America has changed radically since the days of Rodgers and Hart. Spectacles like *Evita* and *A Little Night Music* barely resemble earlier works like *Anything Goes* or *Girl Crazy*. “Few will disagree,” writes the author, “that in the latter half of the twentieth century the direction of musical theater...was steered by Stephen Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd-Webber.” This book traces the biographies of both men as they rise to prominence in contemporary musical theater. Citron also sketches the history of the post-World War II musical, providing an effective backdrop for each man’s development.

Famous for his seriousness and artistic integrity, Sondheim has crafted songs that have won critical praise and awards. The macabre *Sweeney Todd* tackled an unusual subject for the musical stage: revenge. While many critics liked it and the show ran for 558 performances, *Sweeney Todd* lost money. Making or losing money, though, would never properly measure Sondheim’s influence on his peers. *Sweeney Todd* won eight Tony Awards, has received frequent revivals, and has broadened the subject matter of the contemporary musical.

Lloyd-Webber has written the music to many successful productions, including *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, but none has been more successful than *Cats*. It is surprising, and fascinating, to read how disorganized *Cats* was at first, and how haphazardly it came into being. Lloyd-Webber started with a book of poems, not a play, no investors, and a few sketchy ideas. In rehearsals it “looked like a disastrous flop” and when it opened, critics were less than enthusiastic. It was filled with dancing and lacked a traditional storyline, so no one was sure what to call it. Its success, however, couldn’t be denied: *Cats* ran on Broadway for 18 years.

Since both men have been involved in so many well-known musicals, Citron has a wealth of material to draw from. He also includes smaller portraits of luminaries like producer Harold Prince and lyricist Tim Rice. Citron’s previous books, *Songwriting* and *The Musical from the Inside Out*, in addition to his involvement in contemporary theatre, have aided him in crafting a book that is both knowledgeable and accessible. Sondheim & Lloyd-Webber offers an illuminating understanding of all facets of “the new musical.”

RONALD D. LANKFORD, JR. (September / October 2001)

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