

Stephen Schwartz Career – Questions about His Career Start and Assorted Topics

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The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum.

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SECTION 1 – Getting started, Education and Training

When did you know.....

Question:

Dear Stephen! You hear a lot of tv shows on actors etc saying 'I knew I was going to be in film bla bla when I was 7 and my dad had a stage etc...' you hear this from writers and everything but not really from composers... (if you minus Mozart hah) So my question is, not only when did you feel that you wanted to be a composer, when did you actually realize you had a talent for it? Many thanks! Sophie.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Sophie: I knew I wanted to be a composer from about age 7. My parents were friendly with a composer named George Kleinsinger, who was working on a Broadway show called SHINBONE ALLEY, and I heard him play some of the songs and then tried to pick them out on his piano. It was he who suggested to my parents that I might benefit from piano lessons, or at least that's how the "legend" goes in my family. I'm not sure when I knew I actually had enough talent to be able to succeed at it. Oddly enough, I don't think I ever thought about that -- I just knew that's what I wanted to do, and started playing the piano and writing songs, and eventually I grew up and found that I could make a living at it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Shinebone Alley/Children of Eden/Working

Question:

What was it about SHINBONE ALLEY that made you interested in writing for musical theater? Also, what is it about WORKING and CHILDREN OF EDEN that makes you like them more than your other works?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think it was not so much anything about SHINBONE ALLEY itself that made me want to write for musical theatre as the fact that it was the first show that I saw. I think a lot of us get smitten and fall in love with theatre the first time we see it; it certainly was true in my case. As to WORKING and CHILDREN OF EDEN: it is hard for me to put my finger on why they are my favorites; I think it has to do with how closely the underlying content mirrors my own feelings and philosophy. But I know I don't seem to get tired of seeing them. Thanks for your questions. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

New London Barn Playhouse

Question not available:

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I worked at the New London Barn in the summers of 1966 through 1968. I began as assistant musical director and went on to do musical direction, musical staging and directing. The first show I worked on was KISS ME, KATE (and I even made an appearance on stage in the chorus of that show, doing the "Too Darn Hot" number among others.) Among the shows I directed there was a production of FUNNY GIRL that starred Pamela Myers, who later went on to the original cast of COMPANY. Even after I no longer worked there, I frequently visited the Barn during the summer to say hello to Norman Leger and other friends there. And a couple of decades later, my son Scott worked there, directing productions of OKLAHOMA and LOUISIANA PURCHASE! His mother (whom I met at the Barn when she was in PAL JOEY, which I was musical directing and doing musical staging for) also appeared in shows like HELLO, DOLLY under the name Hallie Wexford. So you see I have a long history with the New London Barn Playhouse. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

The Arts: Career? Hobby? Passion?

Question:

Hi, Stephen. I was really wishing I could have downloaded you so you could have joined in the discussion Dan and Jen and I were having at dinner. I would've loved to have heard your thoughts and experiences. But since I couldn't do that, I'll give you an idea of what our discussion was about, to see if you have any thoughts/comments/stories.

Basically, we were talking about how people choose to use their love for music/dance/art, etc. There seem to be some who, while they may have started out loving it, seem to turn it into just a way to make money, and appear to lose themselves and their art in their desire to become richer and more popular. Then there are those who love music and singing and dance, but want to just have it as a fun hobby. There are others who have a real passion for these things, and don't care whether they're rich or poor or whether they ever become well-known. They just want to follow their passion.

We wondered about how those who followed their passion balanced that passion with the need to have enough to live on, while not falling into the trap of seeking fame and fortune for themselves and losing their passion. I know from things you've said over the years that you got a passion to write for musical theatre when you were very young. I'm wondering if there were times, when you were just starting out, before GODSPELL and PIPPIN, perhaps while still in college?, when you had to get odd jobs, like delivering pizza/flipping burgers, etc., while you continued to work toward the direction your passion was leading you. Did you ever wonder if you should get a "real job"? (Society can put a lot of pressure on people who choose a career that's not what most people choose.) Has it been hard to balance between the need to create and the need to live, when it seems like one's creations aren't selling as hoped? Is it hard to make business-related decisions when the business involved is something that involves things you create and a dream and passion you're following?

I hope these questions aren't too personal, and of course you don't need to answer them if they are. But it's a fascinating subject to me. Jen's looking at pursuing her passion for musical theatre, and a comment she made got me thinking about all this. She said, "I don't like to think of it as a career, because I don't care if I make a lot of money. I just want to do it because I have a passion for it." Of course, the dreams of a 16-year-old and the reality of trying to live out those dreams are probably quite different, so I'll be interested in hearing any experiences/thoughts you want to share.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: I have to admit to being really spoiled, since I have never actually had an honest job in my life. When I was a teenager, I did work as a camp counselor for a year, but even then I was in charge of the shows at the camp. Thereafter, I worked in summer stock as a musical director and, believe it or not, a choreographer, while I was in college during the rest of the year. After I graduated, I did a little work in New York as an audition accompanist and musical director for children's theatre, then got a job working in A & R for RCA Records, which was like being paid to go to school and learn about the recording studio. And shortly after leaving RCA, I did GODSPELL and didn't have to worry about supporting myself anymore.

When I first came to New York, I did make a bargain with myself that if I wasn't supporting myself as a musician by the time I was 25, I would go back to school, get my psychology degree, and become a therapist, which as I have said before, I wouldn't have minded doing at all and in fact somewhat regret never having done. So all in all, as I said, I'm totally spoiled. I apologize to you and everyone else reading this for having had it so easy, but that's the truth. Sorry. Tell Jen to hang in there, and my best wishes to her, Dan, and yourself, Stephen

Early Songs/Borrowed Songs

Question:

Mr. S., I was listening, after reading your introductory comments to the Director's Script of "Godspell," to both of the "Godspell" soundtracks I have today. Needless to say, you wrote many songs before the "Godspell" tunes, but, as they are early songs, I started thinking: When did you write your first song, and why? That's a question I'm surprised I haven't asked before, because when I first played in the pit of "Godspell," back in high school (my introduction to your work - I hadn't even heard of "Pippin" before!), that was a question that I thought I would ask you if I ever had the chance, never dreaming I would!

So, yeah, I'm really curious to know (1) when and why you started writing songs, (2) whether it was in a theatrical context, and, most interestingly, (3) if you've ever (I don't know if you're allowed to divulge specifics, contract-wise, but a "yes" or a "no" answer would be vague enough and still satisfy my curiosity) used an "early" song, or even a little melody here or there from an early song, in a later show. I'm extremely anxious for your reply, as I've forgotten this question until now! :) Sincerely, Michael Dube

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The first song I can remember writing was for a puppet show my sister and I put on when I was about seven years old. It was called "Little Lullaby", and if I remember correctly, the show had the highly commercial title of HI, DOG. I think the plot concerned a dog that ran away from home. Bet you're sorry that one never reached Broadway, eh? I actually still remember the tune of "Little Lullaby", but I have been wise enough not to use it in later projects. I have, on very rare occasions, interpolated earlier work into later shows. The one that comes most readily to mind is the four-part fugue "The Goldfarb Variations" from THE MAGIC SHOW. The music for that was originally written for a show I did at Carnegie Mellon in my sophomore year. The song was called "The New Society" and it was from a musical called NOUVEAU, which I imagined at the time to be a scathing satire on the modern art world, something I knew almost nothing about at age 17 when I wrote it. When I decided to do another four-part fugue for THE MAGIC SHOW, I was too lazy to write another one and simply appropriated the music. They say confession is good for the soul; after this posting, my soul should be in great shape. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Your Academic Career

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I hope this question is not too personal for you to answer. I'm sure you were a great student in school but what kind of subjects did you do well/poorly in outside of the arts? For a man as successful as you are I'm having trouble picturing you in a 24 hour writing lab finishing up a research paper or cramming before an exam. Thanks for your time, this student appreciates it. Jack

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Jack: I have to admit that I actually was a good student and did get good grades. My strongest subject, perhaps not surprisingly considering the affinity most musicians have for numbers, was Math, though I was not great at solid geometry, as I have difficulty visualizing three-dimensionally. I was also pretty strong in English and History. By far my weakest subject was Science, particularly the physical sciences, and to this day I STILL don't understand how alternating current works. This is all high school of course, since for college I went to Carnegie Mellon, and the Drama Department (I was a directing major) was a BFA program with very few academic courses. Thanks for your interest, Stephen Schwartz

Importance of Drama School

Dear Stephen:

In your Notes on Broadway interview, you explain the importance of majoring in drama as opposed to music in college. You suggest that experiencing acting was important and that, "A lot of writers don't understand how to get that internal process going, so they write songs that are nice but not really dramatic." I enjoy the dramatic power of your music, but could you talk more about this influence? I don't really comprehend how the internal process that happens on stage relates to composition. Or is was the important factor your exposure to theatre as an art form? Has your experience of crafting the storyline for Working or COE influenced your songwriting? Also how have you become such a sophisticated musician without advanced training?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: In terms of the importance to me of studying acting: It helped me understand what was necessary in a scene (and therefore in a song) for it to be "actable" -- how the character has to be doing something and trying to accomplish something, not just describing how he or she feels, and how there needs to be a progression so the character winds up in a different place emotionally than where he or she started, things like that. It helped me learn how to improvise in my head to help characters come to life so I could write them. If I had wanted to be a pop writer, this would not have been particularly important, but for a theatre writer, it was invaluable. Lastly, you asked about my musical training: I did take seven or eight years of piano lessons and several years of music theory as well, first privately, and then at the Juilliard preparatory division. So I'd had quite a lot of musical training before I got to college. I still wish I knew more about orchestration -- I've sort of learned it as I've gone along, but I'm still not great at it, and I regret never having learned conducting. But in terms of the tools I needed for composition, I felt and still do feel pretty well trained. (I do believe there's such a thing as too much academic training for composition -- I feel it can make you begin to second-guess your own voice and become derivative, and also be too aware of "rules" you need to follow.) Hope these responses answer your question adequately. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Education

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, in the Bio section of your web site it says you've studied at Juilliard and graduated from Carnegie Mellon - both very good schools. Do you feel that those schools are the reason you became the composer that you are? There are some very talented composers and musicians out there with little or no education at all. Were you a musical prodigy destined for this career from the start or was it the schools that made you turn out this way? Thank you for your time.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi and thanks for your interest. In answer to your question: I always had the intention and ambition to become a composer, from about the time I was seven or so, and I like to think I would have been able to do so regardless of what my educational experience was. Nevertheless, I definitely feel both schools contributed to my abilities. At Juilliard, I enhanced my knowledge of music theory and got to learn about and practice composition and orchestration. And at Carnegie, I learned an enormous amount about all aspects of theatre. I think the two most influential experiences for me there were an acting class, given by a disciple of Sanford Meisner, that taught me so much about how actors need to work that it transformed the way I wrote for them, and the experience of writing four original musicals from scratch during my time at CMU for an extra-curricular organization called Scotch 'n' Soda. It's hard to separate one's experiences from the rest of one's life and say what might have happened without those specific experiences, but as I say, I most certainly feel that my time at both Juilliard and CMU was influential, helpful, and well spent. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Scotch and Soda: Voltaire in 1968

Question:

I'm probably one of very few people who often goes around singing, "Madam, spare me your love. I can believe in the dignity of man but as for transports of passion and the like, I'd rather believe in witches!" Have you ever thought of developing the Scotch 'n' Soda production of "Voltaire and the Witches" into a show? (I'm biased, I know -- but still having that music in my head 30-some years later must mean something. Full disclosure: My first audition ever was for "Voltaire and the Witches" and I was terrified. Then you cast me in the chorus, where my off-key singing hopefully was muffled, and where I could shine as a dancer. Always wanted to thank you for that wonderful experience.)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

While there is music in it that I remember fondly, I have not considered turning VOLTAIRE AND THE WITCHES into a professional show (nor either of the other two Scotch 'n' Soda musicals besides PIPPIN that I did at school.) I look at them as learning experiences, and as such, they were invaluable. I think I was incredibly lucky to have had the opportunity, while in college, to write or co-write four original musicals from scratch, and I'll always be grateful to Carnegie Mellon and the Scotch 'n' Soda organization for such a great chance to learn. And it certainly pleases me to learn that music from that long ago "opera" has stayed with you all these years. Hope all is well with you in your life, and thanks again for getting in touch, Stephen Schwartz

Music Theory

Question:

How has music theory helped you in your career?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There are of course many composers of popular songs and Broadway musicals without knowledge of music theory. For me, however, it's hard to imagine writing without it -- it just gives one so many more options. It's sort of like painting with more colors to be able to choose among. You don't have to use all

of them all the time, but at least you know they are there. And then of course, if I get stuck and need inspiration, I can always think, "Hmm, what would Ravel do?" or something like that. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Comment from Glenn:

I know Stephen already answered this question but i wanted to add something from my own experience regarding songwriting. it's the composer's ear that works the magic! theory is the analysis that comes afterwards. having a knowledge of theory can provide a composer with options when needed, but really isn't necessary for the process of composing. developing one's ear by listening to a wide variety of music will give a composer the palette s/he needs. if my fingers stumble on the keyboard, my ear sometimes finds this unexpected diversion a seedling.

Music Theory

Question:

How important is music theory in composition? I know quite a bit of theory, but even when I didn't hardly know any I managed to compose reasonably well... in fact, most of my improvements in music composition haven't been technical or theoretical, but more of subjective. As a composer of many years, what do you have to say about this?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The use and usefulness of music theory is an interesting question. As with all theories about art, I think it's helpful to know things if you're able to put them out of your mind when you actually create. If music theory is something that gives you more tools to work with and more colors in your palette, that's all to the good. But if it starts to restrict what you do by giving you certain "rules" you feel you need to adhere to, then it can be very destructive, and your work can come out feeling academic and passionless. I think music is inherently an art that thrives at the level below consciousness, and therefore one has to be able to let go of the intellectual part of it when writing. It's sort of like the Inner Game of Tennis: you need to know how to hit the strokes mechanically and have practiced them, but then you have to forget about it and just flow with the game. That's my belief anyway, which I'm sure many would dispute.

Analysis

Question:

When you were still in college studying theatre, did you ever analyze musical theatre songs and librettos like we do with classical pieces in composition? What's your take on learning how to be a better lyricist/composer? I've always been about learning is doing and learning is analyzing, but are there other ways you take from what other people are doing with the artform?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I didn't study musical theatre songs or libretti -- when I was at Carnegie Mellon, musicals were quite looked down upon, and for most of the time I was there, it was through an extra-curricular club that I gained musical theatre experience (although they did let me direct the first act of THE APPLE TREE for my senior project.) But when i was younger, I used to take the published scripts of musicals out of the library and write tunes to the lyrics, then listen to the cast albums to see how the real composers had set them, and that was very instructive. I do believe there is much to be learned from analyzing work that you like and trying to see what techniques underlie it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 2 – ALTERNATIVE CAREERS

Second Choice for a Career?

Question:

Hi, Stephen. Here's a hypothetical question for you. I don't know if you're into answering such questions, but I'll throw it out anyway. :) If for some reason (God forbid!) you had to choose a career other than songwriting, what kind of work would you pursue? Since you have such a way with words, would it be something involving writing or poetry? Or would you go in a totally different direction? Did you have to think about those kinds of things as you pursued your studies of music and composition, or were you so passionate about musical theatre that you would stay with it no matter what? I'm glad you're doing what you're doing, 'cause I get to enjoy the results; but you know me: always curious. :)
Peggy.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Interesting you should ask this; I was just talking about this the other night with friends. The fact is that I have always been interested in being a psychotherapist, and at one point, I actually had returned to school to pursue my graduate degree and move towards practicing. This was in 1991, when I was feeling very burned out about show business. Shortly thereafter however, for better or worse, I was asked by Disney to do POCAHONTAS, and my pursuit of this second career had to be laid aside. But I still think I would really have liked it, and I hope in some alternate universe, that's what I got to do. Best, Stephen

Robbins, Fosse, Champion.... Schwartz?

Question:

Dear Stephen, Just when I thought I'd read everything in print about your career, I stumble across something totally unexpected. I'm referring to your bio on MTI's website which states that you not only directed productions at the New London Barn Playhouse during college - which I think is commonly known - but also choreographed many shows. Wow! Pretty cool!

Naturally, I'm curious to know how and why you donned the choreographer's hat. Had you received any specific dance training while at Carnegie Mellon? Did you enjoy the experience of being a choreographer? Gee, next thing you know, I'll read somewhere that you've designed sets and costumes too. ;o). Hope you are having a wonderful summer. Best, Shawn McCarthy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Shawn: I was drafted into service as a musical stager at New London when they lost their contracted choreographer and found I had a bit of a flair for it (though Messrs. Robbins, Fosse, and Champion need have had no worries). I have absolutely no dance training, so I worked out musical numbers by figuring out stage movement patterns and flow rather than by specific steps. When I needed actual steps, I would rely on some of the dancers in the company to help come up with them. Among the shows for which I did musical staging were HOW TO SUCCEED, OLIVER, PAL JOEY, CAMELOT, and FUNNY GIRL (which I also directed and which starred Pamela Myers as Fanny Brice.) When I left New London, that was the end of my choreographic career, with one notable exception. I actually did the musical staging for GODSPELL, although I took no credit for it (I did take a small royalty, though). While once again, I came up with the basic staging flow of the numbers, the specific "steps" for GODSPELL were worked out in collaboration with the cast members and our musical director Stephen Reinhardt, who had been a Broadway dancer and who helped a great deal with the soft shoe aspects of "All for the Best". Anyone who wants to know what my "staging style" at New London was like need only look at numbers like "Bless the Lord" and "Turn Back, O Man" in GODSPELL. Whew -- I'm glad I talked about this -- it was like my choreographic coming out of the closet -- not so bad once you've actually discussed it openly. Thanks for asking, Stephen

SECTION 3 – Musical Influences

Compositional Style/Chief Influences

Question:

How would you describe your own compositional style? Who do you consider your chief influences?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

My compositional style, at least as far as I can be objective about it, is basically theatrical, in that I write songs which try to advance stories or illuminate characters, which tend to end in a different place emotionally than where they started, and generally build at the end. Therefore, I would say my primary influences were the theatre songwriters who went before me -- Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jule Styne, Bock and Harnick, Lerner and Loewe, Stephen Sondheim, etc.. My music however tends to be more in a "pop/rock" style, as you've pointed out, particularly as far as rhythm and harmonic approach are concerned. Most influential on me in this area I would say were the singer/songwriters I admired as a teenager -- Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, the Motown sound of Holland-Dozier-Holland, James Taylor, Paul Simon, Cat Stevens, and more recently Sting, among others. This grew out of listening a lot as a kid to folk music and particularly the popular folk group The Weavers. I was classically trained, and so I'm also aware of influences as disparate as Bach, Beethoven, Puccini, Debussy and Copland. As a lyricist, I also see a combination of the song-form of the theatre writers and the style of the Joni Mitchells and James Taylors, to some extent.

Pop Influences

Question:

Dear Stephen,

I've read you write about your musical influences in one of your past posts. But I observed you only mentioned those musicians who were directly involved with theater. How about those musicians in the pop scene? I hear many musicians claim the Beatles to be a major influence. How about you?

I remember Mariah Carey saying that in order for one to be a great musician, one has to be a great fan first of all. A Filipino songwriter, in one of his workshops, also says something to that effect: "Whatever comes in, goes out. It's an input-output relationship." ...Again, thanks for reading. Jude aka TREX

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The contemporary pop influences on me are really too numerous to list, but I'll go ahead and list some of them anyway. You will note that most of them are from when I was a kid and a teenager, because that's when my tastes in music were forming. In more or less chronological order, I would mention: The Weavers, Odetta, Burt Bacharach, the Motown sound -- particularly Holland-Dozier-Holland songs, Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Cat Stevens, The Mamas and the Papas, Paul Simon, Judy Collins, Jefferson Airplane and their contemporaries, and more recently, Sting and Mary Chapin Carpenter. Is that a long enough list for you? Sincerely, Stephen

Influences

Dear Stephen, I've read how your musical influences were mostly from your formative years. Your list is literally identical to my own; could it be because we were in our formative years at the same time? I particularly love the fact that you cite both Joni Mitchell (have you heard her recent "Both Sides Now" CD?) and Laura Nyro.

What I'd like to know is were there influences on you lyrically apart from musically? And who "turns you on" today? Who do you admire, either within or outside the theatre, now?

Dear Eric: As always with a question of influences, it's a long list. I would say that the lyricists whose work I most admired as a kid and perhaps try to emulate include 1) for theatre: Sheldon Harnick, Larry Hart, Carolyn Leigh, Hammerstein, Sondheim of course -- the usual suspects. Apparently a minority view: I am not a fan of Cole Porter's lyrics. 2) for pop: Other than Joni Mitchell, who's the best, I would cite James Taylor and Don Henley, and more recently Sting and Mary Chapin Carpenter. I am a huge admirer of the lyrics of Paul Simon and Laura Nyro, but I could never write like them; I just look at their work in awe and wonder how they do it. And 3) current writers: I admire a lot the lyrics of a couple of NY "cabaret" writers: Marcy Heisler (for comedy material, she's just amazing) and my good friend John Bucchino; and recent theatre writers, I would mention Adam Guettel -- the lyrics to FLOYD COLLINS are pretty dazzling. I'm sure as soon as I send this, I will think of a dozen other names I should have mentioned, but those are the names that came to mind this morning. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Influences

Who would be your biggest musical influence?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's a long list. First of all I would list some of my favorite classical composers, ranging from Bach and Beethoven, through Puccini and Moussourgsky, up to the more modern composers like Prokofiev, Debussy, Copland, and Bernstein. I certainly can see influences of all of them in my work. Then I would add the folk music I listened to as a kid, popularized by such groups as The Weavers. Certainly theatre composers like Richard Rodgers, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Jerry Bock, all the way up to Stephen Sondheim. And then the huge influence of the pop music writers I have admired over the years, from the 70's singer-songwriters like Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Laura Nyro, Paul Simon, plus the Motown writing team of Holland-Dozier-Holland, to more recent writers like Sting, Suzanne Vega and Mary Chapin Carpenter. And so on. I am influenced by all the music I love and it somehow conglomerates in my head into whatever my own style may be.

SECTION 4 – The Composer's Role

Who Decides Where to Insert Songs?

Question:

When you're working on a show, who decides where in the show to insert a song? Do the producers say, "Okay, Stephen, we want a song here, here and here. Come up with something."? Or do you get to read through the script and discuss with them where a song would help to advance the plot? I hope it's the latter; I can't imagine being told what's expected and then have to get the creative juices flowing under those circumstances. Still, you know me: ever curious. So tell us how it works.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: In my experience, the songwriter or songwriters decide where the songs go. Even working for a company with strong executive input such as Disney, the decision of where to put a song was always left to me and my co-writer. The closest I have come to being told where songs had to go was on PRINCE OF EGYPT. That was challenging, but eventually I was able to come up with ideas for songs for places suggested by the producers or Jeffrey Katzenberg that also felt right to me. Even on that project, however, if I felt a song needed to go at a specific point, I was pretty much listened to. I would think that's generally how it works. Part of the songwriter's job, it seems to me, is deciding what to write

about. I certainly would not be happy writing songs to order -- in fact, I would turn down such a job. Thanks for asking. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Libretto VS. Musical Score

Question:

I have always wondered how the process of the script matches the musical numbers. Does the writer hand you the script and you go from there? Or do you have ideas you bounce back and forth? If you could explain that process for me, that would be very much appreciated. Thank you very much. Kyle DeGoey

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Kyle: The process isn't really cut-and-dried, and varies somewhat from collaboration to collaboration. I tend to try to work out an outline for the show with my book writer first, before either of us does a lot of writing. We discuss extensively the characters, tone, and possible song spotting. I do like to have at least some of the script written before I start writing songs, so I can have a sense of how the characters speak and behave. And of course, a lot of the songs grow directly out of the dialogue, often assimilating scenes or portions of scenes. I guess what I'm saying is the more collaborative the process, the better in my opinion. I hope this at least somewhat answers your questions. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Production Control

Question:

Dear Stephen, I was wondering if you could tell me at which point you give up control over the production that you write. When your writing a new show, do you have complete control (unless you're commissioned to write a show)? Also, once a commercial producer takes the reigns, do they control all aspects of future productions (i.e. the Broadway production and then the tour)? Thanks for you input. I have always wondered exactly how the control of a show goes from conception to production.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

In the theatre, it doesn't really work that way, at least in my experience. Musicals are extremely collaborative, and as an author, I continue to have input throughout the process. Of course, compromise and negotiation are always involved, as with any collaborative effort. I tend to operate under the theory that ultimately, each person is responsible for his or her own department -- that is, the director has the final say about design, staging and (to a great extent) casting, the book writer has final say about the dialogue, and I have final say about the music and lyrics. The producer is a valuable negotiator among these parties if a disagreement arises, and obviously the producer(s)' opinions carry great weight. But generally, a consensus can be reached.

For an interesting, darkly cynical, but still pertinent and (mostly) accurate discussion of this issue, I recommend the chapter called "The Muscle" in William Goldman's book about the 1967 Broadway season, entitled appropriately enough, THE SEASON. Actually the whole book is a great read, and while Mr. Goldman is famously opinionated and I certainly don't agree with everything he says (for instance, in the light of current sensibilities, the book now reads as quite homophobic), it is still in my opinion the best book ever written about the realities of the Broadway theatre. I also recommend Ted Chapin's recent book about the making of FOLLIES, called EVERYTHING WAS POSSIBLE. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Involvement of Composer in Casting a Musical

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, I've always been curious concerning the involvement of the composer in the casting of a musical. How much 'say' does the composer and/or lyricist have vs the producer, vs the director? As well, when a show has been running for a certain period of time and replacements are brought in for the principle roles, who's involved in making those decisions? I'm asking because there have been many times, particularly on Broadway, when very talented 'no name' performers are replaced by 'stars' whose talent is questionable but their name draws crowds. Thanks, Shawn McCarthy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Shawn: Good question. Most Broadway and off-Broadway contracts give the author(s) cast approval; it's built into the Dramatists Guild contract, for instance. I'm always extremely actively involved with the original casting process, as are most authors I know. Once a show has been running a while, however, I tend not to get involved with the replacement casting, particularly late in the run. As far as "gimmick" casting, such as putting in less-qualified stars to bolster sagging business, I haven't had any real direct experience of that yet, so I couldn't answer whether I would go along with it or not. I think it would depend on the circumstances -- how long the show had been running, how close to appropriate the star was, and how bad business was. I hate to think I would agree to a really awful replacement choice under any circumstances, but as I say, never having dealt with it, I can't really answer. Best, Stephen Schwartz

How Much Say Do You Have When Music Is Staged?

Question:

How much say do you get in what is happening during your songs? Do you write things into the book saying what you want to happen, or do you leave totally upto the director? I know Jerome Robbins, when hearing Sondheim sing "Maria" for him for West Side Story, Jerome looked at Sondheim and said "What's supposed to be happening here?" He said that he wasn't quite sure but he figured Tony was just standing there. Irritated, Jerome yelled at the young Sondheim, "Fine! You stage it!" So out of curiosity, do you say much when it comes to the staging of your music?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear David: Actually, I sometimes have quite a lot of input into the way my songs are staged. Having done musical staging in my early career -- in school and summer stock (and, uncredited, the musical staging of GODSPELL), I generally have a picture in my mind of how a number will move on stage. Of course the director or choreographer does his or her own staging, and we may not even talk about it much beforehand. Most often, I'm very pleased with what they've done and feel it is better than what I envisioned. But if I feel they have missed something in terms of the content or intention of the number, then I will discuss it with them, and almost always they will restage to accommodate my notes. This is not to imply that I specifically tell directors or choreographers what to do, but rather that it's important to me that the staging fulfill the intent of the number. I know that story about Stephen Sondheim, and he usually tells it to make the point that as theatre songwriters, we need to have in mind how a number will work on stage, even if the specific staging doesn't look anything like what we imagined. I completely agree with him. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Official versions

Question:

In general, when your work reaches the amateur licensing stage, how is the authorized version approved? When a revival occurs, how is it decided what should be changed in the licensed copies? Do you have authority only over your lyrics or do you have some say in changes in the book as well? In

the case of Children of Eden, for instance, how did you and John Caird decide to make the Paper Mill version the "official" version.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I often continue to work on a show after its initial commercial presentation, particularly in a case such as CHILDREN OF EDEN, where the first major production has not been successful. When I have a collaborator, such as John Caird in the above case, he or she and I continue to work as we did when originally writing the show, and we see subsequent productions of the show until we are satisfied that it is as good as we can make it. We felt we had finally "completed" CHILDREN OF EDEN for the Paper Mill production, and so that became the definitive version. It is Joe Stein's and my hope that the upcoming Paper Mill production of THE BAKER'S WIFE (coincidentally) will be the final version of that show. And I have no doubt that Winnie and I will make some minor changes to WICKED, despite its enormous commercial success, before finally declaring a version to be "official".

Working with Stars

Question:

Dear Stephen: You've worked with many stars of stage and screen in your life. Except for the James Taylor story you kindly shared, I don't recall too many comments or stories about your experiences, as if it's not really so "flashy" for you as it might seem from the outside. (Of course for many of them, you are quite a star.)

One of the main things I want to know in this regard is how much you work with the cast of a movie. I believe you did take time with the singers on Geppetto. Apparently on a talk show Drew Carey said something about your being rather exacting. (He also said on Disney's site what an honor it was to work with you.)

What about for The Prince of Egypt? Did you work with the singers for various versions of the songs? Were you in the studio with Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey as well as Michelle Pfeiffer and Sally Dworsky? With Amy Grant as well as Ofra Haza and Eden Riegel? What was it like spending time with Martin Short, Brian Stokes Mitchell, and all the rest?

Also I've read that Jeffrey Katzenberg was on the trip with you to Egypt. Is he as high powered in person as he seems to be in terms of the movie business? I wonder what it was like to travel with him and the dozen or so folks on the incredibly talented creative team who took that trip. Was that about 1995 or '96? Did you know them before the trip? Did it feel like family by the end?

I suppose "stars" are just as much a part of our world family as anyone else. Still spending time with top talent might add a little spice to your working life. Yes or no?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I've actually had fairly good experiences working with most of the stars I've come in contact with. I always work with whomever is singing my songs within the context of a show or movie, so of course I worked with Drew, Julia and the rest on GEPETTO (they were all great to work with, by the way -- really dedicated and worked long hours with great good humor), as well as people like Mel Gibson on POCAHONTAS or Tom Hulse on HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME. (I pretty much never get involved with the pop singles of the movie songs, so other than stopping by the studio to say hello, I did not work with Whitney or Mariah or Vanessa Williams, etc.)

I had known Jeffrey Katzenberg from Disney, and while we are not close personal friends, I had had enough contact with him to come to like him personally and enjoy his company. He was a lot of fun on the trip to Egypt, particularly since he was so incredibly dedicated to PRINCE OF EGYPT. Those research trips are really highlights of working on the films, and if we don't all emerge as "family" afterwards, we certainly get to be better friends.

I don't tend to have a lot of personal friends who are stars that I see socially outside of work (other than writer-"stars" like Alan Menken or Frank Wildhorn, etc.), but that's probably just circumstantial. I've basically discovered that most stars get to be famous partly because they're very talented to begin with and partly because they work really hard. Hope that somewhat answers your questions. Best, Stephen

SECTION 5 – Comments About His Career

Motivations

Question:

What was your motivation for the completed works you have done? (ie. Pippin, Godspell, Reluctant Pilgrim, etc.) How much of it was artist need to express a story with in? How much was need to be fed? How much of it was interest in getting yourself noticed? I am interested in knowing the motivations behind your work and your inner thoughts on the struggles of completing them. If you could answer these questions, I think it will help us understand your need to find your "corner of the sky".

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I found your question about the motivations for writing a very interesting one. Motivation is always mysterious and usually not one-dimensional. Some of my projects have originated with me, from my coming across a piece of material I was interested in, such as Studs Terkel's WORKING. But usually it is a project that has been brought to me. Then it is usually a matter of my gut reaction -- is this an idea that sparks something in me, that feels like "my territory". Does the story or particular characters grab me? Do I feel I want to spend a couple of years of my life working on this?

Often I'm approached about an idea where I know I would enjoy seeing the finished work, but I don't care enough about the subject matter to devote myself to it for the length of time it would take to bring it to fruition.

There have been occasions when I have done something because I thought it would be good for me from a career point of view and then have found a way to make the subject matter "my own". Examples of this would be most of my Hollywood work, and -- a fact which may surprise you -- my first show, GODSPELL. But I would never do something which I couldn't care about.

In the specific case of the "Reluctant Pilgrim" album, that came about because I had been talking with my friend, the excellent songwriter John Bucchino, about his writing something for the theatre, and he countered by asking why I never wrote individual songs, particularly songs based on my own life, as he does. I started trying to write some individual songs ("Life Goes On" and "Code of Silence" came first) and gradually the idea of doing a collection evolved. Added to that was the motivation of always having wanted to record some of my own material. But as I said, motivation is always complex, and I'm not sure any of us ever knows entirely why we do things. Hope this begins to answer your very interesting question; thanks for writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

If there were a segment... Commenting on your career

Question:

Hi, Stephen. Here's another question for you to ponder: As I was listening to *Working*, I started to wonder what it would be like if one of the characters were a songwriter/lyricist, and if you were cast in that role. How would your character describe the work of a songwriter/lyricist, the good and bad things about the work, the frustrations and joys, etc.? So what would you say about your work if you had a segment in *Working* in which you could share what you do with others? – Peggy

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: That's a hard question to answer fully -- books have been written about writers' response to their profession. Briefly and somewhat superficially then, the positive stuff first: I think being a writer is the best way to make a living in the world. You're doing something you love and getting paid for it, you're getting to "talk" to others about things you care about (and work out personal issues), you're in control of your own projects and schedule to a great extent, and you work with a constantly changing cast of interesting people. The negatives are obvious: the pain of being criticized and constantly having your work judged, the precariousness of being dependent on others' opinions for your success, the egomaniacs and creeps you have to deal with. There is also the issue of how being a professional at something you love to do can tarnish your love for it if you're not very careful (I would think professional athletes experience the same dilemma.) I know this isn't exactly the monologue you asked for, but as I said, it's a complex and subtle issue and a truly thoughtful response would take more time than either of us has. Thanks as always for your interest. Best, Stephen

Career Success and Flops

Question:

Hi, my friends and I are currently doing a project on you and your career as a songwriter and lyricist for our college course. It would be fantastic to have some of your own opinions for our presentation.

We would love to know what you thought about the idea that after the huge success of *Godspell*, *Pippin* and the magic show etc if it would be fair to say your success almost dipped for a short period e.g. *Working*, *Rags*, *Children of Eden* (although fantastic shows acknowledged by your musical of the year nomination for *Baker's Wife* in 1989) and your opinion on why this may have happened. And also your hugely dramatic rise again to the top of your profession through your film scores for *Hunchback* and *Pocahontas* etc, and most obviously *Wicked*. What do you think it is about your music that has achieved this e.g. different eras and changing musical tastes, differences to your writing style and why it may have worked so well at different times?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think it's hard to generalize about what happened to specific shows, when each was in my opinion an individual case. I don't think it was a matter of changing tastes or the nature of an era, etc. From my perspective, the shows that did not succeed (at least not in their initial productions) all were problematic and it was only after revisions and rewrites that some of them worked. To take them in order:

1. *THE BAKER'S WIFE* was a mess in its initial pre-Broadway tryout, and then for years, Joe Stein and I went in wrong directions with the revisions we would make from time to time. It took the insight of Trevor Nunn to set us on the right path, and even then, we weren't able to get the job completely done for his production. It is only recently that, following Trevor's dramaturgical ideas, we have been able to make the show work, and it has been very successful in its recent productions. But certainly its original failure was due to problems within the show, not with the era in which it was produced.

2. WORKING was too long and not entirely structurally correct when it was produced on Broadway. When it was cut and revised shortly thereafter, it became a great success in regional theatres, schools and stock-and-amateur productions.

3. RAGS also has structural problems and story-telling issues, in this case ones that in my opinion remain unsolved. Perhaps someday another Trevor Nunn (or Sam Mendes or Stephen Daldry or whomever) will come along and want to direct a production and have insight into how to make it work. But again, the problem with RAGS is with the show and not with the times (or The Times.)

4. CHILDREN OF EDEN is a similar case to WORKING -- it was too long and had story problems in its initial London production. Once John Caird and I realized what the problems were and addressed them, it has become a great success and is very frequently produced in the States. As many people know, it is my favorite of my shows.

I think in my work for Disney animation, through the ASCAP workshops I have conducted, and mostly just from experience and learning more about writing, I have come to know a lot more about how to structure a musical, and this may be why more recent efforts of mine have met with more success. While I do think that the tastes and issues of a given time affect how much a show dates and how long a shelf life it has, I think success or failure has more to do with the quality of the individual show than more general societal considerations. At least in my particular case, I have never had a show that I thought really worked fail to succeed.

Question:

What inspired you to work on an opera as it is so different from all your other most recent works.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have always loved opera and toyed with the idea of trying to write one someday. The opportunity presented itself recently, and I am excited (and daunted) by this new challenge and learning about a different world.

Question:

Also would there be any other writers performers, stars you would like to work with in the future as we already know about your work with Leonard Bernstein for Mass and Fosse in Pippin, it would be particularly interesting to know of any other unknown collaborations or desired collaborations.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It would be a long list -- there are so many directors, designers, and performers whose work I admire, both for theatre and for film, I wouldn't know where to start. Those I wish I had had a chance to work with include Jerome Robbins, Michael Bennett, and Hal Prince (of course Hal is still with us, but I can't really imagine a circumstance arising in which we could work together.) But there are so many talented people around, I will just enjoy the chance to work with those I get the opportunity to collaborate with.

I hope these responses prove useful to you for your project. Thanks again for your interest, Stephen Schwartz

Playing your own music

Question:

Hi Stephen, I was just wondering that if you sit down to play some of the published music you have written in the past, is it weird to see "Music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz" in the corner?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Always. Even stranger is to hear one of my songs performed or played unexpectedly. One time I was at a bar and the piano player started playing something, and I was seized with horror that it sounded so much like some song I had written I had inadvertently stolen it. Then I realized it WAS a song I had written -- he was playing "Gifts of Love" from BAKER'S WIFE! Stephen

Two Small Questions

Question:

Mr. Schwartz:

What do you like most and least about your job? If you had to write an autobiography, what would the title be? Thanks, Jack

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Jack: Those aren't small questions! The first could fill a book (maybe the book you refer to in the second question) But off the top of my head, here goes...

1. What do you like most and least about your job?

I like a lot of things about my job, but certainly one of my favorite times on a project is working out the structure of a show with my collaborators. It's a bit like doing a puzzle, which is something I also enjoy. I love the flashes of creativity and the leaps of inspiration that seem to come out of nowhere, and the satisfying feeling when I come to believe we have arrived at a solid base to build upon.

There are also many things I don't like (though not as many as I do), but one of my least favorites is having to be reviewed by critics, since most of them don't like my work very much, and aside from being discouraging and hurting my feelings, it makes it that much more difficult to reach my audience.

2. If you had to write an autobiography, what would the title be?

Well, apropos of my above comment about critics, I suppose one title could be PROFIT WITHOUT HONOR. I've also sometimes joked that if I wrote an autobiography, I would call it BEEN THERE, DONE THAT, since it seems I always want to try new things. My apologies, Jack; I'm sure that with some real thought, there are far more insightful answers I could have given you. Maybe someday, if I actually write an autobiography, I will. And then we can see what I call it! In any event, thanks for your interest, and I hope you're not too disappointed with my somewhat glib responses. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Half-finished shows?

Question:

Is there a show that you always dreamed of composing, but for some reason, gave up on, or never really started? Is there maybe a show that lies half-finished in one of your desk drawers? Is there a chance you might pull it out of the drawer some day?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There is no half-finished show of mine lying around in any of my desk drawers. There are some projects that I don't consider completed to my satisfaction: for instance, the musical, RAGS, which still has a ways to go before it fully works, or the television musical, GEPETTO, which my collaborator (David Stern) and I are adapting for the stage for stock-and-amateur presentations, because we feel it could

work well as a live stage show. But I don't think that's what you mean by your question. There are a couple of shows I thought of doing and then wound up letting go of, but that's because I ultimately didn't feel they were viable projects for me. There are a couple of shows I might have done but couldn't get the rights to the underlying source material. But basically, I tend to finish things for better or worse once I've begun them, and in any event, I feel I have plenty of projects to choose among in terms of ideas for any future work.

Watching Your Own Shows

Question:

From Peggy: Hi, Stephen. I'm wondering what it's like for you to be a part of the audience at one of your own shows. In the past you've said you tend to notice what's wrong with a show unless it's really good. I wonder if this is especially true when watching a show you've written the music to and worked so hard on. Do you get frustrated when the actors don't portray the characters or sing the songs the way you and the book writer had in mind? Or do you find it amusing and interesting to see how others view the characters and bring them to life? Are you able to let yourself be touched by your own music and shows, the way your fans are? Do you ever have the opportunity to watch amateur productions of your shows? If so, what's it like for you as a professional? Well, I suppose that's enough for now. This was just something I was wondering about, so thought I'd ask. :)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

90% of the time, if I'm seeing a show of mine, I'm taking notes. So my focus is almost always on what can be done to improve the production. I do remember one time though, at the end of my working on the Mill Mountain Theatre production of CHILDREN OF EDEN (the first American production.) For a couple of weeks, I had been taking notes and watching the show from the sound mixer's board, trying to help get the balances right. The last night I was there, I went and sat in the audience and just experienced the show with them. Since it was a terrific production, directed beautifully by Ernie Zulia and including the wonderful Cass Morgan as Eve/Mama Noah along with an excellent cast, I have to say I really enjoyed myself and was enormously moved at the end when everyone stood up and cheered. But those experiences are few and far-between. Usually, if I'm at one of my own shows, I'm a working boy. Best, Stephen

Stephen Schwartz news

Question:

Dear Steven,

As an avid fan of yours, I am always looking for new information about your work, the people involved in them, and you. I was wondering if there is a newsletter of some sort I could subscribe to? Sincerely, Paul

Answer from Carol

Yes. The Schwartz Scene

<http://www.musicalschwartz.com/newsletter.htm>

SECTION 6 – Favorite Songs and Shows

Favorite show

Question:

Do you have a favourite from your own shows and why?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

My personal favorite remains CHILDREN OF EDEN. For one thing, I think it is my best score. And I also feel what it has to say is the closest to my personal philosophy, though of course my point of view is expressed in all my shows and films.

Favorite songs

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz, I've been a fan of your work since I was in high school and thought Godspell was the greatest thing since the inception of musical theatre. But, you wrote a song for Working which remains my favorite song of yours. It makes me bawl like a little baby every time I hear it: "Fathers and Sons." Such a beautiful composition. Do you have a favorite song of your own composition? Thanks, Robin

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It changes. "Fathers and Sons" is certainly one of my favorites, as it is so personal. Currently, I guess, my favorite song of my own composition is "Forgiveness' Embrace", which is on my UNCHARTED TERRITORY CD. But tomorrow the answer could be different.

Favorite Cast Recording

Question:

Were most of the cast recordings disappoint you, and which cast recording was your favorite?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Since the beginning, because of my background as a record producer, I have nearly always produced my cast albums. Needless to say, therefore, I can always hear flaws and things I wish I had been able to do better. I do believe I've gotten better at it as time has gone on, but I take responsibility for all my cast recordings. I am quite happy with the later ones, particularly CHILDREN OF EDEN and WICKED, though of course even with those I hear the imperfections. Perhaps my very favorite one, though, is also the most recent, since I don't see how it could have turned out much better; it doesn't really qualify as a "cast recording", since it is an assembled studio cast, but I am really delighted with the way the recording of CAPTAIN LOUIE turned out. Thanks for your interest and your question, Stephen Schwartz

Saving Unused or Cut Songs

Question:

Dear Stephen, I was wondering if there have been any un-used songs in anything you have been involved with that you wish were used. For example "Top of the World" or "Someday" from Hunchback or "If I Never Knew You" from Pocahontas (assuming that these were written to be used in the featured animations). I think they are all absolutely fabulous songs and it's a shame they weren't used in the features themselves. I also wanted to ask you if the song "Ein Bisschen Freude" was a brand-new song, or a song translated from when you worked on the featured animation. It's a neat little song and would have definitely been fitting in the animation! But out of everything, is there one particular song that you just wish would have been used? Thanks and best wishes for the millennium! -Kennan

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Virtually all my shows (and I would expect everybody else's as well) had songs cut from them during the process of writing. At one time, I would have answered your question as to which I most regretted losing by mentioning "Close to Home", which was cut for a while from CHILDREN OF EDEN but is now back in the show. I guess the one that most qualifies now is the duet "If We Never Meet Again", which is cut from the most recent version of RAGS. I can't think of another song that I wish were in one of my shows but isn't, since they were all cut for sound theatrical reasons. But among the songs I have cut over the

years but still like out of context are: "Marking Time" from PIPPIN, "Plain and Simple" from THE BAKER'S WIFE, "The Sweatshop Rag" and "Up Until Today" from RAGS, and "Civilized Society", "Shipshape" and the original version of "World Without You" from CHILDREN OF EDEN. Thanks for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Schwartz Favorites?

Question:

Outside of the shows that you have personally contributed to, do you have any favorites of your own? Are there any other musical composers/lyricists that you particularly respect or admire? Finally, what show of your own, if any, do you cling to the most (most meaningful, satisfying, etc...)?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Some of my favorite shows, in no particular order, include (not surprisingly, as they are generally considered to be among the best musicals ever written): MY FAIR LADY, THE KING AND I, GYPSY, SWEENEY TODD, FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, A CHORUS LINE, SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE, the first act of THE APPLE TREE, and RAGTIME. Also maybe FUNNY GIRL and ONCE ON THIS ISLAND. I'm sure I'm forgetting some, but those come immediately to mind. As for influences, certainly these (and many other shows) were influential on me in terms of their structure and how they tell their stories through music, but as a songwriter, I think I have been more influenced by classical, folk, and pop writers. As to my personal favorites of my own shows, the ones that I "cling to most", I would probably say they were WORKING and CHILDREN OF EDEN. Thanks for your interest. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Your most favourite musical that you didn't write

Dear Stephen, What is your most favourite musical that you haven't written or already appeared in ? Just wondering, lol.Thankyou for reading this. Phil

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Without question, THE KING AND I. I love the music, and I think the leading characters are just about perfectly written. There are several other musicals that I think are great and that speak to me strongly (MY FAIR LADY, GYPSY, SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE, A CHORUS LINE, FIDDLER, WEST SIDE STORY, etc.) But KING AND I has always been my favorite. Thanks for being interested enough to ask, Stephen Schwartz

SECTION 7 – Themes in Shows – About message and meaning

Themes of Choice

Question:

I was thinking the other day about how choice seems to be a very strong theme in your works: the precious and terrible gift of free will in COE, the freedom to choose our dreams and the course of our lives in "Dreamscape", and even the recognition of the choices we make, perhaps on an unconscious level ("this dry-eyed detachment I choose" in "Life Goes On"). And of course there's "The Hardest Part of Love", where we give those we love the freedom to live their own lives and make their own mistakes, etc. Is this, in fact an important theme for you in your life and work, or am I just picking up on it as I slowly but (hopefully) surely learn that I have the power to choose, even if all I can do is to choose how to respond to something I can't change.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: Definitely an important theme, and a conscious one at that. Most of my shows deal with this issue (some perhaps a little more obliquely than others). In addition to the ones you cited, obviously PIPPIN does -- Pippin has so many choices open to him, he is unable to settle on any one thing -- as well as GODSPELL, RAGS, and THE BAKER'S WIFE

Fathers/Sons - Parents/Children

Question:

The relationship between parents and children, especially between fathers and sons, runs deep in your work. Charlemagne and Pippin, Geppetto and Pinocchio, Father and Adam, Noah and Japheth. Is this a very personal emotional bond for you or did it just come from the works themselves?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Along with the conflict between romanticism/idealism and realism, this is the other theme that appears in pretty much everything I write. Did it grow out of my own relationship with my father? Well, probably -- don't most men have "father issues"? An awful lot of American playwrights deal with this theme -- Arthur Miller and Robert Anderson come quickly to mind, and of course Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee deal over and over with their relationships with their mothers. I guess it's unusual for a writer of musicals to have this as one of his or her key themes -- I can't think of another off-hand. But there's no question it's one of mine. The interesting thing is that as an adult, I have an extremely close and easy relationship with my parents. Maybe I just worked it all out in my writing.

Outcasts and the Restless

Question:

Your work seems to champion the outcasts and the restless among us. The Hunchback and Esmeralda, Pocahontas, Cain, Japheth & Yonah, etc.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think all of us have inside the part of us that feels like an outcast -- well, maybe not George W. Bush, but everybody else. I certainly remember what it was like as a child to feel "different" from my peers, to struggle with finding ways to fit in and adopt protective coloration like a chameleon. (Then of course, as adults, we have to learn to stop doing it.) So my natural sympathies tend to be with the outsider. I think I really wanted to do CHILDREN OF EDEN when I realized that Cain/Japheth was actually the hero of the story. And of course, the ultimate outcast shows up as the heroine of my next show -- Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West. I think most of us have a little green Elphaba inside us -- Oz knows I do.

An influence question and a thematic one

Question:

Mr. Schwartz--I am a theater student with a tendency for overanalysis, and I'm curious if my wonderings have any basis.

In three of your musicals, Pippin, Children of Eden, and Wicked, there seems to be a strong running theme of paternal conflict: of sons (and daughter) breaking away from their fathers. One may argue that this is not exactly the case in Wicked, but I still feel that it fits on many different levels. Is there any particular reason for this theme, or do you feel it is a universal conflict that most people can relate to?

Another question I have is if you were influenced by Egyptian mythology when writing the chants for the spells Elphaba recites in Wicked. I am something of an Egypt enthusiast and I immediately recognized the gods' names Atum and Amun.

Atum is the creator in Egyptian mythology and is also the word for "one". Amun is a god who came onto the scene relatively late in the culture's history, around the 11th dynasty, who represented pure holiness, unlike any previous god in their pantheon. I may be stretching things here, as I realize the written word for the second one I am referring to is "namen", but to my ear it sounded close enough to the name Amun (often spelled Amen) to wonder if there was an ancient Egyptian connection. Was this intentional?

Thank you for your time in answering a young nerd's musings. Peace, Leah

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Hi Leah: I don't feel you are over-analytical at all. I thought both your questions were very intelligent.

1. Absolutely, I think one of my main themes concerns parent/child relationships and conflict, usually father/son. Although I get along very well with my Dad, I think many men have "father issues", and I certainly did. I don't write about this because I think it is a universal conflict (though it pretty much is), but because it is an important component of my own psyche.

2. You are correct to recognize some Egyptian influence in Elphaba's chants (though I didn't mean to evoke the name "Amun" specifically). There are also Latin, German, Greek and Italian references. I was trying to come up with chants that one sort of understood, without them being in any one recognizable language. Thus, for instance, when she makes the Tin Man, the chant includes the phrase "meno non cordo", which someone who knows linguistics will recognize as meaning "without a heart", but not in any Earth language. I think the Egyptian influence came into it because of my research when I was doing PRINCE OF EGYPT. Hope this answers your interesting questions somewhat, and thanks for writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Research Project

Question:

We are a group of High School students doing a research project on your works and common themes represented in them. We're specifically looking at Godspell, Children of Eden, Pippin, Wicked, and your songs from Pocahontas, Prince of Egypt, and Hunchback of Notre Dame. We're interested in understanding the ways in which your personal philosophy plays into your different works. To what extent does your music reflect your own values? Also, what is your opinion about writing music that expresses worldviews different from your own? Would you write for a show if you completely disagreed with its message? What is most important for you when determining whether or not to write music for a proposed show? Any information you could give us would be greatly appreciated.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think all writers reflect their values and worldviews in what they write. Certainly I do. While I don't attempt to proselytize or use my work to persuade people of my point of view (a hopeless task, in my opinion), I would not take on a project if I disagreed with its overall message. On the other hand, because I am writing for characters, often an individual song will express something completely the opposite of my own personal opinion, if I feel that's what the character would say and feel. "Mine, Mine, Mine" and "Savages" from POCAHONTAS and "Hellfire" from HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME are obvious examples of this. I have to say, parenthetically, that often those are the most fun lyrics to write. But in terms of the overall point of view of a show or movie, as I say, I would not and never have gotten

involved with a project if I disagreed with its basic philosophy. Thanks for your interest, and I hope your research project turns out well. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Breaking Free

Question:

Mr. Schwartz: It seems that many of your shows contain a message of the need to break free from society's constraints and personal responsibility, such as in "Defying Gravity" from Wicked, Pocahontas having to follow her own path, and others. Also, your song "Dreamscape" seems to express this view: "And the dream is mine to choose." Does this common theme stem from your own beliefs and/or experience? Any other thoughts on this topic?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Well, I do think that one of my themes is having the courage to take one's own path and not capitulate to pressure to conform. This isn't a startlingly unusual theme, of course, but it is a way I like to try to live my life, and I suppose that has seeped into my work. Thanks for the question, Stephen Schwartz

Legacy

Question:

Stephen, as I am sure you are already aware, your works are all amazing and great successes. It is certain that your shows will always be remembered, but I was wondering what you WANT to be remembered for. Is there one theme that you want people to gain from all of your achievements?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I'm not sure I would want to control that, even if I could.

The Impact of Media/Theatre

Question:

I've read that the spirit of the 60's blew through Carnegie Mellon when you were there, as it did through Madison, Wisconsin where I was finishing high school. My lingering idealism inspires me to look at your record of social change messages.

In Working, the migrant worker wants to wake people from their supermarket mentality and consider the source of their food. I assume you directed this piece on the PBS video-It's one of my favorite moments from the show. Then there's the characters of Pippin, Eve, and Cain who all questioned the obvious possibilities for their lives. It seems that your songs for these characters offer inspiration for people needing courage to change circumstances. As you have said before, "Colors of the Wind" expresses the nudge from Pocahontas to John Smith to "raise his consciousness" out of his Eurocentrism. Esmeralda sings of outcasts as the children of God. I suspect everyone involved with Hunchback was hoping this inclusive vision would touch the viewers. So my question is, even beyond the hope of creating successful art, are you and your colleagues consciously interested in positive social impact? Or is this too obvious or unartistic a question? Speaking of helping outcasts, I am reminded of what I've heard you did with Godspell in South Africa. Could you please tell the story of what happened there? I've only read one line about it having the first integrated cast. Please tell us the story. Who wanted to put on the show and what happened??? Thanks for sharing your thoughts. Yours, Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: It's an interesting question. In the first place, I'm not sure the content of one show ever really has much influence on how people think about political issues (though I know from experience

shows certainly can on personal issues.) Beyond that, I'm not a big believer in proselytizing through my work. On the other hand, I think the accumulation of attitudes in shows in various media ultimately can have a huge political impact (consider the positive changes in attitudes towards civil rights issues for African Americans, women, and more recently gay people which I think have been greatly influenced by many shows and movies dealing with issues pertaining to them). So I do have a sense of being responsible in what I write. But the ultimate goal for me is always to deal with issues that concern me personally and to try to explore them both honestly and dramatically, and let whatever social impact it may or may not have take care of itself.

In terms of South Africa, however, that's a different story. This was a case of the circumstances under which a show that had commercial value could be performed. In 1974, I (and co-author John-Michael Tebelak) refused to allow GODSPELL to be performed in South Africa unless it was with an integrated cast AND before an integrated audience. Since there was a demand to see the show, ultimately we were successful in this, and I'm proud to have played a miniscule part in weakening apartheid. But the point is that the content of the show was irrelevant -- it could just have easily been PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. It was merely because people wanted to see it and therefore tickets could be sold, and that the authors took (what I believe was) a principled stand. Thanks as always for your interest and interesting questions. Best, Stephen

Songs for a 'family' show

Question:

Dear Stephen, I'm trying to grasp both Disney's perspective and your perspective on creating family shows where youngsters are among the main audience. Do you remember when you first saw Bambi? I quite remember as a child I was in shock for 3 days as I had never witnessed death for anyone I cared about. As either a child or adult I've never been fond of Disney villains and find the contrast with the positive aspects of a story quite extreme in some cases. While Pocahontas was one of the easiest Disney films for me to relate to, Hunchback's Frollo was pretty despicable. Although your Hellfire song suits the character, when it was coupled with the dark animation, it surprised me. Of course at some point young people need to grow into an understanding of desire and of harsh realities like the occasional linking of desire and violence. Are you of the "let the young people face reality" school or do you feel media makers need to be sensitive? Or is it all up to the parents to help kids connect to harsh realities at the right moment. I'm not judging, just acting as a concerned non-parent/writer interested in the impact of media. And one more thing...

What about Geppetto? From what I've read, this show will have fewer shocking contrasts. The conflict is more in the transformation that the character Geppetto has to experience, rather than in "good versus evil." I'm hoping you will share your experience writing about the various sides of Geppetto's transformation vs. writing about Stromboli and Pleasure Island's snaring enchantments. Thanks a million for taking on this issue, if you're up to it. Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: Interesting question. The fact is that GEPETTO does make use of both Stromboli as a villain (although a comic one) and Pleasure Island as a threat. But the emphasis is certainly on the story of Geppetto's journey and what he learns about parenthood, again albeit in a comic way. I know for animated features the need for a villain was always considered paramount at Disney, because it is such an easy and gettable way to tell a story for kids. However, if you think of it, PRINCE OF EGYPT didn't really have a villain, and maybe that's why it didn't really function as a children's movie. I'm not a big fan of villains in stories myself, at least ones who seem to be self-aware of how evil they are. But my favorite

character to write was Frodo, because he was so totally self-justifying and in such denial of his own true motives. Thanks again; interesting to think about. Best, Stephen

Child-Like Quality

Question:

I was thinking about your work recently, and marveling over the fact that your music has such an innocent, child-like quality, while at the same time being quite complex and dealing with complex issues. Would you say that this is an expression of your own personality in some way? Also, you would have done an excellent job scoring the recently deceased Ted Hughes' "Iron Man" story, which I'm told is headed for an animated feature release next year -- with music by Pete Townshend. Are you familiar with this project?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I guess it's good to be "child-like" as opposed to "childish", though of course I tend to think of myself as cynically sophisticated. (I have often been told by friends that I am the goofiest person they know, so that personality trait may reflect itself in my work.) I also try to reflect the personality of the character I'm writing for, and often of late they have been somewhat child-like, as in Pocahontas or Quasimodo. But I would be interested to know if you find that same child-like quality in, say, the songs from RELUCTANT PILGRIM, which are a much more direct reflection of who I am and how I think of things. In reference to the Pete Townshend animated project you referred to, I'm sorry but I'm not familiar with it. Thanks for writing. Best, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Stephen Schwartz's career is covered in the authorized biography: "Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked"

<http://www.DefyingGravityTheBook.com>

The Schwartz Scene newsletter includes Stephen Schwartz's updates

<http://www.MusicalSchwartz.com/newsletter.htm>

Find clips on the NPR site about Stephen Schwartz's musical influences for WICKED, CHILDREN OF EDEN and his other work

<http://www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfid=1875136>

For a video clip of a Stephen Schwartz being interviewed about his career see

<http://www.ny1.com/content/113779/-i-on-stage---i--stephen-schwartz-remembers-a-broadway-career>

For another commentary about his musical influences visit <http://www.musicalschwartz.com/schwartz-musical-influences.htm>