

## **Stephen Schwartz – Advice and Comments on Creativity Concerns**

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### **Creativity**

Question:

Do you believe creativity works best within a group, individually or does it not matter? Why or why not?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think it can work well both ways. There's something wonderful about the collaborative process, where one person's idea can trigger creative responses from others. Perhaps it's a little easier that way. But obviously most of my work is done by myself as an individual, and it's very exciting when an idea, a tune, or the solution to a problem just appears in your head as if out of the ether.

Question:

I am interested in your opinion of how one would stimulate one's own creativity.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

For me it is a matter of doing a lot of preparation and then getting out of the way of my unconscious mind. If I have a specific assignment, I will do a lot of research, read a lot of related material and just jot down ideas and phrases that strike me. I may look at visual images -- paintings or photographs. Imagine myself as the character and see what words or phrases, rhythms or sounds come to me. Just a lot of things to get my mind in the right place. Then I will let go of all of it consciously, and try to let my unconscious mind go to work. Sometimes I will do things like take a walk, take a shower, go for a drive, or even hit tennis balls or play solitaire, anything to get out of the way of my unconscious. And almost always, the creativity just starts to flow.

Question:

Do you think management of creativity is possible?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Absolutely. I think the job of a professional writer is to learn how to harness his or her creativity in service of deadlines, specific problems to be solved, and deliberate goals. Each individual has to develop his or her own process to be able to be creative on demand.

Question:

Think of a time when you were at your creative best. This can be anything! Please describe this time.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

There have been many times when a song just came to me, when I didn't feel I was forcing anything or trying too hard, but the creation just flowed into me. Usually this has involved significant "pump priming" -- that is, diligent preparation, false starts, thinking and perhaps discussion, making many notes. But then it's a new day and the magical experience of creation occurs. I would mention a few of my songs that seemed to arrive this way -- with a lot of preparation but no apparent work once they started to flow: "For Good" from WICKED, "Meadowlark" from THE BAKER'S WIFE, "West End Avenue"

from THE MAGIC SHOW -- three songs that are among my most popular. Once I started writing them, they seemed to arrive fully formed all at once.

### **Collaborative Creativity**

Question:

Also, when you collaborate with people, whether it be Bernstein, Menken, or others, does it usually happen where there is a mutual sharing in the creative process or does the lyricist or composer have more clout?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I think it depends on the specific collaboration. My collaborations have always been pretty balanced in terms of "power sharing", although in the case of MASS, because it was Lenny's project, he was obviously the last word in all regards. Thanks for your interest, and I hope these responses provide some of the answers you were seeking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

### **Short-Circuiting Creative Process/Writer's Block**

Question:

Dear Stephen: My questions for the week relate to Bernstein creativity stories. The first is about Bernstein himself. Told by your former agent, Shirley Bernstein, about her brother's childhood, it goes like this: When Lenny was 4 years old, he had heard that man was made from dust. He gathered whorls of dust from underneath his bed, placed them in the bathroom sink, and turned on the water to make the whorls congeal. (Unfortunately, he couldn't turn off the faucet. By the time his mother found him he was knee-deep in water.)

This story stands in contrast to the one you told in your ASCAP interview. While at age four Lenny was could be innocently and ambitiously creative, later on not so. You tell of the day you were waiting for him while working together on Mass. You must have been at a piano composing a song for Pippin. Bernstein came in and enviously reflected on how he used to be that free. There was a time when he could "...just sit down at the piano and knock out a tune." He lamented, "Now it's so hard for me to put two notes together: I think, 'Is that worthy of Leonard Bernstein?'" Apparently you were quite glad to learn what to avoid at age 23. You could see the trap. You report saying to yourself, "No matter what, don't let that happen to you."

Here are my questions related to these stories. Obviously you can take your pick and answer whatever strikes your fancy.

1. How has Leonard Bernstein's lesson served you over the years?
2. How do you stay out of traps of comparisons or creative ruts? Do you listen to other composers before you start something new? Do you sometimes intentionally stray from styles you've used before?
3. What do you say to critics who suggest you repeat yourself or don't repeat yourself enough (as in the Godspell/Pippin nostalgia I run into suggesting everything should be like those shows)?
4. What story might your family members tell about your creativity at an early age other than the puppet theatre or first Broadway show stories?
5. Most importantly, as you start on a new project, are you still able to sit at your piano and knock out a tune? Do you feel like a kid standing over the bathroom sink able to create life with dust and water? Are you excited? Any news? Wishing you a joyous fresh start! - Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's interesting you should bring this issue up just as I am starting a new project. What Lenny was really talking about was second-guessing oneself and thus short-circuiting the creative process. This is the thing that it is most necessary and most difficult to avoid. One time some years ago when I was feeling blocked, I was talking about it to my friend, a wonderful songwriter named John Bucchino, and he pointed out to me that I was having trouble because I was being "the editor" before "the writer" had had a chance to churn out material. He was right -- all writers are a combination of the writer who goes on instinct and passion and the editor who judges the work, keeps what is good, and throws out what is not. If the editor gets in there too soon, you can't write. It is a constant challenge, and I find when I write, I must work hard not to pay heed to critics or fans or my own insecurities and just try to get something down from which I can work. I am struggling with just that very thing right now. I know I have succeeded in doing this in the past, so I have to have faith that eventually I will again. But it's never easy. Thanks as always for your interest and for raising such an important issue -- maybe answering this will prove part of the solution. Best, Stephen

### **Creative Process question continued - Perfectionism**

Question:

Dear Stephen: Could we dig into this topic a little more? I totally agree that the inner editor is a force to be reckoned with. Actually, at various stages in the creative process, including midway and towards the end, inner editors have been known to combine with drive and vision to create a problematic form of perfectionism. Since you have drive and vision, I wonder if perfectionism shows up.

Julia Cameron explains in her creativity book, *The Artist's Way*, "The perfectionist fixes one line of a poem over and over-until no lines are right....The perfectionist writes so many versions of scene one that she never gets to the rest of the play." As a songwriter, have you ever wanting to tweak lyrics or music until they're past good enough and back to where they started before the tweaking?

One of Julia's exercises to get out of perfectionism is to ask yourself what you would really enjoy doing if you could accept doing it badly. Several years ago I participated in improvisational theatre classes. When I was willing to make a complete fool of myself and say "yes" to my zanniest, spontaneous responses to theatre games, I felt pretty liberated. It helped teach that judgmental inner voice not to fuss quite so much, either in the beginning or in later phases of the process. (There is always more to learn along these lines and I do appreciate reading your editor/writer discussion).

So who sees Stephen Schwartz at his zanniest moments? What would you love to do if it was fine to do it imperfectly? Have you done improv? What about instead of playing tennis, doing something that's totally new requiring a clumsy phase before getting good at it, like, I don't know, snowboarding? Or sailing (or do you sail already)?

Lastly, what happens when you venture into a new genre of music? Do you feel clumsy at it at first and have to let go of any need to be good at what you do? Does that bring out a wilder side of you? I'm thinking of Children of Eden and your foray into gospel music, in "Ain't it Good," or "world" music in "Generations"? (When I want to a song to match a let-loose, perky mood I put on "Generations" and play it over and over. Thanks so much for going through whatever you did to create Children of Eden!) – Carol

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Carol: For me, it's not really an issue of what I would enjoy doing even "imperfectly", since I tend to do what I enjoy doing anyway. (And I've been lucky enough to be able to get paid for some of it!) You

mentioned tennis, and playing tennis is something I really love to do. The fact that I've gotten better at it only enhances my enjoyment, but it's not as if it was a world to "conquer" and now I feel I want to move on to sailing or hockey or whatever. I still really just love playing tennis -- I enjoy the running around and the feeling of whacking the hell out of the ball, etc. But to get to the more serious issue you raise -- the problem of perfectionism for me is not over-tweaking an existing line or lines (I tend to be a pretty rational judge of when a line is the best I'm going to be able to do with it), but getting something down in the first place that I can then tweak. In other words, it's getting that first draft out that I find hard sometimes and when I must shut up the inner voice that is telling me an idea is stupid or not worth pursuing or whatever. Once I have something to work from I'm in pretty good shape. Other writers seem to have more trouble with re-writing, but for me it's the first draft. I have found the "morning pages" exercise that is described in "The Artist's Way" extremely helpful at breaking the internal log jam sometimes, and I would do it every day except that it gives me terrible writer's cramp! Thanks as always for your interest and your interesting questions. Best, Stephen

### **Getting Stuck**

Question:

What do you do when you get "stuck" writing a musical piece? I have a plethora of musical snippets and vamps that I can't seem to do anything with, except maybe for 5-second commercial ditties.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

When stuck on a song, I usually junk it. This is not to say that all songs don't take work. With many, I hit that "brick wall" moment where I feel I can't go any further, but then discover with time and plugging away I can break through. But if I've really been flailing away for too long, I let it go, because I believe that if something is that difficult, there's something wrong with it in its very conception and you should just start again.

### **Hope for aspiring artists**

Question:

Hello Stephen, Firstly, though I'm sure you've heard it countless times, all of us fans thank you so much for making yourself so accessible. My question is this: At any time while creating any of your wonderful scores and/or lyrics, have you ever lost hope and feared that your project would on the whole be ignored? I am right in the middle of creating my first opera, and just seeing how much creative work is poured into it, I sometimes fear that it won't be embraced by a single person other than myself. Again, thank you, Sincerely, Tyler Hays

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Mr. Hays: I think every writer, particularly when he or she is starting out, experiences the fear that his or her project will fail or, worse yet, be ignored or never even heard or seen. (This feeling often alternates with the over-aggrandized feeling that he or she is writing the greatest masterpiece of all time, and one's mood swings back and forth.) This simply comes with the territory.

But if you're going to be a professional writer, that's one of the things you have to deal with. With experience, one's expectations and fears both get more realistic. But I can't tell you that those feelings ever leave entirely.

The best advice I can give you is to try to stay true to your own taste and vision as you work on your opera, so that at the end of the day, at least YOU like what you've done. I wish you the very best with it. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

## **How do Deepen a Show**

Question:

How do you decide that a pivotal moment is a dialogue and not a song? Like the fight scene/dialogue between Glinda and Elphaba, at the end of act 2? And how do you get a sense of the deeper meaning a show and it's character's has for you? (Beyond "Who is the monster/And who is the man"? to the extent of an abusive father-son relationship) Does it just come to you while you're exploring the story? How do you get the show to a more personal level that you can write about?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

These questions that you raise are good ones. But the truth is that I think it's basically a matter of theatrical instinct. You're closest to it when you ask "does it just come to you while you're exploring the story?" I just trust my instincts about these things -- what feels like a song and what feels like dialogue, and the more I think about and work on a show, the more personal it gets, though my reason for taking on any project in the first place is because I feel a personal connection to the story, theme, and main character. I know these are general answers, but this description I think accurately reflects my process. All best to you, Stephen

## **Do You Keep A Notebook Handy?**

Question:

Hello again. I can just see you bracing yourself as you wonder, "Oh no! Now what's she gonna ask?"

I was thinking about the info in the booklet that came with "The Stephen Schwartz Album", along with the things you've said in your posts here, and it sounds like your songwriting and life are really intertwined. You got inspiration for "Crowded Island" while looking out the window with friends, you scribbled words while you rode in a car, etc. I'm just wondering if you have to keep a notebook handy at all times to make quick notes when inspiration strikes, or if it's usually not that dramatic. And if you usually carry a notebook, have you ever not had it with you when inspiration struck and then later forgotten what struck you?

I'm impressed by how much time you seem to spend when writing for a musical, trying to get into the psyche of the characters and the mood of the time/location of the plot. Do you have to find some way to link what the characters are thinking/feeling with something in your personal life to make it more real for you, or do you just use your imagination? Has getting into the thoughts/feelings of the people in shows helped you to do the same in regular life? Okay, that's all for now. That wasn't so bad, was it? (I hope.) Just things I was pondering while working. (Yes, I was really working too!)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: Actually, I don't carry a notebook around with me. I know many writers do. I depend on my memory, which is probably foolish of me (and sometimes quite distracting, like for instance when I'm trying to remember an idea for a lyric while playing tennis.)

In terms of identification with the characters: absolutely, one must draw from one's own life and inner psyche. It's really just like acting: you try to find the things in you that overlap with the character. This is why actors love playing villains, and writers like me love writing them. You get to go to all sorts of dark and twisted places in yourself, wallow around in them in complete safety for a while, and then come out of them again without doing any harm to anyone. The specifics of the characters I write are of course always based on their external realities -- age, gender, intelligence, culture, etc. -- but the inner life

always comes from me. I think that's what all writers do. Has it helped me in dealing with others? I would say yes, actually, since it makes me constantly aware that there are all sorts of things going on within people that they are not showing. Hope this at least partially answers your questions; thanks as always for asking. Best, Stephen Schwartz

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

See the series of Creativity Notes in *Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked*. These notes include quotes from Stephen Schwartz and others about the creative process including use of the subconscious mind, collaboration, writer's block, following the path of least resistance, and other topics.