

Stephen Schwartz Career – Comments on Fame, Recognition, Influence, Popularity, Reviews. Awards, and Opening Nights

The following questions and answers are from the archive of the StephenSchwartz.com Forum. Copyright by Stephen Schwartz 2010 all rights reserved. No part of this content may be reproduced without prior written consent, including copying material for other websites. Feel free to link to this archive. Send questions to office@stephenschwartz.com

Private Life out of Public

Question:

A few weeks ago, our daughter was talking to us about a Backstreet Boys concert a bunch of her friends had gone to. I started realizing how hard it must be for celebrities to have any kind of private life. I'm sure it's quite different for a songwriter than it is for a group of teen idols, but I imagine you get your share of autograph-seekers and people who want to engage you in conversation about your work or whatever, while you're out running errands or eating in a restaurant or whatever. How do you handle these interruptions in a way that will give you your privacy and still satisfy the intruder, or can you do both?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

One of the best things about being a writer is that no one recognizes you. Or at least, very few people, and certainly no one outside of New York City and Los Angeles. I have it doubly easy because I have such a common name, people tend not to recognize that either. So my anonymity is pretty protected. (Nevertheless, I've learned it's not a good idea for me to be too vocal if I'm at a preview of a show I'm not enjoying.) I will say it's one of the reasons that I'm glad I'm not an actor. (The other is that I'm a terrible actor.) I wouldn't mind looking like Brad Pitt, but I wouldn't want to be him. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Being Recognized in NYC

Question:

Hi Stephen, My new wife and I just returned from NYC on our Honeymoon. We saw Les Miz, Drowsy Chaperone and Spelling Bee...they were all amazing. What is it like being a mover and shaker in the industry? One of the things that amazed us is how after the shows, the actors come out to meet the fans, then just walk home! Can you walk the streets of New York without being mobbed?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I most certainly can and do. However, I have to admit that I do get recognized sometimes in the neighborhood. I have a joke that although Andy Warhol famously predicted that in the future everyone would have fifteen minutes of fame, I actually have fifteen BLOCKS of fame: from 42nd to 57th Streets on the west side of Manhattan. Above or below that, and I'm as anonymous as anywhere else. Glad you enjoyed your trip to Broadway; there are several excellent new shows playing for you and your wife to enjoy next time. Thanks for writing. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Role of Recognition in Creative Life

Dear Stephen: As Academy Award night approaches I'm promoted to ask something I've been wondering. It sounds from your posts like you really love your work and would do it regardless of reward. (So glad to hear how much fun you are having.) I wonder if official recognition provides positive inspiration. In the entertainment field, even being nominated for an award acknowledges a major step in achievement. It says, you're playing with the big boys now, so to speak. (1) Has a high level of

recognition changed your life and career? Opened doors? Is it emotionally uplifting or creatively motivating? When we watch actors,... receiving their awards they look pretty excited. You?

(2) Not meaning to embarrass you, here's my list of your impressive credits. Is this right?

"When You Believe" Oscar for Best Original Song, 1998

"Colors of the Wind," Oscar for Best Original Song, 1995

Pocohontas, Oscar for Best Original Musical or Comedy Score

(a joint award?)

Godspell, 1971, two Grammy Awards

Working, (somewhere around 1988), Drama Desk award for Best Director

(3) I don't remember exactly from last year, but I believe you were not present to receive your Best Song Oscar. Anything to say about that? I'm not looking for issues but how you felt about receiving your second or third Oscar? (3rd if two for Pocohontas). (By the way, I've never thought the statue was especially attractive. Still I wonder what it's like to have it around the house or office.)

Here's the last bit of this question, which I'm asking partly to fathom it in my own life. (4) Are there parts of the whole creative adventure that are more fulfilling than others? Is the public acclaim or positive feedback part more, equally, or less fulfilling than other aspects? For me, having people say nice things about my creative expressions helps motivate me to do more. One-to-one feedback lifts me more than public recognition. But the most exhilarating part in my writing process is the quiet "aha" time at home, and also when I'm finally finished with a piece and say, "O.K. I can stop now. This is as ready for the public." What about for you? Thanks in advance for satisfying my curiosity with even a partial answer. Yours appreciatively, Carol de Giere

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Ms. de Giere: Thanks for raising an interesting issue. I find myself in exact agreement with your own reactions: that one-to-one appreciation of something I've done from a listener, audience member, or in fact, an EMailer, is much more gratifying than public recognition, which I find a little embarrassing. And that the most satisfying moments for me are precisely the ones you describe: of feeling you have achieved your goals with a piece, done the best you can, and it is ready to be given to the "public". I am not a big fan of awards, though as you point out, I have received my share. I can't pretend it is not gratifying to win one, particularly something I have known about all my life such as an Oscar. And I can't pretend that I don't appreciate the difference being an Oscar and Grammy winner makes in people's perceptions of my work and my career. But I guess I feel that in a perfect world, awards for creative achievement that turn into competitions would not exist at all. I think most artists are as ambivalent as I about the whole award thing. This doesn't of course mean that I don't hope to win whenever I'm nominated, but it explains why, for instance, when I had a run-through of a show to attend at the same time as last year's Oscars, I felt it was more important to be at the show, or why I am missing tonight's Grammy Awards ceremony because I am on my way to San Francisco to do a concert. In other words, I feel my work in the present is more important than receiving an award (or not) for past work. Thanks for giving me a chance to discuss my views on this extremely visible aspect of our business. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Influence

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, I have chosen to write about you as a Lightbringer for my 6th grade project. I love your music from your musicals. Last year I had the chance to be both a lion and young Abel in the Children Of Eden. For my birthday this year I am hope to see Wicked on Broadway! I have both soundtracks.

Could you answer some questions for me? Who do you feel you have inspired, and how? How can I acquire a picture of you to show my classmates who I feel is a very important Lightbringer in today's society? My report is due on January 13th, 2005. I am looking forward to your reply! - A fan, Joe

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks, Joe. I'm flattered you have selected me as a Lightbringer. In answer to your question, however, I would be hard pressed to say for sure whom I may have inspired. I hope I have inspired my children to "follow their bliss" and pursue the goals about which they are most passionate. I have been told by individuals that a particular song of mine has helped them get through tough times, most recently "Defying Gravity" and "For Good". And a couple of people have communicated with me that they have been inspired by my sheer perseverance, which is perhaps the thing I'm most proud of. But I never set out to inspire anyone but myself, and I think others have to speak for themselves about their sources of inspiration. I would never be presumptuous enough to assume I have definitely inspired anyone. Sorry not to be able to be more specific for you, and I hope my lack of response doesn't impede your project. I wish you the best with it and a happy new year, Stephen

Professional jealousy

Question:

Dear Mr. Schwartz,

Have you ever suffered from professional jealousy? If so, how do you deal with it? I'm a 44 year old former professional writer and cartoonist, who now works as a cleaning woman and bookstore clerk to pay the bills. A "friend" (your song "Toxic People" kind of friend), felt the need to inform me that a young girl I once knew, who's 22 years younger than I and in college, has had several plays produced, recently celebrated the opening of another, and may have one produced at the Kennedy Center.

Half of me wishes her all the success in the world. Half of me is gnawing at my liver with jealousy. I can't afford to feel bitter and green-eyed right now, because I have a project I love that I'm trying to finish. If you, or any forum reader, has advice on how to overcome such ridiculous feelings, I'd greatly appreciate it! Thanks, Moira in Mpls

Dear Moira: The thing about professional jealousy is that, either the person you are jealous of is genuinely talented, in which case they deserve their success, or they're not, in which case it is simply an irritating circumstance over which you have no control. Either way, of course, the jealousy does you no good. Consequently, I think subscribing to the motto "Never compete, never compare" is the best policy (except I suppose in professional sports.) This is one of those things that is, as they say, easy to say and hard to do, but I have found over the years that the above motto actually helps me. Hope it does for you as well. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Reply:

I appreciate your reply, and the motto. Moira

Openings

Question:

Hi Stephen, Do you watch a show of yours on opening night? A video on the making of "Miss Saigon" showed the director on opening night, nervously waiting outside as the cast performed. Also, I was lucky enough to be in the cast of "Pacific Overtures" for TheatreWorks and the director, Robert Kelley, didn't like to watch opening night...or any night really...after previews were done. Do you feel a show is "out of your hands" at that point and I guess...there's no need to see the show? Is it some sort of tradition that the creators have...that watching opening night is taboo? Thanks. Kevin

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

The truth is, as many people know, I never go to openings of my own shows in New York. Hence, I was in Vermont when WICKED opened on Broadway (but I did hear it was a cool evening for those who attended.) I did go to the LA opening of WICKED, since it wasn't fraught with the same kind of pressure. I had a great time, but the truth is the only famous thing I saw was Diane Keaton's hat, which was pointed out to me across a room. Presumably, Ms. Keaton was under it, but I never did see her. So much for glamour, huh? Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Sorry if this is a touchy subject – Tony Award

Question:

Mr. Schwartz, you've enjoyed tremendous success in your career. But if you don't mind me asking... how do you feel about not having a Tony Award? Do you care? Was losing to a show with puppets having sexual intercourse hard? Did you feel like Wicked was going to be the one? I'm deeply sorry if you don't like talking about this.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

It's not a touchy subject at all. I have to say first of all that, despite having won my share of awards, I don't actually set much stock in them. My observations over the years have shown me that very often the people who deserve to win don't and vice-versa, and the people who do win often win for the wrong project (e.g. Russell Crowe winning the best actor Oscar for GLADIATOR rather than THE INSIDER, and that sort of thing.) I also know how corrupt the nominating and voting procedures are for some of the awards (though not, lest I be misunderstood, for the Oscars, which I think actually have the fairest nominating and voting procedures of the major awards.) The Tony Awards are among the most corrupt, and I say this as a Tony voter. Nevertheless, was I disappointed not to win? Sure. It would have been nice to have a Tony, and now I don't suppose I ever will. Did I honestly think the score for WICKED deserved to win? To be honest, yes. Nonetheless, I am a fan of AVENUE Q, both the show and its clever songs (I was also a fan of the score for CAROLINE, OR CHANGE that year.) So that's my honest answer. In the end, one can't really worry too much about awards, or as I call them, "hardware". I have been extremely lucky in my life to be able to make a living doing the thing I am most passionate about and to have been able with my work to reach so many people, such as yourself. Thanks for your interest (and for your sensitivity in the way you asked.) Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Unsung 'heroes'

Question:

Hi Stephen, Just wanted to congratulate you on such a great body of work. I just wanted to ask, does it rile you sometimes that certain songs receive greater acclaim than others? My case in point is on Prince of Egypt. 'Miracles' is a great song, and rightfully garnered all the awards & nominations, and obviously the fact that Whitney & Mariah sang it helped. But I think 'Deliver Us' absolutely blows it out the park, and yet I think I'm correct in saying no awards in sight. 'Deliver Us' is a truly stupendous song!!!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Thanks. I appreciate your enthusiasm for "Deliver Us". I never worry too much about what songs get awards or become popular and which ones don't. The "awarded" songs tend to be the most general in content or most immediately accessible, and that's just the nature of the game. Obviously, I do the best I can with every song, and I have my own personal favorites or ones I am particularly proud of, which don't necessarily coincide with the list of "most popular". Thanks for taking the time to write, Stephen Schwartz

Schwartz On Your Radio: How Does It Feel?

Question:

During the course of your career, you've enjoyed -- besides theatrical success and "Disney"/"DreamWorks" screen success -- a number of radio hits (e.g., "Day By Day," "Colors Of The Wind," "When You Believe.") It's always refreshing to hear a Schwartz song on the radio. I was wondering ... is there any special feeling that you get when you hear a tune of yours over the airwaves, and how do other songwriters feel, do you think? When you go to see a musical of yours, for instance, you know that you're going to experience such-and-such from, say, 8 PM - 10:30 PM. When a creator goes to see his or her movie, he or she knows exactly what they're in for ... and when. But the radio, obviously, is entirely different. So ... does it feel any different? And how did you feel when you heard your first "radio" song on the radio? Finally, are you a fan of that medium? I'm a giant fan of both theater and pop (I have a feeling that most Schwartz fans feel this way) and am quite interested to hear what you have to say about a medium that is undiscussed as of yet on this bulletin board!

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have still not gotten over the little thrill of pleasure I feel every time I hear one of my songs on the radio. There, I admit it. There is something about walking into a restaurant or supermarket or wherever and suddenly hearing one of my songs being played that gets me every time. I also get that feeling at a restaurant or club where there is a piano bar and the pianist plays one of my songs. I remember back when "Day by Day" was released as a single, going to the beach and hearing it coming from the radio of the person on the towel next to me; it was an incredible feeling. It has something to do with the unexpectedness of it, as you suggest. I can't say that the "radio" versions of my songs have always been my favorites, but the thrill of hearing one of them come out of those little tinny speakers transcends that every time. Interesting question; thanks for asking. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

Show Reviews

Question:

Our cast had two different reviews of the same performance of our show, and it got me wondering about reviews and how we as performers should take them. The first review was the one that Gail posted here on this forum, which made us all feel proud of the work we'd done. The other review was in a little newspaper that's apparently left around town in public places and is free for the taking. I guess our director had asked the reviewer of this little paper to come see the show and review it. The reviewer told what COE was basically about, and then said our lackluster singing and dancing and acting made it more like a show for a high school or church group. We're not professionals by any stretch of the imagination, but I was shocked at the difference in opinion between the reviewer for the paper and Gail's post. So how seriously do the rest of you guys take reviews? Aren't they supposed to be objective looks at a show, or can reviewers write from their subjective viewpoint? Obviously, Gail's came from her heart, and meant a lot to all of the cast; but I wonder about our other reviewer's objectivity, and whether he/she even watched the show critically. It was said that our snake tap danced, which was absolutely not the case!, so I wonder if the reviewer didn't want to be there in the first place, and just threw something together. So what do you guys do when reading a review of your show? Do you read

them? Do you take them seriously when what they say differs with what you think your performance was? How much do they help or hurt a show? Just my ramblings as I see how two different people can see an entirely different show even at the same performance. And Gail, thanks again for taking the time to write so positively about us. You'll never know how deeply your post touched a cast who might otherwise have been discouraged by the other review.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I never read reviews, for the very reasons you describe. The only time I make an exception is when I am working on a new production of a show that is still a work-in-progress. Then I will get ALL the reviews of the previous production and read them in one sitting as a whole -- that way, the individual differences tend to cancel out and I can get a fairly objective picture of what's working and what's not in the particular show and what issues my co-writers and I need to address. I did that, for instance, with all the London reviews of CHILDREN OF EDEN before John and I began our rewrites for the first American production, and it was very helpful. But the point is, each review is simply the individual opinion of a single person, influenced by their personality, prejudices, personal agendas, knowledge and ignorance. This is why the power given by the New York theatre community to whomever the critic is for the New York Times has such a pernicious effect on the quality of theatre in New York. Most reviewers are journalists who know nothing about the theatre and less about music -- they've simply been given the gig and moved from some other unrelated department. It would be like me writing reviews of architecture -- I can say what I like or don't like about a building, but I really don't know anything about it and am completely unqualified. I find good reviews almost as destructive as bad reviews, because the seduction is so powerful to believe what they're saying -- and of course, once you give power to anyone else's opinion about your work, you're in trouble. So as I say, I have an unbreakable policy not to read them at all, except for the specific circumstance I mentioned. Thanks, as always, for an interesting question that allows me to sound off. All the best, Stephen

Objectivity An Admirable Trait

Question:

Hi, Stephen. I was digging around in the archives tonight, rereading past posts, and I was struck by your amazing ability to look objectively at your work, to see things you think are flaws in your past work without beating on yourself for them or being afraid to move forward into something new; the ability to decide for yourself whether your work is good or bad, regardless of what reviewers say, etc. I'm wondering if you see these characteristics as something that's just part of your makeup, or whether these are skills you've had to learn because of the nature of your work and always being in the public eye. Whatever your answer, I think they're great qualities. Of course, knowing you, you'll decide for yourself whether or not they're good, and not be swayed by my opinion. :) Looking forward to your comments.

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Admirable or not, I think objectivity about one's work is a necessary trait for writers (or artists of any kind). I think there's no question that it gets easier and stronger as one gets older, but it is something that has always been important to me and that I have always striven for. And I assure you it's much easier not to judge one's work by reviews if you don't read them. Best, Stephen Schwartz

Living Up To Past Accomplishments

Question:

Hi, Stephen. Got another question for ya. With all your awards and accomplishments, do you ever hear little voices in your head, when undertaking a new project, that say things like, "Stephen, what will

happen if you don't write something that receives the acclaim and enthusiasm of such-and-such a song/work? You have a reputation to live up to! What will people think if you fail?", etc.? Being human, I imagine you have times where you have to do battle with these kinds of thoughts, as we all do. And I can't think of anything that would be as destructive to creativity as the fear of failure. So how do you silence these kinds of thoughts/pressures, if you have them, so that you'll be free to do the most creative work you can?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Actually, I never worry about trying to compete with past accomplishments. To the contrary, I always see the work as flawed and hope to do better next time. Far from being intimidated, I tend to feel goaded to try to improve. This may sound disingenuous, but I assure you, it's true. I've never done anything I thought was so perfect I was worried about living up to it. I guess this is one neurosis I'm grateful to have. Best, Stephen

How Critics Can Actually be Helpful

Question missing

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have long made it a policy not to read reviews, positive or negative, once a show is finished and open. But somewhat to my own surprise, I have found a way that critics can be very useful, which is when a work is still "in progress". For instance, when John Caird and I were going back to work on *Children of Eden*, I read all the reviews (some 40 of them) we had gotten when the show was presented in London. And when Winnie Holzman and I were revising *Wicked* between its San Francisco tryout and the beginning of rehearsals for Broadway, I did the same thing. I read them all in one sitting, with no regard to who had written them, whether I had heard of the critic, whether or not he or she was from a major paper, etc. I just read them all, as objectively and dispassionately as I could manage. What I found was that a kind of bell curve emerged -- I could discard the individual idiosyncratic comments and look for basic themes. What weren't they getting? What were we failing to make clear or communicate? Where had our storytelling been murky or our character development proven misleading? Almost always, the specific comments of the critics were useless and showed a basic misunderstanding of how shows are structured, but the aggregate consensus was enormously revealing. I truly believe that reading all those reviews significantly contributed to the ultimate success of both shows. If you can stand to do it, I recommend it. And I continue strongly to recommend never reading reviews of finished work. Stephen Schwartz

Friends Who Don't Share Passion for Theatre

Question:

Hi, Stephen. Here's a question for you, and for anyone else who wants to comment: I've been thinking a lot about my disappointment that there were some people with whom I would have loved to have shared our performance of *COE*, and who chose not to come, for whatever reason. I've noticed that most of those who did come were very close friends who knew how important *COE* was (is!) in our lives. So I started wondering how friendships and our artistic expressions/creations related to each other. Stephen, since I would imagine your work comes from a deeper part of yourself than the work most of us do for a living, do you find that your friendships are closer with those who love your music? Is it even possible to have a close friendship with someone who had the attitude of "Well, Stephen, I'm glad you enjoy your work, but your music isn't for me"? (Can there be such a person???) And for those of us who sing or act or whatever, how much value do/should our friends place on what we do? If our singing/acting/performance comes from the very depths of our being, are they rejecting us by rejecting what we do? Or can they reject the artistic expression of who we are while not rejecting who we are?

The arts come from such a deep part of a person that it's sometimes hard to see whperson that it's often hard to separate one from the other. So how closely do you see your creative work as being who you are, and therefore how seriously do you take others' acceptance or rejection of it? This is something Dan and I were kicking around at the dinner table tonight, and I thought it might be interesting to hear the perspective of someone who does such work for a living, as well as the views of others who love to perform it. I hope this makes sense; I temporarily lost my place while typing, and my screen reader wasn't being much help. Oh well, the post will be good for a chuckle even if it doesn't make sense. :)

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

Dear Peggy: An interesting question. I think I have a rather idiosyncratic attitude towards this issue. I actually don't particularly care whether or not my friends see my work, and in some semi-neurotic way, I'm a little relieved if they don't, because it relieves them of the burden of having to respond to it and me of having to listen to them respond. What I write is very personal to me, and then I put it out there into the world as, I suppose, a kind of gift. And as with any gift, it's about the giving, not what I receive back from it. (I've always found giving easier than receiving anyway.) I do have a couple of writer friends with whom I share my work (and they theirs with me), but those are a couple of very specific relationships. As I said, I know this is not the most common way to look at this, but it's the way I feel and I thought I should be honest in my response to you. Thanks as always for raising an interesting issue.
Best, Stephen

Shows performed

Question:

How does it feel to a writer, when their work becomes available to every high school and community house for production?

Answer from Stephen Schwartz:

I have had the happy opportunity to see school productions of several of my shows, including GODSPELL, PIPPIN, WORKING, and CHILDREN OF EDEN, and it is always an exhilarating experience, as you have imagined, because of the dedication and emotional commitment of the kids performing the shows. I thank you for your interest and for having taken the time to write. Sincerely, Stephen Schwartz

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For a list of Stephen Schwartz's awards see

<http://www.stephenschwartz.com/bio/list-of-awards/>

For more about his feelings on the ups and downs of a career, see the authorized biography *Defying Gravity: The Creative Career of Stephen Schwartz, from Godspell to Wicked*. The book also includes specific details about the influence of reviews and when they are helpful or hurtful.