A MUSICAL THEATER BREAKTHROUGH

Frank Rich ⋮⋮ 10/21/1984

Frank Rich is the chief drama critic of The New York Times. ACCORDING TO BROADway lore, the impresario Mike Todd walked out of a New Haven tryout performance of the first Richard Rodgers- Oscar Hammerstein 2d musical, pronouncing its doom: ''No legs, no jokes, no chance!'' The year was 1943, the show was ''Away We Go!'' A few weeks later, under the new title of ''Oklahoma!,'' Rodgers and Hammerstein's self-styled ''musical play'' arrived in New York and changed the course of American musical theater.

''Oklahoma!'' indeed had no legs - in the form of a chorus-girl kickline - and precious few jokes. But it had beautiful songs and Agnes de Mille ballets, all tightly integrated into a moody, bittersweet libretto that took little time out for the formulaic, vaudeville-and- operetta-spawned trivialities that marked most Broadway musical comedies of its time. Building on innovations previously introduced by Hammerstein and Rodgers with other collaborators - notably, in the Hammerstein-Jerome Kern ''Showboat'' (1927) and the Rodgers-Lorenz Hart-John O'Hara ''Pal Joey'' (1940) - ''Oklahoma!'' ushered in the era of the ''serious'' musical.

The old-fashioned musical comedy would never go away, of course. Just as ''Oklahoma!'' shared its debut season with Cole Porter's ''Something for the Boys,'' so ''Oklahoma!'' descendants like ''West Side Story'' and ''A Chorus Line'' would later coexist with ''The Music Man'' and ''Annie.'' But there was no turning back once ''Oklahoma!'' had paved the way, commercially and artistically, for an American theatrical form in which script, song and dance merged to create drama as well as escapist, fairy-tale entertainment. A revolution had begun - albeit a slow one. Broadway musicals are created in the rough-and-tumble world of big-money show business; experimentation is tempered by the perilous realities of the mass-entertainment marketplace.

Of all the artists who have tried to transform the Broadway musical since ''Oklahoma!,'' no one has been more persistent than the composer and lyricist Stephen Sondheim. Though working in a theatrical form that has usually straddled pop and middlebrow culture, Sondheim is as adventurous and as accomplished an author, playwrights included, as Broadway has produced over the last two decades. And this year, with ''Sunday in the Park With George,'' Sondheim has won his largest victory yet in his struggle to expand the Broadway musical theater to the size of his own artistic ambitions. ''Sunday'' - with a libretto by its director, James Lapine - may not be the most enjoyable or seamless show in the Sondheim canon. But like some other idiosyncratic musicals that faced mixed receptions initially - ''Porgy and Bess,'' ''Pal Joey,'' ''Candide'' - it is likely to leave a lasting imprint on the form.

Unlike those other shows, ''Sunday'' has, at least for now, found a sizable following; in spite of a divided press, it has played to full houses since opening last May. All things considered, this is an amazement. Who would have guessed that Sondheim would find what may prove his largest audience to date for his most daring musical? Here is a Broadway musical that not only lacks legs but dancing. Lapine's libretto is stronger on theme than on narrative or characters; Sondheim's score contains few numbers that fit

traditional Broadway definitions of the term "song"; its second act opens with the company frozen in a silent tableau, held so long that it might give Pinter pause; the pit band contains only 11 musicians, and the instrumentation sets one to thinking of Ravel and Poulenc rather than the traditionally brassy, jazzy or schmaltzy Broadway sound.

As befits a show whose subject is the creation of a landmark in modernist painting - Georges Seurat's "Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" (1886) - "Sunday" is itself a modernist creation, perhaps the first truly modernist work of musical theater that Broadway has produced. Instead of mimicking reality through a conventional, naturalistic story, the authors of "Sunday" deploy music and language in nonlinear patterns that, like Seurat's tiny brushstrokes, become meaningful only when refracted through a contemplative observer's mind. As the art critic Meyer Schapiro explained, Seurat let "solid masses emerge from an endless scattering of fine points" - the points being strokes of basic colors that seem abstract when viewed at the painting's surface but that converge into shimmering images of infinite chromatic variation when viewed from a distance. The Sondheim- Lapine colors are notes and words, often arranged with the same formal rigor as Seurat's pigments, that have an accretional esthetic, emotional and thematic effect.

But "Sunday" is almost as unusual for what it is not as for what it is. It breaks with the history of the serious Broadway musical, much as Seurat broke with the history of art. It even breaks with the history of Sondheim's musicals - which have long been considered among the theater's most innovative. In a season when two Broadway musicals, "Porgy and Bess" and Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd," are receiving the ultimate high-culture imprimatur of entering the opera repertory - at the Metropolitan Opera and New York City Opera, respectively - Sondheim and Lapine have rewritten the rules by creating a musical which is as far removed from opera as it is from "42d Street." "Sunday" is a watershed event that demands nothing less than a retrospective, even revisionist, look at the development of both the serious Broadway musical and of Sondheim's groundbreaking career.

Those two histories have been intertwined for four decades. Beginning in his preteen years - even as "Oklahoma!" was in its planning stages - Sondheim became a surrogate son and protege to Oscar Hammerstein II. It was Hammerstein who instructed the young man in the craft of writing for the musical stage, bequeathing him the breakthroughs of "Showboat" and "Oklahoma!" Once Sondheim's professional career began in the 1950's, he collaborated on shows with many other innovators in the musical theater - among them, Rodgers, George Abbott, Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Harold Prince and Michael Bennett. Judging from "Sunday," one might say that Sondheim lived through the entire history of the modern Broadway musical to reach the point where he could create "something of my own," as his latest hero George puts it. And so, "Sunday" is at once a culmination of past musical-theater innovations and a rejection of them. T HE SERIOUS MUSICALS that precede "Sunday in the Park" have come in several distinct forms - the musical play, in which libretto and score carry equal weight; the operatic musical, and the dance musical - and Sondheim has been associated with them all. The musical play was pioneered by Hammerstein. Before "Showboat" and "Oklahoma!," musical numbers either didn't advance a script or advanced one that was at best jazz-age fluff. "Showboat," an adaptation of Edna Ferber's novel, dealt with unhappy marriages and miscegenation; "Oklahoma!," from Lynn Riggs's play "Green Grow the Lilacs," had a sexually threatening villain. In form, "Oklahoma!" went beyond its predecessor by accentuating songs in which the characters directly expressed their

motivations and feelings; its ballets were not thrown in for divertissement but, like the score, either advanced the story or explored a character's psyche.

Musical plays, frequently adapted from sturdy plays and novels, reached their peak in the 1950's with shows such as Frank Loesser's ''Guys and Dolls'' (adapted from Damon Runyon) and the Alan Jay Lerner- Frederick Loewe ''My Fair Lady'' (adapted from Shaw). Just how important a libretto's architecture became to the musical can be seen by how few predecessors of ''Showboat'' and ''Oklahoma!'' can hold the stage today - even when they contain a larger quotient of standard songs than the fluffy, libretto-poor musical comedies of the same period. Of all the Gershwin musicals, only ''Porgy and Bess'' is stageable now on its own terms instead of as a nostalgic, if not camp, artifact. Time has also eroded all Rodgers and Hart musicals, except those based on Shakespeare (''The Boys from Syracuse'') or on O'Hara (''Pal Joey''), all Cole Porter musicals except his Shakespeare adaptation (''Kiss Me, Kate'') and all Irving Berlin musicals except ''Annie Get Your Gun'' (which was produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein).

Yet even as the musical play ruled among Broadway's serious musicals, and helped streamline the shape of less-ambitious musical comedies, composers and choreographers were trying to stretch the musical away from the book and toward its other components - score and dance.

The operatic musicals - not to be confused with actual operas that were booked into Broadway theaters (such as Virgil Thomson's ''Four Saints in Three Acts,'' Marc Blitzstein's ''Regina'' or Gian Carlo Menotti's ''The Consul'') - are few, because few composers working within the Broadway system had either the musicianship or ambition to attempt them. Still, there are some important operatic musicals; some, such as ''Porgy and Bess'' and ''Sweeney Todd,'' have entered opera company repertories (to hot debate, in some cases). Operatic musicals have often resulted when serious composers decided to meet Broadway's showbiz demands halfway - as typified by Kurt Weill's ''Street Scene,'' Blitzstein's ''The Cradle Will Rock'' and Bernstein's ''Candide.'' Aside from Sondheim and Gershwin, the only notable Broadway-bred composer to attempt an operatic musical was Frank Loesser, in ''The Most Happy Fella.''

Dance musicals, meanwhile, grew out of de Mille's advances in ''Oklahoma!'' Though George Balanchine had staged the first ballet that served a musical's plot - ''Slaughter on Tenth Avenue'' for Rodgers and Hart's ''On Your Toes'' in 1936 - it was de Mille's Freudian dream ballet for Rodgers and Hammerstein that integrated dance into the emotional fabric of a musical's story. De Mille soon became one of the first choreographers to stage an entire Broadway musical - the third Rodgers and Hammerstein show, ''Allegro'' in 1947 (on which the teen-ager Sondheim served as a production assistant).

Ten years later, the dance musical's ascendancy began in earnest - with Sondheim's first Broadway show, ''West Side Story,'' for which he wrote the lyrics. To Arthur Laurents's adaptation of ''Romeo and Juliet'' and Bernstein's alternately Broadway (''Cool'') and operatic (the ''Tonight'' quintet) score, the director-choreographer Jerome Robbins added not only dances but danced sequences: The whole show seemed choreographed.

In spite of Sondheim's important excursions into the operatic musical (''Sweeney Todd''), the musical play (''A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum,'' 1962) and operetta (''A Little Night Music,'' 1973), he made his reputation with the dance musical. After ''West Side Story,'' he wrote the lyrics to Jule Styne's score and Laurents's book for the next Robbins production and perhaps, to this day, the most

perfectly achieved dance musical - "Gypsy" (1959). In 1964, Sondheim contributed a score to another, experimental dance musical, choreographed by Herbert Ross - the unsuccessful "Anyone Can Whistle."

It was also in 1964 that Robbins staged what has thus far proved to be his last Broadway show, "Fiddler on the Roof." In the two decades since "Fiddler" and Gower Champion's equally triumphant (if less hefty) dance musical of the same year, "Hello, Dolly!," the dance musical has been furthered by only two men, the director Harold Prince and the choreographer Michael Bennett. Their theatrical careers reached a creative peak, as Robbins's had, when they intersected with Sondheim's. In back-to-back musicals, "Company" (1970) and "Follies" (1971), Prince, Bennett and Sondheim gave new twists to the Robbins dance- musical tradition.

In a departure from both the Rodgers-Hammerstein and Robbins musicals, "Company" was a largely plotless show in a Brechtian format: It was a series of vignettes on the theme of marriage, and the songs often commented on the action instead of advancing a story. "Follies" took the danced dream sequences pioneered in "Oklahoma!" to their surrealistic apotheosis: A group of neurotic, retired Ziegfeld chorus girls hold a reunion in their old, soon-to-be-demolished theater and bury their pasts after a lengthy Fellini-esque flashback transports them back to the fabled showbiz glory days of their youth.

"Follies" was at once the seminal Sondheim-Prince musical and a dead end. The show's climactic phatasmagoric flashback sequence was a rite of exorcism. Sondheim filled it with songs in the style of old-time musical comedy numbers by Kern and Hammerstein, and others; then, at the sequence's conclusion, he blended them all together in a nightmarish aural-visual spectacle of dissonance and chaos. Both in form and substance, "Follies" seemed to be saying that the musical theater's old traditions were as unsalvageable as the gutted, ghostly theater in which "Follies" was set. But, having made this statement, neither Sondheim, Bennett nor Prince seemed to know how to move beyond those traditions.

The dance musical could not be further advanced under the Prince-Sondheim auspices - and for a simple reason: There was no longer the essential collaborator needed for the task, a first-class choreographer. After "Follies," Michael Bennett parted with Prince to go out on his own (with "A Chorus Line," which further refined staging techniques from "Follies"). Robbins was not about to leave his ballet career to return to Broadway, and neither, needless to say, were the only other master choreographers who had passed through the musical theater, Balanchine and de Mille.

Though Prince hired choreographers for his subsequent Sondheim musicals, they were neither major talents nor major factors in the productions. And even if Bennett had stayed with Sondheim and Prince - or had been succeeded by such roughly comparable (if less visionary) talents as Bob Fosse, Tommy Tune or Gower Champion - it is far from clear if any of these choreographers could have staged musicals that required a dance vocabulary beyond that of show business. While Robbins, de Mille and Balanchine were classically trained dance makers, their successors as Broadway director-choreographers were graduates, however brilliant, of the musical-comedy chorus line. If Robbins could choreograph vintage showbiz routines for "Gypsy," street-gang warfare for "West Side Story" and shtetl folk rituals for "Fiddler," his descendants have thus far only mastered the "Gypsy" portion of this spectrum. The last Bennett, Champion, Tune and Fosse musicals have been "Dreamgirls," "42d Street," "My One and Only" and "Dancin' " - all either set in showbiz milieus or staged in a showbiz vernacular.

Having grand ambitions for the musical theater but no choreographer to further the dance musical line, Prince and Sondheim then turned to their operatic shows - the rehabilitating 1973 revival of "Candide" (for which Sondheim wrote some new lyrics), "Night Music" and "Sweeney Todd." But "Sweeney" was sandwiched between two strange, anomalous musicals, "Pacific Overtures" and "Merrily We Roll Along." Both were neither dance nor operatic musicals but musical plays that retreated, in their fashion, to the Hammerstein tradition. In retrospect, these two neo- Hammerstein musicals, both failures, can be seen as essential way stations to "Sunday in the Park With George." B

Unsurprisingly, Sondheim and Prince didn't seem comfortable with the musical play form in "Pacific Overtures." Aspiring to create a Rodgers- Hammerstein musical that in no way resembled a Rodgers-Hammerstein musical, they and the librettist John Weidman fractured the book's narrative to the point of confusing the audience. And as they floundered in dramatic limbo, they seemed to be scrambling for subject matter. How many times could they tell an audience that, to paraphrase a paradigmatic "Night Music" lyric, every day is a little death? In "Pacific Overtures" and then "Sweeney Todd," they turned to political themes - cultural imperialism, class warfare - but dramatized them with pessimistic variations on Rodgers and Hammerstein's old liberal bromides.

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There was passion in Sondheim's music, but it was inaccessible to some, for it seemed to spring from a source other than his identification with the oppressed proletariats of 19th-century Japan and England. In none of these musicals, however, did his invention ever flag. His scores were imaginatively tailored to the needs of the dramatic material, and, unlike Rodgers and Hammerstein, he made no concessions to Broadway taste. As Rodgers had not done in "The King and I," Sondheim embodied the theme of "Pacific Overtures" in his score by rigorously merging American and Oriental music (however unsettling the sound to Broadway ears). What is not clear is whether the books of "Pacific Overtures" or "Sweeney Todd" (by Hugh Wheeler) merited Sondheim's profligate expenditure of talent. One could argue that these scores sound better on their original cast albums, out of context, than when heard on stage in the shows that contained them.

Sondheim also found that no matter what he did, he was a target for attacks from all sides. A committed theater man, he never, not even in "Sweeney Todd," took the full plunge into opera, nor would he give in to the conservative idea of show music. He was also outside the pop-music fold. With the rise of rock, songwriters roughly comparable to Sondheim in ambition (such as Laura Nyro or Paul Simon) worked in the pop-music arena, not the theater, and took their sympathetic listeners with them.

Sondheim, dismissed by serious music audiences, reviled by conservative Broadway theater audiences for failing to write "hummable" songs, and unknown to most hip young audiences, inevitably became a cult figure. Of his five musicals during the 1970's, only one, "A Little Night Music," produced an old-fashioned Broadway standard - "Send in the Clowns" - and, perhaps inevitably, "Night Music" had the largest critical and most widespread popular success of the group. Most of the time, Sondheim was praised for the brilliance of his lyrics and decried for the coldness of his music. It was actually the Prince-Sondheim shows, not the music, that had become cold - they increasingly seemed to be willed into existence rather than deeply felt.

It took the fiasco of the 1981 "Merrily We Roll Along" to jolt Sondheim into "Sunday in the Park." The analogous Rodgers-Hammerstein project to "Merrily" is "Allegro," also a failure. Told in "Our Town" style with a contemporary Greek chorus, "Allegro" was about the first 35 years in the life of a doctor who is poisoned by big-city success and then redeems himself by returning to the simple values of small- town life. "Merrily" was about a successful Broadway songwriting team that is also spoiled by success - and it, too, was told with an arty, modernized Greek chorus. But, once again, Sondheim's show reversed the tone of the Rodgers-Hammerstein precursor. "Merrily" unfolded in reverse chronology, as did the George S. Kaufman- Moss Hart play that was its source, and ended not with redemption but with de

feat. The good values that the characters trade away for success are imprisoned in the past at the musical's conclusion, never to be retrieved.

Miscast, sloppily written and hideously designed, the production's vulgarity mitigated the feeling of the music. The ugly set, confused narrative transitions and summer-stock choreography demonstrated that even the once-slick craftsmanship of the Sondheim- Prince musicals had collapsed. Given the sophisticated conceits of the score, "Merrily" has developed a following on the basis of its posthumously released cast album. But on Broadway, it came across as an overfed exercise in self- pity: Sweeney Todd's anger at the English class system was now replaced by the anger of a successful showbiz artist who has to suffer money, fools and celebrity as if they were Job- like curses.

"Merrily" also cast a harsh light on the Sondheim-Prince artistic partnership - by ruthlessly exposing how their previous innovations in format and tone had hardened into cliches as rigid as those the two men had once fought. The disillusionment of the showpeople in "Follies" now devolved into contempt for both Broadway and its audience; the Prince-Sondheim musical's signature traits (the interweaving of present and past, the use of choral commentary, the cynical view of all male-female pairings) became as calcified and mechanical as Rodgers and Hammerstein's once-ingenuous optimism had become by the time they wrote their carmelized final shows, "Flower Drum Song" and "The Sound of Music."

Even the pastiche musical gags had an unpleasant edge. In one "Merrily" song, "Opening Doors," the songwriter- hero is chastened by a vulgar producer for not writing a commercial score for a Broadway musical. Echoing many criticisms Sondheim has suffered over the years, the producer sings to the hero: "There's not a tune you can hum . . . /Why can't you throw 'em a crumb?/ What's wrong with letting 'em tap their toes a bit?/ I'll let you know when Stravinsky has a hit - Give me some melody!"

The lyric recalls that of a Rodgers-and-Hammerstein song for their backstage musical "Me and Juliet" in 1953. In that song, "Intermission Talk," an audience at a Broadway musical criticizes Rodgers and Hammerstein's innovations much as the producer in "Merrily" knocks Sondheim's: "They don't write music any more/ Like the old Vienna valses! The guy today who writes a score/ Doesn't know what schmalz is."

But "Intermission Talk" is good-natured. In Sondheim's "Opening Doors," the vulgar producer hums his idea of a good Broadway show tune - and it turns out to be Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Some Enchanted Evening." One felt that Sondheim was mocking his mentor, even as "Merrily" itself was a decadent descendant of a Rodgers-Hammerstein show.

"Merrily We Roll Along" expired in three weeks, seemingly bringing the Sondheim age of the musical to an end. He had run through the dance musical, the operatic musical and the musical play - only to end

up, in "Merrily," with an insular, self-martyring diatribe that blamed Broadway and possibly even Hammerstein for his own creative and commercial frustrations. Even the score of "Merrily," which developed musical themes in the same reverse- chronology format as the libretto's plot, seemed a formal retreat. The producer's admonition to the hero notwithstanding, "Merrily" contained more traditional Broadway melodies than most Sondheim musicals. S UNDAY IN THE Park With George" grows directly out of the ashes of "Merrily," and rebels against it. Catastrophe may have inspired Sondheim to revise his thinking about the Broadway musical. The first received notion to be jettisoned was the Broadway ethic itself. For the first time since a short-lived musical adaptation of Aristophanes's "The Frogs" at the Yale Repertory Theater a decade ago, Sondheim initiated a musical outside the Broadway system: "Sunday" began its career at Playwrights Horizons, a nonprofit 150-seat theater Off Broadway. This allowed the piece a far longer gestation period than Broadway economics permit and also enabled Sondheim to have an uncharacteristically intimate involvement with the day-by-day production process.

"Sunday" also marked the first time in years that Sondheim did a musical without Prince or any other Broadway veterans as collaborators. The link to Playwrights Horizons was the 35-year-old James Lapine, who had never previously worked in the commercial theater. At Playwrights, Lapine had directed the most talented new Off Broadway musical to emerge in the 1980's, William Finn's "March of the Falsettos." He brought Sondheim the gifted young "Falsettos" orchestrator Michael Starobin and a new designer, Tony Straiges. But, more important, in his libretto and direction, Lapine gave "Sunday" the whiff of a sensibility unknown to the Broadway musical.

In his play "Twelve Dreams," produced at the Public Theater in 1981, Lapine had written and staged a Carl Jung-inspired drama in which the associative, meditative "story" was told in terms more suggestive of the Sam Shepard school of dreamlike playwriting than either the well-made or Brechtian plays that had determined the shape of past Sondheim musicals. Lapine's characters were not so much people as figures in a theatrical composition drawn from the unconscious. The same is true in "Sunday" - whose foremost innovation may well be the redefining of plot and characters as they've been known in most Broadway musicals since "Showboat."

This radical step is not a whimsical one - or a gimmick - but a theatrical response to the musical's subject. Seurat's painting, "La Grande Jatte," may be inhabited by people strolling in a real park, but it tells no story and leaves its figures uncharacterized (indeed, expressionless). The subject of "La Grande Jatte" is art itself; it's a pictorial manifesto that melds pure form, color and light into a pleasing, harmonic synthesis.

The subject of Act I of "Sunday" is the process by which such art is created. Accordingly, Sondheim and Lapine tell their story in a theatrical manner equivalent to Seurat's own esthetic method. The characters of the painting are on stage - as invented by the authors - but we see them through Seurat's impersonal eyes. ("I am not painting faces," he explains.) They are mostly fodder for his composition - forms to be atomized into abstractly patterned "dots" of color. Seurat even seems largely oblivious to the two models to whom he is intimately related - his mother and his lover, Dot.

As the painter sketches his figures from his dispassionate point-of-view, so Sondheim and Lapine dramatize their characters just as sketchily. Once the various plots start to approach their Act I climax, they end abruptly. The act concludes with Seurat completing "La Grande Jatte," and, as he does, the fractious, petty characters all freeze in the tranquil postures of the painting: Transformed into the painter's

essentially nonnarrative art, the characters are removed from their own narratives. In defiance of a Broadway musical audience's usual expectations, the stories never do reach completion - and one also waits in vain to find any dancing. The most telling dab of choreography occurs when Dot, anticipating a night on the town with George, fantasizes about being a dancer in "the Follies." Her dance ends almost as soon as it's begun - as if to say Sondheim has himself moved beyond his own "Follies," his last dance musical. As Seurat valued stillness in art, so Lapine stages "Sunday" at a languorous, contemplative pace that is the antithesis of the razzle-dazzle Broadway musical.

In keeping with this style, Sondheim has written a score that is a more austere experiment in form than even his unconventional past scores. Though the "Sunday" songs may sometimes express a character's feelings, the songs play off one another as the colors do on Seurat's canvas. As the separate specks of color mix, fuse and intensify optically on a viewer's retina, so repeated musical and lyrical phrases in various songs merge in the theatergoer's ear to produce a cumulative, shimmering composition. This technique is dictated not by the musical's narrative but by George's artistic process, stated in the musical's opening lines: "White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: Bring order to the whole. Through design, composition, tension, balance, light and harmony."

When Seurat first recites these lines, Lapine and the designers transform an initially all-white stage - the theater's blank canvas - into a rough draft of "La Grand Jatte." As George progresses further on his canvas in subsequent scenes, Sondheim matches the musical's visual technique by remaking and reshaping his own phrases in imitation of the painter's constant refinement of colors and forms.

As Seurat used 11 basic colors, so Sondheim uses a core group of musical phrases and words recurrently in different contexts. And, like Seurat's colors, which appear to change in hue according to which colors surround them on the canvas, Sondheim's basic units of expression change in meaning with each appearance. "God, it's hot up here," sings Dot in the opening scene, as she chafes at posing for her lover. Later, while working at his canvas in his studio, Seurat expresses his frenzy and exhaustion in the phrase, "Hot hot hot it's hot in here." But when the painting is at last finished at the end of Act I, the cast sings in ensemble harmony for the first time, and the uncomfortable heat has been relieved by the harmonic order of Seurat's creation: The once-hotheaded bickerers in the park are now the serene forms of "La Grande Jatte," singing of "pausing on a Sunday by the cool blue triangular water." Still another variation on the theme occurs at the outset of Act II, in a song titled "It's Hot Up Here." One could just as soon follow other repeated words or phrases straight through the show - "connection," "move on," "Sunday," "tree," "color and light," "I'm not surprised" - as well as the variations on the recurrent musical phrases that accompany them.

This process continues in the second act, after "La Grande Jatte" is completed and George is dead. Leaping ahead to 1984, "Sunday" turns its attention to an American artist, also named George, who may be Seurat's great-grandson and who makes multimedia sculptures prized by the present- day art world. But the "dots" this George uses are not Seurat's: He must build up his public image "dot by dot" - with dabs of "hype" - to insure the continued patronage of the curators and foundations needed to support his costly computer-run compositions. In other words, George is working in a commercial art world that resembles Broadway - and he is suffering a crisis akin to Sondheim's after "Merrily." "Art isn't easy," he sings. "Overnight you're a trend/ You're the right combination - /Then the trend's at an end,/You're suddenly last year's sensation."

Act II is about how George reawakens and stretches his artistic vision by leaving the mercantile art world and past collaborators behind to return to his roots. "If you want your work to reach fruition," he sings, "What you need's a link with your tradition." That voyage takes him back to Seurat's Parisian park of "La Grande Jatte" - the site of the modern George's artistic and possibly genealogical "family tree." Revivified, he decides to "move on" and make "things that will be new." In turn, "Sunday" is the product of a similar spiritual voyage and breakthrough for Sondheim. This musical is in one sense a return to Sondheim's own "family tree" - for, with its carefully crafted, if untraditional libretto, it is a reconciliation with the musical- play heritage that Hammerstein willed him 40 years ago. But it also moves on to something new, because Lapine's libretto reflects the revolutionary changes that have occurred in American drama since Hammerstein's day.

"Connect, George, connect," George tells himself - and that's what he and Sondheim finally do. "Sunday" allows Sondheim at last to channel his own passion into a musical that is not about marriage, class inequities or other things he doesn't seem sincerely to care about, but is instead about what does matter to him - art itself, and his own predicament as a driven artist whose austere vision, like Seurat's, is often incorrectly judged as heartless.

This is why "Sunday," albeit the most demanding of the Sondheim musicals, is the first of them to touch audiences as profoundly as the Rodgers-Hammerstein shows touched audiences of another era. Theatergoers always know when they're being addressed with burning passion: When "La Grande Jatte" snaps into its finished form on stage, the spectacle is more dramatic and emotionally transporting than any conventional story Sondheim has ever tried to tell. And if Sondheim sometimes seems to be answering his own critics, as he did in "Merrily," he is elevating the tone and substance of the argument from the sour-grapes, showbiz gripes of the previous show to the impassioned arena of esthetic debate. When a salon painter dismisses Seurat's canvases as being "all mind, no heart" in an early song in "Sunday," Sondheim doesn't respond with snide wisecracks. "I am not hiding behind my canvas," George insists later, "I am living in it."

The show's entire fabric argues, by example, that just as much heart can go into the making of cerebral modern art as into romantic art (whether that romantic art be representational paintings or conventional, sentimental musicals). The case is brought to its finest point in a moving song called "Beautiful," in which Seurat's aged mother, who decries the newly constructed Eiffel Tower as an ugly portent of a fast-arriving modern esthetic order, is sweetly instructed by her son: "All things are beautiful, Mother. . . . Pretty is what changes. What the eye arranges is what is beautiful."

In the same song, Seurat tells his mother, "You watch while I revise the world." Still, if Sondheim is revising Broadway, he isn't leaving it entirely behind. It's because "Sunday" does retain an elaborate text, with many considerable spells of spoken dialogue, that it is not a new wave opera of the Robert Wilson-Philip Glass breed any more than it is a traditional opera. It is, quite clearly, a Broadway musical. But "Sunday," not to mention its success with audiences, blurs old definitions - those that separate Broadway and Off Broadway, show music and serious music, commercial entertainment and art, the theater and the musical theater.

Whether "Sunday" will prove to be a glorious anomaly or a pathway to even more adventurous musicals is anyone's guess. Much will depend on what young artists follow Sondheim into the musical theater -

and on which Sondheim himself does next. Reportedly, Sondheim is already at work on new projects with Lapine - a sign that he is stepping up the pace at which he has written new musicals in the past.

Having broken through to genuine autobiographical concerns in ''Sunday,'' Sondheim may be ready to launch a sophisticated attack on passions (starting with death and sex) that have been superficially toyed with in ''Company,'' ''Follies'' and ''Sweeney Todd.'' Much depends on his continued collaboration with librettists, whether Lapine or others, who open up such subjects in part by liberating them from conventional plots.

The commercial success of ''Sunday,'' meanwhile, may prompt other producers to take a chance on more ambitious shows. Operatic musicals and dance musicals could yet return to Broadway in new, contemporary incarnations, should ''Sunday'' pave the way for iconoclastic composers, choreographers and performance artists to experiment in the commercial theater.

Why should anyone care about the esthetic upheavals caused by a Broadway musical? A few years ago, in a published reminiscence about Oscar Hammerstein, Sondheim offered his own view. Hammerstein was a ''giant,'' Sondheim wrote, because he ''changed the texture of the American musical theater forever, first with Kern, then with Rodgers. And to change that means not only to change musical theater all over the world, but to change all American theater as well, because musical theater has affected playwriting profoundly and permanently.''

It's debatable whether Hammerstein changed all American theater, but that has been the great hope for Broadway's one original theatrical form throughout its history. In ''Sunday in the Park With George,'' Sondheim, the inheritor of that history, has changed the texture of the musical as radically as Hammerstein once did in ''Showboat'' and ''Oklahoma!'' - but, even more than Hammerstein did, he has built a bridge between the musical and the more daring playwriting of his time. Should Sondheim keep moving on and moving others with him, he may yet become the giant he saw his teacher to be - one who leaves our theater profoundly and permanently changed.