

The Quill

The Pennsylvania Shakespeare Festival Newsletter • Spring 2010

2010 Season

Romeo and Juliet

by William Shakespeare
July 21 - August 8

The Merry Wives of Windsor

by William Shakespeare
July 14 - August 8

The Playboy of the Western World

by J.M. Synge
June 16 - July 3

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

Music & Lyrics
by Stephen Sondheim
Book by Burt Shevelove
and Larry Gelbart
June 23 - July 11

Robin Hood

by Brandon E. McLaren
June 4 - August 7

Shakespeare for Kids

by Erin Hurley
July 28 - August 7

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Twice Merry: Jim Helsinger Directs & Acts in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

by Lisa Higgins

It's double the merit in more ways than one in Shakespeare's celebrated comedy about two wives who devise some novel naughtiness to foil the advances of an over-inflated knight: Jim Helsinger takes the reins as director, and he returns as an actor after a seven-year absence from the PSF stage.

Helsinger will play the role of Master Ford, jealous husband of Mistress Ford, played by his real-life wife, Suzanne O'Donnell. Though both are veterans of the stage, including PSF, they have not performed together in ten years, since their first child was born.

Artistic director of the Orlando Shakespeare Theater and a frequent director at PSF, Helsinger has directed and performed in countless productions—but never has he directed and acted in the same production. "It's not something I was naturally inclined to do," he says. "As an actor, I really like working with a director because I like the collaborative process. And as a director, I like working with the whole ensemble."

The addition of Matt Pfeiffer (director: *Dracula* and *Complete Works...* at PSF) as associate director helped facilitate the decision. Also, Helsinger has a long history with the play as a director, producer, and actor in three different productions. "When you've done a play before, you have a leg up on



Jim Helsinger

the memorization, and you've seen a variety of choices played on lines," Helsinger says. "You're not in that mystery place of trying to figure out 'what does that mean?'"

"As Patrick (Mulcahy, producing artistic director) and I were talking about the possibility of having me act in the production, we remembered that this is how Shakespeare's company did it. There wasn't a director—the acting company put it all together."

As a father of young children—Rosalind, 10, and James, 5—Helsinger rarely acts; he mostly directs. (He directed last season's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) However, last year, he performed as Dr. Faustus in *Wittenberg*—directed by Matt Pfeiffer.

The Orlando Sentinel praised the production and the actor: "Helsinger, his head shaved clean, plays the Machiavellian like a master: He's genuinely captivated by the new world of science and psychology, but you also sense that he simply delights in being bad."

To say that Helsinger's gifts as an actor have been missed on the PSF boards would be an understatement. Says Mulcahy: "Every year, patrons who have seen Jim in plays here ask me: 'is he coming back?'" Finally, the answer is 'yes.'"

And after a long time taking turns doing plays, Helsinger and O'Donnell will grace the stage together again. Their shared performance history includes some of the most storied roles in theatre: Hamlet and Ophelia,

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Falstaff's amorous pursuits of the merry wives leads to hilarious surprises.

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NOTES FROM THE PRODUCING ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

What think you of falling in love?

— ROSALIND IN *AS YOU LIKE IT*

Our four main productions this summer explore the rolling and rocky landscape of romantic love, each from its own unique perspective. Legend has it that Queen Elizabeth charged Shakespeare with writing a play showing one of her favorite characters, Falstaff, in the hunt for love, and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* was the result.



Patrick Mulcahy

The Playboy of the Western World, by J.M. Synge, takes us on a lilting comedic journey to western Ireland around the turn of the last century. The play reveals two unexpected lovers aching to bridge the divide between them and hoping to transform their hardscrabble experience into a life of fulfillment.

In *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Hero and Philia are classic, stock comedic lovers seeking to overcome the (hilarious) situational obstacles that separate them.

Romeo and Juliet is perhaps most emblematic of the hope and grief associated with amorous pursuits. Two spirited young people fall instantly and completely in love, and share every sensation, every nuance of the experience in unparalleled love poetry. That this play takes up such voluminous space in

our collective consciousness is exemplified by the number of films made and attributed to Shakespeare's story (77 total), and the number of productions at theatres across the country each year. More to the point, the names Romeo and Juliet are considered synonymous with young love in its freshness, passion, electricity, danger, and beauty.

The joy in a season like ours lies in both its breadth—two very different classic comedies, a vaudevillian musical farce, and a great tragedy, taking us to Verona, Windsor, Ireland, and ancient Rome—and in the way these very different plays shed light from different angles on a common human experience: romantic love.

These great plays offer vivid reflections of this archetypal aspect of human character. Romantic love enriches, enlivens, and sometimes perplexes as we learn what we are here to learn on the greater journey. And it is this greater journey that is most richly illuminated by great classic plays.

So, grab a date or a fellow adventurer, fasten your seat belt, and enjoy the ride at PSF this summer.

Patrick Mulcahy

Shakespearean Insights featured on WDIY 88.1 FM

In a unique partnership with WDIY 88.1 FM, PSF presents Shakespearean Insights—a series of 40-second audio morsels, airing from mid-May through August 7. Patrick Mulcahy is the voice of the insights, which range from the surprising to the inspiring.

For instance, as Juliet anticipates her wedding night, she prays that Romeo will be immortalized in the stars, to “make the face of heaven so fine that all the world will be in love with night!” While Romeo never made it into the celestial book of names, Juliet did, along with a number of Shakespeare's leading ladies and gentlemen.

In 1851, William Lassell began the practice of naming newly discovered satellites of Uranus after characters in the works of Shakespeare or Alexander Pope, and the International Astronomical Union continues

the practice today as new satellites are discovered. Titania, Bianca, Desdemona, and many others keep Juliet's company as she awaits the discovery of her Romeo in the heavens.

“We are honored to work with WDIY, the Lehigh Valley's community public radio station, to bring this program to listeners. It's win/win/win—we're able to do outreach in a different medium, WDIY is promoted to our audience, and listeners get great information,” says Mulcahy.

The program airs at 10:04 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays and at 5:29 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Shakespearean Insights is also available at pashakespeare.org and WDIYfm.org.



Romeo & Juliet

An Interview with Patrick Mulcahy

Why *Romeo and Juliet* now?

The beauty of great plays is they are always in style, always in season. So, now is always a good time for a terrific production of *Romeo and Juliet*. And, of course, we haven't done it for about 10 years, so there is a whole generation of people who have not yet had a chance to see a professional production of it here in the valley.

So what makes it a great play?

It's Shakespeare's first tragic masterpiece. The lyric love poetry is perhaps unparalleled. I think it is also unique in its breadth on the spectrum from comedy to tragedy. It's hard to name another Shakespeare play that is essentially a comedy for the first half, and then hurtles headlong into tragedy. Most of his great tragedies employ comedy sparingly, often for temporary relief, irony, or as an emotional contrast to the darkness ahead. But in this play, there are five or six scenes in which the characters, and hopefully the audience, are having a great time.

The catalyst for much of the exuberance is Mercutio. He is a lot of fun—and one of Shakespeare's most fascinating characters, unlike any other. There are other compelling and charismatic tricksters in Shakespeare—Iago, the clowns and fools, Richard III—but none rival the mercurial wit and pure originality of Mercutio. And this is at the heart of Shakespeare's appeal: vibrant, distinctive, irresistible, fully dimensional characters. Perhaps hyper-dimensional in the case of Mercutio.

I also think what makes a play great is the substance of the insights into humanity, beyond the play's great entertainment value. The ideas stay with you because they resonate deeply. In this play, a core conflict is fate vs. free will, our choices vs. that which is beyond our control, and, more importantly, our difficulty sometimes in seeing the difference. Romeo and Juliet are star-crossed lovers, we are told, and yet they make decisions in moments of heightened passion that involve choice, and some of those choices are



catastrophic. This is human, of course, which is why we care.

The play is also inspiring. I can't think of a play that more fully illuminates the unique character of fresh, spontaneous young love—a love that is perhaps made more pure by its brevity. It cannot be corrupted, because it ends before life can taint its sublime energy. The purity is preserved. Their deaths are deeply troubling on a lot of levels, but one outcome that transcends their death is an uncompromised and, therefore, uniquely beautiful love.

Also, in many of his plays, the friction point between the individual needs and group expectations ignites some of Shakespeare's dialectical oppositions: to be or not to be, marry your love or marry the respected guy in town that will make a good marriage for the families, hate your ancestral enemy or fall in love with him. And, in his plays, the consequences of choice go beyond living and dying, or getting what you want or not, to questions of being, questions of the way of things.

Can you give an example?

There were a few moments in auditions where I heard lines I had never heard before or got an insight from something an actor did that was new to me. And I've lived with this play for 25 years. One of those moments was when the nurse returns in the aftermath of the violence that kills Tybalt and Mercutio, and she says, "There's no trust, No faith, no honesty in men. All perjured, All forsworn, all naught, all dissemblers."

Jo Twiss, who we have now cast in the role, found the resonance in that moment, in those words, of a woman who has glimpsed bits and pieces of human failing before but now sees the darkness and deception in humanity with crystal clarity, all at once, and sees a reality she despises. The nurse's insight illuminates a piece of the human puzzle in a way we aren't expecting in that moment. We are expecting her to stay with her personal grief over Tybalt. Instead she sees through that

grief to a larger truth, which is what tragedy does for us, certainly in plays, and often in life. We see things differently, sometimes more clearly. Tragedy allows us to see what is noble in us but was masked by human failing. The nobility comes later in this play.

You said there were a few moments like that in auditions. Any others to share?

We were auditioning Ezra Barnes (Dickinson in 1776) for the Prince. In his audition, something happened we always hope will happen: the actor did something that not only met the expectations of the director, and, in my case, the artistic director—but he made an acting choice that illuminated what we should work for in the production. His Prince cared deeply about his community, Verona, and was hurt personally by this violence in the streets. Not something I've seen from a Prince before. And it peeled back one more layer of the humanity in the play. His Prince saw all the implications for the community in this

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A Couple in Real Life and On Stage: The Capulets, Greg Wood and Susan Riley Stevens

With performance histories at PSF, Philadelphia area theatres, and theatres around the country, Greg Wood and Susan Riley Stevens each embody the phrase “working actor.” Married in real life (and parents to two-year-old Laura), they will perform together at PSF for the first time, as Juliet’s parents, the Capulets.



Greg Wood

his life. But at that time, children were property. So he tries to do what’s best for her and his family—the match with Paris. That Juliet disobeys him comes as a complete shock.”

Adds Stevens: “I think Lady Capulet loves her status and position—in her family, and in Verona—and that contributes greatly to her happiness in life.”



Susan Riley Stevens

Wood’s career at PSF includes the title roles in *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and many others. Stevens’ credits include Regan in PSF’s *King Lear* and Emilia

in *Othello*. She also performed in *Bad Dates* at the Act 2 Playhouse, which earned her a Barrymore Award for Outstanding Leading Actress in a Play.

“It always takes my breath away to hear the language that these two teenagers use to describe their feelings,” Stevens says. “It’s just gorgeous. I actually remember being 14, and although I could never have articulated any of it, I know I felt passionately about the relationships and people in my life.”

“Shakespeare gives meaning and magic to a story of teenage romance, and as the adults unknowingly push them toward their tragic end, they seem to embody the ideal of romantic love in its purest form.”

“Being one of the most powerful families in Verona gives (Capulet) great influence,” says Wood. “Marriages at that time, especially among the wealthy, were business arrangements. He loves his daughter more than

Romeo and Juliet, continued

path to destruction and was moved by it not only as an individual but as the man charged with stewardship of life and living in Verona. He made it deeply personal. And yet, again, it transcended the personal to the way we live together. I’d like to write a book someday about this play and call it, *The Play We Think We Know*.

What do you mean?

Well, we all think we know *Romeo and Juliet*, don’t we? We saw the Zeffirelli film in school, and we’ve seen a few productions that often fail to measure up to the play itself, and we think we’re done with *Romeo and Juliet*. Those auditions reminded me that, collectively, we are far from getting to the bottom of this play.

How do you get beyond the limitations born of that sense of familiarity?

We (PSF) need to access and illuminate the great ideas in the play and translate them into action. We need to access the great ideas in the company of artists. We need to approach the play as if all the discoveries about its treasures have not already been made by someone else. We need to get the right artists in the right roles. (We have been working very hard at that.) And, the beauty is that we have a magnificently constructed, exquisite play—a masterwork—to explore and fulfill. But we need the audience’s help, too.

What can an audience member do?

The audience can do what actors do and aim for a sense of “now, and for the

first time, these things are happening, and these words are being spoken.” The pathway to the richest experience of a Shakespeare play is listening with care. Listening to a Shakespeare play is different than listening to contemporary material. It’s more terse, richer, the way a gold mine is richer earth. It takes more energy to reach the gold, but it’s that extra attention that yields the treasure.

Marcus Aurelius talked about this, that wisdom comes from learning to trade easy pleasures for more challenging and complex ones. I can promise that an audience that does so will come away having heard insights in this play that will surprise them. That’s why many audience members see their fourth *R&J*, or their fifth *Hamlet*: to experience the insights a particular production or actor will illuminate in the play, or perhaps just to hear and see aspects of the play that have never been apparent to them in previous productions. Olivier described Shakespeare’s plays as inexhaustible.

You said you’ve spent 25 years with the play.

I was in three professional productions by the time I was 23. I got my Equity card playing Romeo. My first professional production was *R&J*. My first Equity production in New York was *R&J*. Even before all that, I did four or five scenes from the play, the balcony scene several times, as an undergrad here in America and while studying in England. So, for an actor, other than *A Christmas Carol*, the things you can count on in life are death, taxes, and *Romeo and Juliet*.

I’ve also been teaching it now for 20 years. I see it periodically. And for most of us who have been doing this for a while, when an actor forgets a line in rehearsal or class,

we can usually prompt them from memory. There seems to be a Verona section in our brains where this play lives on, day to day, as we go about our otherwise normal lives. It gets into the coating around the DNA. Perhaps that sense of the play will then become hereditary.

Why aren’t you directing it?

We are blessed with a rich pool of artists at PSF. The list of plays I’m burning to direct that I give to other directors is a long one. That’s just part of running a theatre.

When Rick Sordelet staged the fights for *Cyrano* a few years back, both Dennis (Razze) and I noted his dynamic work with the actors and his keen insights into specific human moments. I knew he had also directed Shakespeare plays at other theatres.

Dennis raised the idea of Rick directing *R&J*. The more I thought about having a director for *R&J* who has spent his professional life exploring the interaction between violence and humanity, the more excited I got about the idea. The violence in this play is so integral to the action, the imagery, and the essential event of the play, which is the human community coming to terms with its proclivity for destruction. So we hired an expert in violence. And there is a certain magic that happens when Rick gets into a room with actors.

Final thoughts?

It’s a play of incomparable freshness, vitality, and passion. It’s set in Italy, it’s hot-blooded, it’s sexy and romantic, it’s funny (until it isn’t), and it’s a great evening in the theatre. ■

The Playboy of the Western World

An Irish Comic Masterpiece

By Nathaniel Myers

Riots in the theatre led to riots in the streets of Dublin when *The Playboy of the Western World* opened on January 26, 1907, at the Abbey Theatre. Shouting and foot stamping were some of the tamer methods of protestation that evening; one actor recalled that a stagehand “had armed himself with a big axe [...] and swore by all the saints in the calendar that he would chop the head off the first lad who came over the footlights.”

It's hard to believe that Dubliners protested the same play that James J. “Jim” Christy, director of PSF's production, loves for its depiction of Irish ebullience and resilience: “The play presents the harshness of their lives while still capturing the exhilaration of living.”

Part of the play's brilliance lies in its ability to relish and rejoice in stereotypical Irish characteristics—a gift for storytelling, a tremendous facility with language, a romantic sensibility, and, most of all, a wonderful sense of humor—while cautioning against the limitations and dangerous exploitation of these same characteristics.

Playboy tells the story of a rural Irish community that initially lionizes a stranger who comes to town boasting that he's killed

his father—and then denounces him when the true reality of the deed is revealed.

The script by J. M. Synge evokes wonder from Patrick Mulcahy, producing artistic director, who considers the play among his favorites: “How has this playwright pulled off this extraordinary synthesis of the comedy of character and the darker humor, that still leaves us refreshed by the end?”

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats provides what may be the best answer: In his Nobel Prize lecture delivered some 15 years after the Playboy Riots, he said “everyone upon the stage is somehow lovable and companionable, and Synge described [...] a reality which he loved precisely because he loved all reality.”

So what caused the opening-night uproar—the first of several nights of public disturbances that culminated in multiple arrests—in 1907? From today's perspective, it's hard to fathom a new play creating such real-life drama.

One theatergoer noted that, “An unusually brutally coarse remark put into the mouth of ‘Christopher Mahon,’ the playboy of the title, set the house off into hooting and hissing amid counter applause, and the din was kept up till the curtain closed in.”

The “unusually brutally coarse remark”—not to give too much away—is a sug-

gestive comment by the protagonist in the third act about women in their shifts. That is, their undergarments. In contemporary society, for a word like “shifts” or its modern equivalent to provoke moral outcry is almost unimaginable; but even in the Ireland of the early 1900s, it is unlikely that the salacious implications of such a word would be enough to cause rioting in the streets.

Historians and scholars have long debated the deeper reasons for the public's antagonism at the Abbey. Some attribute the fracas to an undercurrent of growing hostility to English colonial rule in Ireland, others blame resentment of an upper-class, Anglo-Irish representation of lower-class Ireland. Perhaps it was a combination of both. What all sides of the argument recognize, however, is that the protesters believed Synge's portrayal of the Irish people was, simply, uncomplimentary.

Whatever the cause for the riots, the play explores an implicit, broader critique into the nature of celebrity according to Mulcahy—a theme that he believes will resonate with present-day audiences. Noting that while we often idolize sports figures and movie and television stars, “when they become us, we resent their apparent transformation from inspiring idol to just another mirror.” In this way, Synge's play

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FROLIC IN THE FORUM: C

By Lisa Higgins

Comedy—the raucous and the refined, the ancient and the contemporary—is “as resilient as man.” *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, winner of innumerable Tony Awards, offers an “ancient and honorable style of fooling,” according to *The New York Times* critic, who also confessed: “you keep laughing as if the old sight and sound gags were as good as new.”

With a title that’s a direct descendant from vaudeville routines, *Forum* traces its rich history to the prolific Roman comic playwright, Plautus (c. 254–184 BC). His work inspired *Forum*’s co-authors, Burt Shevelove and

Larry Gelbart, the award-winning comedy writer best known for developing the TV series *M*A*S*H* and co-writing the classic movie comedy *Tootsie*.

Forum won six Tony Awards when it debuted in the 1962–63 season: best musical, best actor, best supporting actor, best book, best director, and best producer. And every actor who has opened in the central role of Pseudolus on Broadway (Zero Mostel, Phil Silvers, and Nathan Lane) won a Best Actor Tony for his performance. Jason Alexander, who performed as Pseudolus in one scene in *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway*, also won the Tony for Best Actor in a Musical.

Plautus would have been proud. “Plautus is often called the ‘Father of

Stock Characters’ because he uses the same comic types in most of his plays—the wily servant, the young lovers, courtesans, the philandering husband with the domineering wife, and the braggart soldier,” says Dennis Razze, PSF associate artistic director who is directing. “One of his plays is the basis for Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. What a lot of people don’t know is that most of Plautus’ plays were sung to musical accompaniment, so he has also been called the ‘Father of Musical Comedy.’”

Lauded as “the funniest musical ever written” by the *Wall Street Journal*, the play begins on a spring evening in ancient Rome as Pseudolus welcomes the audience to his temple to worship the gods of tragedy and comedy—emphasizing that “tonight we will perform a COMEDY!” Pseudolus quickly launches into the legendary opening song, “Comedy Tonight.”

Bring on the lovers, liars and clowns
Old situations,
New complications
Nothing portentous or polite.
Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight!

The moment of the song’s creation is often regarded as a crucial event in the musical’s development and ultimate stratospheric success. “When an early version of *Forum* was in tryouts in Washington, D.C., it was not faring well with critics and audiences,” says Razze. “The great director/choreographer Jerome Robbins was brought in as a play doctor, and after seeing a rehearsal, he suggested that Sondheim write an opening number that would set the outrageous comic tone for the evening. That’s how ‘Comedy Tonight’ was born. After the addition of that number, along with some other rewrites,



Photos by Lee A. Buttz

Brad DePlanche

Role: Pseudolus, the slave who is “the master of all of the comic intrigues that occur.”

PSF credits: *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (photos above.)

Razze says: “He is a bit of an everyman character, and his desire to be a free man in Rome sits well with our notion of American values and democracy.”



Carl N. Wallnau

Role: Senex, a philandering husband.

PSF Credits: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 2009 (photo right); *Twelfth Night*, 2008 (photo left); among others.

Razze says: “Carl is masterful at conveying a scheming personality and has a bit of Groucho about him.”



CLOWNS AT PLAY



Chris Faith

Role: Hysterium, slave to Senex and his wife Domina.

PSF Credits: *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)*, 2009 (photo left); *King Lear*, 2008; *The Taming of the Shrew*, 2007 (photo right).

Razze says: “Hysterical antics are one of Chris’s comic gifts—so he is ideal to play the worried and stressed out servant.”



* In keeping with the spirit of the play, this headline was borrowed from May 20, 1962 issue of *The New York Times*.

COMEDY TONIGHT!

the show had a triumphant opening on Broadway in 1962.”

In *Forum*, Sondheim both composed the music and wrote the lyrics for the first time. “Previously, he had written lyrics for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, but this is his first Broadway score—and it’s a terrific one filled with great tunes and fabulously witty lyrics,” says Razze.

**The situation’s fraught
Fraught than I thought
With horrible,
Impossible
Possibilities**

The “situation” is as familiar as the latest movie, soap opera, or sit-com. In a 1996 interview for the NPR program “Fresh Air,” Terry Gross asked co-author Gelbart: “What’s the connection between Plautus and *Forum*?”

Gelbart replied: “Total. We read the 26 plays of his which still exist...and we selected a character here, a character there, a bit of a story line here, and another one from another play, and then started adding our own connective tissue and our own Plautine-like complications.

“One would think comedy was always with us, and in fact it has always been with us, but [Plautus and others] organized that comedy. They gave us stereotypes. They gave us the hen-pecked husband. They gave us the moonstruck young lover. They gave us ... all sorts of comic conventions which have not been changed or improved upon in two millennia.”

Keep a straight face if you can. ■



Wayne S. Turney

Role: Erronius, an old man whose children were abducted by pirates many years ago.

PSF credits: *Cyrano de Bergerac*; *My Fair Lady* (photo right); *The Imaginary Invalid* (photo left).

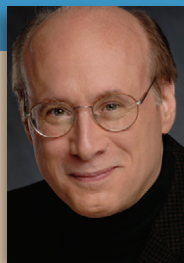
Razze says: “Wayne plays befuddled old men better than anyone I know—odd, since he himself is extremely bright and he used to fly jets!”

Dennis Razze

Director

PSF Credits: 1776, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Amadeus*, *My Fair Lady*, and many others

“I have long been a fan of ancient Greek and Roman theatre—my doctoral work was in theatre history and I’ve been to Rome and Greece to see the theatres. I’m also a fan of (*Forum* co-writer) Larry Gelbart, who later won an Emmy for *M*A*S*H*. He collaborated with some of the greatest comedy writers of all time, Sid Caesar, Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Woody Allen. Gelbart won the Academy Award winning screenplay for *Tootsie*—so I must confess, the section where Hysterium unwillingly disguises himself as a girl really tickles my funny bone.”



Sidebar on Sondheim: An Interview with John Bell

Editor’s Note: John Bell is the author of several articles on Stephen Sondheim and the co-author of the book *Music Theory for Musical Theatre*. He is the chair of DeSales University’s Performing and Fine Arts Department and a professional director, choreographer, conductor, and actor.



Stephen Sondheim, composer and lyricist of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, has won eight Tony Awards (more than any other composer), including the Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre, multiple Grammy Awards, an Academy Award, and a Pulitzer Prize. He has been described as “the greatest and perhaps best-known artist in the American musical theatre.”¹

What first attracted you to Stephen Sondheim’s work?

When I was a freshman in college, I auditioned for a Sondheim revue. It was my first exposure to his songs and his songwriting style. I recall being surprised and excited by the depth in the lyric writing. Sondheim was clearly writing about rumblings beneath the surface. I also remember feeling that his melodies were rapturous. Most people say Sondheim’s music is un-hummable. I feel just the reverse. In fact, I think some of his best songs rival the great melodic invention of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers.

What differentiates him, in your opinion, from other musical theatre composers?

Like Porter and just a few other musical theatre writers, Sondheim serves primarily as his own lyricist. I think that intensifies the potency of his songs. The message being conveyed in the lyric is intrinsically tied to and supported by the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic choices he makes to express character and situation.

One of my favorite Sondheim anecdotes is that Sondheim has stated that if you ask him to write a torch song he’ll respond that he can’t do it. He says he has to ask: “what kind of torch song do you want?” But he says that if you want a torch

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comments on our modern society and not only upon a provincial Irish town.

Synge's Ireland has little in common with the "shamrock" Ireland presented in *Riverdance* or *Finian's Rainbow*. The play's reach is much greater, its themes more profound—small town existence, the necessary function of narrative in our lives, daily disappointment met with restorative humor, and, at its center, a romantic love story, a pair of star-crossed lovers for early 20th century Ireland. Synge renders all this thematic material into a wonderfully rich and lyrical prose.

In some ways, it is a disservice to Synge to describe his dialogue as prose when at times it is more akin to poetry. Take, for example, the first line of the play: "Six yards of stuff for to make a yellow gown." Students of poetry would recognize this line as a slight variant of the metrical form known as iambic pentameter, itself the principal meter of Shakespeare. This rich linguistic lyricism lends a larger vitality to the play. As Mulcahy notes, Synge's reality, while often harsh, is "a poetic one."

The result of this coupling of a harsh and poetic reality is a tragicomic tale of enormous beauty and consequence—a story that reflects the severity of the world while simultaneously allowing us to transcend our daily lives through laughter and love.

Editor's Note: The writer is a 2005 alumnus of the DeSales University theatre program. He grew up playing the recorder for the PSF Green Show before he was a college student, when he was a member of the acting intern company. He is currently in the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Notre Dame, studying 20th century Irish and British literature, with an emphasis on poetry. ■



Sondheim *continued*

song about a woman who's walking down the sidewalk in a red dress, who steps into a bar, and sits down and orders a Grasshopper—that he can write. Now you've given him something to characterize. Why did she choose the red dress? Is this her favorite bar? Where is she going? Why did she stop in for a drink? Why did she order the Grasshopper? His response illuminates the fact that Sondheim is one of the few, truly great musical dramatists of the American musical theatre. I would rank him right up there with Jerome Kern and Richard Rogers in this regard. He's a smart writer and, in his songs, smart singers seem even smarter.

What has given him staying power during the past 50 some years?

I'm not sure Sondheim would agree that he's had staying power. He is the first to admit that his is an acquired taste. He has often lamented that audiences have not always turned out for his shows. And even his most popular shows have not had the type of blockbuster success as many of those from the Golden Age and even some of his contemporaries like Andrew Lloyd Webber.

That said, I think the fact that Sondheim has always been attracted to new subjects and new approaches to musical storytelling has kept him in the vanguard and solidified his place as one of America's preeminent musical theatre writers. The subject matter to which he has been attracted includes everything from Roman comedy (*Forum*) and political assassination (*Assassins*) to expressionist Pointillism (*Sunday in the Park with George*) to Grand Guignol (*Sweeney Todd*). No other writer for the American musical theatre has shown, as one of Sondheim's own lyrics says, that there's "so much stuff to sing."

Fittingly enough, he has said that he would like that lyric to be the epithet on his tombstone.

How did you first become associated with Stephen Sondheim?

Having been introduced to his music in a college revue, I was excited to thumb through the Arts and Leisure section of *The New York Times* one Sunday and find an advertisement for his new musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*. I simply wrote a very saccharine-coated, three-page, single-spaced fan letter and sent it to the Booth Theatre, where the show was playing. A great deal of

time passed and I heard nothing. Then one day, I received this very elegant envelope in my campus mailbox with a New York return address. I opened it to find a lovely, very short note from Steve Sondheim telling me he was flattered by my remarks and that if I were ever to find myself in New York to call him up. He included his phone number!

Well, I had never been to New York; I had never seen a Broadway show. So, my mom and I immediately planned a grand New York adventure, which, because of Steve's great generosity, included a meeting at his home and then attendance at *Sunday in the Park*. It was a lovely, magical night.

How is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* different from Sondheim's other works?

The interesting thing about *Forum*, in the context of the Sondheim canon, is that for a writer who is acclaimed for having broken new ground in both form and content, *Forum* is actually a very traditional musical comedy.

In fact, *Forum* is the one Sondheim show which most directly links him to the early roots of American musical theatre. Having been mentored by Oscar Hammerstein, Sondheim learned from an early age that good musical storytelling involves using the songs to develop character and advance plot. And most of Sondheim's scores achieve those objectives in thrilling and innovative ways.

But with *Forum*, Sondheim must have instinctively known that the wild, farcical nature of the story would become almost unbearable if the songs didn't provide respite. So he wisely uses the songs to provide cessation of action. Once the plot advances so far, the story pauses for a song, giving the characters an opportunity to catch their breath and comment upon what has just occurred. Whether a ballad or a comic number, after that brief pause, the story ensues. Sondheim knew that audiences needed those breaks in the action as well.

This approach to dramatic structure is the traditional formula for the musical comedy and was used in many of the works of great writers such as Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, and Cole Porter. So really, *Forum* is Sondheim at perhaps his most traditional and, if audience appeal is any measure, his most accessible. ■

1. Frank Rich, "Conversations With Sondheim," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2000.

Hamlet Succeeds Julius Caesar

The Prince of Denmark succeeds the Roman emperor in PSF's annual fall road tour of a Shakespeare play. The Linny Fowler WillPower Tour of *Hamlet*, October 6 to November 19, will travel to middle schools and high schools in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware following initial performances on the DeSales campus. If your school is interested in booking the tour, please call 610.282.9455, ext. 9, or e-mail Erin.Hurley@desales.edu.

WillPower Travel Notebook: A Trip To Warren

Story and photo by Jarrod Yuskauskas

When you're cast in PSF's WillPower tour, as I was in the fall 2009 tour of *Julius Caesar*, you're told that you will perform in a variety of spaces with a range of qualities. Within the first few days, our cast of nine learned how true this was when we found ourselves stabbing Caesar on the stage of a state-of-the-art high school performing arts complex one day and at center court of a school gymnasium the next.

One space was rumored to be a lovely old theatre, and when we arrived at the Struthers Library Theatre in Warren, Pa.¹, early one morning, we were greeted by a magnificent and imposing but beautiful brick façade. This opened to a large, warm stage and the most beautiful theatre in which I have ever performed.

Built in 1883 to serve the town as both library and cultural center, the theatre was first used for opera, then completely redesigned in 1914 as a more standard proscenium theatre for vaudeville, touring productions from Broadway, and the films of its long-term tenant, Warner Brothers. Today, the theatre welcomes a variety of live performance groups, houses a long-standing successful community theatre, and still shows the occasional film.



The *Julius Caesar* set at Struthers Library Theatre

Beyond the theatre, the "library room" just above the mezzanine lobby serves as overflow from the newer town library. A fireplace is adorned with tiles that depict the adventures of King Arthur, a two-of-a-kind set with the other decorating a hearth at Parliament in London. The uppermost level of the theatre provides rehearsal space and costume storage for the community troupe that calls Struthers home.

Fortunately for us, we were at Struthers for two performances. The first was for students from all four of the high schools in Warren County and the second was open to the public who, as we learned at the Q & A session after, were excited and hungry for live Shakespeare. Between the two shows, we walked around the center of town, a delightful blend of architecture new and old that maintains the charm of history and proves that it remains a vital town with a bustling business district full of friendly faces at many charming shops and restaurants (one had the best baklava I've had in years).

What a joy for us to perform on this historic stage, have an intimate tour, and spend time appreciating the beauty of Warren.



Photo by Bryan Sheffield

Shakespeare Competition Awards Students \$15,000

Renewable DeSales University scholarships and engraved trophies were awarded at PSF's third annual Shakespeare Competition held March 6. Sixty-six student actors from 17 high schools in Pennsylvania and New Jersey performed scenes and monologues. The day-long program included three rounds of competition, discussions and workshops with theatre professionals, and a closing showcase.

"Students and teachers raved about the sense of artistic community that the competition created and the performance recommendations provided by the five professional adjudicators," says Erin Hurley, PSF education director. "Each student received insights into Shakespeare's words that enhanced and deepened their experience with the language."

The scholarships are renewable for the four years should the student choose to attend DeSales University as a theatre major. The scholarship recipients and the roles they performed in the competition are:

Peter Danelski, Fool, *King Lear*

Philadelphia High School for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia

Sarah E. Webster, Helena, *All's Well That Ends Well*

Villa Victoria Academy, Ewing, N.J.

Anthony Saraceno, Orsino, *Twelfth Night*

Notre Dame High School, Easton, Pa.

Jacob McEntire, Edmund, *King Lear*

Abingdon Friends School, Jenkintown, Pa.

Matt Bazulka, Petruchio, *The Taming of the Shrew*

Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Performing Arts (LVPA), Bethlehem, Pa.

Rachel Towne, Kate, *The Taming of the Shrew*

LVPA, Bethlehem, Pa.

LeCheat Reed, Viola, *Twelfth Night*

North Penn High School, Lansdale, Pa.

Ryan Egan, Romeo, *Romeo & Juliet*

Conrad Weiser High School, Robeson, Pa.

Sara Burik, Rosalind, *As You Like It*

LVPA, Bethlehem, Pa.

1. Warren is located about 70 miles southeast of Erie on the border of the Allegheny National Forest.

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PSF News

Wall Street Journal Critic Lauds PSF Resident Sound Designer

Matthew Given, PSF's resident sound designer (six seasons) and production manager (two seasons), designed sound for the Orlando Shakespeare Theater's production of *Hamlet* in January and earned high praise from Terry Teachout, the theatre critic of the *Wall Street Journal*, who wrote that he "especially liked... the sound design of Matthew Given, who has mashed up Brahms, Dvorák, Debussy, and Arvo Pärt into a sumptuous sonic backdrop."

The accolade reads like music to the ears. "Sound design at its best creates a mood and doesn't make a presence of itself," says Given. "One of the most intriguing elements about sound design is the subtlety of it."

Sound design begins with reading the script and meeting with the director and other members of the design team. "How to use sound to tell a story is the first thing I start with," he says, "and I'm intrigued by using solo instruments in theatre, relating a particular character to an instrument."

For example, in last season's production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, "Cleopatra had an airy sensibility to her, so there was a woodwind, a flute—though it didn't stay small;

whereas Antony had a percussive, military sense. Then I tried to see how these sound elements work with and against each other."

Although sound design has only gained recognition in contemporary theatre in the past 30 years or so, Given notes that sound was the first design form used when the Greeks built amphitheaters to naturally amplify sound effects they created.

"Prologues" Give the Context

To offer audiences insights and a framework in advance of seeing a Shakespeare play, PSF introduced Prologues—discussions led by a PSF artist before every performance. Informal and free, Prologues are held in the theatre 45 minutes before curtain for *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Volunteers Welcome

The 150+ members of the PSF Company come from around the country—last year they came from 22 states. The 100+ volunteers of the PSF Guild come from around the Lehigh Valley. And together, the Company and the Guild provide a welcoming and entertaining experience for more than 30,000 patrons. If you have six hours that you could contribute to the PSF experience, contact Tim Walling at 610.282.WILL, ext. 2, or psf@desales.edu.

Amy Best
Director

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Robin Hood: Mystery Man of Sherwood Forest

June 4 - August 7 • Schubert Theatre

Fable and fact spark our imaginings of the man known as Robin Hood. Celebrated in ballads and stories dating to the 15th century, Robin Hood even merits mention from Shakespeare in two of his plays. A lively new adaptation of this classic tale makes its debut at PSF this summer.

"Just as we carefully select the Shakespeare plays in our season, we like to alternate the selection of our children's play between magical fairytales, like last season's *Cinderella*, and action-packed adventure plays," says PSF Education Director Erin Hurley, who is directing the play.

With a sense of humor alongside their sense of adventure, Robin Hood and his Merry Men pursue villains and victories in

the Sherwood Forest. The brooding Sheriff of Nottingham who seeks to end Robin's sway and supremacy in Sherwood is a key target.

"*Robin Hood* will be a classic production with period costumes and lots of action," says Hurley. "Our story also has its share of romance: Maid Marian dons a disguise and falls into a dungeon of distress. And of course, how could our tale be complete without an archery contest?"

Amy Best has designed vibrant folk-tale costumes and five-time Emmy award-winning set designer Bob Phillips' lush world of Sherwood Forest will be full of surprises. Adds Hurley: "*Robin Hood* is sure to be a feather in PSF's cap this season."



Kids meet the cast after every performance!

Merry Wives, continued

Bottom and Hermia, Arnolphe and Agnes (*The School for Wives*), Antipholus and Adriana (*The Comedy of Errors*). Helsingier delights in reporting that they met playing the roles of Orlando and Rosalind in Orlando on Rosalind Avenue in the Orlando Shakespeare Theater production of *As You Like It* in 1993.

Over the years, Helsingier says, "Many times, I was in the comic plot and she was in the main plot." This time around, there are multiple comic plots, which he describes as an "Elizabethan sit-com."

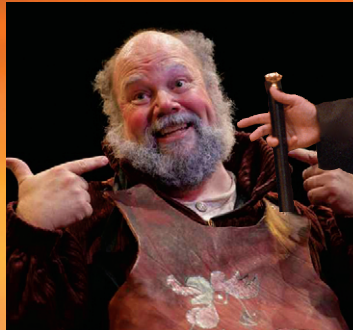
"*Merry Wives* is not about the intelligence, nobility, or the higher class—it was written about the merchant class," he says. "In these characters, you see the beginnings of what have become stock characters: the jealous husband, the foreigner, the local bartender. And everyone wants to marry the same girl."

"The characters are as strange and nutty as the people you meet in the bar or at the PTA; they are reflections of ourselves."

According to *The Essential Shakespeare Handbook*, "The play abounds in characters who bubble with mischief... The ridiculous trials and tribulations of Falstaff as he attempts with stunning lack of success to woo two middle-aged, middle-class wives makes for an irresistible comic plot."

"Imagine Windsor on a really fun day in 1602," Helsingier laughs, "where the women can smile about how smart they are, and the men can laugh at themselves." ■

Who's Who: A Merry Cast



John Ahlin
Sir John Falstaff, an impoverished knight



Richard B. Watson
Doctor Caius, a French doctor, suitor to Anne Page



Jim Helsingier
Master Ford

Suzanne O'Donnell
Mistress Ford



Anthony Lawton
Master Page



Grace Gonglewski
Mistress Page

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Mon., June 28, 7:30 p.m.

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C.S. Lewis' imaginative story into a 90-
minute, two-person play that crackles
with wit and insight and features tap,
Latin ballroom, and martial arts.



Underneath the Lintel

By Glen Berger

Mon., July 26, 7:30 p.m.

Performed by Christopher
Coucill—who inspired PSF
audiences as Don Quixote
and King Lear—this one-
man play explores the world and its won-
drous mysteries via a library book that was
checked out 113 years ago.



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