

LIVE FROM LINCOLN CENTER
March 31, 2005, 8:00 p.m. on PBS
Stephen Sondheim's
Passion

Stephen Sondheim, a protégé of the great lyricist, Oscar Hammerstein II, first burst upon the national scene in 1957 as the lyricist for Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. But beginning with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, for which he created both the lyrics and the music (and which won a Tony Award in 1962), Sondheim has enriched the Broadway theater with its most stimulating and provocative musicals of the past 35 years. Sondheim's *Passion* will be our next Live From Lincoln Center presentation on the evening of Thursday, March 31 originating from the Rose Theater, the newest performing space at Lincoln Center. The star-studded concert version, directed by Lonny Price, will feature Patti LuPone, Audra McDonald and Michael Cerveris, with a 56-piece onstage orchestra conducted by Paul Gemignani. (By the way, Sondheim will have celebrated his 75th birthday just 9 days before our *Passion* telecast.)

Sondheim created his first musical as a school production when he was 15. While studying music at Williams College he wrote the book, lyrics and music for several college shows. With a magna cum laude degree from Williams, he then went to Princeton where he continued his musical studies with Milton Babbitt. Though known primarily as a composer of severe serial music, Babbitt also has an encyclopedic knowledge of the music for films and the Broadway stage. The influence of Hammerstein and the work with Babbitt undoubtedly solidified Sondheim's expertise in musical theater. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history. Following *A Funny Thing....* came *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964); and in quick succession *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971) and *A Little Night Music* (1971/72). Later the '70s and '80s produced *Sweeney Todd*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sunday in the Park With George* (which received the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1985), and *Into the Woods*. *Assassins* was a product of 1990, and in 1994 *Passion* opened on Broadway in May. One of Sondheim's most challenging works, *Passion* went on to win no fewer than 4 Tony Awards.

On its surface, the story of *Passion* is a relatively simple one: the power of redemptive love. But underneath the surface is a story of wildly conflicting emotions. The action takes place in northern Italy in the latter half of the 19th century. Giorgio, a soldier, is involved in a passionate affair with a married lady named Clara who lives in Milan. He is transferred to a remote, bleak outpost where he meets Fosca, the cousin of his commanding officer. Fosca is sick and ugly and emotionally devastated by the breakup of a brief and ugly marriage. In Giorgio she sees the embodiment of her idealization of the perfect man and she falls obsessively in love with him. He is at first repelled by her, but as her pursuit of him becomes more and more compulsive, his resistance weakens by degrees.

At the end, as she is near death, he surrenders to her unconditional love and Passion.

The original story comes from an autobiographical novel titled *Fosca* by a writer named Iginio Ugo Tarchetti who died of tuberculosis and typhus in 1869 at the age of 29. In 1981 the Italian film maker, Ettore Scola, fashioned a movie from the novel titled *Passione d'Amore* (The Passion of Love). Sondheim saw the film and immediately sensed the story's potential for the musical stage. In James Lapine, who had written the books for *Sunday in the Park With George* and *Into the Woods*, Sondheim had found his ideal collaborator, but it took more than a decade before the two of them took on the task of *Passion*. I mentioned wildly conflicting emotions. Teacher and author Joanne Gordon points out in *The Sondheim Review* (a quarterly magazine devoted to the works of Sondheim) that *clara* in Italian means "light", and *fosca* means "dark". She points out further that the contrasts extend to the "differences between man and woman; the physical and the spiritual; truth and hypocrisy; giving and taking; selfishness and selflessness; sickness and health; emotion and reason; dream and reality; order and chaos; passion and dalliance; major and minor; and word and music. Each of these opposites is explored and an unexpected truth about the nature of human love is ultimately revealed." Heady stuff indeed, and a far cry from the normal concerns of what we once called Musical Comedy.

A very special treat is in store for us, then, on the evening of March 31 when the Sondheim-Lapine *Passion* is our menu for the next Live From Lincoln Center. As always, I urge you to check with your local PBS station for the exact date and time of the telecast in your area.

See you then!