



Showstoppers: Send in the Clowns

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Situating the term 'Showstopper'

In this series of lectures, I'll be thinking about the concept of the 'showstopper', one of the most recognisable terms related to musical theatre. Quite literally and obviously, the word 'showstopper' (a portmanteau word) refers to 'stopping the show' – according to the Oxford English Dictionary, more specifically, it's 'A performance which or performer who receives prolonged applause from the audience; one that "stops the show"'. This places correct emphasis on something I won't be focusing on here, but which is an important dimension of the showstopper, namely the fact that performers and performers are essential to the process. There are two impressive aspects to what the performer must do. First, they must deliver a performance that's so intense, moving and/or impressive that they draw prolonged applause and cheering from the audience, so much so that the performance cannot immediately proceed. Second, they must be brave in the sense that they have to give the power that they hold over the performance to the audience; members of the audience receive the power to decide when the show can start again. This can be very stressful and emotional for a performer to manage, especially when they are playing a character: the emphasis transitions from the performer's successful projection of *another* person, i.e. the person they are pretending to be, to the person who has delivered that effect. The actor then has to manage the audience's reception, and (usually) stay in character while the audience responds to what the actor underneath is doing. This can be highly emotional and complicated, especially when the performer has delivered a routine that has left them out of breath. It makes them vulnerable, so that it's not only about delivering a powerful performance but then managing the consequences.

'Showstopper' is an American term, as one might expect from something we mostly associate with Broadway musicals, even though I think aspects of it are analogous to big (European) operatic showcases that can stop the show and potentially be encored. The OED lists a newspaper article from September 1916 in the *Fort Worth Journal-Gazette* as its earliest instance of the term, but I found one from May 25, 1912 in the trade magazine *Billboard*: 'Alice Walsh proved a show stopper when she appeared in the spotlight and rendered Will Rositer's song hit, I'd Love to Live in Loveland With a Girl Like You...Her other songs are also well received.' The comment appears in a review of a burlesque show, a lowbrow genre of American theatre that typically included a variety of acts including strippers. Fans of Sondheim might notice the irony that this quote refers to a song with 'Loveland' in the title, reminding us of the climactic 'Loveland' sequence of his musical *Follies* (1971).

Most of the early references in the press to 'show stoppers' were in connection to burlesque or other lowbrow forms of entertainment, another being blackface minstrelsy, a racist form of variety show that emerged in the 1830s as a means of comically denigrating African Americans. Thus, it is an historical fact that the more demure 'showstopper' familiar from mid-twentieth-century Broadway musicals (e.g. 'The Rain in Spain', which is well-documented to have landed with particular applause in the first production of *My Fair Lady* in 1956) derives from rowdy responses to strippers or blackface performers.

We start to see songs from operettas and musicals reported as 'showstoppers' in the press from the late 1920s, but one of my favourite examples (pertinent as we approach the American election in November

2024) is a June 1936 news report on the use of applause machines in the Republican national convention in Cleveland. It reads: 'Under this system applause highpoints can be calculated comparatively, and the impact of the oratorical explosions can be measured. Zeal of the cheering squads can also be recorded'.

Into the 1940s, we start to see reviews of ballet and opera performances where certain numbers or arias were reported as 'show stoppers', most surprisingly including a 1942 performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* (hardly an obvious candidate) at the Metropolitan Opera. Then from 1959, a series of albums were released by various performers, each labelled with the word: *Eydie Gorme sings Showstoppers* (1959); *Carol Burnett Remembers How They Stopped the Show* (1960), a title that implies that the showstopper is a thing of the past; *This is Broadway's Best: A Two-Record Set of Great Show-stoppers* (1961); a surprising album from the New York Philharmonic, *Kostelanetz Conducts Showstoppers* (1965); and in 1979, Liberace's *Showstoppers* album featured the subject of today's lecture, Stephen Sondheim's 'Send in the Clowns'.

Sondheim's approach to musicals

The late Stephen Sondheim's remarkable legacy includes writing the lyrics to the musicals *West Side Story* (1957) and *Gypsy* (1959) and both the music and lyrics to *Company* (1970), *Sweeney Todd* (1979) and *Into the Woods* (1986), among many others. He is without question the most revered composer for the American musical theatre, and has received awards including the Oscar, Tony, Pulitzer, Grammy, and Kennedy Center Honor. Today's lecture considers a song from one of his most enduring musicals, *A Little Night Music* (1973), based on the film *Smiles of a Summer Night* by Ingmar Bergman.

Sondheim had three guiding principles for writing songs for musicals, which we will refer to in this lecture: Content dictates form; Less is more; God is in the details. Let's start with 'Content dictates form', which addresses how the form of a song has to derive from what that song is trying to say.

The plot of *Night Music* concerns Desiree, an actress whose string of previous relationships includes the lawyer Fredrik, who is now married to Anne, aged 18. After eleven months, their marriage has not been consummated. Fredrik takes Anne to the theatre to see Desiree in a performance. The encounter causes Fredrik and Desiree to make love. However, Desiree currently has a lover, Count Carl-Magnus, who is married to the long-suffering Charlotte but is possessive of Desiree. The progress of the plot is to work out how Carl-Magnus and Charlotte, and Desiree and Fredrik, can change partners and get back together again; and one of the solutions is for Anne to run off with Fredrik's son Henrik, thus leaving Fredrik free for Desiree, who no longer requires Carl-Magnus.

The context of 'Send in the Clowns' is the climactic scene in Act 2, in which Desiree un masks herself from her usual impulse to 'act' in real life and tells Fredrik the truth: she would like to get back together with him and recognises that she is the love of her life. He responds in a way that makes it clear that he is tempted but remains committed to his marriage to Anne; and Desiree responds in turn with 'Send in the Clowns', a song of regret in which she expresses the opinion that they've both been fools. (During the course of the song, he leaves the room, and she completes the song on her own.)

I've been fortunate to gain the support of the Sondheim Trust in preparation for this lecture, and they have kindly allowed me to reproduce many of his manuscripts and drafts for this song. We can see from these that Sondheim began by sketching out ideas for what the dramatic moment for the song was going to be, possibly in discussion with the director, Hal Prince (who certainly suggested that this scene should contain a song for Desiree rather than Fredrik, as was the original idea; Sondheim wrote it at high speed a couple of days before the end of the rehearsals for the show). These sketches show that initially, Fredrik came to visit Desiree in her bedroom, expressed uncertainty about why he was there, and Desiree was to explain in song that he had come to be 'saved' by her (i.e., rescued from his unhappy marriage). In the end, the song almost does the opposite: Fredrik says he does not want to be saved and Desiree opens her heart, expressing regret in short melodic fragments.

Sondheim explained he was inspired by Rachmaninov in writing the music for the song: in the lecture we'll briefly consider how he drew from the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* and to some extent the slow movement of the Second Piano Concerto to create both the accompaniment (continuous triplets) and melody (short phrases to suit both the limitations of the actress for whom the song was written and the breathlessness of the character in the scene). I will also explore Sondheim's musical sketches for the song, which show he wrote out three ideas that he abandoned, followed by a page of eight fragments that he

developed into the music we know and love. The bridge of the song (the part that starts ‘Just when I’d stopped opening doors’) seems to have come to him almost exactly as it appears in the show; the outer sections required more refinement.

It seems the music was written in tandem with the lyrics, one of the benefits of having the same person write both words and music (something Sondheim shares with Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Frank Loesser and Noel Coward, but not many of the other great songwriters for musicals). Sondheim’s sketches for the lyrics are especially rich and reveal his fertile creative instincts. One page of sketches has 97 distinct ideas for the song’s lyrics; we’ll look at this in the lecture to help us appreciate how writing this kind of song is like putting together a complex jigsaw, with the added challenge of having to create the pieces as well as putting them together.

Why is the song called ‘Send in the Clowns’? Audiences can be confused upon first encountering this title, but Sondheim explained on numerous occasions that this was a reference to the practice in the circus of sending in the clowns when something goes wrong. Desiree is telling Fredrik that there’s no need to send in the clowns: ‘Don’t bother, they’re here.’ ‘Clowns’ also derives from the theatrical language of the song, which Sondheim evokes both because Desiree is an actress and also because she’s not actually acting on this occasion – hence lines such as ‘Making my entrance again with my usual flair’. This provides wonderful material for a great actress to deliver, hence the history of figures such as Judi Dench and Jean Simmons performing it.

Reception

The song provided the perfect showcase for Glynis Johns (1923-2024), the actress who first performed it on Broadway. Best known for appearing as Mrs Banks in Disney’s beloved *Mary Poppins*, Johns was a versatile dramatic actress who had made impressive contributions to a range of British and Hollywood films but was an unusual choice for a musical. In fact, her distinctive voice and intense acting ability were admired when she regularly stopped the show with ‘Send in the Clowns’, and the reviews of her performance become, if anything, more appreciative as the months go on. *Variety* praised her for her ‘effortless conviction’ when the show opened in February 1973 but when the original cast album was recorded and released in April, the *New York Times* talked about ‘the climactic “Send in the Clowns,” sung with haunting effect by Glynis Johns in her sensuously musical croak.’ *Newsweek* added its own comments: ‘a moving bittersweet song, which Glynis Johns as the actress delivers in the classic *disease* tradition of Mabel Mercer and Edith Piaf.’ As for the *Washington Post*, it said her ‘singing of “Send in the Clowns” isn’t singing at all, but it is a thrillingly heartbreaking whisper, a classic moment.’ Talking to *The Hollywood Reporter* in July of that year, Johns said it was her favourite song to sing in the show, adding that it ‘is very difficult to do because you walk a fine line in making it work.’ By January 1974, the *New Statesman*’s correspondent offered the following assessment: ‘Miss Johns does a hauntingly broken-voiced rendering of the hit song “Send in the Clowns”’. Clearly Johns offered something unusual, but when she was replaced by Jean Simmons in the US tour and original London production, there was appreciation for Simmons’s approach too: ‘Jean Simmons as the actress-mistress makes you wonder how four simple words like “Send in the Clowns” can be so curiously affecting...’ wrote the *Guardian*. Less successful was the 1977 film adaptation with Elizabeth Taylor as Desiree: the poster for the show optimistically declaimed ‘Send in the Clowns...Send in the Crowds...’ but it bombed.

From showstopper to standard

In talking of showstoppers, we should not get them mixed up with standards, defined by the OED as ‘Something (esp. a tune or song) of established and long-lasting popularity.’ Songs that stop the show do not necessarily become of long-lasting popularity, and vice versa; but it’s perfectly possible for some songs to tick both boxes. As it happens, ‘Send in the Clowns’ managed to do just that. Frank Sinatra recorded a much-admired version on his comeback album in 1973, marred only by Gordon Jenkins’s arrangement that changed some of the harmonies (much to Sondheim’s chagrin). Other popular artists, including Bobby Short and Shirley Bassey (just two of the artists of Black heritage that have made particularly successful versions, followed by Judy Collins, whose 1975 recording won the Grammy for Best Song in 1976. This solidified the song’s status as Sondheim’s most successful opus. In an interview with *The Stage* in November 1975, he commented: ‘It baffles me... I have written a lot of easy tunes, but no one likes to record my stuff; and it’s significant that the success happened two years after the show opened. But I’m not

so sure that the title song from *Hello, Dolly!*, say, would have been a hit if Louis Armstrong hadn't recorded it. Hits are flukes and when someone makes a recording, it captures the imagination of the record buying public and then becomes a hit.' Such is the nature of art: the creator puts it into society, and society decides its destiny.

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Further Reading

Key reading for anyone wishing to follow up on 'Send in the Clowns' is Mark Eden Horowitz's article from *The Sondheim Review* (Winter 2005): 'Biography of a Song: Send in the Clowns' in which he considers many of the manuscripts I am looking at here. Horowitz's work is enhanced by insights from Sondheim himself.

In addition:

Stephen Banfield, *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals*, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Martin Gottfried, *Sondheim*, Harry N. Abrams, 1993.

Mark Eden Horowitz, *Major Details and Minor Decisions*, Rowan and Littlefield, 2019.

Meryle Secrest, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, Knopf, 1998.

Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*, Virgin Books, 2011.

Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Found his Sound*, University of Michigan Press, 2005.

Craig Zadan, *Sondheim and Co*, Harper and Row, 1986.

Primary Sources

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Filmography

A Little Night Music, 1974

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