

## **Side by Side by Sondheim @ The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis**

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Additional Music by Leonard Bernstein, Mary Rodgers, Richard Rodgers, and Jule Styne

Conceived by Ned Sherrin

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After the passing of Stephen Sondheim in late 2021, the world began to put the composer's body of work into perspective, with many theatre companies all over the globe mounting endless productions of his musicals and performing special concerts paying tribute to this absolute legend of the musical canon. With his penchant for melodic complexity, brilliant use of tone, and lyrics that sing deeply of the human condition, Stephen Sondheim cemented himself as the favorite composer of many musical theatre fans and artists, myself included. He was truly a game-changer in the field of songwriting, treating his work with the same insight and meticulousness as the writing of a straight play, and the effects of his groundbreaking genius will continue to be felt for generations to come.

*Side by Side by Sondheim*, a musical revue celebrating Sondheim's early work, is the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis' first production of a Sondheim property since his passing, and the first after their award-winning, critically-acclaimed productions of *Follies* and *Sunday in the Park with George*. But both of those productions were from a completely different era of the Rep's history; in the years since, we now have brand new leadership, brand new venues, and brand new programming. So, in what was purported to be their send-off to the greatest musical theatre composer who ever lived, it was our hope that the Rep would open the doors to a brand new way of looking at Sondheim's work, a brand new point of view that would give us a deeper appreciation for this incredible artist. Instead, the Rep took a giant step backward, floundering ass-over-tits every inch of the way.

Right when I entered the theater, I noticed at least four red flags that let me know this production of *Side by Side by Sondheim* was resting on a shaky foundation. I encountered the first red flag before the show even opened; the Rep was originally going to present another Sondheim revue, *Putting It Together*, before replacing it with *Side by Side* mere weeks before rehearsals. After doing some research, I found that *Putting It Together* is not only a much more comprehensive revue that covers the majority of the Sondheim canon, but it also attempts to "put them together" into a cohesive plotline. *Side by Side*, on the other hand, only covers Sondheim's work up to *Pacific Overtures*, and its structure is exactly like *Jerry's Girls* in that it's just the songs slapped together with no plot. The fact that the Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, the premiere professional theatre of the St. Louis region, would choose to go in this direction is baffling to me.

The second red flag is the narrator. *Side by Side* is also like *Jerry's Girls* in that the songs are divided into sections based on specific themes that are explained by a narrator. Originally, one of the four onstage singers was going to be the narrator until they were replaced at the last

minute by local veteran actor Alan Knoll. The show program still credits the original narrator, the decision was that last minute. Despite reading from notecards, Mr. Knoll knows how to work a crowd and he transforms his misreads into decent comedic moments. But I do have to wonder if Mr. Knoll was brought on board so late in the process because of availability, or if director Reggie D. White had so little confidence in the presenting abilities of his singers. Given the absence of Knoll's name in the final program, the evidence is pretty damning.

The third red flag is the fact that this show has six production assistants. There's an assistant costume designer, an assistant lighting designer, an assistant sound designer, an assistant projection designer, and two assistant directors. *Side by Side by Sondheim* is a revue featuring four singers and two pianos – it's a very bare-bones show; you don't need this many assistants to keep it afloat. You could make the argument that the assistants are all interns, but if that's the case, why do they all have their own individual credits? Again, one has to wonder if Mr. White did not trust the main production crew to do good work on their own and tried to get more hands on deck to save the ship. In any case, the "interns" are Benji Arrigo, Kaleb Babb, Jonah Boblin, Raiyon Hunter, Josh Hoon Lee, and Josh Nguyen.

And finally, red flag number four: the preshow music. It was literally just a generic Broadway medley. Yes, a good chunk of the preshow was Sondheim music, but the second that I detected "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" in the playlist, that was the last straw for me. That was the moment I knew for a fact that the people involved in this production just didn't care. Yes, I know that is extremely nitpicky, but I'm a musical theatre turbo-nerd and a Sondheim uberfan. If your show is a Sondheim revue, you have to set the tone with a Sondheim preshow. Have these people even seen a Sondheim show, or been involved in one? Once the show started, my suspicions only got worse.

The four onstage singers are Phoenix Best, Paul HeeSang Miller, Saidu Sinlah, and Amy Spanger; I refuse to call them a "quartet" because they only rarely behave as such. Director Reggie D. White staged the show in such a way that every song is an individual scene, with the actors only appearing all together in a few of them. Even when we get to the moments they do interact, they have very little chemistry and their performances mostly rely on schtick. Their performances lack the depth, sophistication, and polish that is crucial for a Sondheim property. All of these actors have been on Broadway (as was made apparent in the song "Broadway Baby"), but you wouldn't believe it based on this production alone. It was as if Mr. White and musical director Tre'von Griffith instructed the performers to hold themselves back so as not to overpower each other or the pianos, deftly played by Kris Pineda and Stephen A. Eros. Directing a performer to hold back on their rendition of a Sondheim song is completely antithetical to how the music should be performed. As a result, we get a group of very talented Broadway veterans who are constantly struggling to enunciate, stay on key, hit high notes, harmonize, and not feel like a bunch of jackasses parading around in Oona Natesan's tacky costumes, which are particularly unflattering when paired up with Heather Beal's lazy choreography. It doesn't help either that Sharath Patel's sound design doesn't enhance the singer's voices very well, compounding their ability to "finish the hat", as it were.

The performances are set against projections designed by Camilla Tassi, augmented by Xavier Pierce's lights, both production designers that, along with the pianists, feel like the only ones who are actually trying. But again, I have to wonder if you really need all of those visual bells and whistles. The word I would use to describe this show is "overproduced." *Side by Side by Sondheim* is a revue that you could stage with just the four actors onstage the entire time, dressed in simple formal wear, delivering beautiful songs with lovely voices. The fact that the Rep chose to go down this road of overproducing the hell out of it is mindboggling.

I'm going to keep it a buck: this is cringe. There is literally no other word for it but "cringe." The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis' production of *Side by Side by Sondheim* was the first show I've ever encountered that got every single thing wrong: the directing, the acting, the dancing, the visuals, the ambiance – everything about this show was just one big bad idea from the start. This show feels like one of those high school talent shows that imploded before it opened, implementing production decisions for the sake of self-preservation rather than genuinely trying properly represent an artist's life, work, and philosophy. Hell, I've seen high school theatre productions that don't make two hours feel like a fucking eternity.

The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis should be embarrassed and ashamed that this is on one of their stages. The premiere professional theatre of the St. Louis region tried to give us a tribute to the greatest musical theatre artist of all time but ended up delivering weak sauce singing and staging, and some awkward, distasteful jokes that would make Stephen Sondheim roll in his grave. I had to personally apologize to the person I attended this show with for wasting their time. The Rep's *Side by Side by Sondheim* is the worst musical I've ever had to review since I started this blog. I hated, hated, hated, hated every goddamned minute of this show; this is the angriest I have ever been at a musical production in several years. Considering the pedigree the Rep has with Sondheim, this infuriates me to no end.

TL;DR – this show fucking sucks, review over, bye.