on writing

A PUBLICATION OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, EAST

IN THIS ISSUE: Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

The number of musicals that have been written in their entirety by one person are few and far between; musical theater is the one form of writing that almost always demands collaboration. So it is quite remarkable that, as a student at Yale Law School, John Weidman decided what he really wanted to be was a musical book writer. Even more remarkable, he got his chance: he sent a play that he wrote to Hal Prince, who saw it as a musical and enlisted the help of Stephen Sondheim. The result was *Pacific Overtures*. And it was the first of many collaborations.

In this issue, Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman talk about the work they've done both together and with others. Also in this issue, we are printing some samples of their work and examples of the *way* they work.

The Back Page features excerpts from a new book written by Jenny Allen and illustrated by Jules Feiffer.

—Arlene Hellerman

Front cover illustration by Herb Gardner

Stephen Sondheim AND John Weidman

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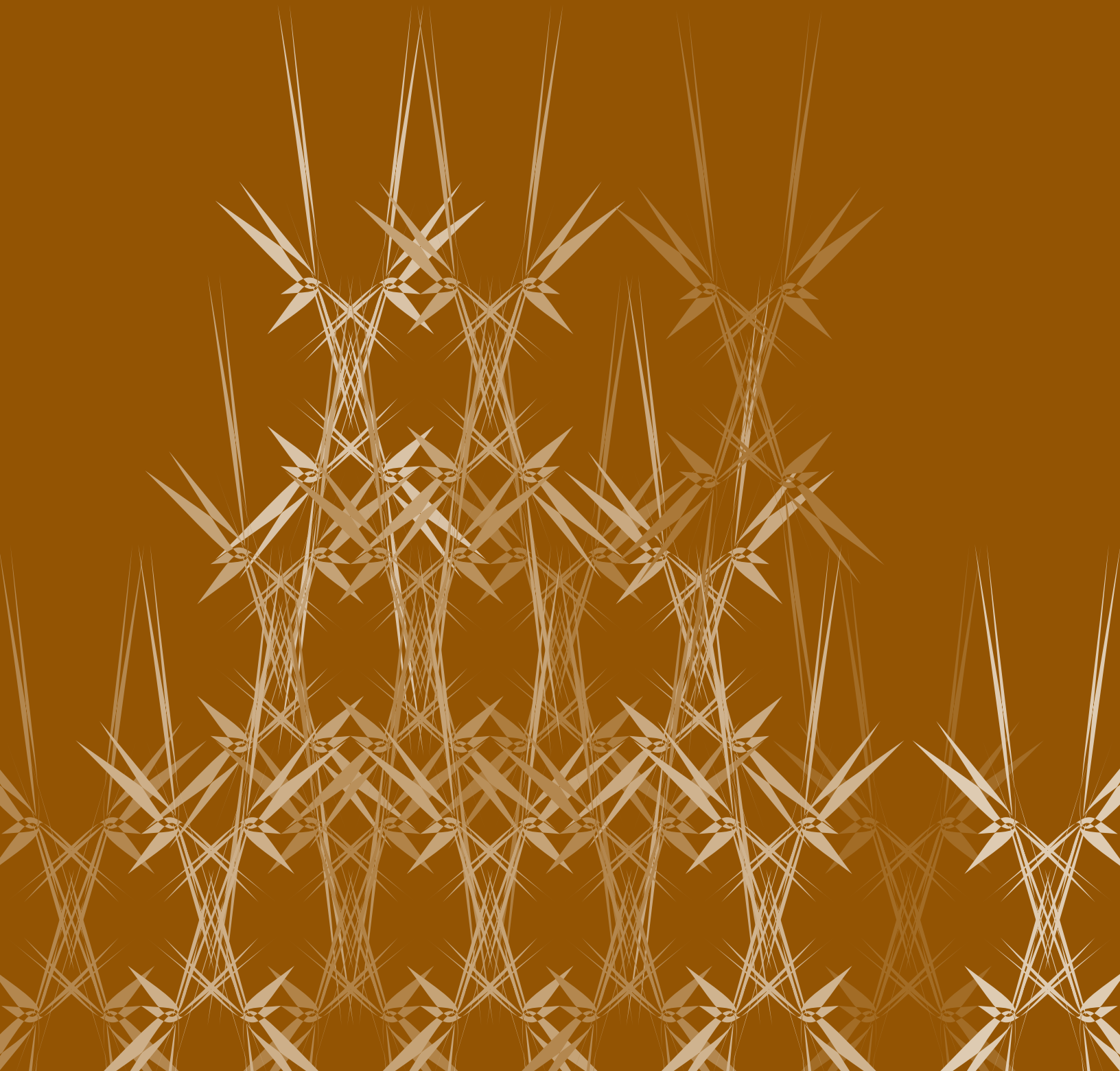


ON WRITING: How do you guys work together—and do you each work differently with other people you collaborate with?

SONDHEIM: I work with John the way I worked with James Goldman and James Lapine—well, of course there's an exception because in the case of *Assassins* we talked about it a great deal and then John virtually wrote the entire thing as a draft.

WEIDMAN: Yes, but by the time I went away to write we had a very clear sense of what the structure of the piece was, not what all the elements would be, but what most of them would be. That was a show where I felt it was important to write a finished draft before I gave anything to Steve. It's got such abrupt changes in tone that you really needed to read all the scenes in sequence; if you read one on its own you'd have no idea what was coming next.

SONDHEIM: Usually the way we write is, we talk about the plot and about the characters and where songs would be useful and where they might not. And then John goes home and starts to write and creates the characters and creates the diction, and meanwhile I sort of collect ideas. And then after a couple of scenes, when I get to know his characters the way he's created them, I start imitating. That's primarily what I do as a songwriter with most of the librettists I work with, which is to imitate them, to imitate their styles and to get inside the skins of the characters they create.

WEIDMAN: *Pacific Overtures* is another exception—

SONDHEIM: Oh, yeah.

WEIDMAN: —Because that show started in a different way. It started as a straight play which Hal Prince was going to produce on Broadway. I was coming into town for auditions and it looked as though the whole thing was going to go forward and then Hal stopped it and said it felt to him as though the story wanted to be musicalized. What I heard was, "I'm not going to do your play." I didn't hear it's going be musicalized. But he passed it on to Steve and after a certain amount of back and forth we went ahead.

SONDHEIM: Hal sent it to me and I didn't see that it sang—or hear that it sang—but I thought it certainly could use background music and I offered to do that. And Hal said, "I wish you'd think about it more deeply and live with it a little bit." And over a period of a month I saw a way into it. But after that the process remained: we would discuss the characters and the scenes and how the songs would be used.

WEIDMAN: Yes, that's correct.

SONDHEIM: It was the same process, two writers working together to make a play into a musical, which is not dissimilar to making an idea into a musical.

WEIDMAN: What seems to me to be the essential ingredient in that kind of collaboration is something you can't put your finger on and it has to do with a shared sensibility; if it's present it's very powerful and if it's absent you're in a lot of trouble. One of the reasons I have been so comfortable talking things back and forth with Steve is that the exchange of ideas seems to be very fruitful and takes us in a direction that neither of us might have thought of individually. I have worked with other people where almost no amount of talking is helpful because you're really not on the same page. And in those cases sometimes I've gone away and written a draft first so I can get down on paper at least what I think the shape and the content of the show is supposed to be. But if you start out feeling as though you're talking at cross purposes, it's usually a signal that the collaboration isn't going to work.

SONDHEIM: And sometimes it takes a long time to find that out.

WEIDMAN: Yeah, it does.

ON WRITING: Stephen, you said you found a way into *Pacific Overtures*. What was it?

SONDHEIM: It was a specific musical thing that I discovered. I was looking for a musical style. I didn't want to make fake, Oriental "playing on the black keys" kind of music. And one evening I was up at Leonard Bernstein's for dinner and he took a long phone call—and he had a harpsichord. I started to fiddle with the harpsichord while he was on the phone and I don't know what possessed me, but I put one forearm on one manual and another forearm on the other manual and just gently let my weight go down on them. And the plucking sounds that came out of the harpsichord as I did that suggested a way of approaching the music. I put it together—I don't know what the unconscious connection was—with the guitar feeling of Manuel de Falla. He had a very distinctive harmonic style that was based on Spanish guitar tuning and it was not unlike the Japanese scale. And putting those two things together made it work for me, I could make a connection with my own feeling about Western music because I loved de Falla's music and knew it very well. Somehow all those connections were made and I thought, okay that's the way into this piece.

WEIDMAN: Also, *Pacific Overtures* started as a straight play, I had never imagined it as something which would become a musical. It covered a much briefer timespan than the musical ultimately did. I found a copy of it a couple of years ago and it does not feel like a musical at all. In fact, when we moved away from the play and into the process of re-imagining the narrative in musical terms, the story changed. The basic idea of the fisherman who becomes a samurai and the samurai who becomes westernized was always at the heart of the piece, but everything else changed and became more stylized and more interesting.

SONDHEIM: It was a much more politically oriented play as I remember it, though I don't remember it that well. The first scene was in the president's office, I believe?

WEIDMAN: No, that was the second scene. The first scene took place on the hanamichi, the Kabuki runway that runs through the house. The Dutch ambassador, in order to show proper deference, crawled on his belly the length of the hanamichi in order to let the shogun know that the American ships were coming.

SONDHEIM: Sounds like a musical to me.

WEIDMAN: Yeah, it sounds great. But the play was very tightly constructed and the most imaginative thing about it was the choice of the subject matter, rather than the way in which it was executed.

SONDHEIM: It was traditional in the way I think of the plays of Robert Sherwood and the political playwrights of the '30s.

WEIDMAN: Yes.

SONDHEIM: In which you make points through character and situation and plot, and you're examining various attitudes towards whatever point you're making. And it was very clear. It was not didactic but it was a *play* play.

WEIDMAN: When I went back and reread it, I was very pleased that Hal had interrupted the process of producing it in order to reimagine it as a musical. *Pacific Overtures* was an example of something which was not purely an author's piece. Hal and Steve had done a whole series of shows together at that point and Hal, from the very beginning, was very interested as a director in telling a story using some version of Japanese theatrical techniques.

SONDHEIM: Which is I'm sure what turned him onto the piece in the first place. Certainly, he thought it was an interesting play. But as a director he got really excited because of the possibility of using Kabuki techniques.

WEIDMAN: Yeah, he did. Just what a New York audience was waiting for.

ON WRITING: It didn't do well?

WEIDMAN: Well, it's interesting. It ran for about six months on Broadway the first time around but it got wildly mixed reviews. A lot of times when people say something got mixed reviews, they mean it got lukewarm reviews.

SONDHEIM: Polarized. Red and blue state—

WEIDMAN: *Newsweek* thought it was a work of genius and *Time* magazine thought it was trash, or the other way around. And it really went that way right down the line.

SONDHEIM: Alistair Cooke said it was one of the most important events in the theatrical history of the United States and other people said, what is this piece of pretentious nonsense.

WEIDMAN: Very confusing to me. I thought the fact that Hal Prince and Stephen Sondheim had decided to do my show meant I had it made. But it turns out life is more complicated.

SONDHEIM: *West Side Story*, in a less dramatic way—because it was my first show—there were people who loved it and people who just really loathed it.

ON WRITING: People loathed *West Side Story*?

SONDHEIM: Of course, of course. It's all about this ugly gang. What is that doing in a musical? Meredith Wilson wrote an angry column in *The New York Times*—I shouldn't say angry, it wasn't angry, it was folksy because it was Meredith Wilson—about there are certain things that don't belong on the musical stage and one of them is juvenile delinquency.

ON WRITING: Wow.

SONDHEIM: I misquote, that is not exactly what he said. But that's what he said.

ON WRITING: Does the critical reaction affect you?

SONDHEIM: It's only important insofar as it affects the box office. It's good for your ego when you read something nice about yourself and bad for your ego when you read something not nice, even if you have no respect for the person who wrote it. Which is a very good reason not to read reviews.

ON WRITING: Do you read reviews?

SONDHEIM: I don't read reviews except *The New York Times* until long after the show, unless somebody points me to a specific review. What I usually do is collect them all, put them away and then maybe read them many years later. I still haven't read the reviews on *Passion* because I heard that they were all similar.

WEIDMAN: The story of *Assassins* speaks to this. When *Assassins* opened at Playwrights Horizons in 1990 the critics were uniformly negative except for David Richards in the Sunday *Times*, who loved it.

SONDHEIM: By which time it was too late.

WEIDMAN: Yeah. The critics were either angry or contemptuous—I mean the reviews were just bad. And because the show dealt with such risky material to begin with, it really felt like a blow. I took it personally—I'm not quite sure what I mean by that—but it was very demoralizing because it felt like people wouldn't see what we had written. And that really turned out to be the case. It closed at Playwrights.

ON WRITING: You were hoping it would go to Broadway?

WEIDMAN: Well, yes and no.

SONDHEIM: It's not a matter of Broadway—

WEIDMAN: —It's about an audience that would have gone but didn't get the chance. If you're pleased with a show and proud of it—and I think both Steve and I felt then as we feel now that when we finished *Assassins* we'd done exactly

time it's been done since then, it's been done differently.

ON WRITING: Do certain plays lend themselves more to different interpretations?

SONDHEIM: I would have thought so. I used to make jokes that anybody who wants to restage *Sunday in the Park with George* has a lot of trouble because it's about Seurat. You can't have him cut his ear off at the end of the first act, for example. And then this new production in London is startling in terms of its approach to the piece. So I would have said up until a couple of months ago the answer to your question is, yes, some pieces have to be done or should be done almost exactly the way they were done originally. Now I don't think so.

ON WRITING: But could you restage *Oklahoma!* in a radically different way?

SONDHEIM: I don't know. Until three months ago I would have said, no, of course not.

WEIDMAN: But I'm sure it's been done—maybe those aren't productions we've seen but, I mean, there have been God knows how many productions of *Oklahoma!*.

SONDHEIM: I'm not sure.

WEIDMAN: I challenge that. I insist that it's been done differently.

ON WRITING: Maybe it could be like Shakespeare where you take all the characters in *Oklahoma!* and put them in the South Bronx.

SONDHEIM: Eventually yeah, except they're talking about the West. Shakespeare is so far removed from us we'll accept anything. And maybe in 200 years if anybody wants to do *Oklahoma!* it would be done.

WEIDMAN: I saw *Sunday in the Park* at the National in London in 1990, and it had a lot in common with the New York production but still there were variations—

SONDHEIM: Variations, yeah, but it wasn't really a fresh take. Whereas this new production of *Sunday* was done with an entirely different approach.

WEIDMAN: It's very exciting when you get a director who really understands what your intention was and is able to tease it out beyond the text, which Joe Mantello did with *Assassins*, it just makes you feel good. It makes you feel grateful.

ON WRITING: It's interesting to hear you talk about directors because one of the things screenwriters always talk about is an envy of playwrights because theater is a playwright's medium and the director's contribution is just bringing the writer's vision to life. But you're really talking about directors as collaborators almost re-envisioning your work.

SONDHEIM: Well, no. The great thing a director has in the theater when he wants to do a revival is a complete new canvas to paint the show with. That's one of the things I think would make wanting to be a director attractive, because you can do *Hamlet* in your own individual way and that sort of thing. But you're talking about the reinvention or the redoing, the renovation, the re-whatever it is of something that's established. And that's not necessarily a collaboration because again, just to use my most recent experience, the director of *Sunday in the Park with George* had no communication with Lapine and me. He just went ahead and did it.

ON WRITING: Can they do that?

SONDHEIM: Sure.

ON WRITING: Legally?

SONDHEIM: Sure, sure.

what we wanted to—you want people to see it. Sam Mendes did it in London the next year where the critical reaction was exactly the opposite. The reviews were uniformly enthusiastic. It wasn't until Joe Mantello did it at the Roundabout that it got resurrected here in New York. And for it to win the Tony Award—going up on stage at Radio City Music Hall after the experience 15 years previously of wanting to wear Groucho glasses when I left my house so I wouldn't be attacked in the streets, it was pretty unreal.

SONDHEIM: I had the reverse reaction, also in London, when *Sweeney Todd* was done there the first time. The critics tromped on it with all feet. They just loathed it and it closed in three months in a commercial production. When it got redone years later by Declan Donnellan at the National Theatre, suddenly they all loved it a lot.

ON WRITING: It's an interesting thing that you've both had the experience of having seen your work done a number of times by different directors. What's that experience like? Because a lot of playwrights and songwriters—lyricists? What is the name for—

SONDHEIM: Well, a songwriter is somebody who writes songs and a lyricist is somebody who writes lyrics.

ON WRITING: So you're a songwriter?

SONDHEIM: Yeah.

ON WRITING: It sounds so pedestrian for what you do.

SONDHEIM: It's funny you say that. The first plane trip I shared with Leonard Bernstein going over to London, we were filling out the customs form and where you write your profession on the thing I started to write "songwriter." He looked over my shoulder and said, "Write poet, write poet." I always write songwriter, although there's not enough space for such a long word. But to answer your question, it's always wonderful that a piece has enough vitality to be not only revived but revived with a different approach. A lot of shows are revived but they're done pretty much the way they were in the original. When you have a show like *Assassins*—or in the case of *Sweeney Todd* now—with an entirely different approach, it means that they're alive. And that's the thing about the theater, a piece is alive as long as there are people who want to perform it. Whereas in the movies they always give the same performances, same sets.

WEIDMAN: One of the things that happened in the commercial theater I guess about 20 years ago—I'll say it's noteworthy because that's a neutral way of describing it—was the idea of replicating a show in exactly the same way every place around the world as if it were a movie. One of the pleasures of writing for the theater is the experience, it's not always pleasant but overall it is, of seeing the different ways in which somebody will take what you've written and express it on stage.

SONDHEIM: Wait a minute, wasn't that true of *Oklahoma!*? That was done the same way all over the world surely. Or am I missing the point?

WEIDMAN: Well, there were 19 productions of *Les Miz*, I think, at one point running around the world.

SONDHEIM: Simultaneously.

WEIDMAN: Simultaneously. With exactly the same set, exactly the same—

SONDHEIM: Well surely all the companies of *Oklahoma!* that were going around at the same time, there may not have been 19 but let's say there were eight.

WEIDMAN: If they were touring companies or spinoffs of the Broadway production, yes. But the notion that a show could run for 20 years in 19 different places in exactly the same way—*Assassins* is an example of what I'm talking about. It ran for a couple of months down at Playwrights. Every

WEIDMAN: They cannot change a word of dialogue or a lyric, they can't change the music. What makes it a playwright's medium—including in the musical theater—is the control the author has over the content of the piece. Which is not a control any screenwriter has over the content of his screenplay. In the theater the playwright—

SONDHEIM: —The writer is legally king. The most the director can do is say, "I want to change a scene." If the writer says, "No, I won't change the scene," the director can say, "Okay, in that case I won't direct your play." And that's up to the playwright.

ON WRITING: Right. But something like, for instance, the current revival of *Sweeney Todd*—

SONDHEIM: The director started taking cuts and made some changes because of the necessity of having a small cast. I either approved or, with the cuts I thought were unnecessary, worked with him to make the scenes viable so they could be staged. I was perfectly aware that if you have a total of 10 people on stage you can't have a marketplace scene with 25 people in it. What do you do about that? You can't even have a marketplace with five people in it because they're all playing instruments. And that was true with *Sunday in the Park with George* at the National where the director wanted to add people to one scene and take some away from another, James Lapine and I either approved, disapproved or consulted with him on how to do it. And in fact, Sam Mendes did the same thing with *Assassins*. He came to us and said, "I'd like to do this and I'd like to do that," but Sam could have done, without consulting John or me, any production he wished at the Donmar, as long as he didn't change a word—

WEIDMAN: —He couldn't change the text.

ON WRITING: The Donmar Theatre is in London?

SONDHEIM: Yes, that was Sam's theater.

WEIDMAN: For example, in *Assassins* there's a character named Sam Byck who hijacked an airplane and his intention was to fly it into the White House and kill Richard Nixon. Byck participates in some of the group songs later in the show, but basically he delivers two monologues and that's how he expresses himself. Sam thought the monologues should be combined. I remember him saying not even Shakespeare would give a character two monologues unless something had happened to him in between. And I thought, oh well, all right, Shakespeare. And Steve and I talked about it and I said, "You know what, it really ought to stay the way it is. Let's leave it alone." And that was it. Had it been a film, it would have been a very different process.

SONDHEIM: There were tiny little cuts he asked for, and John would think about it and if he thought, okay that's not a bad idea, he agreed. But if John hadn't been around or John said, "No, don't change a thing, I'm going off to the Bahamas," Sam would either have to accede or not do the show.

ON WRITING: Some screenwriters and directors say, once they do the movie that's it, they don't want to look at it, it's done. And here you have to keep looking at your work. And if you look at it 10 years later do you say, "I can't believe I did that," or, "I want to redo that...."

SONDHEIM: Yes, of course. And that's the fun. You can't do that with film. You can't say, "Oy, did I misdirect that scene. It's supposed to be funny." Too late, the actors are dead, they're under contract to another studio. I mean, you can't do it. But here you've got a whole group of new actors and you say, "Let's try the scene backwards." And you look at it and you say, "That was a terrible idea. Let's try the scene with a song." It's great.

WEIDMAN: *Pacific Overtures*, which opened on Broadway in 1976, was done at the Roundabout two years ago. But I looked at this scene in the first act—we call it the boat scene—and it just went on and on. And I thought, I can't stand to

stand in the back of the theater and look at this. And I figured out a way to make a big cut, it was like a page. Steve and I discussed it. He said, "No, no, leave it alone." And then I called him back and he said, "Well read me the cut...." I read him the change, and it made a huge difference in the way the scene landed with the audience.

SONDHEIM: That's another thing that happens, of course, and Shakespeare's a perfect example. As time goes on, audiences' sensibilities and impatiences change. Four or five hours of Shakespeare seemed perfectly okay in 1583 but not so good today at Shakespeare in the Park. So you cut a lot.

ON WRITING: Right.

SONDHEIM: It even happens in one generation. Maybe John wouldn't have felt so impatient with his scene in 1976.

WEIDMAN: That's very possible.

SONDHEIM: One of the reasons all the Pulitzer Prize-winning plays of the 1930s and '20s aren't done anymore is that you stop and think, I get it, I get it, let's get on with it—because it's just spelling things out to the audience. These audiences have been exposed to MTV, and like a goat going from mountain crack to mountain crack, they know how to get to the next point without having to see someone drive the car up to the garage, park it, all that. So John's sensibility has changed along with the audiences'.

WEIDMAN: Yeah. Back in the '80s Tim Crouse and I wrote a new book for *Anything Goes*—Jerry Zaks' production at Lincoln Center with Patti LuPone and Howard McGillin. We started with the 1934 script and there would be pages and pages and pages of dialogue before you got to a song and then more pages and pages. The quality of the writing was quite funny, and very good people had written it.

ON WRITING: Who wrote the book?

WEIDMAN: P.G. Wodehouse and Guy Bolton—and then [Howard] Lindsay and [Russel] Crouse had rewritten what they wrote because they'd gone back to England. But no contemporary audience would sit still for a musical that was rhythmed in that way. So the task became to maintain the flavor and the spirit of the piece so that it felt like 1934 but to make it move in a way that a contemporary audience would be comfortable with. And it's the same thing that Steve's talking about.

SONDHEIM: Virtually any so-called classic musical needs that. They didn't do it with the recent production of *Oklahoma!* and the result was, it was endless.

ON WRITING: Herb Gardner used to talk about his relationship with Bob Fosse and Paddy Chayefsky where they all showed each other their work and gave each other notes. Do you have people who you show your work to and get notes from?

SONDHEIM: It depends on how many opinions you want. There's one person I count on to look at something and give me an opinion, and a couple of other people who I sort of count on. But the problem is, you don't want too many cooks because you do get as many opinions.

WEIDMAN: Yeah.

SONDHEIM: When you're in previews and playing in front of an audience you want opinions from perhaps one or two people who are professionals, who can say something that is valuable.

WEIDMAN: And of course, in previews the best opinion you get is the reaction you're getting from the audience.

ON WRITING: Can you think of an example?

WEIDMAN: I could talk about the scene I cut in *Pacific Overtures*. The reason I was so uncomfortable standing in back is I could sense that the audience was losing patience with the scene. They were

tolerating it and they were paying attention but you just feel what's not working. And with comedy, if people don't laugh, they don't laugh.

ON WRITING: Right.

WEIDMAN: You can tell yourself, I don't care what they think, it's hilarious—but it's not. It's harder with things that are not comedic. But you develop a sense of when the audience is riveted and when they're waiting for something that is going to be riveting.

SONDHEIM: But sometimes you can misread that.

WEIDMAN: Yes, you can.

ON WRITING: In what way?

SONDHEIM: Sometimes they're not laughing, but it's because they're absorbed.

ON WRITING: Right.

SONDHEIM: And other times you *tell* yourself that they're not laughing because they're absorbed. It's hard to make that distinction. And if you have an *amicus curiae* in the audience whose opinion is both objective and professional, that person can say they're bored or that person can say, leave it alone, they're absorbed. I'm exaggerating now but that's exactly it.

WEIDMAN: And also performances take time to develop. Often you can get caught between trying to decide whether the material is deficient or whether the performance is not finished yet. And if you're insecure, the way I certainly am and most people are, I immediately assume it needs to be rewritten. And you can do that too soon.

SONDHEIM: The crucial and hardest thing about theater is to let the piece develop its own rhythm. I truly believe in changing nothing in the first three or four performances. Nothing. Let the actors get used to different audiences. I'm talking about during previews. And then you can start to look at it and say, that's the author's fault, that's the director's fault, that's the cast's fault—whatever that is. But you've got to let it play. Otherwise you go into a panic.

ON WRITING: How long do you have in the preview process to really work on the show?

WEIDMAN: In a commercial production there tend to be fewer previews because the producer needs to get the show opened so it can be reviewed—that's the moment when the tickets are either going to sell or they aren't. But if you're doing something at a not-for-profit theater—and this was true of *Anything Goes* which was done at Lincoln Center and *Assassins* which was done at Playwrights Horizons—often, since the producers are dealing with a subscription audience, the official opening can be held off till quite late in the run which gives you the luxury of an extended period to work with the material.

SONDHEIM: In the old days when shows went out of town, like in the '50s and certainly earlier, the problem was you would go out of town and it would be a very specific schedule. It was usually a week in New Haven and then two weeks in Boston and maybe an extra week in either Philadelphia or Washington, around that. The point was you were to open on October 20. So you'll find that most of the shows of the '40s and '50s have okay first acts and dreadful second acts because there was no time to get to the second act. Because it takes longer than you think to put in new songs and things like that and to work through them. By the time the show came to New York they didn't have enough time to fix the second act. That's one of the reasons people changed from going on the road to opening in New York and playing the previews there until you get everything ready. The problem with that is you're under a microscope, audiences prepped by word of mouth and actors having their friends come backstage and saying, "This is terrible, you've got to get out of the show."

ON WRITING: And then the critics are coming during previews, aren't they?

SONDHEIM: There's a gentleman's—if that's the word for critics, which it isn't—agreement to hold off their reviews until they give an official date.

ON WRITING: So do the critics come opening night?

WEIDMAN: They used to all come opening night. Now they come to a series of designated performances that precede the opening night—

SONDHEIM: —But only three or four. You freeze the show three or four performances before and every critic sees the same show. But it's a limit of four at the most and that was, I believe, introduced by Hal for *Cabaret*. I think that was the first time anyone said, "I don't see why everything has to rise or fall on opening night." Because opening nights were either electric or, "Oy, Gott in himmel, she fell into the pit in the middle of her solo and they never heard the second chorus." And Hal said, why don't we invite the critics to come to any one of two or three or four performances as long as they all hold off writing their notices. It turned out not only to be valuable, it is now the way all shows open. And I remember a particular payoff, the critic for *The Daily News*, Doug Watt, came to see *Company* the first of those four performances and didn't like it but was intrigued enough to come back to the third and wrote a good review, having seen it twice.

ON WRITING: But you're still reworking the show—

SONDHEIM: No, not on the last three or four performances.

WEIDMAN: By then the work on the show is finished.

SONDHEIM: Usually, in fact, you freeze the show five or six performances before the official opening so the actors know they're playing exactly the same show tonight that they played last night with no changes of dialogue. So they're completely confident by the time the critics arrive.

ON WRITING: In film they have preview screenings for an audience and everybody knows they're previewing so it's not the same kind of public exposure.

SONDHEIM: Yeah, sure.

ON WRITING: And you can have time to work it through. But in theater, you're working this live thing through. Do you always go into previews knowing you have more work to do?

WEIDMAN: Yeah, absolutely. Always.

SONDHEIM: Always, always, always, always. Even if you've come from out of town, it's a different size stage, there's a different ambience, it's a New York audience.

WEIDMAN: And it appears that there's an enormous amount of time to work on the show and change it because after all they're only performing for two and a half hours each night. But there are eight performances a week and there are a lot of union rules that affect how much new work you can put in and when you can put it in—

SONDHEIM: —Rehearsal time.

WEIDMAN: —So that often you're looking at a show that has already been rewritten but the rewrites aren't on stage yet.

ON WRITING: Wow.

WEIDMAN: Which can be disorienting because it's like the real show's in my computer but the audience is sitting in front of something different and they're looking at it and developing opinions.

SONDHEIM: For example, if you write a song and everybody says, okay that works, and you rehearse it. But then it has to be orchestrated, then it has to be staged. Now, you can't just orchestrate and put it in that evening because you have to have an orchestra call which costs money and the

orchestra call either has to be an hour in length or three hours in length, whatever the union dictates. And if there are just a few tiny changes that's one thing but if it's a whole new song then you think, gosh, we can't afford to call the orchestra for one hour just for this one song, we'll wait till we have more than one song or other things to do so it makes the call worthwhile. So you write the song on Tuesday, it doesn't mean it goes in on Wednesday. It goes in maybe Friday or next Tuesday. And time spins.

ON WRITING: So what is that first performance like?

SONDHEIM: First preview? Oh it's terrifying. There's a slight preparation for it. Usually you have a dress rehearsal, what they call an invited dress, where for the first time the actors get to play in their costumes with the full orchestra and the scenery in front of, usually, invited casts from other shows. So you get a fairly hip audience, which is an enthusiastic audience. And the actors get a chance to just feel an audience so by the time the first preview—which may be that evening—goes on, their toes have been in the pool.

WEIDMAN: Your friends don't come to the first preview. You see somebody you know at the first preview, you want to kill them.

SONDHEIM: And they're no longer your friends.

ON WRITING: Really?

SONDHEIM: Oh sure. If I saw anybody come in to a preview of mine without my inviting them, God, I would really be angry. No, because the baby isn't born yet.

ON WRITING: In terms of making changes in previews, is it difficult to do a Stephen Sondheim play?

SONDHEIM: Only if you're Stephen Sondheim.

ON WRITING: I guess what I'm trying to say is—

SONDHEIM: You're talking about expectations.

ON WRITING: Yes, that's it.

SONDHEIM: Of course, of course, expectations are terrible. I remember Neil Simon opened a play called *The Good Doctor* in New Haven which was an attempt at a Chekhovian comedy, but not the kind of piece that he was famous for. It was not received well and I remember him saying to me, "I wish I could change my name because everybody coming into that theater expects to see a Neil Simon play instead of a play by a writer named Neil Simon." Completely unfair because their expectations colored their reaction. And once an audience starts to react, there's nothing you can do. You know, the plane has taken off. And I thought, oh goodness, isn't that pretentious of him to say. He was absolutely right. Absolutely right. And he was trapped.

ON WRITING: Do you feel that?

SONDHEIM: Sometimes, absolutely, sure.

ON WRITING: John, do you feel that pressure when you're writing with Stephen?

SONDHEIM: We're known as a team of a certain kind of piece. I mean for critics and for hip audiences. We write—John will forgive the phrase—politically oriented pieces, because John is a political playwright. And by politics I don't mean that he's writing about the Democratic Party, I mean they are political plays. If you look at the three things we've done together, they are very clearly about this country and where it stands and blah, blah, blah. So there's a certain expectation.

ON WRITING: Wait, *Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins* and—

WEIDMAN: —*Bounce*, which remains a work in progress, we are finishing a revision of it now. But we did it at the Goodman in Chicago and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, three years ago, two years ago?

SONDHEIM: Yeah, three.

WEIDMAN: These weren't out-of-town tryouts, they weren't productions that were moving through a couple of cities being fine-tuned on their way to New York. These were stand-alone productions at two of the best theaters in the country. Nonetheless, we were hoping to be left alone by the critics as much as possible. And in the old days when shows went out of town, they *were* left alone. It was understood the show was like a pie in the oven and nobody was going to open the door and look at the pie until it came out.

SONDHEIM: A few vultures would come up. But also, it was a long trip by train to Boston.

WEIDMAN: Yeah.

SONDHEIM: And even longer to Chicago.

WEIDMAN: And it was just understood that's the way it worked. Now, when *Bounce* opened at the Goodman, in a sense we might as well have been working on it on 44th Street. And the Internet has made the situation even worse. People will see a show out of town and immediately get online and start talking about how terrible it is or maybe how terrific it is. But they're more inclined to write about it if they think it's terrible. So it's very difficult to get under the radar at all. But certainly working on a piece with Steve, you know everybody's watching.

SONDHEIM: Yup, it's absolutely true. However, I like to think it doesn't affect our work as we're writing. It was the same thing when I worked with Hal Prince. One of the reasons I believe that reviews on *Merrily We Roll Along* were so harsh was because it was Hal and me. I think if it had been Sam Smith and Joe Jones they wouldn't have been so harsh. They were anticipating whatever they were anticipating.

ON WRITING: I want to go back to something you said earlier. John, when you were talking about *Pacific Overtures* and making the transition from the straight play to the musical, you said it became more imaginative. Is there something about a musical that opens up the drama?

WEIDMAN: I guess I was not trying to draw a distinction between all plays and all musicals but between the way *Pacific Overtures* came out when it was a straight play and the way it came out as a musical. It was, as all musicals are, more stylized than the straight play.

ON WRITING: More stylized in terms of....

WEIDMAN: Language in a musical is completely different from language in a play. If you took a great scene from a great play and put it in a musical, it would feel awkward and like it didn't belong there. And if you took a great scene from a great musical and put it in a play you would have the same experience. Everything has to happen faster in a musical, people have to speak in a way that conveys information quickly but do it in a way that makes them seem entirely authentic and real so that it doesn't feel like you're hurrying.

SONDHEIM: There's a contract an audience unconsciously signs when they're coming to the theater which is, we're going to watch something that may—I'm talking about a straight play now—it may pretend to be real but there's this fourth wall missing and the people are going to be sort of cheating towards us. I'm talking to you and we're having a terrible husband-wife fight but we're sort of cheating out there a little bit so that John, the audience, gets it. Right away there's something artificial. In a musical, not only do you have that but in the middle I'm going to start to sing to you. It's another thing that you're adding. It's completely artificial and yet you have to make the audience accept that enough so they will get absorbed in the story you're telling. That's what all of this is about. Of course, the language—and John is right—think of yourself as a playwright: you have a story to tell and two-thirds, three-quarters, three-fifths of it are sung. How much space does the playwright have to deal with dialogue and get

all this important information across, not just expositional but emotional.

WEIDMAN: Yeah.

SONDHEIM: I'm very fond of saying that one of the really terrific things about *West Side Story* is how much Arthur Laurents accomplished considering that he had no space to tell a very melodramatic story. There are stories like *Sunday in the Park with George* where not a lot happens so the playwright has a chance. But in *West Side Story* something happens all the time. Somebody's either shooting somebody or hitting somebody or screaming at somebody and he's got to do that. So of course, everything has to be much more concise.

WEIDMAN: The dialogue also has to be authentic in a way which makes it seem appropriate and consistent that the person is going to go from talking into singing.

SONDHEIM: Right.

WEIDMAN: So that if somebody sang a musical number in the middle of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* it would seem as though they had lost their mind. But in a musical, that is the vocabulary of the piece and—

SONDHEIM: —And the audience accepts that, if you do it gracefully and well. But you have to do it gracefully and well, otherwise it's ridiculous. As John says, if you're doing a musical of *Long Day's Journey*—yes, you can do a musical of *Long Day's Journey*, but unless you do it very carefully it's going to seem pretty silly when people start singing.

ON WRITING: Do the songs move the action forward or do they elucidate a moment in the action?

SONDHEIM: Both. I was trained by Oscar Hammerstein who moved the story forward and then I started to work with Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. And one of the things that Burt pointed out was there are other ways to use songs—which is the way, incidentally, the Romans used them—which is, as he said, to savor the moment. "Poems" is a perfect example from *Pacific Overtures* in which you're taking a moment and expanding it. You're "telling a story" because they're making a journey home, but that could be accomplished in a line. We're trying to make an emotional relationship between two guys by taking one tiny moment, the start of a friendship, and expanding it into three and a half minutes of friendship so that you feel at the end of the song, not so much that the story has moved forward—the action takes care of that—but that their emotional story has developed in some way so they're better friends at the end of it than they were at the beginning of it.

ON WRITING: And what's an example of a song moving the story forward?

SONDHEIM: The opening of the second act of *Sweeney Todd*, "More Hot Pies" in which there's 10 minutes of plot: she opens this parlor, he gets a chair, they test the bodies going down to the basement.... In a movie it'd be at least two minutes and in a play it'd be 20.

ON WRITING: Is that something that you and John go over?

SONDHEIM: Oh do we ever.

WEIDMAN: Yes, sure.

ON WRITING: Not just, is a song needed here, but what kind of song?

SONDHEIM: Well not so much what kind of song but, okay we've got to deal with what happens next. Do we do that musically? Can we do that musically? And so we start to talk. Maybe that wouldn't have been possible musically. Maybe I would have had to write a refrain and John write a little scene with the American ambassador. Then

I'd write another refrain and John a little scene with the British ambassador. Then another refrain and a little scene with the Dutch ambassador.

ON WRITING: What's a refrain?

SONDHEIM: The chorus of the song. "Old MacDonald had a farm, e-i-e-i-o." That's a refrain.

WEIDMAN: There's another song in *Pacific Overtures* that is an interesting example. It's called "Bowler Hat." It charts the changes in Kayama the samurai after the Americans have left. He's appointed to a minor post, and the song is a series of letters he writes to his superior over the course of—I guess it ultimately covers seven or eight years. As time passes—and the song develops—he becomes much more arrogant and impatient with the traditional Japanese attitude towards the Westerners, who he would rather embrace than repel. Steve and I talked about the scene and he said, "Write me a series of letters or diary entries that convey the change in Kayama's character over time and the specifics of what was going on in the town he was administering." The plan was for Steve to absorb the letters into the song. But what we wound up with was a song which preserved the letters as spoken interludes: Kayama would sing, and then we'd come back to the letters. And there was constant development in the way Kayama looked on stage and the tone of the letters, the tone of the way he sang and the content of what he sang. It was a fascinating outcome given the initial intention. It's what you can do in musical theater that you obviously can't do any place else.

ON WRITING: I want to ask about *Bounce* and the rewrite. When is that going up, do you have a date yet?

SONDHEIM: No we don't have a date. We hope maybe the end of next season, perhaps. It's a piece we like a lot and it's been a long slog. We did a workshop of it at New York Theatre Workshop, Sam Mendes directing, and then we did another version of it with Hal Prince directing in Chicago and at a commercial theater in Washington.

ON WRITING: What's a workshop?

WEIDMAN: No costumes, no sets, with minimal staging.

SONDHEIM: The orchestra is usually three instruments: piano, bass and drums, or something like that.

WEIDMAN: So it looks a little like the last run-through in a rehearsal hall before you actually go into the theater, but with a little more musical support.

ON WRITING: Is it like one step above a table read?

WEIDMAN: Yes, that's correct.

SONDHEIM: It's a staged table read, exactly right.

ON WRITING: Is it in front of an audience?

WEIDMAN: Yeah. But different kinds of audiences. We actually thought we had a brilliant idea. Usually you rehearse it and then your friends come in for two or three presentations and that's it. But we thought it would be useful or interesting or somehow productive to do a workshop every night in front of strangers at New York Theatre Workshop.

ON WRITING: But you wanted to rewrite it?

WEIDMAN: Well, yeah.

SONDHEIM: Over a period of time with an audience coming every night.

WEIDMAN: It became glaringly obvious we would have been better off if we hadn't had an audience, because what we were discovering about the piece were things we needed to be working on in the rehearsal hall or back at a typewriter. But we had the obligation of dealing with an audience.

SONDHEIM: You might be interested to know—or I'll assume you are—how workshops started.

ON WRITING: I'm interested.

SONDHEIM: Not a lot of people know this, but they started with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Hal Prince was the producer, I was the composer and Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart were the writers and we were trying to get Jerome Robbins to direct it—and he wanted to. He seemed to want to anyway. But Jerry was famously skittish about committing himself to dates. So he said, "Look, why don't we get some actors together and sit around a table and, Steve, you play the score and let's just listen to it." Prior to that time what you did with a show was you wrote it, it got accepted by a producer, you cast it, you went into rehearsal, you went out of town and you fixed it out of town as much as you could and then you came to New York. Nobody had ever thought of just sitting around a room with actors reading it long before rehearsals were to begin. We decided to indulge Jerry—Hal and I and everybody else connected with it—all right, he's so temperamental but he's a genius so let's put up with it. And it turned out to be an invaluable experience. We learned so much about the show and indeed about the actors. One of the actors we hired was Davy Burns, who ended up in the show because he was so wonderful in the reading. And Hal and I decided that we would do this with every show we did. Sometimes Hal would read it aloud in his office all by himself and I would play the score and the only other person there would be the book writer or maybe the set designer. Then maybe I would write a little more and the book writer would write a little more and then a month later, two months later we would get some actors together, sit around a table. Nobody had ever done this before. Now what's happened is that the process has become so overblown that workshops are done primarily to raise money. They're done in front of full audiences, etc., etc. I don't think I'll ever do another workshop of that sort again.

ON WRITING: I think I might have seen one. It was to show producers.

SONDHEIM: Well that's the trouble. Who's it for? When we started it was for ourselves. And now it's become for audiences and reactions and that sort of thing. That's what John was talking about.

WEIDMAN: Yeah, it's multipurpose. The purest and best use of the experience is to show the authors what they've done and what they still have to do. And if you bring money people in you may discover half an hour into it that, you know what, it wasn't ready for money people to look at. Because they're looking at what you're showing them and they're not going to fill in any of the blanks or make any assumptions about the direction in which it's headed. It's difficult.

ON WRITING: So with *Bounce*, you did a workshop in front of a paying audience?

SONDHEIM: Yes. First, we did workshops of our own just for ourselves over a period of, what, three years I guess.

WEIDMAN: They were readings. The actors didn't get up on their feet.

SONDHEIM: Yes, they were readings, sorry. That's absolutely correct. Then Sam Mendes came aboard as a director and he directed this workshop down at New York Theatre Workshop that ran for a month in front of public audiences who I guess were subscribers.

WEIDMAN: It's a subscription theater and I'm sure they were mostly subscribers, but I think there were extra tickets that could be purchased by anybody who wanted to come and see it.

SONDHEIM: And because it was a prestigious show between John and me and Sam and starring Nathan Lane and Victor Garber, it was, as we say, a hot ticket.

WEIDMAN: Under the radar, I don't think so.

ON WRITING: No.

SONDHEIM: It was a mistake.

ON WRITING: You're saying that it was a work in progress.

SONDHEIM: Yeah, exactly right.

ON WRITING: So what were you thinking?

WEIDMAN: You know what, I can no longer answer that question. It seems so wrongheaded I cannot tell you what we were thinking.

SONDHEIM: I think we were so confident that the piece was so good that all it needed was a little tweaking. That's my guess about what was going on in our heads. I'm not sure that's true.

WEIDMAN: I don't think it is.

SONDHEIM: Okay. I take it back.

WEIDMAN: We had done a series of readings and I think some kind of a workshop was the logical next step.

SONDHEIM: And the readings had been fun and good.

WEIDMAN: The last reading that preceded the workshop went very well. And so a workshop seemed like the next step, but why a workshop in front of paying customers seemed like a good idea, I just don't know. And, as Steve said, for a month—when I said, "a month," I started to shake here. It just went on and oh my God.

SONDHEIM: It turned out to be a rocky experience. It was a mistake.

WEIDMAN: But the material, from the moment Steve first mentioned it to me, he said, "Have you ever heard of a guy named Wilson Mizner?"

ON WRITING: Wilson Mizner?

SONDHEIM: Yeah. And his brother, Addison.

WEIDMAN: I hadn't heard of them. Steve said, "Would you read something about them?" I said, "Sure." There was a biography of the Mizner brothers, it was a series of pieces that had appeared in *The New Yorker* which had been collected and published as a book in the '50s sometime, I guess. I read the book and I thought that the material—and I mean that in the broadest sense—was terrific. The relationship between these two guys and the kind of high-risk lives that they lived against the background of what was happening in America between about 1885 and the market crash I thought was extraordinary.

SONDHEIM: They were well-known people in those days.

ON WRITING: What did they do?

WEIDMAN: Addison had a meteoric career as a famous architect. He built Palm Beach and created a Spanish style of architecture which was highly regarded. He made millions and millions—

ON WRITING: Kind of like Stanford White?

WEIDMAN: Not that prestigious.

SONDHEIM: Although down in his neighborhood he was. In Florida there are streets named after him.

WEIDMAN: And Wilson was a guy who lived about 17 different lives. He was a gambler, he was a fight promoter, he was a sort of a playwright and he was quoted in the papers all the time.

SONDHEIM: He was a great wit.

WEIDMAN: Yeah.

SONDHEIM: Like Dorothy Parker.

WEIDMAN: And an extremely untrustworthy guy who always walked out of a situation having made a mess and never bothering to clean it up.

But they seemed like two prototypical Americans of a certain kind who lived a certain kind of prototypical American life during a particularly vivid period. And the issue was to get the story right. We think we have now, after a couple of cracks at it previously. But we'll find out.

ON WRITING: Did the songs change?

SONDHEIM: Oh, yes indeed. I've written more songs for this show than any other show I've ever written. That's because it's a very chameleon-like piece. It's changed its focus. In New York Theatre Workshop it had a kind of—it's a pretentious word but it's the only one I can think of—gravitas, a kind of weight to it. John and I had designed it originally as a Bob Hope/Bing Crosby road movie. That relationship between the wiseass and the patsy seemed in its own exaggerated way a way to tell this story. The relationship between these two brothers was much more sophisticated, but the point was, it had a liveliness to it. Sam encouraged us—with our heartfelt cooperation—to make it a little weightier and that didn't seem to work at New York Theatre Workshop. Then we took it to Hal and he said he wanted us to add a sex interest, a female who would be involved with the two of them in a certain way. And to give it a kind of—gosh I don't know what the word is.

WEIDMAN: A kind of musical comedy pizzazz.

SONDHEIM: Exactly. Which we'd intended but not with a lady, because what we found out from the Chicago and the Washington tryouts—and again we went along enthusiastically with Hal's ideas—was that the love story's between the two brothers. And so we've reverted essentially to what we wrote many years ago before either of the directors got hold of it—but with what we have learned from those two productions, what we've learned from Sam's production and what we've learned from Hal's production. And that's what it is now. So it's back to the breezy Hope/Crosby, we hope, tradition.

WEIDMAN: But with a serious purpose.

ON WRITING: So now you're going on to your third director. Are you going to be less open to this new director's input because you feel that the other directors have sort of sidetracked you from your original idea of it?

WEIDMAN: The previous directors didn't pull us in the wrong direction, we were asking for help. As Steve said, there's nothing we did that did not seem—

SONDHEIM: —They excited us.

WEIDMAN: They all seemed like good ideas when they were suggested.

ON WRITING: So it's more like, you tried them and they didn't work.

SONDHEIM: Yeah, exactly.

WEIDMAN: But we did make a deliberate decision after the last go-around was over that we wanted to pull it back in and make it an author's piece again. When we wrote *Assassins*, no director saw it until it was essentially in the finished form that it was in when it went off to Playwrights. We wrote it until we were satisfied with it. And we pulled this piece back in and that's what we're trying to do. That's the goal this time around.

ON WRITING: I see.

SONDHEIM: At least if it works, fine, if it doesn't it'll be our—

ON WRITING: —Failure or success.

SONDHEIM: There's a great danger with directors being in on the writing of a piece because many directors want to be writers but they're not. I think what directors, first-rate directors, are best at is editing. I really like the idea of a director who comes in after the piece is written and says, that scene is unfocused, what is she doing there, I don't know how to cast that part, what do you think that should look like,

etc., etc. That's when I think directors are at their best.

ON WRITING: John, how did you work with Susan Stroman when she directed *Contact*? That was pretty much all choreography as I remember it.

WEIDMAN: It's interesting, *Contact* doesn't have a lot of dialogue but it doesn't have significantly less dialogue than many musicals that are mostly sung through. Musical books are really about structure and less about talking. But what happened in *Contact* was that when people on stage stopped talking they didn't begin to sing. Language disappeared and what you heard were records—with dance against it. So it seemed like there was less of a book to some people than there was. There are three pieces and they all have very specific stories and very specific narratives.

ON WRITING: How did you develop the script?

WEIDMAN: Susan got a call from André Bishop at Lincoln Center offering her the rehearsal room downstairs to create a piece and she called me up and asked if I wanted to talk to her about it. She had been in an after-hours club and had seen this woman in a yellow dress and found her behavior riveting. We started talking about her, who might meet her and how his life might be changed, and we just sort of built the piece from there. By the time we went in to the workshop I had written a script that looked more like a screenplay than a play because there were long descriptions of what happened and then intermittently there was dialogue.

SONDHEIM: So you described the dance action. I didn't realize that.

WEIDMAN: I didn't describe the dance action—that was one hundred percent Susan—but I described the basics of what occurred: so-and-so crosses to the bar, he fumbles for his lighter and so on. It was a tremendous pleasure creating that piece with her. We didn't even know if it was going to be produced, and then Lincoln Center decided to do it down at the Newhouse where we thought it would run for a couple of months. And then suddenly it was a Tony Award-winning musical—bizarre.

SONDHEIM: What was great was the reviews came out the day of the first rehearsal of the workshop—

ON WRITING: Of *Bounce*?

SONDHEIM: Of *Bounce*, right. And everybody introduced themselves around the room. And I wanted to say, "I'm John Weidman." I just didn't have the nerve to do it. Because the papers were full of "the most brilliant musical ever put on the stage," and John shyly beaming in the corner....

WEIDMAN: It was a very strange morning.

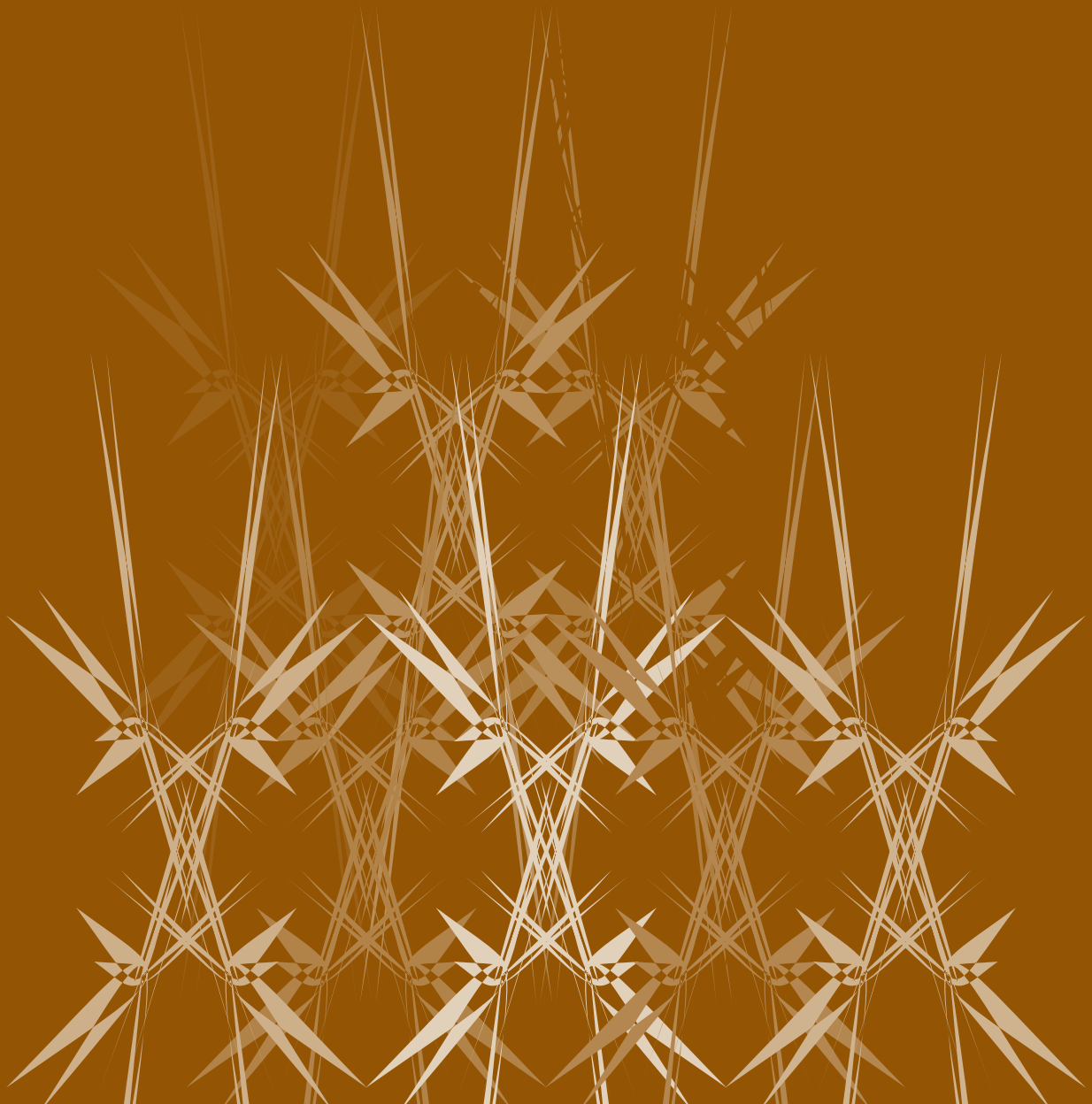
SONDHEIM: A very strange morning.

BIOGRAPHIES

Stephen Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *The Frogs* (1974), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Assassins* (1991), *Passion* (1994) and *Bounce* (2003), as well as lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965) and additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). *Side by Side by Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me A Little* (1981), *You're Gonna Love Tomorrow* (1983), *Putting it Together* (1993/99) and *Moving On* (2001) are anthologies of his work as composer and lyricist. For films, he composed the scores of *Stavisky* (1974) and co-composed *Reds* (1981) as well as songs for Dick *Tracy* (1990). He also wrote the songs for the television production *Evening Primrose* (1966), co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and the play *Getting Away with Murder* (1996) and provided incidental music for the plays *The Girls of Summer* (1956), *Invitation to a March* (1961), *Twigs* (1971) and *The Enclave* (1973). *Saturday Night* (1954), his first professional musical, finally had its New York premiere in 1999. Mr. Sondheim is on the Council of The Dramatists Guild of America, the national association of playwrights, composers and lyricists, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981.

John Weidman wrote the book for *Pacific Overtures*, (Tony nominations, Best Book, Best Musical, Best Musical Revival) score by Stephen Sondheim, directed on Broadway by Harold Prince and in 2005 at the Roundabout by Amon Miyamoto. He co-authored, with Timothy Crouse, the new book for the Broadway revival of Cole Porter's *Anything Goes* directed by Jerry Zaks at Lincoln Center Theater, (Tony Award, Best Musical Revival) and the Royal National Theatre by Trevor Nunn (Olivier Award, Best Musical Production). Weidman wrote the book for *Assassins*, score by Stephen Sondheim, directed Off-Broadway by Jerry Zaks, in London by Sam Mendes (Drama Critcs' Award for Best Musical) and two seasons ago on Broadway by Joe Mantello (Tony Award, Best Musical Revival). Weidman wrote the book for *Big* (Tony nomination, Best Book), score by Richard Maltby, Jr. and David Shire, directed on Broadway by Mike Ockrent, and co-created with choreographer/director Susan Stroman the musical *Contact* (Tony nomination, Best Book; Tony Award, Best Musical). His new musical, *Bounce*, score by Stephen Sondheim, premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. He and Susan Stroman are currently at work on a new musical, commissioned by Lincoln Center Theater. Since 1986, he has written for *Sesame Street*, receiving 12 Emmy Awards for Outstanding Writing for a Children's Program. Weidman is president of The Dramatists Guild of America.

Selected Work



The song "Bowler Hat" from **Pacific Overtures** *combines sung sections and spoken interludes; it moves the story forward by charting the changes in Kayama the samurai after the Americans have left.*

SCENE FOUR

(KAYAMA and MANJIRO kneel at either side of the stage before small, delicate tables. BOTH MEN wear traditional robes. KAYAMA is writing on a piece of rice paper with a brush. Occasionally he dips the brush into a shallow lacquer ink bowl. Beneath his table is a box. Arranged in front of MANJIRO is the paraphernalia for the tea ceremony—an earthenware cup, a bamboo whisk, a cast-iron kettle, etc. MANJIRO contemplates these objects solemnly and silently)

RECITER
Two men, whose fortunes have been altered by the Westerners' arrival. Manjiro, the common fisherman made samurai. And Kayama Yesaemon, the minor samurai made governor.

(Reading as KAYAMA writes)

A letter from Kayama Yesaemon to the Shogun: My Lord Abe. It is my privilege to inform you of the current state of our relationship with foreigners here in Uraga.

(KAYAMA removes a bowler hat from the box under his table and examines it)

As you have doubtless learned from servants far more worthy than myself, there are now two hundred Westerners among us. Five times as many as a year ago—when they first came.

KAYAMA
IT'S CALLED A BOWLER HAT.
I HAVE NO WIFE.
THE SWALLOW FLYING THROUGH THE SKY
IS NOT AS SWIFT AS I
AM, FLYING THROUGH MY LIFE.
YOU POUR THE MILK BEFORE THE TEA.
THE DUTCH AMBASSADOR IS NO FOOL.
I MUST REMEMBER THAT.

(ATTENDANTS enter and replace Kayama's writing brush with a steel pen. THEY add a line or two to his face. MANJIRO is similarly aged, but everything else about him remains unchanged. The RECITER continues with Kayama's letter)

RECITER
Three years ago we set aside one district of the town for Westerners, and yet we are still unable to provide them with residences which they consider suitable. For this I humbly ask your indulgence.

KAYAMA
I WEAR A BOWLER HAT.
THEY SEND ME WINE.
THE HOUSE IS FAR TOO GRAND.
I'VE BOUGHT A NEW UMBRELLA STAND.
TODAY I VISITED THE CHURCH BESIDE THE SHRINE.
I'M LEARNING ENGLISH FROM A BOOK.
MOST EXCITING.
IT'S CALLED A BOWLER HAT.

(ATTENDANTS add a touch of gray to KAYAMA and Manjiro's hair. MANJIRO begins the tea ceremony. Meanwhile, Kayama's table is replaced by a more Western one. HE is given a chair. During all this, the RECITER reads)

RECITER
Of all the Westerners with whom I have to deal, the merchants are most worrisome. They import goods we do not need, and export those we cannot do without. Last month they bought and shipped to Shanghai so much flour that the price here almost tripled. The noodle makers were affected most severely and threatened to set fire to the Western warehouses. I found it necessary to restrain them.

(KAYAMA takes a watch from his pocket)

KAYAMA
IT'S CALLED A POCKET WATCH.
I HAVE A WIFE.
NO EAGLE FLIES AGAINST THE SKY
AS EAGERLY AS I
HAVE FLOWN AGAINST MY LIFE.
ONE SMOKES AMERICAN CIGARS.
THE DUTCH AMBASSADOR WAS MOST RUDE.
I WILL REMEMBER THAT.

(As MANJIRO continues the tea ceremony, ATTENDANTS place a nineteenth-century tea service on Kayama's table and pour him a cup of tea, which HE lightens and sweetens)

RECITER
Although the Westerners have been in residence for upwards of six years now, our samurai still mistake their foreign manners for disrespect. To avoid unpleasant incidents, I have required all samurai to remove their swords before entering the city.

KAYAMA
I WIND MY POCKET WATCH.
WE SERVE WHITE WINE.
THE HOUSE IS FAR TOO SMALL.
I KILLED A SPIDER ON THE WALL.
ONE OF THE SERVANTS THOUGHT IT WAS A LUCKY SIGN.
I READ SPINOZA EVERY DAY.
FORMIDABLE.
WHERE IS MY BOWLER HAT?

(ATTENDANTS enter and dress KAYAMA in Western clothes. THEY replace his table with a desk and a revolving chair. MANJIRO continues with the tea ceremony)

RECITER
I will not bother you with details of the rowdy sailors and adventurers who plague our port. As you know, provisions of the treaties which you signed eight years ago make it impossible for me to deal with them. But fortunately, the behavior of the foreign consuls and ambassadors themselves has been above reproach. They have built themselves a club, complete with bar and billiard room. And only gentlemen may enter.

(KAYAMA produces a monocle, which HE polishes)

KAYAMA
IT'S CALLED A MONOCLE.
I'VE LEFT MY WIFE.
NO BIRD EXPLORING IN THE SKY
EXPLORES AS WELL AS I
THE CORNERS OF MY LIFE.
ONE MUST KEEP MOVING WITH THE TIMES.
THE DUTCH AMBASSADOR IS A FOOL.
HE WEARS A BOWLER HAT.

(MANJIRO finishes the tea ceremony. ATTENDANTS enter and dress him for sword practice. A French oil painting is hung on the screen behind KAYAMA)

RECITER
My lord, here in Uraga we have reached an understanding with the Westerners. Of course I wish them gone, but while they remain I shall try to turn their presence into an advantage rather than a burden. Last week I joined them in a fox hunt.

(KAYAMA puts on a pair of glasses)

KAYAMA
THEY CALL THEM SPECTACLES.
I DRINK MUCH WINE.
I TAKE IMPORTED PILLS.
I HAVE A HOUSE UP IN THE HILLS
I'VE HIRED BRITISH ARCHITECTS TO REDESIGN.
ONE MUST ACCOMMODATE THE TIMES
AS ONE LIVES THEM.
ONE MUST REMEMBER THAT.

RECITER
Your humble servant, Kayama Yesaemon.

(An ATTENDANT enters, carrying a gray tailcoat; HE holds it out to KAYAMA)

KAYAMA
IT'S CALLED A CUTAWAY.

(KAYAMA drapes the coat over his shoulders and exits up the hanamichi. MANJIRO adjusts his robes and contemplates his sword)

The song "Poems" from **Pacific Overtures** *both sharpens the differences between Kayama the samurai and Manjiro the fisherman, and deepens the friendship between them.*

ABE
He is yours.

(ABE and the Court begin to move off)

RECITER
If the Councilors can no longer pretend that the Americans are not coming, they have not yet given up the hope of pretending the Americans were never here.

MANJIRO
My Lord Governor of Uraga, you have saved my life.

KAYAMA
And why not, my friend, when you saved mine. The mats were your idea.

MANJIRO
You, a samurai, calling me, a fisherman—friend! This is not Japan. This is America.

KAYAMA
America?

MANJIRO
It is not the Americans who are barbarians. It is us! If you could have seen what I have seen in America... But what I feel in my heart is enough to have me boiled in oil.

KAYAMA
I think you are going to be far too useful to me to boil. But now I must return to Uraga. My wife has had no word from me for many days, and will be worried. Come with me. It is a long journey and we can keep each other company.

(KAYAMA and MANJIRO begin the walk to Uraga)

I will make a poem.

RAIN GLISTENING
ON THE SILVER BIRCH,
LIKE MY LADY'S TEARS.
YOUR TURN.

MANJIRO
RAIN GATHERING
WINDING INTO STREAMS,
LIKE THE ROADS TO BOSTON.
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
HAZE HOVERING,
LIKE THE WHISPER OF THE SILK
AS MY LADY KNEELS.
YOUR TURN.

MANJIRO
HAZE GLITTERING,
LIKE AN ECHO OF THE LAMPS
IN THE STREETS OF BOSTON.
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
MOON,
I LOVE HER LIKE THE MOON,
MAKING JEWELS OF THE GRASS
WHERE MY LADY WALKS,
MY LADY WIFE.

MANJIRO
MOON,
I LOVE HER LIKE THE MOON,
WASHING YESTERDAY AWAY,
AS MY LADY DOES—
AMERICA.
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
WIND MURMURING.
IS SHE MURMURING FOR ME
THROUGH HER FIELD OF DREAMS?
YOUR TURN.

MANJIRO
WIND MUTTERING.
IS SHE QUARRELING WITH ME?
DOES SHE WANT ME HOME?
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
I AM NO NIGHTINGALE,
BUT SHE HEARS THE SONG
I CAN SING TO HER,
MY LADY WIFE.

MANJIRO
I AM NO NIGHTINGALE,
BUT MY SONG OF HER
COULD OUTSING THE SEA—
AMERICA.

KAYAMA
DAWN FLICKERING,
TRACING SHADOWS OF THE PINES
ON MY LADY SLEEPING.
YOUR TURN.

MANJIRO
DAWN BRIGHTENING
AS SHE OPENS UP HER EYES,
BUT IT'S I WHO COME AWAKE.
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
YOU GO.

MANJIRO
YOUR TURN.

BOTH
LEAVES,
I LOVE HER LIKE THE LEAVES,
CHANGING GREEN TO PINK TO GOLD,
AND THE CHANGE IS EVERYTHING.
SUN,
I SEE HER LIKE THE SUN
IN THE CENTER OF A POOL,
SENDING RIPPLES TO THE SHORE,
TILL MY JOURNEY'S END.

(KAYAMA's house appears)

MANJIRO
YOUR TURN.

KAYAMA
RAIN.

MANJIRO
HAZE.

KAYAMA
MOON.

MANJIRO
WIND.

KAYAMA
NIGHTINGALE.

MANJIRO
DAWN.

KAYAMA
LEAVES.

MANJIRO
SUN.

BOTH
END.

KAYAMA
Wait here.

(KAYAMA enters the house and approaches TAMATE, who is turned away from him, kneeling at the household shrine)

Tamate, I have the most extraordinary things to tell you! I have been to Edo and appeared before the Councilors. You won't believe what happened. I was—

(In his excitement, KAYAMA has not noticed that TAMATE hasn't moved. Downstage, MANJIRO waits impatiently, his attention elsewhere. The RECITER watches the scene)

Tamate? Tamate. What is it?

(KAYAMA puts his hand on TAMATE's shoulder. She falls into his arms. He appears to cry out, silently. The appropriate sound comes from the RECITER. KAYAMA turns her gently around. SHE is clutching one of his short swords in her hands. HE falls to his knees, lowering her body gently to the ground. There is what seems to be an endless pause, filled only with the wracked sobbing of the RECITER)

A script page from the last of the three pieces in **Contact**. *Although most of the story was told in dance, the narrative content of each scene was described in detail.*

BARTENDER
And God said ...

(HE puts on a pair of dark glasses)

Let there be light.

MICHAEL
Who is she?

BARTENDER
Someone who likes to dance.

MICHAEL
You mean she's a regular?

BARTENDER
I mean she likes to dance. I'm not sure there's anything about her I'd call regular.

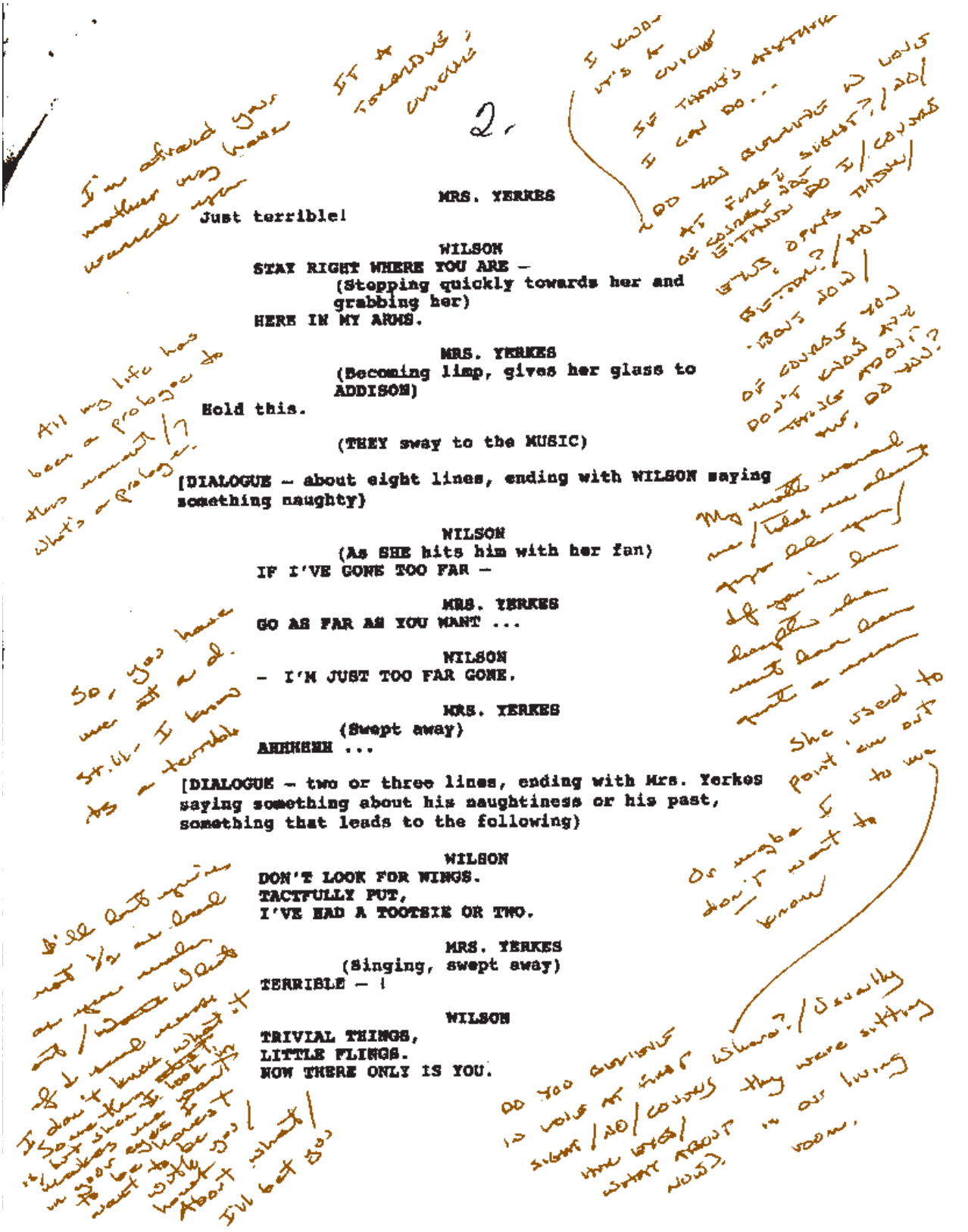
(MUSIC starts again: "RUNAROUND SUE," sung by Dion. COUPLES begin to dance, as the GIRL IN THE YELLOW DRESS crosses to the bar. JOE steps in front of her: Does she want to dance? SHE shakes her hand and brushes past him.

Ignoring MICHAEL, who watches her, fascinated, SHE settles on the stool beside him. SHE takes a compact out of her handbag and adjusts her makeup. The BARTENDER pours her a glass of champagne. SHE takes a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of her handbag, puts them on the bar beside the wine, and hands the handbag to the BARTENDER. SHE takes a sip of wine and reaches for a cigarette. MICHAEL stares at her. The BARTENDER taps him on the shoulder with a book of matches. MICHAEL brushes them aside, his eyes glued to the GIRL. The BARTENDER tries again. MICHAEL brushes them aside again)

BARTENDER
Matches!

(MICHAEL turns, "gets it," grabs the matches, and starts to strike one—but HE's too late. The GIRL lights her own cigarette and takes a deep drag as "RUNAROUND SUE" ends and MUSIC starts again: "BEYOND THE SEA," performed by the Royal Crown Revue.)

During one of the several rewrites of Bounce, *I wrote a scene in which Wilson Mizner meets and romances his brother Addison's one and only client, Myra Yerkes. I sent the scene to Steve, who absorbed the central part of it into a song called "Stay Right Where You Are." Steve then passed the song back to me to fill in the dialogue breaks. My notes, scribbled on the script page below, are incomprehensible even to me. — John Weidman*



2.

MRS. YERKES
Just terrible!

WILSON
STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE —
(Stopping quickly towards her and grabbing her)
HERE IN MY ARMS.

MRS. YERKES
(Becoming limp, gives her glass to ADDISON)
Hold this.

(THEY sway to the MUSIC)

[DIALOGUE — about eight lines, ending with WILSON saying something naughty]

WILSON
(As SHE hits him with her fan)
IF I'VE GONE TOO FAR —

MRS. YERKES
GO AS FAR AS YOU WANT ...

WILSON
— I'M JUST TOO FAR GONE.

MRS. YERKES
(Swept away)
AHHHHHH ...

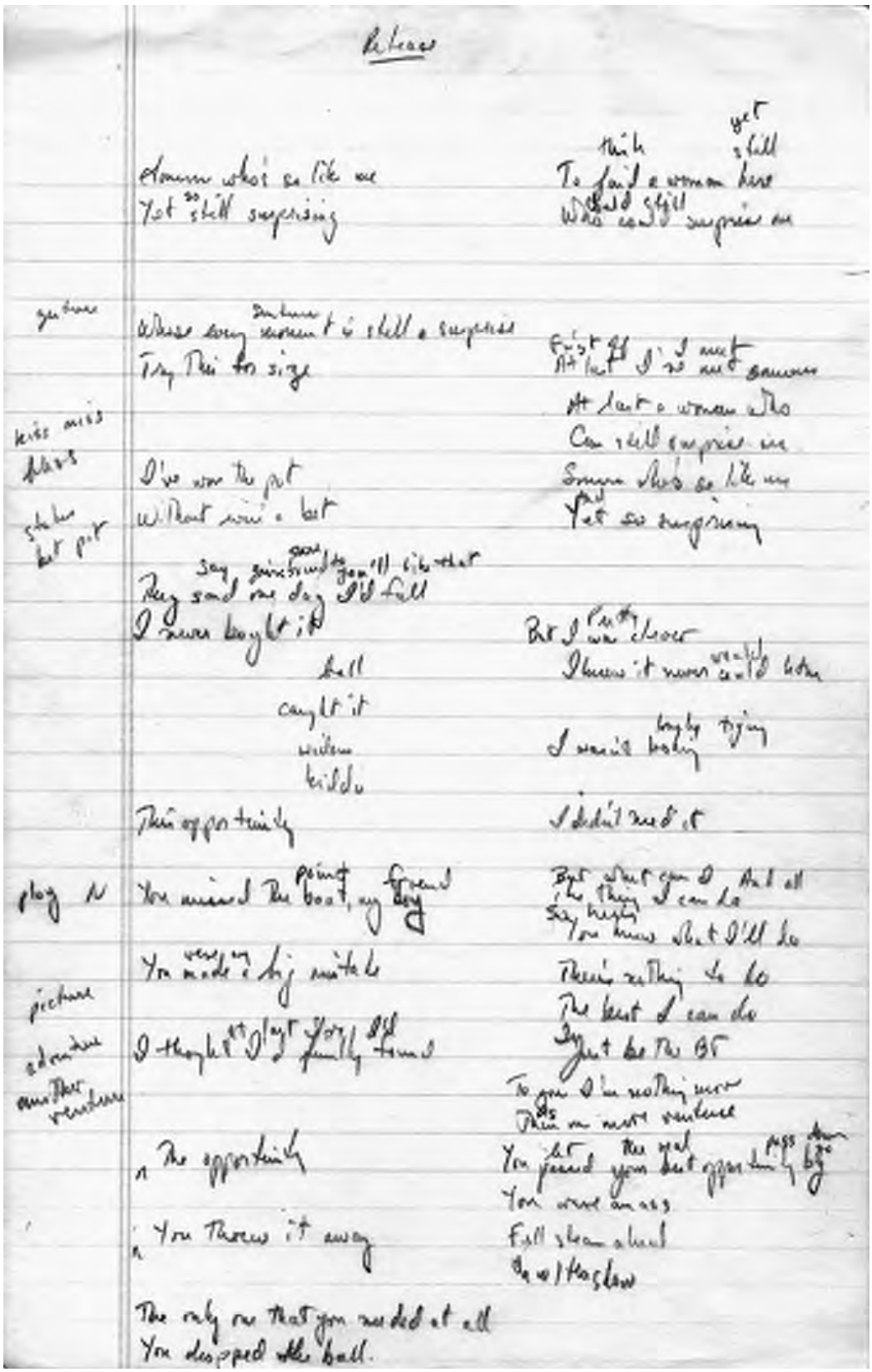
[DIALOGUE — two or three lines, ending with Mrs. Yerkes saying something about his naughtiness or his past, something that leads to the following]

WILSON
DON'T LOOK FOR WINGS.
TACTFULLY PUT,
I'VE HAD A TOOTSIE OR TWO.

MRS. YERKES
(Singing, swept away)
TERRIBLE — !

WILSON
TRIVIAL THINGS,
LITTLE FLINGS.
NOW THERE ONLY IS YOU.

"Steve likes to write lying on a particular sofa using a particular kind of pencil and a particular kind of legal pad," says John Weidman. The following are three sheets from one of those legal pads on which he is sketching out the lyric for **The Best Thing That Ever Has Happened** *from* **Bounce.**



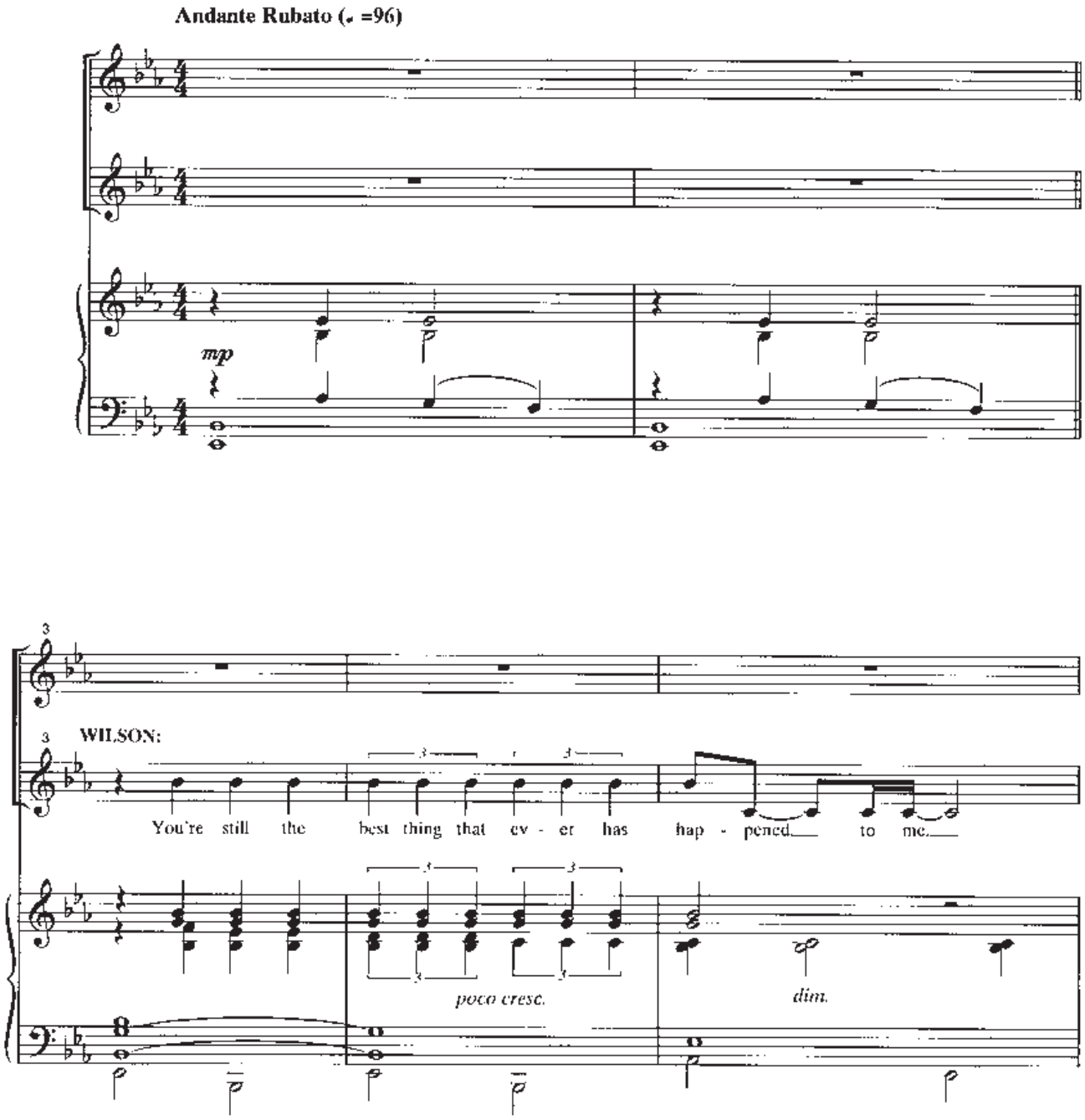

Best Thing
I can't believe I found
Someone just like me
For all that I am
But what I'm not
Someone who's not. but
Like me at all.
And yet in some ways
Not like me at all
Someone who's so like me
Not like me at all.
I've been the best thing that
Ever has happened to you,
Remember Now that
Go on This what
And so on You know all that
I'll be the best thing that's happened to you

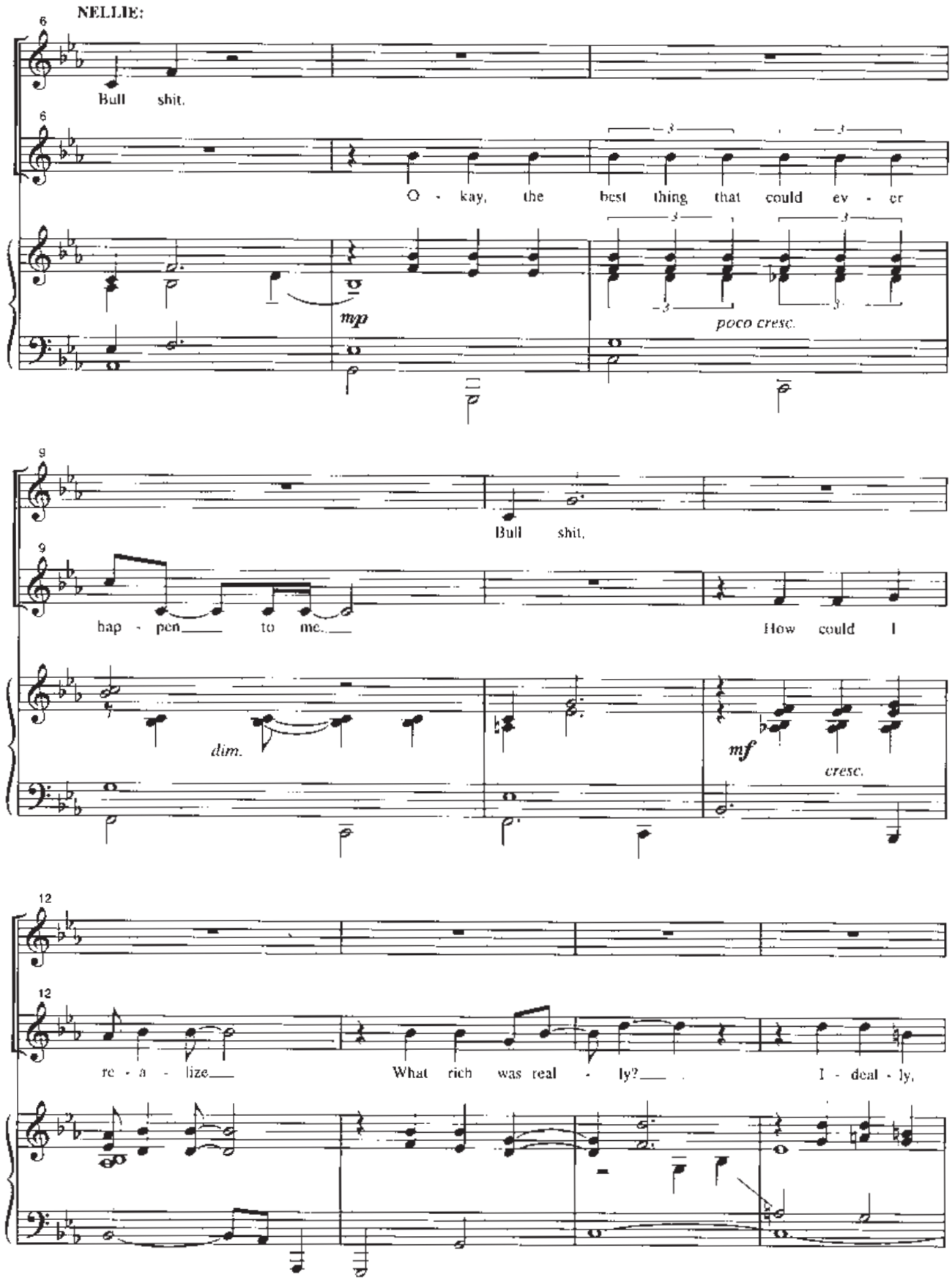
When **Bounce** *was performed at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, this song sealed the relationship between Wilson Mizner and Myra Yerkes. Yerkes has since been cut from the show and so the song, excerpted below, has disappeared along with her.*

THE BEST THING THAT EVER HAS HAPPENED

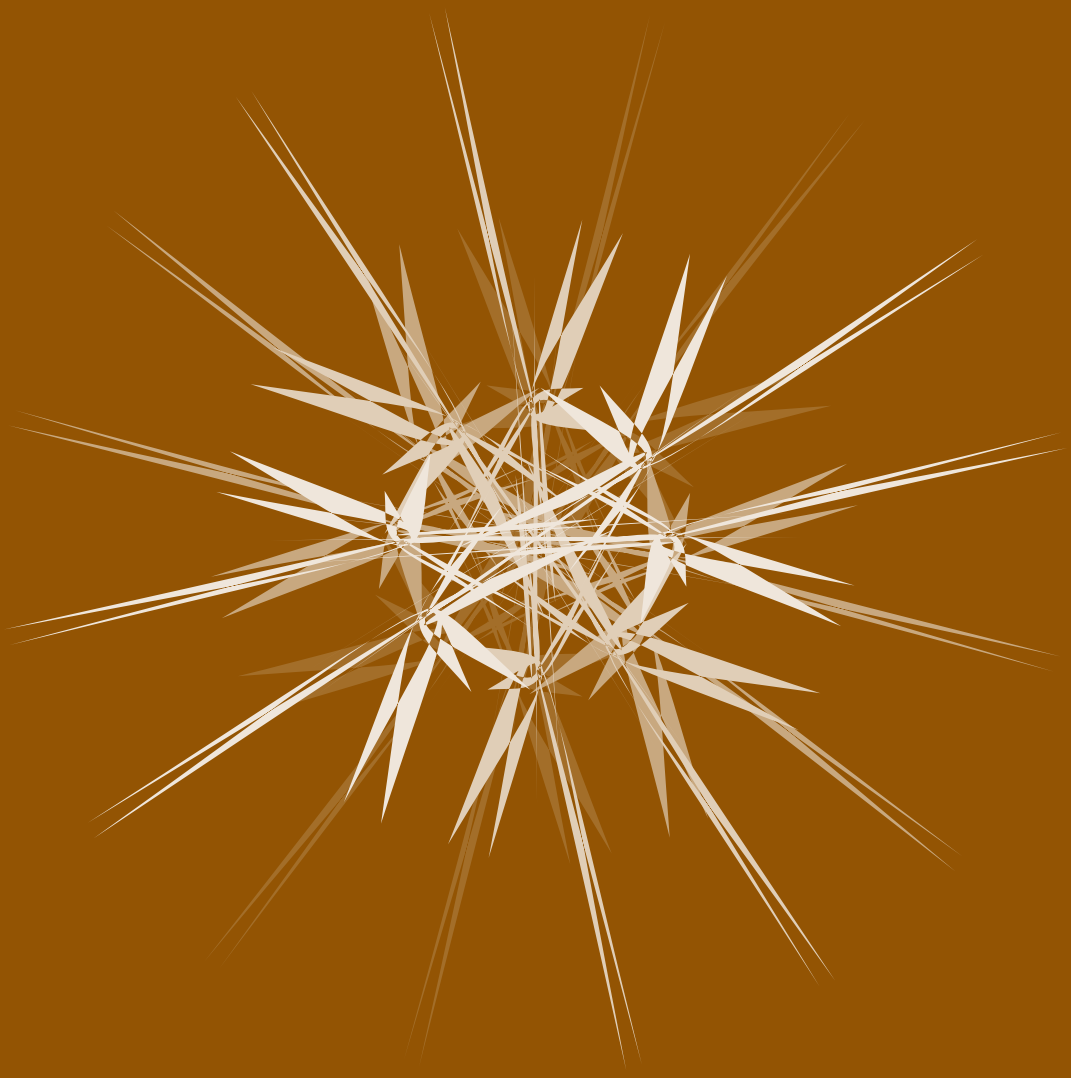
(Nellie, Wilson,)

Words and Music by
STEPHEN SONDHEIM



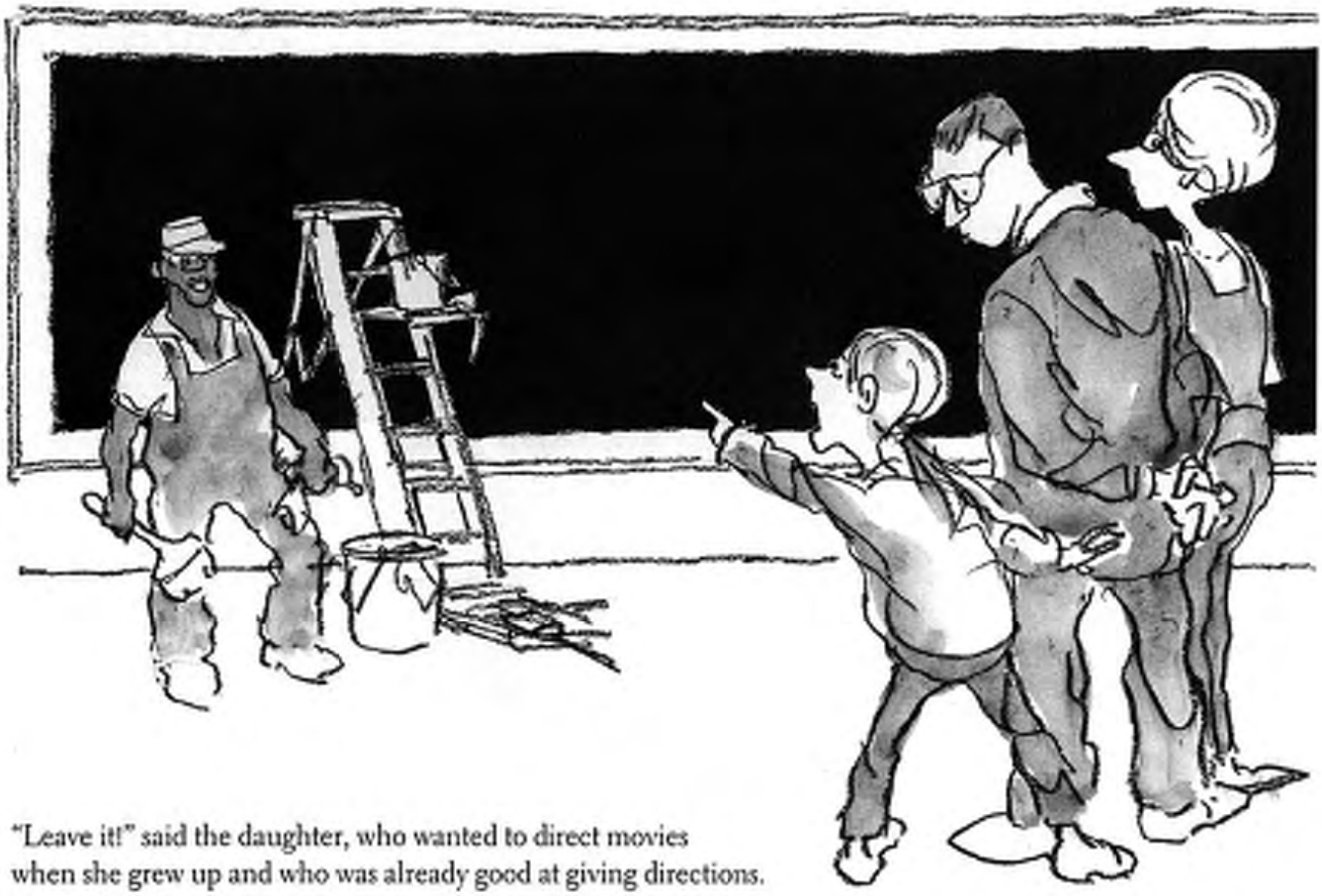

NELLIE:
Bull shit.
O - kay, the best thing that could ev - er
mp
poco cresc.
Bull shit.
hap - pen to me.
How could I
dim.
mf
cresc.
re - a - lize
What rich was real - ly?
I - deal - ly,

The Back Page



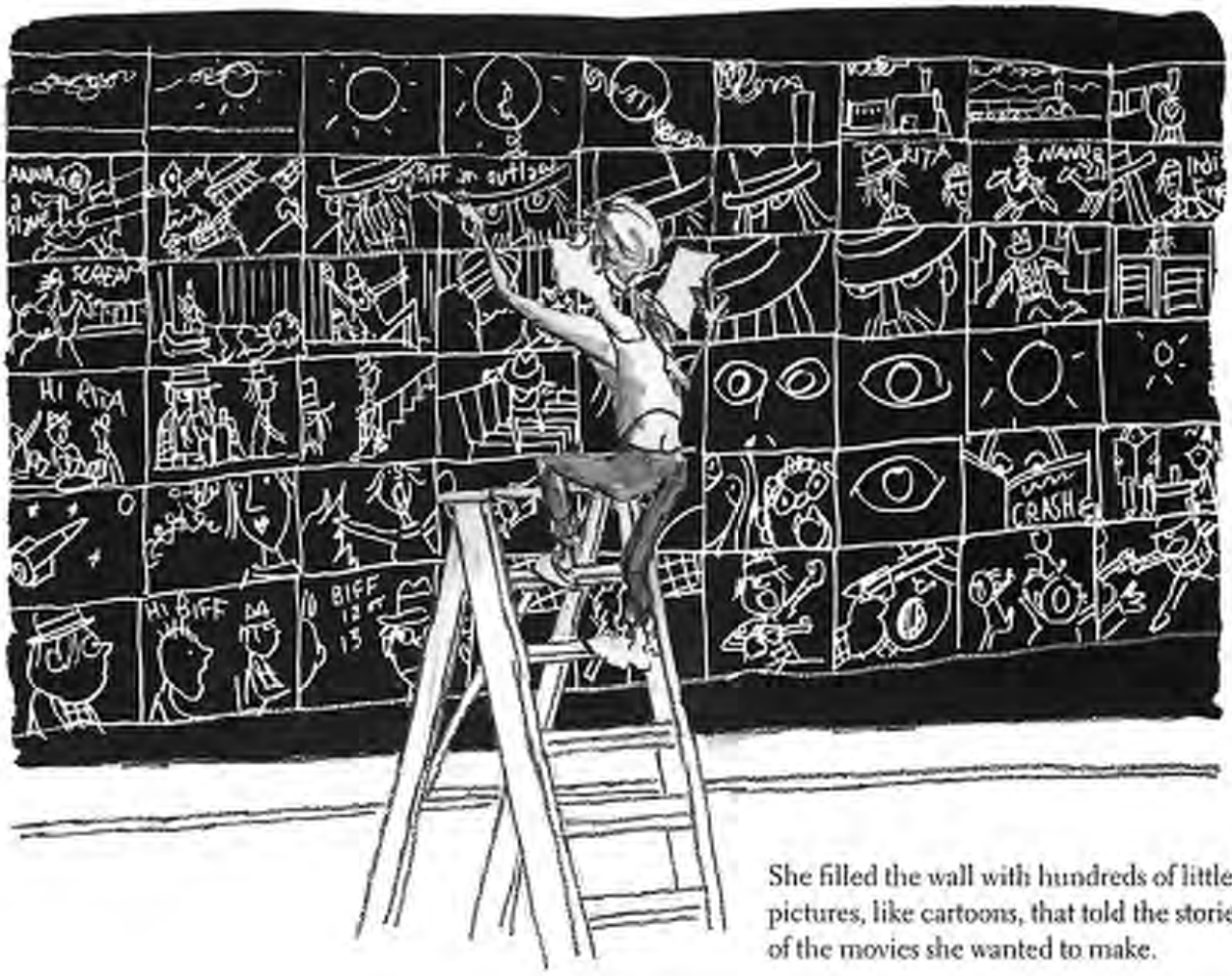
Excerpts from the short story **The Long Chalkboard**
written by Jenny Allen and illustrated by Jules Feiffer from the book
The Long Chalkboard and Other Stories *published by Pantheon Books.*

Underneath a layer of celadon, a housepainter found the chalkboard.



"Leave it!" said the daughter, who wanted to direct movies
when she grew up and who was already good at giving directions.

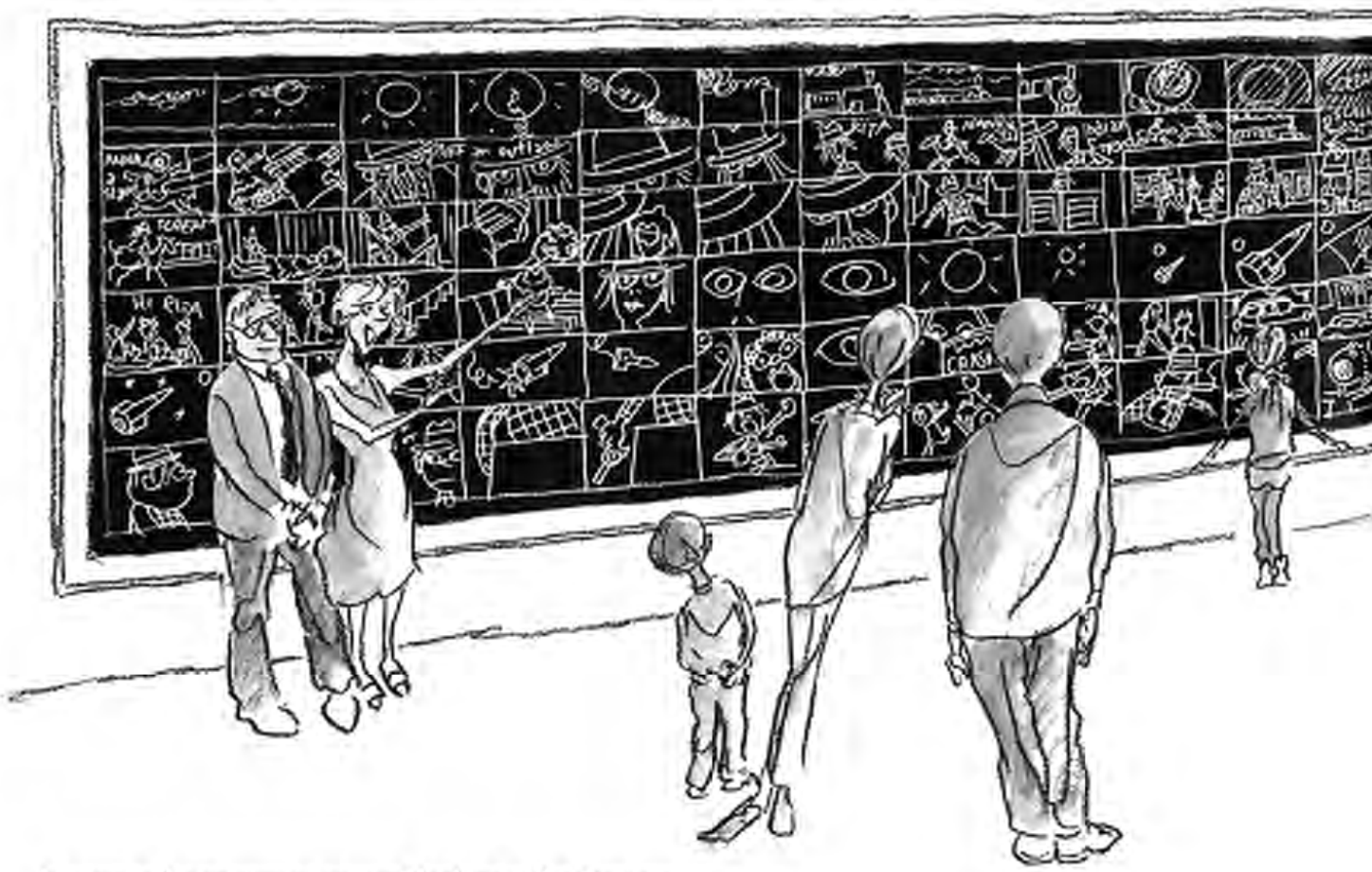
"Of course, sweetie," said her parents.



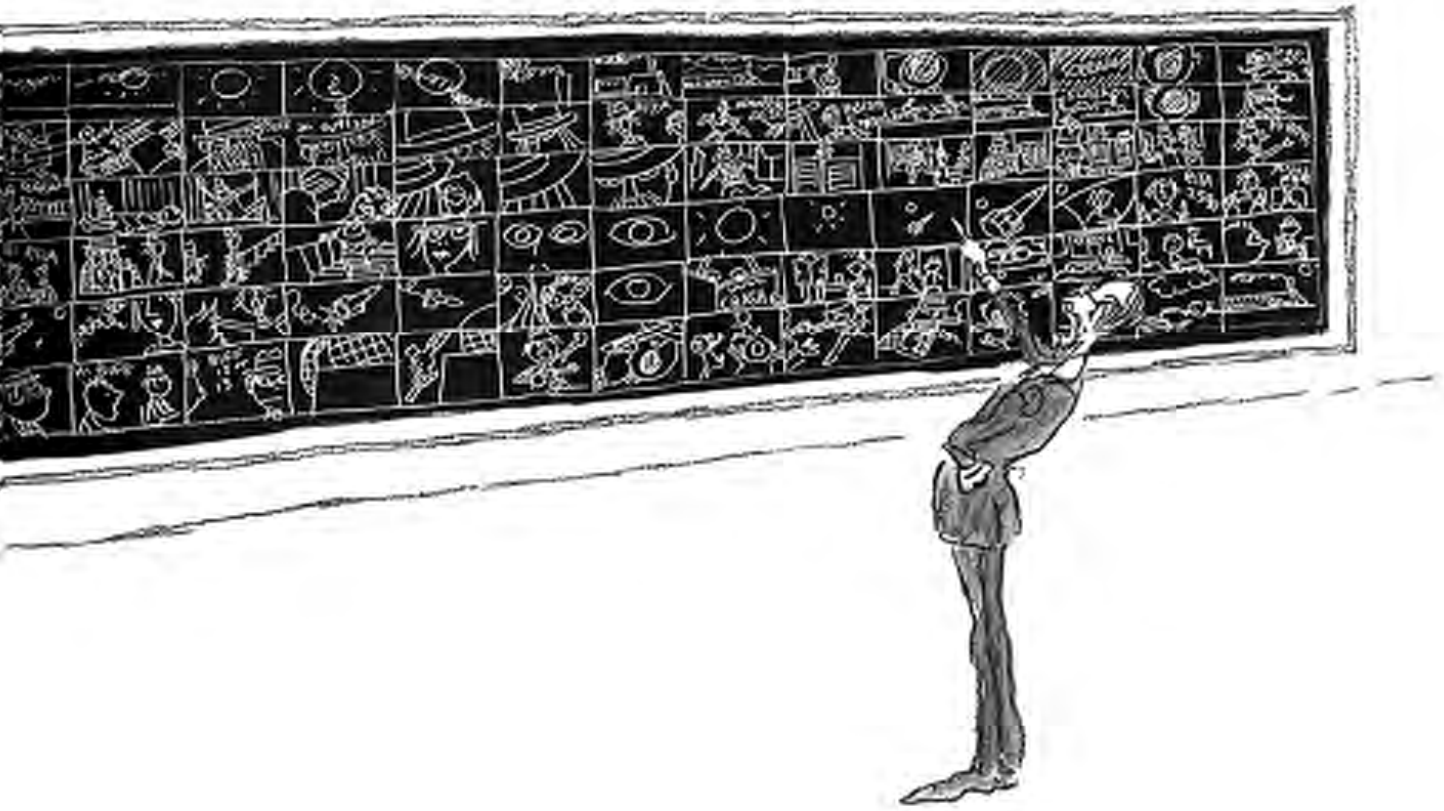
She filled the wall with hundreds of little pictures, like cartoons, that told the stories of the movies she wanted to make.

Critics loved it. Audiences loved it. It won every award a movie could win. It was an instant classic.

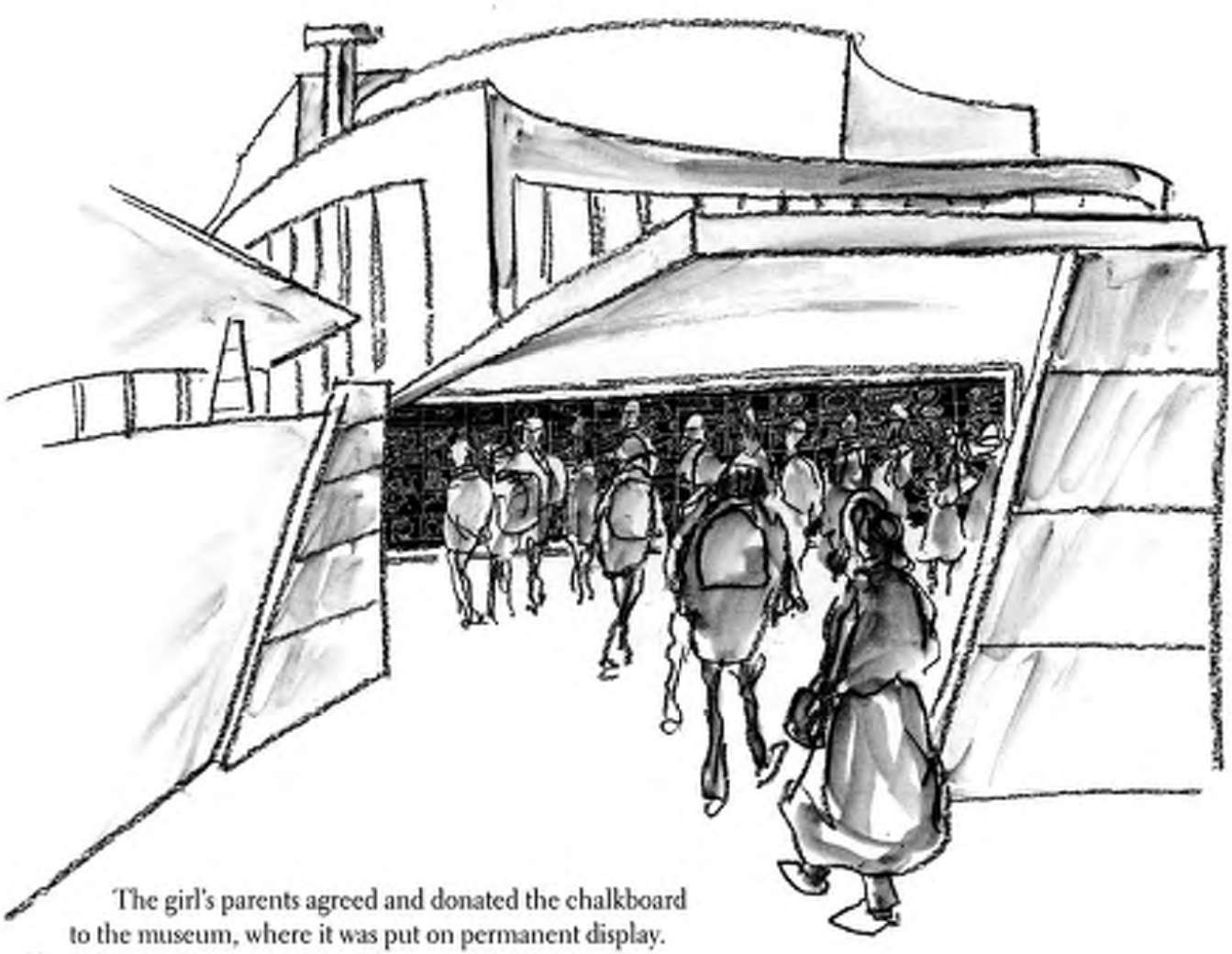
The girl's parents kept the cartoons on the chalkboard, polyurethaning them to preserve them.



Visitors to the apartment enjoyed looking at the drawings.



One visitor, the friend of a friend, was the president of a famous museum in Washington, D.C. "This chalkboard represents an important piece of our nation's cultural history," he said.



The girl's parents agreed and donated the chalkboard to the museum, where it was put on permanent display. Young filmmakers came from all over the world to see it.