

Side by Side by Sondheim

By Yale Alexander

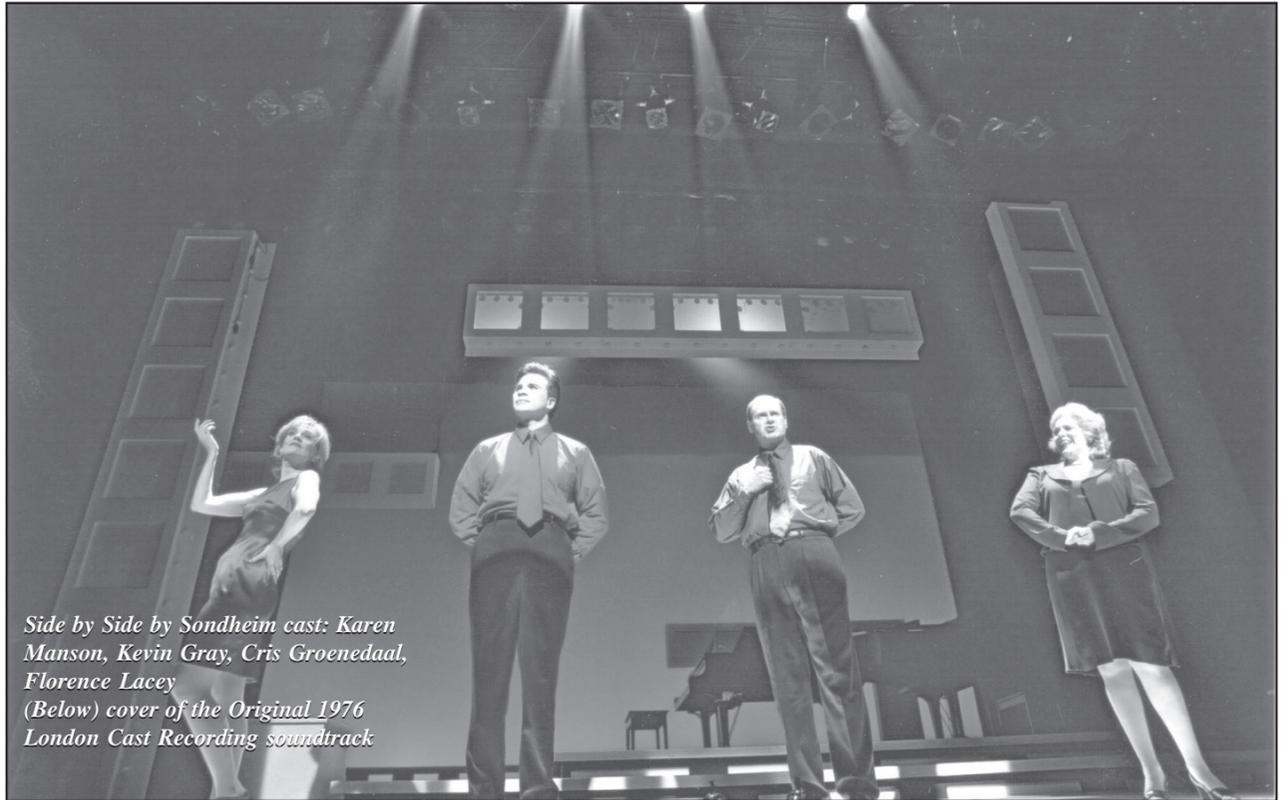
I'll say right off, that I'm a big fan of Stephen Sondheim's music. Not always his shows, but definitely his music. I don't need to list many song titles to convince you that his music almost always outlives the shows they were first presented in. That's why the original concept of "Side by Side by Sondheim" was such a great idea. The essence of the music, distilled into a revue format seems perfect, especially since most of his song lyrics tell complete stories by themselves. Yes, it's a wonderful format, unfortunately, tinkering with the simplicity of its presentation can wreak terrible havoc.

Such is the case with the production of the show at The Coconut Grove Playhouse, directed (or should I say mis-directed by) Jay Allison. A good example of how a revue is done was recently seen at The Amatur Theater, in "Forbidden Broadway Cleans Up Its Act" (also reviewed in this issue). The two shows are not comparable in any other way. While "Forbidden Broadway" is a satiric spoof, "Sondheim" only sometimes seems that way. Mr. Allison could have taken one clue from Gerard Alessandrini, though. To quote Judge Judy "keep it simple, stupid".

Simply put, "Sondheim" was overdone by exactly half. The set was twice as big, and twice as ugly as it needed to be. There were two grand pianos, and two pianists, where one of each would have sufficed. (I suggest keeping the cute blonde one.) There were also four cast members, two women and two men. While the original show was conceived with four singers, unfortunately, two of them in this show are excess baggage.

In compensation, we have two marvelous singers in Kevin Gray and Karen Mason. All of the songs are marvelous. It isn't that the show is too long by half, it's that these two singers don't sing all of them.

Usually in a revue format, with four singers, to be blunt, you would cast two that can sing high and two that can sing low. In this show, Ms. Mason and Mr. Gray can sing anything, and the other two, to be kind, have more limited ranges. To be fair, Florence Lacey and Cris Groenendaal don't have bad voices. Let's just say that their ranges have diminished with time. It is their misfortune to be cast next to two singers who



Side by Side by Sondheim cast: Karen Manson, Kevin Gray, Cris Groenendaal, Florence Lacey
(Below) cover of the Original 1976 London Cast Recording soundtrack

are at the very peak of their powers. It is our misfortune, that out of "fair distribution", some of the loveliest songs in the show are given to the weaker singers. I was left literally to imagine what they might have sounded like under better circumstances. However, both Ms. Lacey and Mr. Groenendaal do display a fair amount of acting talent, and Mr. Groenendaal does have a shining moment when he plays one of the strippers in "You Gotta Have A Gimmick" from "Gypsy". For help in picturing this, he is a tall, balding, 50ish man, wearing a butterfly costume over his shirt and pants.

To focus on the positive, though, Mr. Gray is cute and amusing throughout, with a huge and versatile voice. He has his own "stop the show" moment when he does "Being Alive", and shows us what that really means. However, if there is a star in this show, it is Ms. Karen Mason. With a supple and lovely voice, she explores these songs with a seemingly limitless vocal and dramatic range. The best performers of Stephen Sondheim's music must be either great singers (Ethel Merman), or great actors (Angela Lansbury, Bernadette Peters), or both. Karen Mason is both. Yes, there are others who fit this category, but not many, and Ms. Mason deserves to be acknowledged among them. I have had the privilege of listening to her voice ripen over 15 years, and was very gratified to learn that she took over the role of Norma Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard", both on Broadway and the tour. She's

recorded several albums, and works constantly, yet the one thing that has kept her from the fame she deserves, is that she has yet to create a starring role in a Broadway musical. Hopefully, the operative word here is "yet". While she gives fully realized performances of every one of her songs in this show, I would doubt there was a dry eye in the house when she sang "Losing My Mind". The song is from the show "Follies", and is best know from Liza Minnelli's "Results" album, but believe me, this is the one you'd remember if you'd heard it. I look forward to the day Ms. Mason does her one-woman Sondheim concert.

These gem-like moments are all the more reason to mourn Mr. Allison's waste of material and talent. Steve Shapiro is credited with sound design, but hopefully he is not responsible for the "special effects" used to give a "spacey" sound to certain songs, or the ear-shattering synth-screaming used to punctuate the song "Sweeney Todd". It was literally painful. Special criticism is reserved for Troy Hourie, the set designer. In addition to being oversized and ugly, the set was a distraction, as it looked like it was about to come crashing down at several times. Admittedly, at some points this might have been an improvement, but there is no imaginable excuse for the lighted "SONDHEIM" sign that descends ominously at the end of the show. At that point it really did seem like a spoof. I honestly had the above opinions and observations before I learned that the show was, in fact, produced in this form without the permission of the author. I can only imagine what he'd think if he'd actually seen it. (See side bar for details.)

Theater Update

Sondheim Knocks Show on Its "Side"

By Yale Alexander

THIS IS A THEATER QUEEN DISH EMERGENCY! THIS IS NOT A DRILL! "Side by Side by Sondheim" which was supposed to run until April 22nd, at The Coconut Grove Playhouse, was closed after Friday night's performance by a Cease and Desist order from the author. Stephen Sondheim, (hence the title) objected to changes the director had made to the show. It seems the director, Mr. Jack Allison, had neglected to get THE AUTHOR'S PERMISSION before making these changes. According to a cast member, the director wasn't too concerned with getting permission as he "invited Harold Prince to the opening night". Mr. Prince, perhaps the best know director of musicals on Broadway, is also a good friend of Mr. Sondheim's. Some of the cast members have already moved on to other projects. The Coconut Grove Playhouse will likely fill the remaining time in the run with concerts by renown Broadway singer Barbara Cook. Incidentally, her show is titled "An Evening of Sondheim". Call the theater for information.



FOOD LOVERS
Cafe

"Very Good"
Miami Herald

Epicurean Plate
Award 1997/98

Chef Agnes & Host Rene
Winner - "Golden Spoon Award" - 1999, 2000, 2001

SERVING
TUES, WED, THURS: 5:30 - 9:30 FRI & SAT: 5:30 - 10:30
CLOSED SUNDAYS & MONDAYS
ON PARLE FRANCAIS

1576 East Oakland Park Blvd., Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33334
(954) 566-9606
www.FoodLoversCafe.com

the best cellar

BEST WINE STORE
New Times, BPB

leader in South African wine.

(954) 630-8020

2424 "A" Wilton Dr.
Wilton Manors, FL

Gift Certificates
We Deliver & Ship

Got Wine?
Weekly wine tasting
8:00PM - Wed & Thurs
April 11th and 12th
Boutique Wines by Tropical
April 4th and 5th
Boutique Wines from Southern