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SundayArts

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BY DON AUCOIN
GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK — It was midway through a recent performance of the raucous musical adaptation of “Beetlejuice,” and the shock-haired demon of the title had just discovered his softer side.

“Someone to ruin my sleep’ — I get it now!” Beetlejuice (Alex Brightman) belted, alluding to “Being Alive,” the finale of Stephen Sondheim’s “Company,” when protagonist Bobby is finally ready to commit to a relationship.

Suddenly, Sondheim is everywhere. Even in the netherworld.

Around the time Brightman was roaring that “ruin my sleep” line at the Marquis Theatre, it was being sung in earnest at the nearby Bernard P. Jacobs Theatre at a gender-flipped revival of “Company,” starring Patti LuPone and Katrina Lenk.

One day later, another major Sondheim revival opened on Broadway: “Into the Woods,” with a cast that includes Sara Bareilles, Brian d’Arcy James, Phillipa Soo, Patina Miller, Joshua Henry, and Gavin Creel.

A name bigger than any of those — former secretary of state and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton — provided the voice of the Giant when Little Rock’s Arkansas Repertory Theatre staged “Into the Woods” a few months ago. And Daniel Radcliffe of “Harry Potter” fame has announced he will star in an off-Broadway revival later this year of “Merrily We Roll Along.”

Eight months after he died at 91, Sondheim stagings are serving as exclamation points in the summer seasons of theaters from Greater Boston to the Cape to the Berkshires. Looking ahead to the fall and beyond, the Washington, D.C.-based Signature Theatre has announced that its upcoming 2022-2023 season will include not one

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CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK

Side by side by side by side

Can there be such a thing as a surfeit of Sondheim? Multiple revivals of musicals from the late composer-lyricist raise that surprising question.

FROM TOP LEFT CLOCKWISE: MATTHEW MURPHY/AP, VINCENT TULLO/NYT, THEO WARGO/GETTY, SARA KRULWICH/NYT, JEFF SPICER/GETTY, NIKO TAVERNISE/AP, CHARLES SYKES/INVISION/AP.

MOVIES

Trying to survive a horror-movie marathon

By Odie Henderson
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

The best advice for “surviving” a movie-watching marathon is don’t fall asleep. This was evident last Saturday night at Coolidge Corner Theatre’s “Nightmare on Elm Street Marathon,” 12 terrifying hours with the self-proclaimed “man of your dreams,” Freddy Krueger.

Horror fans have enshrined Freddy in the Boogeyman Hall of Fame alongside Jason Voorhees from “Friday the 13th” and Michael Myers from the “Halloween” franchise, but what differentiates Freddy is his penchant for murdering teenagers in their dreams. In other words, his seven films are perfect for an endurance test where staying awake is the key. The people on the screen are doing the same thing we’re doing in the audience — trying to outrun Mr. Sandman — only they get killed in ingeniously gory ways when they fail. All we get is spilled popcorn and the public announcement that we snore.

The Chordettes’ “Mr. Sandman” was one of the many appropriate songs played by the marathon’s master of ceremonies, Mark Anastasio, program director at the Coolidge, who kept the audience amused and entertained between screenings. For this installment of the theater’s “After Midnight” series, 200 moviegoers were treated to an all-35mm rendering of Freddy’s oeuvre, from 1984’s “A Nightmare on Elm Street” to 1994’s “Wes Craven’s New Nightmare,” both written

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MEDIA

Theatrely’s news and TikToks speak Gen Z’s language

By Serena Puang
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Red-carpet events for Broadway shows are typically full of reporters trying to get in one or two questions, but when Theatrely senior features contributor Amanda Marie Miller went to the gala for “POTUS,” she was on a mission to make a TikTok.

“Hey, over here! I have one dance move if you have time for it,” she said, flagging down cast members.

In preparation, she broke down every move in Lizzo’s “About Damn Time” into a brief combination that she could teach quickly. The final video compilation of dance clips from various cast members — including Julie White, Rachel Dratch, and



KAYLEEN BERTRAND

Editor in chief and president Kobi Kassal runs Theatrely out of a New York office.

Vanessa Williams — has attracted over 91,000 views.

This is the work of Theatrely, a media start-up founded in Boston and launched during the pandemic. It is the only Gen Z-led media company that creates theater-related content specifically targeted toward younger audiences, according to Theatrely publicist Taylor Lhamon.

Theatrely’s team of five full-time staff and 35 or so contributors write and produce videos, articles, and reviews across all social platforms and on their own news site, theatrely.com. In their short time on the scene, Theatrely’s writers and producers have become regulars at red-carpet events,

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Matthew Gilbert speculates about what Peter Jackson’s new Fab Four project might look like

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Theater

Sondheim bandwagon is getting very, very crowded

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but three Sondheim musicals (“Into the Woods,” “Sweeney Todd,” and “Pacific Overtures.”)

In other words, the Sondheim bandwagon is getting very, very crowded.

As one who reveres Sondheim, I’m of mixed mind about all this. Of course it’s heartening to see the artistry of a certified national treasure gaining wide recognition. So kudos to theatermakers and recording artists for doing what they can to ensure that his work is enshrined as a cornerstone of our cultural legacy, and for at least tacitly pledging allegiance to the standards he helped instill.

But this heretical thought keeps intruding: Is there such a thing as too much Sondheim? Or, to be more precise, does the work of this singular genius — a man who never had the slightest interest in catering to mass taste — lose some of its specialness if it becomes ubiquitous?

After all, nothing dilutes mystique like saturation. Any of you baby boomers out there remember when a movie starring Robert De Niro or Meryl Streep or Al Pacino was an Event? Or when “The Godfather” was not instantly streamable, and only aficionados could summon chunks of dialogue from memory?

Scarcity can make the heart grow fonder. So can variety. It’s hard not to notice that the spotlight mostly keeps falling on the same handful of Sondheim shows. There aren’t many revivals of “Anyone Can Whistle” or “Do I Hear a Waltz?” or “Passion.”

Homages to the legendary composer-lyricist began to multiply as he grew older, picking up speed around his 80th birthday and further accelerating over the next decade. Then his death triggered a spate of revivals, tribute albums, concerts, cabaret evenings devoted to his work, and awards-ceremony salutes at not just the Tonys but the Oscars and Grammys.

Two events bracketing Sondheim’s death provided a measure of his longevity and impact. A few weeks after he died came the release of the Steven Spielberg-directed film of “West Side Story,” the musical that launched Sondheim’s career as a 27-year-old lyricist in 1957. Just before Sondheim’s passing, an off-Broadway revival of his “Assassins” opened, featuring Will Swenson, who is currently starring as Neil Diamond in “A Beautiful Noise” at the Emerson Colonial Theatre. In April, Danny Burstein (who starred in the 2011 revival of “Follies”) hosted “Celebrating Sondheim: Songs from ‘A Little Night Music’” at New York’s Symphony Space, along with Broadway performers like Kate Baldwin, Carolee Carmello, and Judy Kaye.

Actors tend to be in awe of Sondheim, who enriched so many of their careers. Mandy Patinkin told me in an interview eight years ago that Sondheim was “the Shakespeare of our time.” Hyperbolic, sure, but I like the general sentiment.

Each summer brings reminders, though, that even Shakespeare — who wrote nearly 40 plays, twice Sondheim’s output — is not immune to overkill. My



MATTHEW MURPHY/ASSOCIATED PRESS



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THEO WARGO/GETTY IMAGES



NIKO TAVERNISE/20TH CENTURY STUDIOS VIA AP



SARA KRULWICH/NEW YORK TIMES/FILE

From top: Katrina Lenk in the current revival of Stephen Sondheim’s “Company”; Sondheim in 2018; Patti LuPone won a Tony Award for her performance in “Company”; Sondheim (left), Bernadette Peters, and James Lapine celebrated the news that “Sunday in the Park with George” had won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1985.

shoulders sag when I hear of yet another production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” and I’m starting to have the same reaction when a cabaret singer solemnly launches into “Send in the Clowns.”

Part of what made Sondheim fascinating was his paradoxical status as a household name who still, somehow, seemed to exist just outside the mainstream.

“I write generally experimental, unexpected work,” he once said. “I think I’m getting more and more accepted, but I’m still essentially a cult figure. My kind of work is caviar to the general. It’s not that it’s too good for people, it’s just that it’s too unexpected to sustain itself

very firmly in the commercial theater.”

Today, it’s far from unexpected when a theater company stages Sondheim. Quite the opposite.

For her debut as the new artistic director at Waltham’s Reagle Music Theatre of Greater Boston, Rachel Bertone chose to present “West Side Story” (it closed July 16). Next month, as her swan song after leading Pittsfield’s Barrington Stage Company for nearly three decades, Julianne Boyd will direct a production of “A Little Night Music.” At Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater on the Cape, the Sondheim revue “Marry Me a Little” is wrapping up July 22.

Now, it’s hard to quarrel with these productions in and of themselves. Ber-

tone did a fine job with “West Side Story.” Given Boyd’s sterling track record, there’s every reason to look forward to her take on “Night Music.” I can attest that the revival of “Company” absolutely deserved the five Tony Awards it won last month, more than any other musical and tied with “The Lehman Trilogy” for most Tonys overall. New York critics have been over the moon in their enthusiasm for the Broadway revival of “Into the Woods.” (It opened in the spring at New York’s City Center in a concert version as part of the Encores! series, but was such a smash it swiftly transferred to Broadway.)

One worries, however, about Sondheim-mania turning into too much of a

Start-up Theatrely speaks Gen Z’s language

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their TikTok has amassed over 471,000 likes, and excerpts of Theatrely’s reviews have been featured on three Broadway marquee.

Growing up in Florida, editor in chief and president Kobi Kassal and CEO Jordanna Brody, both 25, were family friends and theater kids. For college, they both chose schools in Boston.

In 2017, Kassal started a radio show called “Theatre Talk Boston” at Boston University as a way to listen to show tunes and talk about theater news with his friends. In between acting in theater productions at Emerson College and working at a doughnut shop, Brody was a frequent guest.

After both graduated in 2019, Kassal kept “Theatre Talk Boston” going through written and social media content while he worked full time running social media at the Huntington Theatre Company. During the pandemic when live theater was put on pause, his work on the side evolved into Theatrely. In 2021, he quit his job at the Huntington to do Theatrely full time, and Brody officially joined the team.

Kassal attributes some of the company’s success to the timing of its launch and the unique environment the pandemic created.

“I never envisioned myself running a media company. I was studying hotel

marketing in college,” he said. “[In the early days of the pandemic] there were many, many weeks where I just sat at home, watched ‘Ozark’ and played piano. But then there were other days where I was like, ‘You know what, let’s try and build a new media organization.’”

“I sent e-mails to all the New York publicists as well as publicists at all of the regional theaters across the country to say ‘Hey! We’re a new theater outlet. . . We’re here when you need us.’”

According to Kassal, the reception was surprisingly positive. The digital productions most theaters were doing at the time were particularly well-suited to the company’s social media-driven approach. While shows were still shut down, Theatrely was able to build relationships that carried over when live theater returned.

According to Danielle Morales, an independent theater publicist who previously worked with Kassal at the Huntington, it’s also more than that.

In response to renewed calls for racial justice in 2020 and movements such as We see you White American Theater, the theater industry has been working to attract younger audiences and reduce major representation gaps both on and off the stage. But change can be slow, Morales explained, and in Boston theater has to compete with many interests, including a thriving sports culture, which can make attract-

ing young people particularly difficult.

Morales contrasts Theatrely’s efforts to those of traditional media outlets.

“People are trying to diversify their writers and what they’re reviewing. And I don’t think it comes necessarily organically to some of these publications,” she explained. “They’re [Theatrely] doing it from the jump.” The staff, their writing, and the programming they cover “are all speaking to youth,” Morales said.

Theatrely is now based in New York City but maintains a connection to Boston’s theater scene.

“We care about our coverage of a show on 42nd Street just as much as something on Tremont in Boston,” said Kassal, also noting that more Broadway shows are now getting tryouts in Boston. He tries to catch shows when he’s in town, and Theatrely has a writer based in the city.

Both Kassal and Brody spoke about their experiences of being the youngest person in the room at shows and other events. Sometimes they get pushback for their unconventional approach.

“A very smart person told me ‘Everybody in the theater space wants to be first to be second,’” said Kassal. “No one wants to do a TikTok interview the first time — it’s like ‘What is that?’ Then as soon as one person does it and it goes viral, it’s exciting and everyone’s like, ‘Oh, can we do that?’”

But according to Brody, it’s this approach that helps them connect to their core audience.

“Being Gen Z, we have a different relationship to technology and to social media than people that didn’t grow up learning how to utilize them,” she said.

“I really enjoy reading a lot of our writers’ stuff because they’re using these intersections of culture and media and social media with the theater world.”

Brody and the rest of the Theatrely team aren’t trying to imagine what young people might hypothetically engage with; they’re their own target demographic.

So in honor of the Tony Awards in June, Theatrely shot a five-minute mu-

‘I really enjoy reading a lot of our writers’ stuff because they’re using these intersections of culture and media and social media with the theater world.’

JORDANNA BRODY, Theatrely CEO

sic video in Times Square, an original song that celebrated every Broadway show of the season. They’ve done creative projects like inviting chef/food writer Claire Saffitz to review baking in “Birthday Candles,” a production in which actress Debra Messing makes a cake on stage. And they frequently film “Stage Door Speed Rounds,” quick TikTok interviews with actors outside of Broadway shows.

“Gen Z is definitely weary and tired of institutions,” said Juan A. Ramirez,

good thing, if not now then down the road.

After all, there are only half a dozen open slots in your average regional theater season. Sondheim devoted a lot of time to encouraging young composers, including Lin-Manuel Miranda (“Hamilton,” “In the Heights”) and Jonathan Larson (“Rent,” “Tick, Tick . . . Boom!”) at the beginning of their careers. Will a no-season-without-a-Sondheim-show mind-set take hold at regional theaters, and might that crowd out new work by the next Miranda or Larson?

One thing a Sondheim musical should never be is obligatory. That would be the exact opposite of the legacy he strove for a lifetime to build. His goal was never to become a box-office powerhouse like Andrew Lloyd Webber or Jerry Herman, or to be as beloved by the general public as, say, Irving Berlin, or Rodgers and Hammerstein (the latter of whom was Sondheim’s mentor and a crucial early influence).

After his early commercial success as lyricist for mega-hits “West Side Story” (1957) and “Gypsy” (1959) Sondheim deliberately set a more challenging course for himself. With his complexity and his aversion to happy endings, he wrote musicals that polarized audiences. Some found his work overly cold or dauntingly cerebral. Even his rambunctiously successful “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” (1962) featured music unusual enough that his “West Side Story” collaborator Leonard Bernstein told Sondheim: “You’ve got a lot of wrong notes in there.”

Broadway audiences apparently felt that way about Sondheim’s follow-up show, “Anyone Can Whistle” (1964). Despite the presence in the cast of Angela Lansbury and Lee Remick, it lasted only nine performances. From an artistic standpoint, Sondheim’s Broadway output in the 1970s was nothing short of astounding — “Company” (1970), “Follies” (1971), “A Little Night Music” (1973), “Pacific Overtures” (1976), and “Sweeney Todd” (1979).

But then came the colossal flop of “Merrily We Roll Along” (1981), which closed after 16 performances. Sondheim rebounded with “Sunday in the Park with George” (1984) and “Into the Woods” (1987), which became a favorite of high school drama clubs (despite being shot through with Sondheim-ian darkness).

Now everyone wants a piece of him. Movie stars like Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter leaped at the chance to be part of the 2007 film adaptation of “Sweeney Todd.” Ditto for Streep, Anna Kendrick, and Emily Blunt when it came to the 2014 movie version of “Into the Woods.”

But any producer or artistic director tempted to add to the flood of Sondheim shows should perhaps first consult his indispensable 2010 book, “Finishing the Hat.” In the preface, he enunciates the three principles that, he says, “underlie everything I’ve ever written.”

All three are spelled out in boldface lettering. One is “**Content Dictates Form.**” Another is “**God Is in the Details.**” The other? “**Less Is More.**”

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Theatrely’s chief critic. In his reviews, he often references memes and tries to keep his writing conversational. While he doesn’t write to pander to Gen Z, he finds that his “youth reflects that on its own.”

For example, when he was interviewed on New York 1’s “On Stage” segment, he found that his perspective on “MJ: The Musical,” the Broadway show about Michael Jackson, differed sharply from the two older critics on the panel. They both enjoyed the show, but Ramirez called it a “monument to misconduct,” referring to the multiple accusations of sexual abuse against Jackson.

“My formative years were not spent growing up alongside Michael Jackson. So I don’t have the particular art versus artists conflict,” he explained. “I was a sophomore in college . . . when [Donald] Trump was elected, when MeToo happened, when the BLM movement started really happening in earnest.”

“I’m not gonna be the one to be like ‘Let’s both sides this issue,’” he said. “We’ve seen what that kind of stuff does. The language of social justice has been disseminated widely enough that we can all analyze this sort of thing and smell BS from far away.”

Theater is changing, and Theatrely is changing with it. When Amanda Marie Miller, the writer who makes TikToks on the red carpet, saw Julie White again at press day for the Tonys, it was White who asked Miller, “Do you have another dance move for me?”

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