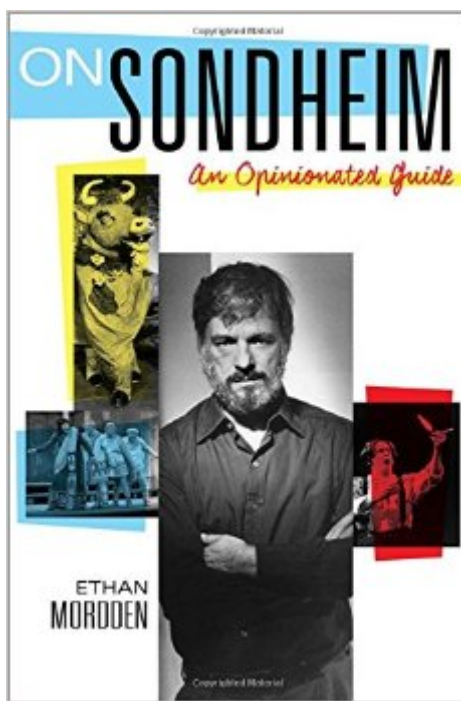


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On Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide



Synopsis

In *On Sondheim*, renowned author Ethan Mordden takes the reader on a tour of Stephen Sondheim's work, arguing for the importance and appeal of the composer-lyricist in American theater and, even more, in American culture. Over the course of eighteen shows, Mordden demonstrates that Sondheim is a classical composer who happens to write musicals. Sondheim has intellectualized the musical by tackling serious content usually reserved for the spoken stage: nonconformism (in *Anyone Can Whistle*, 1964), history (in *Pacific Overtures*, 1976), and cannibalism as a metaphor for class warfare (*Sweeney Todd*, 1979). Yet his work combines complex music and intellectual plots with a masterly skill for the fabric of theatre. His shows are all intensely theatrical, produced with flair and brilliance, whether in the lush operetta of *A Little Night Music* (1973) or the quixotic fairy-tale magic of *Into the Woods* (1987). Mordden provides fresh insights and analyses of every Sondheim show, from his first hit (*West Side Story*, 1957) to his most recent title (*Road Show*, 2008). Each musical has a dedicated chapter, including articles on Sondheim's life and his major influences, and comprehensive bibliographical and discographical essays place the Sondheim literature and recordings in perspective. Writing with his usual blend of the scholarly and the popular - with a wicked sense of humor - Ethan Mordden reveals why Stephen Sondheim has become Broadway's most significant voice in the last fifty years.

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Customer Reviews

I agree wholeheartedly with the prior reviewer, enubrius: ON SONDHEIM: AN OPINIONATED

GUIDE is not to be missed. In the world of theatrical writing, there are academics, there are career journalists, and there are "theater people" -- Mr. Mordden, due to his great experience and prior work, combines all the best attribute of the three camps, with perhaps special concentration in the last. This relatively short book is powerful and powerfully interesting, whether you're a relative newb out to learn more about America's greatest living Broadway composer, or a more seasoned observer who has had exposure to some of Mordden's earlier works. To add a mild clarification: This book is indeed "Opinionated" but those who expect a slash-and-burn from Mordden will probably be disappointed. He is not slow to assail a (very few) critics or journalists with labels like "stupid" and he did himself no favor in the second paragraph of the book in proclaiming that Sondheim's Ethical Culture/Secular Humanist background left him "free of the occult confusions that religion invents." (A few pages later the author chokes on the result of that unnecessary judgment, being virtually obliged to overlook the religious import of a song like "You'll Never Walk Alone," which he merely describes as "folksy.") But on the whole the tone is readable, genial, perhaps lightly professorial, lightened by Mordden's almost complete avoidance of shopworn theater cliches in favor of metaphors that tell: A backstage shouting match becomes a "geschrei"; in the 2014 film adaptation of INTO THE WOODS the Witch, Meryl Streep, doesn't just leave the room: She "gazungles into a twirly mist and then evaporates.

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