

Sunday in the Park with George
Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim
Book by James Lapine

Sunday in the Park with George is the seminal Sondheim score, because it is the one in which you will find, buried deep in a complex and multi-layered show written with James Lapine, some of the most useful lyrical flags on the Sondheim route-map.

In here are the lyrics that give us "Art isn't easy," but also "Art is what you do for yourself" and "Children and Art" and, most centrally, "Move On": "If you can know where you're going, you've gone... Look at what you want, not at where you are, not at what you'll be... anything you do, let it come from you, then it will be new." If ever there was a Sondheim credo it lies there; all that and the great anthem to *Sunday*. As Stephen Sondheim himself has always said, musicals remain works in progress however many times they may open and close in different productions worldwide, and the ongoing greatness of *Sunday in the Park* after two decades lies in its willingness to explore the very nature of the making of art, just as the Sondheim and Jule Styne musical *Gypsy* explores the very nature of show business itself.

Sure, there will always be the great critical debate about the second half, about whether the show really needs a break, about how well the time-shift works: but never forget that without the controversial, somehow still apparently work-in-progress second half, we would not have the crucial "Putting it Together, nor indeed "Move On," nor "Children and Art."

It is inherent in the genius of *Sunday in the Park* that, like the painting itself from which it derives, it changes every time you see it and suggests somehow that it will always be capable of that change: it is not set in stone, but rather in the light-shifting quality of paint.

Just as the painting lets us in to a moment from a lost work of 19th century France, so a musical written a century later lets us in, uniquely, to the process of art itself. Not only is there no musical like it, it is rare to find a play or a novel that undertakes the analysis of a work of art, even while celebrating and criticizing it, in quite such intricate detail.

In the Middle Ages, painters who could not afford new canvasses on which to work would simply buy up job lots of old, discarded artworks and just paint over them. Then, over the next hundred or so years, the original painting would start to seep through the new one, giving a shadowy outline in the background. The process in art is known as *pentimento*, which could have served as a wonderful subtitle for *Sunday in the Park with George*. What you see is not always what you get.

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Find out about the Kennedy Center's production of [Sunday in the Park with George](#).

Synopsis:

Inspired by the painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* by Georges Seurat, *Sunday in the Park with George* focuses on the famous French pointillist painter himself, who believes that reality can always be improved upon in art. Through the act of painting, he washes away the petty disagreements of the characters in his landscape, creating a world of order, balance, and harmony. Locking himself in his solitary studio filled with paints and canvasses, Seurat devotes himself fully to his art, unable to commit to anything else—including his longtime mistress, Dot. Sondheim's songs merge past and present into basic, heartfelt truths about life, creation, and emotion. This 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning musical confirmed for London's *Daily Telegraph* that Sondheim is "one of the finest theater composers of his generation."

Things to think about:

Look at George Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte—1884* on the Web site of the [Art Institute of Chicago](#). Seurat believes that reality can be improved upon in art. Do you think that reality was improved upon in this painting? If so, how does Seurat achieve this effect? If not, why?

Artists, like Sondheim, are constantly inspired by other works of art and often create their own pieces based on this inspiration. Find a painting that you like, and create a poem, song, dance, sculpture, or other art form based on the painting.

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