

## CHECK OUT THE BEST THEATRE BOOK OF THE MONTH FOR AUGUST 2021

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MICHAEL GILTZ | AUGUST 17, 2021

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### theater book of the month, just for you.

#### *Putting It Together: How Stephen Sondheim and I Created Sunday in the Park With George*

By James Lapine

\$40, Farrar, Straus and Giroux

“How’d they do that?” is question that elicits interesting answers, and many books tell how a movie or album or play or other work of art was created. But it’s even more intriguing when someone asks “How’d *I* do that?”

Artists describing their own creative journeys have a few choices. They can keep a diary, like actor Antony Sher did with his brilliant book *Year of the King*. Sher tells of tackling *Richard III* as it happens and the result is gripping, illuminating, and a must-read for any would-be actor.

You can look back fondly (or bitterly) and tell the story from your own perspective. Think of Moss Hart’s irresistible memoir *Act One* or Alan Jay Lerner’s fond remembrance of tackling *My Fair Lady*, *Gigi*, and *Camelot*. Those are charming tales invariably colored by the passage of time and the fact that you’re getting just one person’s perspective.

Or you can do what director and playwright James Lapine is doing with *Putting It Together*. Wait many years, so the dust has settled. Talk to everyone and let them have their say, including people you butted heads with, annoyed, charmed, confused, and/or intimidated. It’s the insider’s angle, but it’s not just you settling scores (pun intended). It recognizes theater is a collaborative medium, memories are faulty, and, hey, maybe you were a schmuck that one day and it all worked out so why not be generous?

The result is a delight, right alongside *Year of the King*, *Act One*, Lerner’s *The Street Where I Live*, and a handful of others. Unlike the musical whose making it chronicles, the book doesn’t wow from the start. It feels a little disjointed. You get Lapine’s thoughts, and then maybe a chat between him and Stephen Sondheim (“Where did you first hear about me?” and the like), and then back to Lapine.

But slowly he works in other voices: actors, arrangers, producers, assistants to the costume designers, and so on. Personalities come to life. Battle scars are displayed. (Actor Kelsey Grammer dressed down Lapine during rehearsal one day, and let’s just say most of the cast was not displeased.)

Soon the entire messy, crazy, groundbreaking story of *Sunday in the Park With George* comes into focus. You understand how bold it was, from Sondheim collaborating with an untried Off-Broadway newbie to the presentation of the show for paying audiences when it was still being workshopped to the royalty pool that helped change the way shows are financed and the rewards shared.

Indeed, when Lapine talks *money* — not just budgets, but directors’ fees and contract negotiations and the gubby details of how everyone got their share of the box office — well, it might as well be an eleven o’clock number for me since no one talks money. The book includes images of lyric sheets with handwritten notes and other wonderful ephemera; I just wish he’d included a contract or two.

The stories are fascinating and revealing without ever feeling dishy. Mandy Patinkin storms out one day! (*Of course he does*, you think.) But Lapine wins his confidence by telling Patinkin’s wife he knows it’s never about ego but always about the work. Dana Ivey is astonished by those who simply don’t get the show and rudely let her know it. Bernadette Peters is easy to costume. Musical director Paul Gemignani and orchestrator Jonathan Tunick (who didn’t work on this show) simply do not get along. At all. Choreographer/movement director Randolyn Zinn came up with the idea of having the people in the painting bow to George at the finale?!! It’s a transcendent moment one assumed came from Sondheim or Lapine. Here, Zinn modestly says she’s very proud of that detail, when she should be shouting it from the rooftops. One could go merrily on and on.

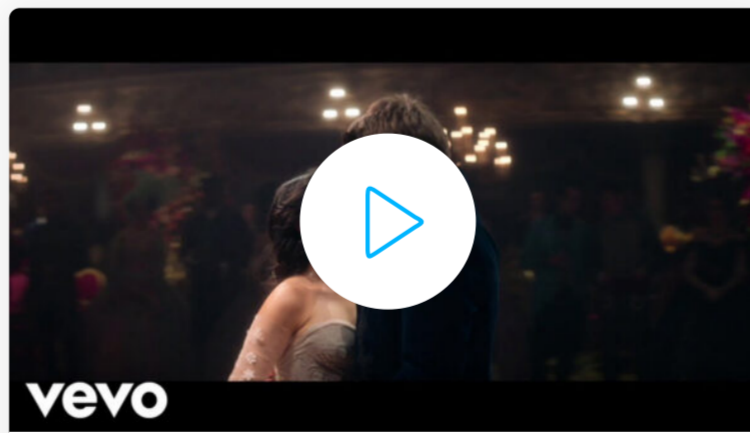
Anyone with an interest in theater in general or the making of one of its great achievements in particular needs this book. In pointillism, the closer you get to a work of art, the more it dissolves before your eyes and all you see are the blue, purple, yellow, red splashes of color. In *Putting It Together*, the closer you examine each detail, the more it comes to life and the more you appreciate the struggle and sweat and messy humanity that went into the birth of a classic.

*Michael Giltz is the cohost of the weekly entertainment podcast Showbiz Sandbox. He covers all areas of entertainment as a journalist, critic, feature writer, and analyst, contributing to numerous outlets including New York Daily News, New York Post, New York magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Entertainment Weekly, Los Angeles Times, Indiewire, Parade, Book and Film Globe, and many others. When Michael’s not attending the theater, he’s reading about it.*

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