SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE, a moving study of enigmatic painter Georges Seurat, is one of the most acclaimed musicals of our time. It won a Pulitzer Prize for its insightful and personal examination of life through art and the artist.

Georges Pierre Seurat (1859 – 1891) was a French Neo-Impressionist painter and draftsman known for devising a painting technique called Pointillism. His large-scale work *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1886) altered the direction of modern art by initiating Neo-impressionism, and is one of the icons of 19th century painting.

Seurat was born in Paris to a devoted mother and a one-armed, misanthropic father who collected religious images. He had an older brother and sister and a younger brother who died at the age of five. His parents cannot have had a very satisfactory marriage, because Seurat’s father lived in a suburban home within easy access by rail to the city, while his wife and children lived in the family apartment in the boulevard de Magenta.

Paul Signac, fellow artist and friend of Seurat described the family in a letter, “I often dined with them on Tuesday, the one day Mr. Seurat devoted to his family. He had a mechanical arm, the result of a hunting accident. He had a mechanical arm, the result of a hunting accident. At the table, he would screw on to the end of his arm knives and forks which allowed him to carve meat with celerity and even passion. He positively juggled with these pointed and sharp-edged arms. Georges paid no attention to these vaudeville antics.”

Seurat’s interest in art developed at an early age. In 1878, at age 17, he attended the École des Beaux-Arts, studying with Henri Lehmann, a pupil of the great French neoclassical painter Jean Ingres. Undoubtedly, another primary influence on Seurat was Eugene Delacroix, renowned for his use of color, his ability to inject a modern spirit into classical forms and his skill in co-ordinating and unifying large works. Seurat noted certain harmonious color combinations and how complementary colors, like red and green, reinforced each other in Delacroix’s work.
He served the minimum of one year of military service then returned to Paris in 1880. He lived comfortably, receiving an allowance and having no need of a job or pressure to sell his work. He organized his life exactly as he wanted it, a life of solitude; but not far from his mother, with whom he dined in the evening. He proceeded to train himself for a great project he envisioned, and for the next two years he devoted himself to mastering the art of black-and-white drawing.

At the same time, he worked at painting, proceeding methodically as usual. He made what he called “croquetons,” oil sketches from nature dashed off with quick strokes on little wooden panels, which provided the elements he needed for his compositions.

Seurat spent 1883 on his first major painting, a huge canvas titled Bathers at Asnières. It was rejected by the Paris Salon. In a period during which private exhibitions by art dealers were unknown, the official Salons controlled the only opportunity artists had to show their work. So to be rejected by the jury meant to be condemned to oblivion for at least a year, until the next Salon.

Seurat turned away from such establishments and in 1884 he and other artists formed the Société des Artistes Indépendants. There he met and befriended painter Paul Signac. They became leaders in a new movement in art, Neo-Impressionism, a French avant-garde art movement that flourished from 1886 to 1906. They renounced the random spontaneity of Impressionism in favor of a measured painting technique grounded in science and the study of optics.

Michel Chevreul, a French chemist and Director of the GobelinsTapestry Works, was perhaps the most important influence on artists at the time. His book, THE PRINCIPLES OF HARMONY AND CONTRAST OF COLOR, is a treatise on color, optical effects and perception. During his restorations of tapestries he noticed that the only way to restore a section properly was to take into account the influence of the colors around the missing wool. Chevreul discovered that two colors juxtaposed, would have the effect of another color when seen from a distance.

Another important influence was Ogden Rood, who also studied color and optical effects. Like Chevreul, he stated that if two colors are placed next to each other from a distance they look like a third distinctive color.

The separation of color through individual strokes of pigment came to be known as Divisionism, while the application of precise dots of paint came to be called Pointillism.

Seurat thought that the knowledge of perception and optical laws could be used to create a new language of art using lines, color intensity and color schema. Seurat called this language Chromoluminarism.

Divisionism quickly received both negative and positive attention from art critics. For example, one critic, Joris-Karl Huysmans, said “Strip his figures of the colored fleas that cover them, underneath there is nothing, no thought, no soul, nothing”.

In the summer of 1884 Seurat began work on his masterpiece, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, which took him two years to complete. He moved to a quieter studio, where he lived secretly with a young model and showgirl, Madeleine Knobloch, whom he portrayed in his painting Jeune Femme se Poudrant (next page).

There is next to nothing known about Knobloch, other than that the artist kept her existence carefully hidden from his friends and parents. He may have wanted to shield himself from critical comments from his intellectual friends about his working class mistress.

Their relationship began in 1888. In 1890 she gave birth to a son, whom Seurat acknowledged, giving the child his own names in reverse, Pierre-Georges. His mother only knew of her son’s mistress and child two days before Seurat’s death.

Seurat died in Paris in 1891. The cause of his death is uncertain, and has been attributed to a form of meningitis, pneumonia, infectious angina or diphtheria. His son died two weeks later from the same disease. Seurat’s last ambitious work, The Circus, was left unfinished at the time of his death.

Excerpts from Wikipedia.com; SEURAT by Alain Madeleine-Perdillat; SEURAT by John Rewald; SEURAT AND THE MAKING OF LA GRANDE JATTE by Robert L. Herbert; SEURAT by Richard Thomson
Sunday in the Park With George

A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1886) shows members of each of the social classes participating in various park activities. The tiny juxtaposed dots of multi-colored paint allow the viewer's eye to blend colors optically, rather than having the colors physically blended on the canvas. It took Seurat two years to complete this 10-foot-wide painting, much of which he spent in the park sketching in preparation for the work (there are about 60 studies). It is now in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Over the last 50 years, Stephen Sondheim has set an unsurpassed standard of brilliance and artistic integrity in the musical theater. His music, steeped in the history of the American stage, is also deeply informed by the classical tradition and the advances of modern concert music. His words, unequalled in their wit and virtuosity, have recorded a lifetime of profound, unblinking insight into the joys and sorrows of life and love.

Stephen Joshua Sondheim was born in New York City in 1930. His father, Herbert Sondheim, was a successful dress manufacturer, his mother, Janet Fox, a fashion designer. Young Stephen was given piano lessons from an early age, and showed a distinct aptitude for music, puzzles and mathematics. His parents divorced when he was only ten, and Stephen, an only child, was taken by his mother to live on a farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

The area had attracted a number of well-known personalities from the New York theater world; a close neighbor was the playwright, lyricist and producer Oscar Hammerstein II, who had a son Stephen's age. Stephen Sondheim and Jimmy Hammerstein soon became friends, and Stephen came to see the older Hammerstein as a role model. At the time, Hammerstein was inaugurating his historic collaboration with composer Richard Rodgers. When Sondheim was in his teens, Rodgers and Hammerstein were enjoying unprecedented success with the shows OKLAHOMA! and SOUTH PACIFIC. Sondheim resolved that, like Hammerstein, he too would write for the theater.

Sondheim studied piano seriously through his prep school years, while Hammerstein tutored him in writing for the theater. With Hammerstein's guidance, he wrote scripts and scores for four shows, a project that occupied Sondheim through his student years at Williams College. On graduation, he was awarded a two-year scholarship to study composition. He studied with the avant-garde composer Milton Babbit, writing a piano concerto and a violin sonata while trying to break into the theater. Sondheim's first efforts at securing a Broadway assignment fell through, but he found work for television, and made the acquaintance of two playwrights who were to play a significant role in his career: Arthur Laurents and Burt Shevelove.

Although Sondheim aspired to write both words and music, his first Broadway assignments called on him to write either one or the other. At age 25 he was hired to write lyrics for Leonard Bernstein's music in the landmark musical WEST SIDE STORY. Before the show opened, he made his Broadway debut as a composer, with incidental music to N. Richard Nash's play, THE GIRLS OF SUMMER. After the success of WEST SIDE STORY in 1957, he won a second lyric-writing assignment for the Broadway musical GYPSY. Both shows had scripts by Arthur Laurents and were directed by Jerome Robbins.

The credit, "Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim” finally appeared on Broadway for the first time in 1962. The show, A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE FORUM, was an unqualified success, and introduced the first of Sondheim's tunes to become a show business standard, Comedy Tonight. The script for FORUM was co-written by Sondheim's friend, Burt Shevelove. Sondheim collaborated with Arthur Laurents again on ANYONE CAN WHISTLE (1964). The show closed almost immediately, but has since become a cult favorite; its title song remains a favorite of Sondheim's admirers.

Sondheim returned to the role of lyricist-for-hire one more time to collaborate with Hammerstein's old partner Richard Rodgers on DO I HEAR A WALTZ? in 1965. From then on, he would insist on writing both music and lyrics, although nearly five years would elapse before a new Sondheim musical opened on Broadway. Royalties from WEST SIDE STORY, GYPSY and FORUM, all of which were made into motion pictures, freed him to develop projects of his choosing. In the meantime, he published a remarkable series of word puzzles in New York Magazine. Many critics have related his love of puzzles and word games to the dazzling word play of his lyrics, with their intricate rhyme schemes, internal rhymes, puns and wide-ranging allusions.

Sondheim made a historic breakthrough as both composer and lyricist with COMPANY (1971), a caustic look at love and marriage in contemporary New York City. The show marked a sharp break with Broadway's past, and established Sondheim as the most inventive and daring composer working in the musical theater. COMPANY was Sondheim's first collaboration with director Harold Prince, who had produced both WEST SIDE STORY and FORUM. Sondheim's second collaboration with Prince as director, FOLLIES, paid masterful tribute to the song styles of Broadway's past, while deploying them to ironic effect in a poignant commentary on the disappointment of middle age and the corrosive effects of nostalgia and self-delusion.

While Sondheim's admirers stood in awe of his accomplishments, his detractors claimed that his work was too bitter to win wide popularity, and his music too sophisticated for popular success. His next production, A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC,
put these doubts to rest. Its elegant, waltz-based score and warm humor charmed audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, while its signature song, Send in the Clowns, became an unexpected pop standard.

Sondheim received Tony Awards for the music and lyrics of all three of these shows. The following year, the winning composer thanked Sondheim, "for not writing a show this year." Sondheim did find time in 1974 to write a show for a performance in the Yale University swimming pool, an adaptation of the classical Greek comedy THE FROGS, with a script by Burt Shevelove. He also co-wrote the screenplay for the fiendishly intricate murder mystery, THE LAST OF SHEILA (1973). From 1973 to 1981, Sondheim served as President of the Dramatists Guild, the professional association of playwrights, theatrical composers and lyricists.

Their first collaboration was SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE (1984). The play intertwines the story of Georges Seurat and his mistress with that of a contemporary artist. SUNDAY was a solid success, and brought Sondheim and Lapine the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a rare instance of the Pulitzer committee honoring a musical play.

INTO THE WOODS (1987), another collaboration with Lapine, sought the meaning inside some of the most familiar childhood fairy tales, and has been produced successfully all over the United States.

Between Broadway assignments, Sondheim has written scores for the films STAVISKY (1974) and REDS (1981), and contributed songs to the films THE SEVEN PERCENT SOLUTION (1976) and DICK TRACY (1990). Sooner or Later, written for DICK TRACY, won him an Oscar for Best Song.

One of Sondheim's most disturbing productions was ASSASSINS (1990), an examination of the motives and delusions of the men who murdered American presidents. PASSION (1994), another collaboration with James Lapine, took a dark, intimate story of unrequited love and set it to music of heartrending poignancy.

As the Broadway theater has turned to more predictable fare, Sondheim and his collaborators have sought out new venues for his increasingly daring work. BOUNCE, recounting the follies of the 1920s Florida land boom, opened in Chicago and Washington in 2003.

In 2008, the American Theatre Wing presented him with a special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement. Sondheim has gathered the years of his writing for the stage in two books, FINISHING THE HAT: COLLECTED LYRICS (1954-1981) WITH ATTENDANT COMMENTS, PRINCIPLES, HERESIES, GRUDGES, WHINES AND ANECDOTES and LOOK, I MADE A HAT: COLLECTED LYRICS (1981-2011). The books provide invaluable insight into the art and craft of songwriting, as practiced by an artist of monumental accomplishment.

James Lapine, (above) a director and librettist, has won the Tony Award for Best Book of a Musical three times, for INTO THE WOODS, FALSETTOS (with composer William Finn) and PASSION.

After SUNDAY IN THE PARK in 1983, he and Sondheim's next musical was INTO THE WOODS in 1987. They collaborated on the musical PASSION in 1994, winning the Tony Award for Best Musical and Best Book of a Musical. In 1992, Lapine worked again with William Finn, and wrote the book and directed A NEW BRAIN. He then directed THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE, which premiered in 2005. The latest Finn-Lapine work is LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE, which premiered in 2011 at the La Jolla Playhouse in California.

In 1991 he directed his first film, IMPROMPTU, with a screenplay by his wife, Sarah Kernochan, about the romance of George Sand and Chopin. Lapine will direct the upcoming 2012 Broadway revival of the musical ANNIE.
SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE sits precariously between traditional plot-driven musicals and the concept musicals developed mostly by Sondheim and director Harold Prince. Like concept musicals, SUNDAY explores an idea more than telling a story, and yet it does still tell a story. The difference is that the exposition and conflicts are established in the 1880s but the resolution comes a hundred years later to a protagonist who is a different man and yet the same.

Writer James Lapine and composer Stephen Sondheim discussed at great length the idea of turning Georges Seurat's famous painting into a musical. Lapine wondered why no one in the painting is looking at anyone else. He also noticed that the central character is missing: the painter. Those two observations were enough to start the two men writing a musical based on fictionalized events leading up to the creation of this painting. But it's about more than just why the people in the painting aren't looking at each other; it's more specifically about why the woman in front is missing: the painter. Those two observations were enough to start the two men writing a musical based on fictionalized events leading up to the creation of this painting. But it's about more than just why the people in the painting aren't looking at each other; it's more specifically about why the woman in front is placed so prominently. Sondheim and Lapine's answer was that she was Seurat's mistress, Dot, and the show became about George's struggle to reconcile his obsessive passion for his art with his often ignored personal life, represented by Dot.

Like many of Sondheim's shows, SUNDAY is about connecting, in fact the word "connect" is peppered throughout the score, and it is only when Dot comes back to George (actually his great-grandson) at the end of the show that he can connect. Sondheim is making a statement about artists building on that which has gone before them. And in a way, he's established that both Georges are, in a way, the same person, the Artist as an icon.

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE does on stage what Seurat's painting does on canvas -- catch people in the midst of living their lives, but in a formal, un-naturalistic style. Like the hundreds of people we each encounter every day without really knowing them, most of the characters in the show just pass through this park, but in this case they are frozen there for all time, caught not all at one moment but at many moments at once.

This score was ground-breaking (as much of Sondheim's work is) when it opened in 1984. It was the first minimalist Broadway score, a score based on a very limited amount of thematic musical material, developed and mixed in endless variations. Just as Seurat used only a few colors in endlessly varied combinations to create a full world of color, Sondheim did the same with the score. Also, unlike most Broadway scores, it's packed with leitmotifs, short musical phrases that represent characters or ideas, a device Sondheim would continue to use in INTO THE WOODS and PASSION.

The show opens with a series of musical figures, which will be a leitmotif throughout the show. They represent the creation of art. The stage is completely white and as these chords are played, Georges enters and the white stage becomes the park, and he brings Dot out. The creation of the famous painting has begun to the sound of these "creation of art" chords. On top of these chords, we hear the first quote of the Sunday theme, the melody of the first lines of the Act I finale Sunday. Not only is Sondheim establishing this theme as important, he's also creating a framing device (how appropriate for a musical about a painting) beginning and ending the act with the same music. It's interesting that there is no overture and the first music we hear is not a song.

We hear the creation of art motif from the first moments of the show. Everyone on stage freezes. Georges says "Order," and everyone turns to him. Georges then recites the words that describe the creation of art, "Order, design, tension, balance and harmony." As he does this, he directs and arranges the people in the park. By the end of the song, as the melody and harmony build to a thrilling climax, each character finds his place in this "perfect park" that Georges has created, and for the first time in the show, they sing together in harmony. Over the ringing of the last chord, we hear the two-note "Sunday" motif. The painting is complete. The act is over.

Another interesting thing about the show is that the two acts are set a hundred years apart and yet are intimately related. One of the devices that helps connect the two acts is the actors play different though parallel roles in the two acts. The actor playing Seurat also plays the modern George. The actor playing Dot also plays her daughter Marie, who is the modern George's grandmother. The actor playing Seurat's mother later plays an art critic and friend of the modern George. Jules, the more conventional, commercially successful painter and colleague of Seurat later becomes the director of the modern day museum, in both cases walking the tightrope between making art and making a living (as evidenced by the museum director's comic monologue about selling the air rights over the museum for condominiums). The crass American couple in Act I becomes a crass but rich arts patron and a museum publicist in Act II.
Act II opens with the exact same image that closed Act I: the tableau of the painting. The score says that the audience should feel the tension, waiting for something on stage to happen. Finally, music starts. It's the accompaniment from the first song, Sunday in the Park with George. In Act I, this was a song about how hard it is to pose for a painting. Now, reformed as It's Hot Up Here, it's about how hard it is to be in the painting. These people are no longer real, they are now figures in a painting. The lyric goes for every possible laugh, describing in detail how awful it is to be stuck in a painting forever, unable to move, trapped with the same people for eternity. These people no longer live; they only exist as George perceived them, not as they really were. They cannot “run amok,” they cannot make choices, do as they choose anymore. They're stuck there “in this gavotte,” or in other words, in George's pre-arranged, carefully positioned tableau.

The connection between art and science is presented as both awful and funny, as George's technician tells him he's leaving the art world to go back to NASA, where there's less pressure. But even as we laugh, we also understand how difficult it is for George to be not only artist, but also marketing expert, fundraiser, and celebrity. Certainly the modern day George understands how to promote himself and his art better than Seurat did, but the relationship between art and the real world is still an uneasy one.

This is a musical with great relevance to our modern world. Though on its surface this show is about an artist trying to find his voice and reconcile his life with his art, it's about much more. As with any great work of theatre, the more particular it gets, the more universal it becomes. It's the shows that try to be universal that fail. This is a show about our epidemic inability to sustain relationships, as evidenced by a 50% divorce rate and skyrocketing domestic violence. This is a show about juggling a career with a relationship, an issue that speaks strongly to women at the end of the 20th century. It's about art and commerce, an issue that has become a political firestorm as Congress works to eliminate funding for the arts, as corporate arts funding dwindles, as computers make it cheaper to replace musicians and other artists with software.

In the finale, George reads the words Seurat began the show with, the words Dot recorded faithfully in the red book, “Order, design, composition, tension, balance and harmony,” also apply to life. This show does not spell out for us explicitly what will happen to George after the curtain goes down. It's enough that we know he understands, that he's made some decisions, that he will move on. He has returned to “a white page or canvas, so many possibilities.”

Finishing the Hat Lyric

Finishing the hat.
How you have to finish the hat.
How you watch the rest of the world
From a window
While you finish the hat.

...Studying the hat.
Entering the world of the hat.
Reaching through the world of the hat
Like a window,
Back to this one from that.

Studying a face,
Stepping back to look at a face
Leaves a little space in the way like a window.
But to see--
It's the only way to see.

...Finishing a hat...
Starting on a hat...
Finishing a hat...
Look I made a hat...

Where there never was a hat.

In an interview with The American Academy of Achievement, Stephen Sondheim was asked if writing is a lonely profession: “Of course. So is painting. You're there with your own head, and a pencil or a brush, or a piano. It's all in Finishing the Hat. It's all about trancing out, and when you trounce out properly, when you're completely in that world, there is no other world, and so there's no conflict...” Seurat is having trouble bal-
In 1884, Georges Seurat is sketching studies for his famous painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. His mistress, Dot, models for him despite her frustrations (*Sunday in the Park with George*). Meanwhile an Old Lady and her Nurse discuss how Paris is changing to accommodate a tower for the International Exposition.

The setting abruptly changes to an art gallery, where Seurat's first painting is on display. Jules, a more successful artist and Georges' friend, and his wife Yvonne, think Georges' work has (*No Life*).

Back on the island Jules and Yvonne have a short discussion with Georges and depart. They interrupt their coachman Franz's rendezvous with the Nurse.

In Georges' studio he works on his painting while Dot prepares for their date at the Follies (*Color and Light*). In the end, Georges chooses to continue painting instead, greatly upsetting Dot.

In the park Georges sketches a grumpy Boatman. Dot enters on the arm of Louis, a baker. Two chatting shop girls both named Celeste notice Dot with a new man (*Gossip*). Georges sketches two dogs and imagines what they might enjoy doing (*The Day Off*). Jules and Yvonne enter during the song and mock the unconventional nature of Georges' art. They protest an initiative to have his work included in the next group show.

The two Celestes try to attract the attention of two soldiers; Jules returns to further lecture Georges on his shortcomings as an artist; the Boatman returns and laments the condescending attitude of artists. Dot explains why she chose Louis over Georges (*Everybody Loves Louis*).

As the park empties for the evening, Georges returns. He misses Dot and laments that his art has alienated him from those important to him (*Finishing the Hat*).

At the studio Dot tells Georges that she is pregnant and that she and Louis are getting married and leaving for America. She asks for a painting he made of her but he refuses. Jules and Yvonne come to the studio. Yvonne and Dot talk about the alienating nature of artists while Jules and Georges discuss Georges' painting in progress. Jules is not impressed with Georges' new technique. Jules and Yvonne leave and Dot and Georges examine their failed relationship (*We Do Not Belong Together*).

In the park, the Old Lady, Georges' mother, urges him to paint and preserve, before new buildings obliterate the trees, everything that is (*Beautiful*). Even as Georges insists that change is beautiful, his mother pines for the old view. Around him, the park fills with characters, squabbling and fighting until Georges calls for "order" and "balance". He re-arranges the people and the trees and, from the chaos, assembles a peaceful promenade on La Grande Jatte. Harmony at last. As the fractious ensemble comes together, Georges freezes his models into the final tableau of his finished painting: an ordinary, perfect (*Sunday*).

The action fast-forwards one hundred years to 1984 and George's work is on exhibition in America. As the curtain opens the characters, still in the tableau, complain about being stuck in the painting (*It's Hot Up Here*). The characters then deliver short eulogies for Georges, who died suddenly at 31.

Georges and Dot's great-grandson, also named George and also a struggling artist, is at the museum unveiling his latest work: a color and light machine called (*Chromolume #7*), an artistic reflection on the painting from the first act.

Marie, George's grandmother and Seurat and Dot's daughter, helps with the presentation. At a reception, various patrons and curators congratulate George on his work while George comments about the difficulties of producing art (*Putting It Together*). As the guests drift off to dinner, Marie looks at her mother in the painting, remembering what she said about (*Children and Art*).

Weeks later, Marie has died and George has been invited by the French government to do a presentation of the "Chromolume" on the island where the painting was made. The island of La Grande Jatte is now crowded with concrete towers and has dwindled to a tiny patch of grass. On the island, George reads from a book he got from his grandmother, the same book Dot used to learn to read, and he ponders the similarities between himself and his great-grandfather (*Lesson #8*). A vision of Dot appears and discusses 'her' book with George. Dot tells George to stop worrying about his critics (*Move On*).

George finds some words written in the back of the book, the words Georges muttered while he worked, according to Dot. As George reads them aloud the characters from the painting fill the stage and recreate their tableau (*Sunday*). As they leave, George reads: "White: a blank page or canvas. His favorite, so many possibilities."