CULTURAL COMMENT

A GIFTED COMPOSER GONE TOO SOON

In the summer of his death, Peter Foley and I talked about the shape of an artist's life made under the special pressures of the modern musical theatre.

By Adam Gopnik

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The composer Peter Foley. Photographs by Todd Cerveris

Saved

The death of Stephen Sondheim, in 2021, left a rupture in the theatre world, and especially the musical-theatre world, deeper and more profound than any other artist's passing could. Sondheim had so dominated that world, at least in its more ambitious and self-consciously artistic reaches, that to lose him was to lose a father—though, in this case, a father often taken on in a forced adoption by self-designated children. Like all forced adoptive fathers, Sondheim spent years both rejecting the role and embracing it, acting kindly and judging firmly.

But his passing also left a kind of puzzle, or possibility: all the next-generation Sondheimians, sons and daughters of Steve, could begin to escape from the encompassing shadow of the master. For those of us who love and participate in the musical-theatre form, the history and future began to present new possibilities, a more varied spectrum—and figures easily overlooked, or rather underheard, had a new presence. As Jennifer Homans has written about New York City Ballet after Balanchine, exactly the most Balanchinean moments can now seem stiff and academic, while the dancers turn to newer spirits and traditions for inspiration that they can no longer find in the master, and sometimes they discover exemplars in the overlooked.

And so we open our ears to sounds and subjects that the scale of Sondheim's genius might have, at least a little, stifled or overshadowed. No member of that family of bereaved and inspired children has a more moving arc than Peter Foley. He was inspired by Sondheim's example, benefitted from his mentorship, suffered from the eventual rupture of their relationship, and then retreated into what might have seemed more private musical activity—and yet when his final, inspired work, "The Names We Gave Him," a show about the First World War, with book and lyrics by the actor and poet Ellen McLaughlin, had its first, revelatory, ringing production at Montclair State University, in December of 2021, it awoke the musical world. Now an evening dedicated to his songs will finally happen, at Symphony Space, on June 5th, under the supervision of his wife and frequent collaborator, Kate Chisholm, and the scale and significance of his achievement may be still more apparent—a cheering truth made almost unbearably poignant by the fact that Peter Foley never had the chance to see or hear his last work onstage. He died in August of 2021, at the age of fifty-four, after years of quiet struggle with the rare disease ocular melanoma, a cancer of the eye.

Foley had become, over the years, a quiet fixture on the musical-theatre scene, writing incidental music for many PBS shows, doing the dutiful and meticulous work of copying scores, and serving as a music director on various shows—a role that includes such seemingly mundane tasks as playing the piano in workshops but usually extends, as it did in Foley's case, to actively editing and amending the composer's work, particularly when the composer, however gifted, is an unschooled musician. I collaborated, all too briefly, with Peter on what was meant to be a song cycle for his friend and Yale classmate, the singer and actress Melissa Errico, with our one finished song, "On Vit, On Aime," recorded on her much praised "Out of the Dark" album, of old and new music inspired by film noir.

Foley's gift for sinuous, haunting melody and surprising musical shapes, not to mention matching music to word, was evident in our work together. But it was when I was introduced, in a concert, to a twenty-minute musical sequence called "Montage," from "The Hidden Sky," the first full musical he wrote with Chisholm, adapted from an Ursula K. Le Guin story, that I became aware of the grandeur and power his music possessed. It is a long, complex, multi-voiced unspooling vocal piece about, of all things that might seem resistant to being sung, the heroine's postapocalyptic discovery of the Fibonacci sequence—the sequence of numbers that is formed by adding together the two previous ones and that elegantly describes the spiral structures of flowers and shells and so many other living and growing things, the very under-grammar of existence. To have managed to evoke this discovery, in music that itself metaphorically mirrored the sequence, was a kind of miracle. I was so taken by it that, facing the unbearable truth that he was passing, I pressed Foley to sit for a series of interviews in the summer of his demise, which he bravely undertook despite his physical struggles;

I wanted to understand something of the shape of an artist's life made under the special pressures of the modern musical theatre.

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SOMEONE IN Berkeley LOVES ME
Thesaurus
Peter Foley
FOLEY (Local 802)
Dad
Love, Grace

Growing up in Berkeley, California, he explained, he slept, so to speak, in typical musical teen-age dogmatic slumbers—pop and reggae—until a production of Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" made its way to a local theatre, and his life course was set. This was a generational experience: his contemporary, the hyper-gifted Andrew Lippa, of "Big Fish" and "The Addams Family" fame, also encountered "Sweeney" on a record, right around the same time, and his life course, too, was set. (Lippa later wrote a song about *his* Sweeney epiphany for Sondheim's birthday.) "That was my touchstone," Foley said of "Sweeney." "I began *proselytizing* for it—in high school, we even had a 'Sweeney Todd' watching party when the DVD came out, with meat pies and ale." Infatuated by Sondheim and the show, he made his way to Yale, where he began to write a student production, rather obviously in its debt, a musical about the Jack the Ripper murders called "Whitechapel," starring Errico and Chisholm as two of Jack's victims. All who heard the show remember it as eerily precocious, both lyrically and musically. “We all thought Peter Foley was going to come to New York and take over the world,” his longtime friend, the music director Rob Berman, recalls, “but it didn’t quite work out that way.”

Choosing Le Guin’s postapocalyptic story, perhaps a bit naïvely, as the perfect vehicle for his professional début, Foley wrote both music and lyrics. (Eventually, he largely gave up writing lyrics, not out of a lack of a gift for language but because “I was such a perfectionist that, if I had written music and lyrics both, nothing would have ever gotten finished.”) Chisholm, to whom he was by now married, was an excellent word-maker and wrote with him the show they called “The Hidden Sky.”

It was then that the eternal risks of the mentor-protégé relation became plain. Sondheim, who had been informally mentoring Foley, as he did so many younger writers—everyone will recall his support of the young Jonathan Larson as portrayed in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s “Tick, Tick . . . Boom!”—came to an early workshop. “We did this workshop,” Foley told me. “And he came to see it, and . . . he did not like it. It was a really awful experience, because everybody was, like, What did Sondheim think? What did Sondheim think? And . . . I had to lie. He called me the next day, and he was just giving me the tough love: ‘This is never going to work. The emotion is all generated by the small space and the large number of singers. I think you should abandon it.’ It’s not exactly ‘Sweeney Todd,’ in terms of a linear movement—it has an almost oratorio-like feel to it. A lot of it is stop-and-reflect songs. He just couldn’t relate to it on any level. Which is not to say that he thought of me as untalented. He thought of me as very talented. He just wanted me to . . . not do this.”

Of course, Sondheim not only had the right but the duty to offer an honest view of new work; saying something is good when it isn’t helps no one. But, though the workshop and development went on, the experience was stunning, and, in some ways, as Foley admitted afterward, for a long time crippling—not least because he realized, as he entered a musical world which had (and still has) Broadway production as its goal, that he didn't entirely like Broadway musicals. He liked Sondheim shows. "The so-called market for so-called art musicals had been decreasing. I asked myself, Am I really that interested in that form, or am I just interested in Steve? I loved the classic shows and songs, but, you know, 'The Will Rogers Follies'—I just wanted to kill myself, it had no interest for me. I was never that kind of fanboy: 'It's a musical, and therefore I must see it!' 'Miss Saigon'—who gives a fuck? I loved 'Floyd Collins.' I loved 'The Last Five Years.' Every three or four years, there'd be a musical I would really obsess with. And I did love the form in some ways—but there are too many stories I'm not interested in set to music I would never listen to."

The experience with "The Hidden Sky" complicated Foley's later advancement. The development of any musical is usually a six- or seven-year event, with uncountable false starts, workshops, and multiple miseries along the way. Given that Foley's choices, then and after, were so dramatically, one might say hopelessly, idiosyncratic and not too obviously commercial—a show about tulip mania in seventeenth-century Holland, another adapted from the quirkily complex novel about childhood "I Capture the Castle," and "Names," his masterpiece, a show about an obscure story involving an amnesiac French soldier in the First World War—it is not so surprising, in retrospect, that none of them quite "caught." Still, perseverance seemed likely to lead to brighter prospects—an early version of "Names" was for a long time in line for production at the Public Theatre—when, in 2010 ("a really exciting time of potential and dreaming," as Chisholm recalls), a minor eye issue turned out to be ocular melanoma, an uncommon, treatable, but cruelly persistent form of cancer. He kept word of it extremely quiet, except among a select circle of close friends, and for five years was in a kind of temporary remission.

With his work moving in an inimitably contemplative direction, Foley's inability to get a full-scale commercial production of a finished work was neither surprising nor any sign of a lack of creative impetus. As with all artists, what was "weak" in his work was what was strong in it. Exactly what Sondheim was worried about, that Foley's art gained its emotional force from powerful, anti-dramatic counterpoint in compressed space, is exactly what is most unforgettable about it. As Jean Cocteau said, our unique talent is the thing that troubles people in our work, and over time criticism adjusts itself to that truth. Whatever is most criticized is the thing to cultivate, as it is what is unique to you. Peter's gift for entwining duet and choral writing, for filling a space with haunting music that was dramatic without necessarily being "narrative"—that filled one's heart without driving a story forward—is exactly what makes it matter. With the added irony that so much of his final work reflects the influence not of the bravura, high-energy "Sweeney" Sondheim but of the sublime, quiet, inner-directed Sondheim; Foley's beautiful duet "Yellow Field," the musical high point of his last work, though wholly original, seems close in feeling to similar Sondheim duets in "Passion" and "Pacific Overtures," just as Foley's Fibonacci sequence seems an unexpected outgrowth of "Finishing the Hat."

There may be one other foundation to what promises to be Monday night's revelations. In our long conversations during the summer of his death, Foley startled me by explaining that, since the time of "The Hidden Sky," he had, with typical quietness and typical stubbornness, been initiated into Sufi circles in New York. An unusual destiny, and yet appropriate, given the combination of high esoteric mysticism and dancing delight that distinguishes the great Sufi poets. One imagines Foley in the words of the Sufi poet Rumi: "How can there be an end? When the sun sets or the moon goes down, it looks like the end. It looks like a sunset—but in truth, it's dawn." If only he could have lived to set them! ♦

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