**Harrison Whitaker**

# Sondheim's Puzzles

You think you hear a floorboard creak behind you. Panicked, you turn down another dark corridor. Your destination, the master bedroom, is obscure to you: You've never been in this house before, and any information you have has confused you as much as it's informed. Reasoning that master bedrooms in Manhattan are rarely on the ground floor, you race up the first set of stairs you can find. You look at the long row of doors lining the hallway, and a chill runs down your spine: You know that a murderer waits behind one of them.

You strike it lucky: The master bedroom was the first door you opened, but there's nothing resembling a clue to be found. 'Basin knowingly contains itself' was all you were given. You chew on this for a minute. Basin, you think — ah! Basin knowingly contains itself. Perhaps in the en suite, you reason. Sure enough, it's there: Right underneath the sink, you find an envelope. Inside is a small slip of paper with the words 'A boy's best friend …' You pause. It couldn't be? you think, but you decide to leave quickly just to be safe.

As you walk out, you hear a rustle in the shower. You waver at the threshold for a moment, but curiosity gets the better of you. You walk slowly over to the tub and raise your hand to pull aside the curtain when — *whoosh* — the murderer whisks it to one side and shoots you to death, right there. As you bleed to death on the linoleum floor, you look up and notice that you're the most recent victim of Anthony Perkins, who stands above you with a wide grin on his face. How versatile, you think: He can kill from either side of the shower curtain.

What you've just experienced is one of Perkins and Stephen Sondheim's famous murder mystery parties; appropriately, Sondheim provided the puzzles, while Perkins added the necessary layers of suspense and horror.[1] Later games would up the complexity as the venues expanded from an empty house to large stretches of Midtown Manhattan to, eventually, a Hollywood film set: Sondheim and Perkins would eventually collaborate on a murder mystery screenplay, *The Last of Sheila*, which was directed in 1973 by Herbert Ross, a long-time attendee of the Sondheim/Perkins functions.[2] The two again split labour according to specialty — Sondheim would take the mystery and Perkins the murder.[3]

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By the time *The Last of Sheila* was released, Sondheim's reputation as a master of puzzles was firmly established: He had, in 1968, composed a series of cryptic crosswords for *New York* magazine, the first of their kind to be seen in a major American publication.[4] Though the film was lukewarmly received both critical and financially, Sondheim's love for crafting artistic riddles would persist. He continued to host mystery parties in various forms, and Sondheim's only non-musical play, co-written with George Fruth, was 1996's *Getting Away with Murder*.[5] Sondheim developed something of a shadow persona for himself as a puzzle master alongside his mastery of musical theatre; on his death, a number of outlets ran obituaries which bemoaned that his loss was as great a blow to the world of cruciverbalism as it was to Broadway.[6]

It is precisely this attitude, however, that I'd like to push back against — the artificial separation between Sondheim the puzzler and Sondheim the lyricist–composer. Though these mutual interests of Sondheim's rarely intersected, they are deeply intertwined. Particularly in his early career, up until the release of *The Last of Sheila*, Sondheim developed his craft in making puzzles as much as he did in writing his musicals — he once described lyric writing as 'analogous to the symmetry of a crossword puzzle' — and the two, therefore, have profound links that prevent one from being fully understood without the other.[7] While Douglas Braverman has claimed that only a true lover of crosswords could have written lyrics such as 'The hands on the clock turn/But don't sing a nocturne/Just yet', I offer a much more expansive idea of how Sondheim's puzzles provide a meaningful lens for understanding his artistry as a whole.[8] It is only by solving some of the great puzzles the man has left behind that the questions posed by his art can begin to be answered.

## A Collaborative Character

Like the solution to any great riddle, perhaps Sondheim's most defining trait as a puzzle master is his incredible ability to hide in plain sight. His two published murder mysteries, *The Last of Sheila* and *Getting Away with Murder*, were both done in close collaboration with other writers — it is difficult to know where Sondheim ends and his partners begin. This, however, is exactly how Sondheim wanted it: He considered himself 'a collaborative animal' and insisted that if, in his meticulously constructed work 'there's any role for inspiration … it comes from collaboration'.[9] This latter quote is particularly representative not only of Sondheim's personal understanding of his creative process but also how he was understood by his critics: For most of Sondheim's career,

his unshakeable mark of Cain was that his writing was 'cold', stimulating to the head but not the heart — any pathos could be chalked up to his collaborators.[10]

Sondheim's own view of creation serves only to bolster this critique: He traces his love of music back to the moment that he could see 'the logic of it'. If the characters of *The Last of Sheila* or *Getting Away with Murder* have a sterility to them, it's likely because they were created by his co-authors after Sondheim had already fully outlined the plots and intrigues of both. In a discussion of *Getting Away with Murder*, Sondheim claimed that while the characters are 'vividly drawn' and 'extraordinarily colorful', the play itself is 'very much about the plot'.[11] In his review of the play's original run, Vincent Canby complained that the play's characters 'are merely functions of the game Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Fruth are playing'.[12]

Canby's critique is undoubtedly correct — Sondheim himself would surely be the first to agree with it — while also sidestepping the nature of Sondheim's style. Both *Getting Away with Murder* and *The Last of Sheila* represent Sondheim at his most arch, assembling a cast of insufferably bourgeois characters only to torture them until the curtain falls or the credits roll. Indeed, given Sondheim's long history of playing murder games with his jet-setting friends, it's difficult not to see his brief forays into screenwriting and non-musical theatre as biting ripostes against his coterie. This fact did not go unnoticed in Sondheim's time: The first drafts of Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth* (1972), in which the upstart Milo Tindle and the blue-blooded Andrew Wyke engage in increasingly antagonistic murder mystery games with one another, were originally titled *Who's Afraid of Stephen Sondheim?* and Laurence Olivier, who portrayed Wyke onscreen, first introduced himself to the composer by declaring 'Oh Mr. Sondheim, I'm so delighted to meet you. I've been playing you.'[13]

In this way, Sondheim's framing of his murder mystery plots is a self-conscious acknowledgement of his own style and persona: Both *The Last of Sheila* and *Getting Away with Murder* revolve around a controlling, cynical figure who artificially assembles a group of people, each of whom has a defining character flaw. In *The Last of Sheila*, millionaire producer Clinton Greene (James Coburn) beckons his friends to a week-long game on his yacht in the Mediterranean. The opening credits of the film play over shots of various games and puzzles in Clinton's study as he raps away at a typewriter; Clinton finishes writing one of his invitations the very moment that the 'Written by Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Perkins' card appears onscreen (see Figures 1 and 2), lest there be any doubt as to the equivalence between Clinton's role in the film and

Sondheim and Perkins's roles in making it. He knows that one of them killed his wife Sheila (Yvonne Romain) and has devised a game to torment the murderer. He gives each player a card with a secret attribute — 'YOU are a SHOPLIFTER', 'YOU are a HOMOSEXUAL', 'YOU are a HIT-AND-RUN KILLER' and so on — which is true for another player; the object of the game is to figure out which card applies to which player.

Braverman has noted how each character's secret is subtly revealed in their first appearance onscreen: Phillip (James Mason) is first shown directing a commercial with a number of child actors, and his card later reveals that he is a child molester while Christine (Dyan Cannon) is shown to be a loquacious gossiper; her card indicates that she was an informer during the McCarthy era. He claims that the fulfilment of these leitmotifs 'enhances the consistency, and hence, the reality of the characters and their motivations', but, if anything, the distillation of these characters down to a single trait only highlights their role in the larger mechanism of the plot.[14] This fact is highlighted reflexively within the film's mystery itself: The first letter of each attribute — S for 'SHOPLIFTER,' 'H' for 'HOMOSEXUAL' and so on — spell out 'SHEILA', and the players had taken a photo arranged by Clinton on the game's first day in which they stood under the word 'SHEILA' with each letter lined up to the bearer of its trait (see Figure 3). Several characters comment on how Phillip's card — 'LITTLE CHILD MOLESTER' — is phrased awkwardly, clearly being composed merely to fit the 'L' of the

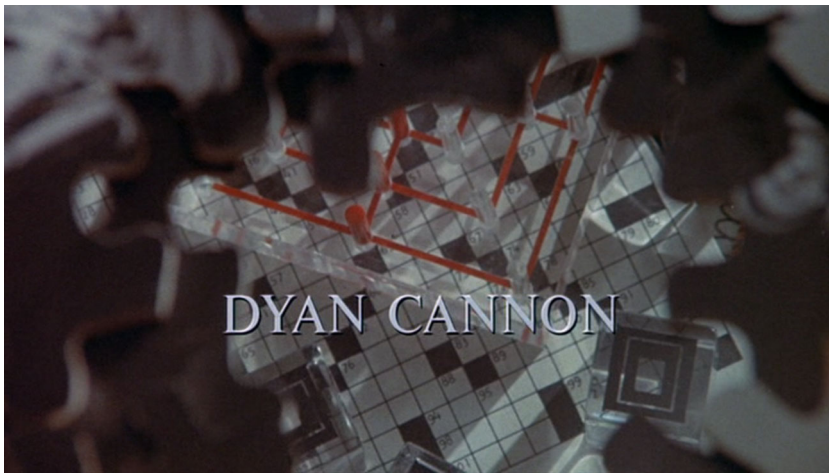


**FIGURE 1** The camera fixates on a crossword puzzle as the opening credits of *The Last of Sheila* begin. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

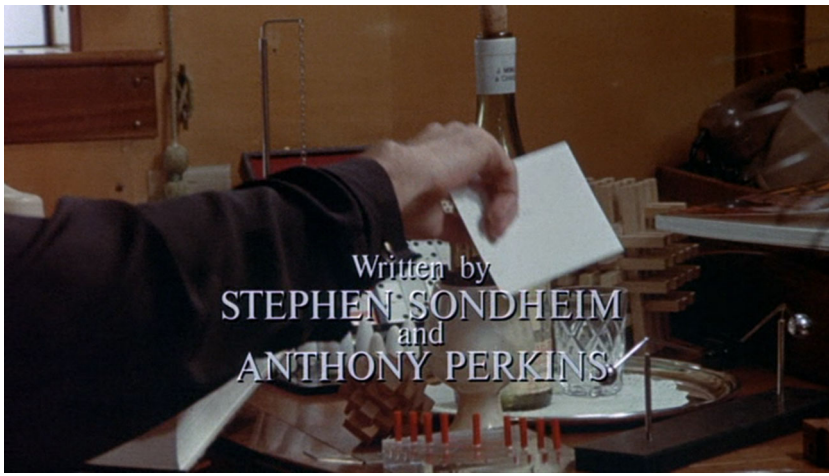


**FIGURE 2** Clinton Greene finishes writing the cards for his game just as Sondheim and Perkins receive their credit. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

**FIGURE 3** Clinton's friends arrange themselves below the letters of the ship's name, *Sheila*. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

'SHEILA' pattern. The criticism, of course, falls flat, as it is this very inconsistency which allows the characters to solve the mystery in the first place. Sondheim is here giving perhaps his single clearest response to critics of his characterisation: The characters may be mere mechanisms

of the plot, yes, but it's a plot so intricate that it requires mechanistic characters in order to function.

The distillation of characters into a single trait is taken even further in *Getting Away with Murder*, whose central characters are revealed by the play's end to have been selected for a psychological study in which each represents one of the seven deadly sins. As in *The Last of Sheila*, introductions are key: Dossie, representing Lust, makes a pass at another character within moments of meeting him while Vasili arrives onstage carrying an armful of indulgent food, indicating his eventual assignment of Gluttony. Even when crafting his starkest characters, however, Sondheim finds room for some irony. Martin Chisholm, who was a last-minute substitute in the study for the role of Sloth, proactively commits several murders throughout the play in order to avoid being caught. His preferred 'weapon' is a disused elevator shaft which he appears next to at the play's start; appropriately, the play's original ending sees Martin accidentally fall down the shaft himself as he seeks to leave the building. While this undoubtedly bears the canny mark of Sondheim, the replacement ending in which Martin merely gets in the functioning elevator and leaves is in some ways all the more fitting — it is, after all, less work than taking the stairs.[15]

## Cryptic Creativity

Sondheim's status as a 'collaborative animal' was not reserved for films and plays alone — in fact, his earliest musical partnerships were borne and defined by a love for puzzles. He struck up a friendship with Burt Shevelove over a decade before they wrote *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* over the notoriously difficult cryptic crossword in *The Times*, which they would solve as a team. Often, puzzles took precedence over the industry: Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein would take Thursday afternoons off from working on *West Side Story* in order to solve the weekly cryptic in *The Listener*, fresh off the boat from England.[16] Bernstein would later compose a poem for Sondheim's birthday, which begins 'Stephen Sondheim is maker and solver of puzzles' and ends by declaring him a 'Puzzler, poet, friend, riddle, musician'. The poem is an acrostic spelling out Sondheim's name; indeed, it's almost possible to see Clinton and his ham-fisted 'SHEILA' acrostic as a send-up of Bernstein's awkward wordings and unnatural line lengths from years prior.

For all his appetite to work cheek-to-cheek with others on everything from crafting musicals to writing screenplays to solving crosswords, puzzle composition was strictly a solo affair for Sondheim. All of his cryptic

creations for *New York* were solo creations, and he introduced his series for the magazine with an essay that outlined an unusually authorial vision of puzzle making. In the article, Sondheim bemoans an overreliance in American crosswords on 'tirelessly esoteric knowledge' not merely for being tedious but for being a kind of barrier to expression. Introducing the concept of the British cryptic crossword, he notes that:

> This kind of puzzle offers cryptic clues instead of bald definitions, and the pleasures involved in solving it are the deeply satisfactory ones of following and matching a devious mind (that of the puzzle's author) rather than the transitory ones of an encyclopedic memory. To call the composer of a crossword an author may seem to be dignifying a gnat, but clues in a 'British' crossword have many characteristics of a literary manner: cleverness, humor, even a pseudo-aphoristic grace. In the best puzzles, styles of clue-writing are distinctive, revealing special pockets of interest and small mannerisms, as in any prose style. The clues of the author who calls himself 'Ximenes' in the *London Sunday Observer* are, to the eye of a puzzle fan, as different from those in, say, *The Manchester Guardian* as Wilde is from Maugham.[17]

This distinctly auteurist vision of puzzle-making does not easily coexist alongside the Sondheim who claims that all music is a system of cold, hard logic. Still, that didn't stop him from trying to square the circle in a later interview by claiming that both puzzle and music-making (and indeed all artistic creation) are, at their core, 'the creation of form out of chaos. And I believe in form.'[18]

For as much as Sondheim seems to believe in a kind of objectivity at the heart of his craft, his own account of puzzle making makes clear that he sees the rigidity, the logic itself as the object of expression.[19] The baroque intricacies of the plot of *The Last of Sheila* may indeed flatten the film's characters, but in this way, the plot itself becomes its own character. It's no surprise that, after the failure of the first production of *Merrily We Roll Along* in 1981, Sondheim contemplated giving up theatre to write mystery novels full time.[20] For Sondheim, art was the funny thing that happened on the way to form — if his musical and lyrical style is recognisable, his disposition as a puzzle master is even more so.

One of the final crosswords Sondheim created for *New York* magazine demonstrates this fact plainly: It's a cryptic puzzle that, fittingly, also functions as a murder mystery. The clues are nested in a short story — 'He was standing in the jungle-like **1D** (12) of the late Sir Leonard Feisthill, **19A** (4) while adviser to the Secret Service Department of

**11D** (12)' — which must be decoded in order to fill out the puzzle grid. In order to solve the murder, however, the cruciverbalist must look beyond the words themselves. One of the clues, 'Plan in retrospect to help if you put on weight', leads the reader to 'aid-gram', itself indicating the solution 'diagram'. It is in this way that Sondheim moves beyond words and into the structure of the crossword itself: 'Diagram' highlights the fact that the black bars which divide up the crossword grid themselves spell out Lucius I. Feisthill, the name of the murderer.[21]

This is the fundamental Sondheimian conceit: The form of the puzzle, be it contained within a crossword, film, or play, must itself become part of its own solution. For as cleverly as his clues may be worded, the joy of the puzzle is in its construction, in this case literally within the perpendicular architecture of the crossword grid. For Sondheim, the meaning is never found by reading between the lines but by seeing them for exactly what they are — lines.

## Games Where You Don't Have to Move

Following on from this, we can see that the puzzle at the heart of *The Last of Sheila* is full of knowing references to its own structure. Just as the film begins with its equation of Sondheim and Perkins' scriptwriting with Clinton's game making, it insists throughout on an inextricable link between the nature of the murder mystery itself with the medium of film. Clinton invites his guests on the premise that he's planning a move about his wife's death, fittingly titled *The Last of Sheila*, and the film ends with Philip blackmailing the true murderer into financing *The Last of Sheila* as a kind of comeback film for the aging director. The murder mystery, the eventual real murder of Clinton himself, and the solution all rotate around the movie at the movie's centre — why? What, for Sondheim and Perkins, was so important about film to the act of puzzle-making?

The answer, appropriately for Sondheim, lies within the medium itself. As Clinton describes his game early in the film, Philip remarks that 'I like any game where you don't have to move', to which Clinton replies, 'Well, you don't have to for this one — if you're smart enough'. This latter remark is odd, given that the very structure of the game — each night, the group stops at a Mediterranean port and scours the environment for clues — demands frantic movement. Clinton's implication, however, is that the all the information anyone needs is posted right in front of them in the form of the carefully aligned 'SHEILA' photo (see Figure 4). For Clinton, that was the real beauty of his game: For

**FIGURE 4** The group contemplates Clinton's death as the *Sheila* photo looms in the background. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

all of its baroque flair, it was fundamentally quite simple and eminently solvable by all who think on it in the right way.

This, of course, bears a striking resemblance to the merits of the cryptic crossword as outlined by Sondheim in his original *New York* essay. The 'cleverness, humor, [and] … pseudo-aphoristic grace' of cryptic crosswords mask what is, practically, quite a simple conceit: Sondheim complains that traditional, trivia-heavy crosswords risk 'sending you … to *Webster's New International*' while cryptics are a pure 'test of wits'. What Sondheim was looking to introduce the American public to, in puzzles, films and musicals, was the kind of game where you don't have to move, even if it's just to grab a dictionary.

And it's no coincidence that the character in *The Last of Sheila* who voices that sentiment is Philip, the film director. In finally bringing his famous murder mysteries to the big screen, Sondheim was experimenting with a new kind of puzzle format. His soirées with Perkins, for all their fun, allowed for a frustrating amount of user intervention and error. On one of their evenings, players scrambled around New York City looking for a poster of a certain woman running for Congress; when they found it, they knew to enter the building it was pasted on. Waiting for them at the top of the stairs was a woman serving coffee and slices of cake, which, if arranged in the right order, would spell out the next clue in icing. Unfortunately, the actress Lee Remick and her team unwittingly ate the cake instead.[22] For as much as it may have muddled the game, this mishap would not lower Remick's stock with

Sondheim or Perkins: She was the original choice to play the role of Lee in *The Last of Sheila*.

Putting a murder mystery on film not only forestalled any such mishaps, but it also gave the puzzle makers exceptional control over what the players, now the viewers, could see and how. Sondheim and Perkins, in collaboration with Ross, could craft each visual clue perfectly, giving the audience just enough information to work things out but not enough that they could do so with ease — no movement required. This newfound power is taken advantage of throughout the film but is perhaps on clearest display in the early scene in which Clinton arranges his guests such that they're lined up correctly below the letters of 'SHEILA' on the side of the boat. As Clinton prepares to snap the shot, the film's camera zooms in and moves gently upwards, revealing the boat's name lingering above the group's heads. The film then immediately cuts to an extreme close-up of Clinton, grinning, with the group's perfect composition visible in his sunglasses (see Figure 5).

In just two brief shots, the film has already told us everything we need to know in order to solve the mystery: A subtle but clear camera move emphasised the importance of 'SHEILA,' and a cut to the reflection in Clinton's glasses tells the viewer that he has arranged this photo exactly how he wants to see it. Just as Clinton's guests have no need to move so long as they can see the photo Clinton took, neither do *The Last of Sheila*'s viewers. The specificity of the film camera gave Sondheim a new and pleasurably rigid structure with which he could deliver a

**FIGURE 5** Clinton's careful composition of the photograph is reflected in the lens of his sunglasses. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

mystery, the linearity of cinema offering a solid form not unlike a crossword grid into which clues could be placed and mysteries hidden. Of course, Sondheim takes it all one step further and renders even the title fair territory for his puzzles: The film's true murderer, unbeknownst even to Clinton, stands under the final 'A' in the photograph. To solve the film's mystery, you barely even need to watch it — merely knowing the title is *The Last of Sheila* gets you more than halfway there.

## Sondheim, Scientist

If Sondheim's puzzles and film converge on their mutual play with form, then both converge with his music on their collective reliance on what he terms their 'logic'. In one interview, Sondheim emphasises his love for puzzles — 'not games, puzzles' — by claiming that 'all art — symphonies, architecture, novels — it's all puzzles. The fitting together of notes, the fitting together of words have by their very nature a puzzle aspect.'[23] Across books and interviews, Sondheim repeatedly attests to a cold 'logic' at the heart of music, statements that his partisans have long been trying to add clarifications to.[24] Martin Gottfried offers a representative defence with his claim that 'beyond the brilliance of his mind, his insistence on logical precision and the exactitude of language, lies the humanity of his music'.[25] This is the most common reply to accusations of headiness against Sondheim: Sure, maybe it does seem a bit cold and unfeeling, but if you can just ignore all of that …

But perhaps we should take Sondheim at his word: Not only is his work defined by its logical fitting together, the precision of its structure, perhaps that itself contains the beauty. In this way we can see why he was drawn to Georges Seurat, whose 'scientific' principles were the foundation of all artistic creation.[26] In *Sunday in the Park with George*, George's first lines all but confirm the alliance with his creator: 'White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: bring order to the whole' echoes Sondheim's oft-repeated belief that art is the creation 'of order out of chaos'.[27] The mechanical nature of George's creativity is expressed in his staccato narration of his painting — 'Red red orange /Orange pick up blue / Pick up red/Pick up orange/From the blue-green blue-green' — which reflects his character's early, full-throated declaration of a belief in form: 'Colour and light/There's only colour and light. /Yellow and white. /Just blue and yellow and white.'[28]

Only Sondheim's choice of media extended far beyond Seurat's coloured dots. The lines of crossword grids, the icing on a cake, the title of a film were all dabs of paint on Sondheim's palette. Sondheim's apparently scientific devotion to the logic and structure of his work is the point

in itself. If there's a single right way for things to be put together, he's done so, and if musicals like *Sunday in the Park with George* have a certain remove to them, it's not without cause. In fact, it was the oddly unhuman composition of Seurat's painting that drew Sondheim towards it as a subject to begin with — 'Why are fifty people not looking at each other?' was his pithy description.[29] Compare that with Ernst Bloch's famous description of Seurat's masterwork:

> This picture is one single mosaic of boredom, a masterful rendering of the disappointed longing and the incongruities of a *dolce far niente*. The painting depicts a middle-class Sunday morning [sic] on an island in the Seine near Paris, and that is just the point: it depicts this merely with scorn. Empty-faced people rest in the foreground; most of the others have been grouped into wooden verticals like dolls from the toy box, intensely involved in a stiff little walk …[30]

Bloch's reading of the painting's stilted characters as a critique of bourgeois sclerosis could apply just as easily to *The Last of Sheila*, *Getting Away with Murder*, or any number of Sondheim's works as it could Seurat's painting. The qualities in Sondheim — the stiffness of his characters, the surgical precision of his construction — that have long been seen by both critics and admirers as defects are in fact part of the foundation of him as an artist.

Artist, naturally, being the only possible word: For as much as Sondheim may have professed that composition was a kind of science, he also understood the profound uniqueness in the act of creation. For Sondheim, the moment the idea for *Sunday in the Park with George* clicked was when co-writer James Lapine noted that the key character absent from the painting was 'the artist' himself.[31] Sondheim needed to construct a work of art about the construction of a work of art himself with an appropriately formalist painter at its centre. After years of playing with form not only in musicals but in crosswords, films, and party games, he could finally make form a subject in and of itself.[32]

## Sondheim's Lost Career

It's easy, as a fan of Sondheim's puzzles and mysteries, to mourn a kind of a second life Sondheim could have lived if not for his success in theatre. He was forced to give up writing his regular *New York* crosswords in order to begin working seriously on *Follies* — which itself was originally intended to be a murder mystery.[33] His apparent desire to write

mystery novels after the failure of *Merrily We Roll Along* may have been merely a coping mechanism, but a very real second collaboration with Anthony Perkins — a multi-part murder mystery miniseries for HBO entitled *Crime and Variations* — never made it beyond the pair's 75-page treatment.[34] To paraphrase Chekhov, musicals were Sondheim's lawful wife and puzzles his mistress: When sent a tribute puzzle by the Enigmatist society, he fittingly replied that 'I'm determined not to tackle the puzzle until I finished the opening number of my new show'.[35]

It's not as though, however, his work outside of musicals is entirely ignored. Serious crossword fans are still challenged by his *New York* creations to this day, and director Rian Johnson paid homage to him not only in the *Sheila*-inspired structure of his film *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* (2022) but by including a brief cameo from Sondheim himself, appropriately playing the murder mystery game *Among Us* (see Figure 6). Even the legacy of Sondheim's parties lives on: The cast of *Glass Onion* would regularly host Sondheim-inspired mystery parties when not filming.[36] Still, anyone impressed by the byzantine intellectual thrills of *The Last of Sheila* will wince at the knowledge that the treatment to *Crime and Variations* is merely gathering dust in the HBO vault.

This attitude — one I myself held until I began to write this essay — fails to see the full picture of Sondheim as an artist. Or rather, it fails to see the composition of the pictures itself, the small dots of colour that

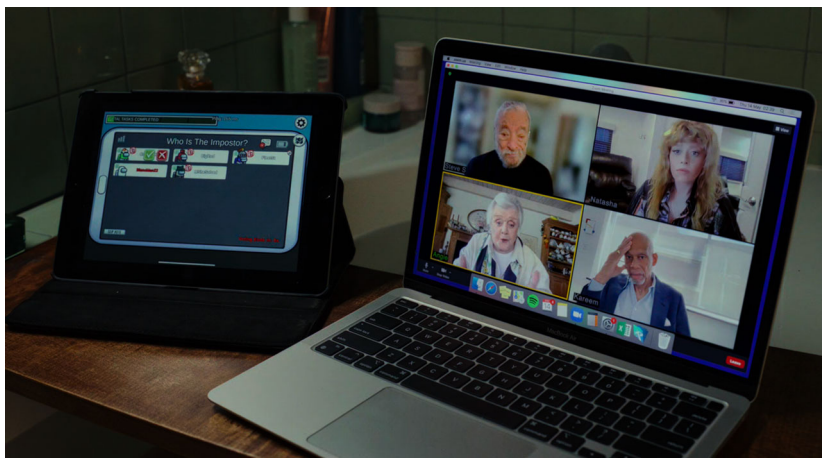


**FIGURE 6** Angela Lansbury, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Natasha Lyonne, and Sondheim all cameo on a Zoom call in *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

comprise the painting or the straight lines that make up the crossword. What makes Sondheim's crosswords great or what makes *The Last of Sheila* such a cerebral treat can be found in equal share in his musicals: an unending, always reflexive play with the medium itself, a constant experimentation with the tenets, tropes and moves of a certain genre or form. From lyrical runs ending on an unexpected word to jarring jumps in time across acts to the organiser of the murder game himself being murdered to the crossword grid being a clue in and of itself, Sondheim's angels are in his architecture. Only on a retrospective viewing of *The Last of Sheila* or, say, *Merrily We Roll Along* can the complexity of the whole picture be seen. The same is true for Sondheim's artistry.

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## Conflict of Interest Statement

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study

## Notes

1 This imagined description of Perkins and Sondheim's games is derived mainly from accounts of Peter Shaffer's experience playing one in New York in the late 1960s found in Anthony Shaffer, *So What Did You Expect: A Memoir* (London: Picador, 2001), 184-6 and Charles Winecoff, *Split Image: The Life of Anthony Perkins* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 273-4.

2 Alexander Larman, '*Glass Onion*'s psychotic 1970s sibling: the strange saga of *The Last of Sheila*', *The Telegraph*, 29 December 2022.

3 Douglas Braverman, 'The Last of Sheila: Sondheim as Master Games-Player' in *Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook*, ed. by Joanne Gordon (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 85-91 (86).

4 Stephen Sondheim, 'How to Do a *Real* Crossword Puzzle', *New York*, 8 April 1968.

5 In 2011, Sondheim finally shared one of his famous murder games with the public as a fundraiser at the American Museum of Natural History; Patrick Healy, 'This Time It's Crosswords (Not Cross Words) That Surface from Sondheim', *The New York Times*, 16 September 2011; Craig Zadan, *Sondheim & Co*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 352-3.

6 See Ben Zimmer, 'Stephen Sondheim Didn't Just Change Musicals. He Changed Crosswords', *Slate*, 4 December 2021; Alan Connor, 'Stephen Sondheim's Other Job: Crossword Setter', *The Guardian*, 6 December 2021.

7 Mark Shenton, 'My 2004 Interview with Stephen Sondheim', *ShentonStage.com*, 29 November 2021.

8 Braverman, 'The Last of Sheila', 85.

9 Barbara Isenberg, 'Sondheim Songless: The Master Minus the Music? Well, He's Been Playing with Puzzlers for Years and Now Takes a Turn at Mystery Playwriting with 'The Doctor Is Out', *Los Angeles Times*, 10 September 1995; Stephen Schiff, 'Deconstructing Sondheim', *The New Yorker*, 28 February 1993.

10 See Michael Schuman, 'Stephen Sondheim Taught Me How to Be A Person', *The New Yorker*, 27 November 2021; Joe Nocera, 'Hearing with the Heart', *The New York Times*, 3 November 2010.

11 Isenberg, 'Sondheim Songless'.

12 Vincent Canby, 'Theater Review: A Most Sinister Gathering of Not-So-Usual Suspects', *The New York Times*, 18 March 1996.

13 Stephen Sondheim and Anthony Shaffer, 'Theater: Of Mystery, Murder, and Other Delights', *The New York Times*, 10 March 1996; Descriptions of Sondheim's puzzle and antiquity-lined Long Island home also closely mirror the design of Wyke's country manor in *Sleuth*.

14 Braverman, 'The Last of Sheila', 88.

15 Stephen Sondheim and George Fruth, *Getting Away with Murder* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1997), 117-22.

16 Zimmer, 'Stephen Sondheim'.

17 Sondheim, 'How to Do a *Real* Crossword Puzzle'.

18 Schiff, 'Deconstructing Sondheim'.

19 Sondheim's interest in the possibilities of structure and constraint brings him in close alignment with Oulipo writers like Geroges Perec, himself a prolific cruciverbalist whose over 100 crosswords for midcentury French newspapers remain largely untranslated into English.

20 Zadan, *Sondheim & Co.*, 295.

21 Stephen Sondheim, 'New York Magazine Puzzle: Murder Mystery', *New York*, 11 November 1968, 68.

22 Winecoff, p. 271; Mary Blume, 'Herb Ross Plays a Film Game in 'Shiela', *Los Angeles Times*, 28 Jan 1973, 464, 478; The woman serving the cake was, in fact, Anthony Perkins's mother Janet.

23 Schiff, 'Deconstructing Sondheim'.

24 See Schiff and Isenberg; Stephen Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 3.

25 Martin Gottfried, *Sondheim* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 10.

26 Schiff, 'Deconstructing Sondheim'.

27 Isenberg, 'Sondheim Songless'.

28 James Lapine, *Putting It Together: How Stephen Sondheim and I Created* Sunday in the Park with George (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 282, 285.

29 Ibid., 23.

30 Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 814.

31 Lapine, *Putting It Together*, 23.

32 Robert McLaughlin similarly argues that Sondheim's suspicion and subversion of narrative as a unifying force in the musical distinguishes him as a postmodernist; see 'Sondheim and Postmodernism' in *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 25-38.

33 Zadan, *Sondheim & Co*., 153.

34 Ibid., 352-3.

35 Alan Connor, 'Stephen Sondheim's Other Job'.

36 Adam Woodward, 'Rian Johnson: "Sondheim's my guy"', *Little White Lies*, 28 November 2022.

## Author Biography

Harrison Whitaker has recently submitted his PhD dissertation, 'Types in Transition: The Evolution of the Working Man in New Hollywood Cinema,' at the University of Cambridge's Centre for Film & Screen. His article 'How Hollywood Watched Television' won *Cambridge Quarterly*'s Richard D. Gooder Essay Prize in 2023, and his other work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Review of Film and Television Studies* and *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*.