

Something familiar

Improvised Sondheim Project offers canny homage to Sondheim's complex style

BY JOHN OLSON

It's been 10 years since Stephen Sondheim premiered a new musical, but Chicago audiences had the chance to see three new musicals "in the manner" of Sondheim during December 2012. *The Improvised Sondheim Project* was the brainchild of five improvisers and musical theatre artists who teach music improv at Chicago's Second City Training Center. Creating musical comedy scenes or even full musicals on the spot is a staple of improv comedy, but improvising in Sondheim's complex styles was a special challenge that Jeff Bouthiette, Erica Elam, Aaron Graham, Matthew Van Colton and Amanda Murphy had discussed long before beginning their project in 2012. They did in-depth studies of *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods* among other shows to find patterns and constructions they could use to improvise their own "Sondheim musicals" for audiences.

"We found that much of what we teach in our music improv courses — like traditional song structures of verse and choruses — didn't apply to Sondheim," Graham says. "Instead, the structure is dictated by the characters' needs. For example, while traditional musicals will likely have an 'I want' song, Sondheim gives us a 'decision point' song, when a character must make a choice between two options. There might be an A section for the first option, expressed musically with a smooth, legato melody, followed by a B section, with a staccato melody in which the second option is considered, and maybe a C section, a bridge in which additional information is presented relating to the character's decision. Several songs from *Into the Woods* follow this pattern — 'Giants in the Sky' and 'Moments in the Woods,' for example."

Duets present a special challenge, as it's difficult for two improvisers to create lyrics to be sung concurrently and in harmony. Graham explains how Sondheim's "interruption duets" lend themselves to improvisation. "In these duets, one person is obsessed with something — as when Sweeney sings of his razor blades: 'These are my friends.' Then a second person, Mrs. Lovett in this case, comes in with an interruptive comment: 'I'm your friend too, Mr. Todd.' Larger group songs might be 'revolution numbers.' Multiple people are singing about multiple things, but they are all tied together by a musical hook to which each performer will return. The title song of *Into the Woods* and *Sweeney Todd*'s 'God, That's Good!' follow this structure."

To improvise lyrics, Graham mentions alliteration, repetition and internal rhyme as three

characteristics that read as Sondheim-esque. The content is often introspective with multi-dimensional, flawed characters thinking aloud, as in Shakespeare's plays. Music is frequently dissonant, rhythmically complex, prone to unusual melodic jumps — and not traditionally pretty. Graham says there was no effort to parody any particular Sondheim shows.

Graham and his partners invited eight other improvisers to attend a closed workshop in the summer of 2012 to try out exercises and songs. From those eight, four additional performers — Joey Bland, Katie Dufresne, Nicole Hastings and Mary Cait Walthall — were invited to join the cast. The team booked a run of three Thursday evenings (Dec. 6, 13 and 20, 2012) at Chicago's Stage 773 theatres. John Hildreth served as director.

I attended the first performance. The audience, asked to suggest a title for the evening's musical, proposed "Bubble Me This." Murphy, the music director, set the stage with a rhythmically and harmonically complex prelude, and the performers began an opening number that established the storylines of two families and a third couple using a song structure resembling the opening number of *Into the Woods*. Family No. 1 was a married couple whose young daughter is taking a bubble bath; Family No. 2 was a couple with a chronically ill "boy in a bubble"; the third couple was unmarried, and their relationship was "on the bubble," about to collapse. The marriages were shown to have strains, and it was revealed that the unmarried man with the rocky relationship was an ex of one of the married women. In its contemporary setting and exploration of marriage, it was reminiscent of *Company* but darker, more like the writing of James Lapine than George Furth.

The experience was eerily like seeing a new, unfamiliar Sondheim musical. The humor was in the improvisers' ability to create absurd situations and give those situations the high emotional stakes of a Sondheim treatment. The initial run of *The Improvised Sondheim Project* closed on Dec. 20, 2012, but the team hopes for a longer run in 2013. [TSR]

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PHOTO PROVIDED BY THE IMPROVISED SONDHEIM PROJECT

Joey Bland and Katie Dufresne were part of *The Improvised Sondheim Project* in December 2012 in Chicago.