

Sondheim 102 • Classes 1 & 2 • *Sunday in the Park with George*

How would Act 1 George answer these questions? (Same for Act 2 George?)

- What is art?
- What is the process of creating art?
- What is the relationship between artist and subject?
- For whom does the artist create?

- In creating art, what is the role of—
 - feeling (emotion)
 - thinking (science)
 - individuality or uniqueness
 - public recognition and/or critical reception?

Cynthia McIninn:

- Art is the combination of science and color
- The process is very painstaking and exacting. You must put your whole self into your art and make it the most important and only thing in your life.
- The artist shapes the subject into whatever he wants. He sees every subject as an inanimate object.
- The artist creates for himself and does not take any other feelings or wishes into account.
- There is no place in art for emotion or feeling.
- There is no need for color mixing in art because the science of the eye and the mind will mix the colors for you. You only need red and blue and your eye will see the purple.
- Each artist should have their own individual perspective on what they see and what they bring to the canvas.
- It doesn't matter what the public or critics say as long as the artist is happy with their work.

Peter Principe:

"I'm not sure I can address the issues your questions raise except obliquely. First, some context. I've been uncomfortable for the last few classes of Sondheim 101, because I haven't enjoyed the musicals, and I keep wondering if I'm missing something blindingly obvious. I mean, we're not talking chopped liver here, we're talking Stephen-#%&!-Sondheim. Then, a couple of things said during last Thursday's class helped me puzzle it out.

"Sondheim is using the musical format to approach some heavy, profound questions that heretofore hadn't been explored in this form. If Shakespeare's form was the play, Sondheim's was the musical. The play can accommodate subjects across a wide spectrum, from *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* to *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

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Musicals, in my limited experience, have not be used as a vehicle for exploring the heavier end of the spectrum. So, one does not expect to find Fred and Ginger playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Sondheim is pushing and shoving the musical form into unexplored territory and thereby requires different expectations and mindset from his audience.

“As to what is Art, it beats me, Claude.”

Lynda Carlson:

To me, the artist is creating the painting primarily for himself.

Nancy Nye commented on her beliefs about both “Georges”:

I think *Sunday in the Park with George* is the most interesting and touching show we have studied. It is a brilliant piece, and the best of Sondheim. Frank Rich understood it, whereas I think the other critics did not understand the show. The show is complicated. I felt sorry for Act I George (and Dot) because he was tremendously obsessed with his art and did not know how to balance, and he became very remorseful. Act II George figured it out with the help of ancestors. The lyrics are deep. The words “move on” and “forever” are ever in my mind.

I have special feelings for Act I George. This could happen to people other than artists and poets. It could have happened to me (and possibly to you) in careers that we dearly loved. And I think Alan Magid hinted at this in his comments during the last class.

Martha Dimes (rest of this document)

Act 1 George:

- I don't have answers to all of [the questions] for Act 1, but they have provoked my thinking in somewhat related directions. I'm not sure about "what is art" for George, but I do think he somehow needs to make art, and his art parallels his relationships with Dot, Jules, his mother, et al. Some thoughts:
- The phrase that keeps popping up for me is E.M. Forster's epigraph "Only connect" (*Howards End*)—which conversely implies distance. George's pointillist technique of separate dots requires distance from the viewer to emerge as a whole. In Act 1 he is separated from Dot physically by a clear screen, and he is outside the picture/window frame of his subjects. He loves Dot in a way, but sees her mainly as part of his painting, not as the fully characterized Dot who loves the Follies, for example. He SEES color and light; Dot (*Sunday in the Park with George*) FEELS heat sweat, fatigue, and so on. He doesn't connect, as Jules does, with the movers and shakers of the art world. "Finishing the Hat" is central to the act and to understanding George: Art comes first, and "the kind of woman willing to wait's not the kind that you want to find waiting" as he focuses on the hat, the sky, the dog, the grass, the light. He "watch[es] the rest of the world from a window." The only way he can connect is

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by keeping his distance. An incredibly sad yet forceful song. The result: gorgeous art as put together finally in "Sunday," a triumph of art and of Sondheim's music.

- For whom does the artist create? George creates for himself/his vision and uniqueness, though he doesn't seem calculated about that; certainly not for the critics (cf. Jules). "Sunday" shows US the excellence of his art, though those around him don't see it.
- "Color and Light" shows him thinking through his technique, which does involve optical science (Seurat must have known something about how that works).
- [I'm curious about what Seurat might have learned in art school: Are they principles of design, order, composition, balance, light, and harmony the same as those of "the masters?" How does he diverge from other artists in these principles? Need to do some research. . . .]
- This is what I've got for now. I love this show; it's right up there with *Follies* at the top of my favorites.

On Act 2 George):

- This George has been caught up in the collaborative technical form of art and is concerned about how it is perceived by viewers and critics—very different from Act 1 George. As noted by the art critic, Blair, there's not much uniqueness there, and little growth from chromolume to chromolume, nor much feeling involved in the creation or result.

Comments on Act 2:

- I'm surprised that the initial critics of the show found that the two acts "don't go together" (or "belong together"?). There are connections large and small linking them. As with George's pointillist technique, the two acts are large "dots" that viewers put together to make a whole.
- Other large dots: the same lead actors playing parallel parts, familiarly related; the word "forever" repeated throughout as a theme; musical leitmotifs repeat in both acts, deepening the connections; repetition of the key words "order, design, tension, balance, harmony"; George says "Connect the dots" and "Connect, George, connect." It's what he must do in his art and in his relationships, and what we must do as viewers.

Examples of connection, from Act 1 to Act 2:

- The pointillist music for "Color and Light"; a faster, electrified version for "Chromolume #7." Dot ends the scene where she leaves: "I have to move on"; the theme becomes richer in "Move On." Similarly, "We do not belong together"; "We've always belonged together; we will always belong together."
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- “White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: bring order to the whole.” “White. A blank page or canvas...So many possibilities.”

Some musical leitmotifs, from Act 1 to Act 2:

- “Your eyes, George...I love your painting” (“Sunday in the Park”); “Hello, George, where did you go, George” (“Everybody Loves Louis”); “Hello, George; I do not wish to be remembered like this, George” (“Hot Up Here”) (all Dot); “All right, George, as long as it’s your night, George” (George, “Putting It Together”). All these are internal monologues, legato, within allegro songs.
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- “Color and Light” and “Putting It Together” are pointillist patter songs. Both are about “putting it together, but in the first George sings about making his art; in the second he sings about making professional (not artistic) connections: making art versus describing “the art of making art” as unproductive connecting.
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- “I’m not surprised” repeated among those who don’t respect the art in both acts.

Some scenic, thematic, and character parallels:

- The major one: the “Sunday” finale to both acts.
- Alternating the park and the studio; alternating the museum and the park. George 1 sketches or paints in both, whereas George 2 tries to work the room and tries to figure out how to reach the art he wants.
- Use of “pop-up” scenery in the painting; use of pop-up George in “Putting it Together” (art in one, the would-be schmoozer in the other).
- Concentration: George 1 tells Dot to concentrate, be still; Dot is told “you have excellent concentration” (“Hot Up Here”); finally Dot says concentration is more than being still; it’s “to be where I was,” not in the past or future. “Look at what you want, not at where you are, not at what you’ll be...taught me how to see...understand the light.”
- The major one: George 1 and Dot and George 2 and Marie/Dot, played by the same actors. George 2 initially rejects the family connection and then comes to accept and value “the family tree” (Marie and Dot merge).
- George 2 uses the third person to describe himself, creating distance from himself as artist or trying to find himself as artist (monologue before “Move On”)? “See George attempting to make a connection.”
- Jules parallels the museum director, Bob, in that both are overly concerned with what’s popular and accepted (played by the same actor): “looking for the next his artist” and buying air rights for condos.

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- In “Move On,” George 2 comes back to connect with George 1 and with Dot, wanting to explore something new “and the feeling, and the light, moving on.”
- Beginning with Marie’s observation that “George is blue,” George 2 finds his way through his dissatisfaction back to George 1’s ways of seeing and making art. George 1’s characters bow to him as he does. Most of the parallel themes become that much richer by the end; perhaps that’s why two new words (composition, light) are added to the artist’s list in the final scene. If we connect the dots, do we see George 2 becoming as good an artist as George 1?