

INSIDER'S INSIGHTS

Westport
Country
Playhouse



Being Alive | August 24 – September 9, 2007



Being Alive

In the late 1990s, writer/performer Billy Porter saw something at a benefit performance that, in his words “was just electric”: Sondheim’s music paired with prose from the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. A Broadway actor and singer himself, Porter’s sharply honed instincts for musical theatre made him sit up and take notice. There was something about this blend of wildly different works of theatre art.

Porter’s fascination was the starting point for a creative journey nearly ten years in the making: combining the words of William Shakespeare, the music and lyrics of Stephen Sondheim, the rhythm and blues of his upbringing, Porter drafted *Being Alive*.

Though the art forms Porter has chosen are different stylistically, they are among the popular and mainstream forms of their day – and the artists Porter features work within accepted mediums to question and challenge, critique and comment on the very culture that grants their success.

Shakespeare found wily ways within the literary conventions of his time to explore blasphemous pagan ideas and rituals. Sondheim imbeds satirical and unconventional lyrics within the genre of the catchy, popular Broadway tune. And historically African-American artists have used musical styles from jazz to rhythm and blues to explore and transcend painful experience and racial injustice.

Being Alive is more than the sum of its parts. On the one hand it is a cultural fusion – taking a unique look at Shakespeare and Sondheim from the perspective of the contemporary African-American culture. On the other, it is something more. In Porter’s words: “I needed to figure out, what do I want to say that will create some sort of transcendent thought process so that it isn’t really about race, but it’s about being human.”

Take this musical journey with us as we examine the world through the eyes of Billy Porter, Stephen Sondheim and William Shakespeare.

INSIDER'S INSIGHT

Written by Debra Baron, Director of Education
and Gabriel Davis, Education Associate

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Available for download at westportplayhouse.org/beingalive.htm



An actual cast of Shakespeare's face, taken at his death.

Shakespeare: a life of powerful and enduring words

There are very few concrete facts known about William Shakespeare's life. While his actual birth date is uncertain, we do know he was baptized on April 26, 1564. There is much speculation regarding his childhood and the rest of his life because of the poor record-keeping at that time. What we do have record of are his 38 plays and 154 sonnets – a prolific output that may not even represent the full breadth of what he wrote while he lived.

Speculation extends to Shakespeare's education as well. Some suppose he attended King Edward VI Grammar School in Central Stratford. But our best guess may come from examining what we do have: his plays. He could have been parodying his own life, for instance when he made fun of a typical sixteenth-century Latin lesson in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

In 1582 at the age of eighteen, Shakespeare married twenty-six-year-old Anne Hathaway presumably because she was three months pregnant. Shakespeare's first child was born a short time after. Less than two years later, Shakespeare and Hathaway had twins. But after his children were born nothing is known until he entered the London theatre scene in 1592.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, drama became the ideal means to capture and convey the diverse interests of the time. Shakespeare understood this, combining popular appeal, complex characterization, poetic grandeur and philosophical depth in all of his plays. His style evolved, reflecting his own tastes and the tastes of his audiences, keeping current with the times.

His verse style, choice of subjects and stagecraft all bear the marks of the time. Iambic pentameter, in common usage when he was writing, became an evocative tool in Shakespeare's hands: his rhyming couplets at the ends of scenes were worded for maximum suspense. For instance in *Macbeth* – as he leaves the stage to kill Duncan, Macbeth says:

“hear not Duncan; for it is a knell
that summons thee to heaven or to hell”

His plays are also noted for their use of soliloquies: giving the audience the opportunity to understand the character's inner motivations and conflicts. Some of Shakespeare's most famous quotes are the beginnings of these in-depth explorations of a character's mind – “To be or not to be”, “What a piece of work is man” and “All the world is a stage.”

Although much of what is known of Shakespeare's golden years is speculative, we do know with relative certainty that he died on April 23, 1616. Having already achieved fame in his lifetime, his work has grown even more popular after his death. He became the most quoted writer in the history of the English-speaking world, and in fact, the original words and phrases he coined impact the very way we speak English today. His works have been translated into every major language and productions of his work are essentially continuous around the world – there are currently 95 companies and 90 festivals devoted to his work in the United States alone.

The elements that pervade all his work: extensive wordplay, double entendres and clever rhetorical flourishes – common in Shakespeare – are also prevalent in the work of another player in the creation of *Being Alive* – Stephen Sondheim.

The Seven Ages of Man

With a clear vision of what he hoped to create, Porter began to seek out a strong foundation on which to rest it all upon. What he found was Shakespeare's famous soliloquy “All the world's a stage,” which appears in *As You Like It*. Shakespeare's text likens life to a play and our world to a stage – throughout our “performance” on this planet/stage, we play seven distinct parts as we travel through the “seven ages” from our first entrance (birth) to our final exit (death).

“All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely
players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many
parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the
infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
Then the whining school-boy, with his
satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like
snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a
soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like
the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in
quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then
the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal
cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age
shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on
side;
His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too
wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly
voice,
Turning again toward childish treble,
pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene
of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere
oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans
everything.”

– *As You Like It*,
Act II, Scene VII, lines 139-166



The Summer of 1950 at Westport Country Playhouse!

In 1950, Gertrude Lawrence and Dennis King, stars of "Traveller's Joy," posed on the steps of the Jolly Fisherman restaurant in Westport with one of the most impressive groups of staff and intern/apprentices ever assembled at the Playhouse:

First row, from left: Frank Perry, production assistant (became movie director); Dennis King, actor; Gertrude Lawrence, actress; Prudence Truesdell, properties.

Second row: Dorothy Herr, box office; King Sinanian, special assistant; Peg Henry, intern; Mary Rodgers (daughter of Richard/became composer).

Third row: Chase Soltez, stage manager; Neal Wilder, intern; Phoebe Hopkins, intern; Sam Willson, intern; Hal Stone, production assistant; Conard Fowkes, intern; Chilton Ryan, production assistant and former apprentice.

Fourth row: Stephen Sondheim, apprentice (became composer).

accommodation, aerial, amazement, apostrophe,

Shakespeare: the inventor

In all of his work – the plays, the sonnets and the narrative poems – Shakespeare uses 17,677 words. Of those over 1,700 were first used by Shakespeare. Writers often invent words, either by creating new forms of existing words or coining new words outright when they are unable to find the exact word they require in the existing language. Shakespeare is the foremost of those. Below is a short list of words that he originated. Ask yourself – how often a day goes by when you don't use at least a few of these words?

accommodation, aerial, amazement, apostrophe, assassination, auspicious, baseless, bloody, bump, castigate, count (noun), countless, courtship, critic, dexterously, dishearten, dislocate, dwindle, eventful, exposure, frugal, generous, gloomy, hurry, impartial, inauspicious, indistinguishable, invulnerable, lapse, laughable, lonely, majestic, misplaced, monumental, multitudinous, obscene, perusal, pious, premeditated, radiance, reliance, road, sanctimonious, submerge, suspicious

As if that were not enough, ask yourself how you could express yourself in normal conversation if Shakespeare had not created these idioms?

fancy-free, catch a cold, elbowroom, fair play, heartsick, hot-blooded, housekeeping, lackluster, leapfrog, clothes make the man, method in his madness, to thine own self be true, ministering angel, dog will have his day, brevity is the soul of wit, mind's eye, it's Greek to me, heart of gold, give the devil his due, too much of a good thing, naked truth, break the ice, strange bedfellows, wear one's heart on one's sleeve, all that glitters isn't gold, eat out of house and home, be all and end all, one fell swoop

A few notes on Sondheim

In the summer of 1950, Stephen Sondheim served as an apprentice at Westport Country Playhouse. Sondheim wrote the music and lyrics for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *The Frogs* (1974), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Assassins* (1991), *Passion* (1994) and *Bounce* (2003) as well as lyrics for *West Side Story* (1957), *Gypsy* (1959), *Do I Hear a Waltz?* (1965), and additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). *Side by Side* by Sondheim (1976), *Marry Me a Little* (1981), *You're Gonna Love Tomorrow* (1983), *Putting It Together* (1993/1999) and *Moving On* (2001) are anthologies of his work as composer and lyricist. For films, he composed the scores of *Stavisky* (1974) and co-composed *Reds* (1981) as well as songs for *Dick Tracy* (1990). He also wrote the songs for the television production *Evening Primrose* (1966), co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and the play *Getting Away with Murder* (1996) and provided incidental music for the plays *The Girls of Summer* (1956), *Invitation to a March* (1961), *Twigs* (1971) and *The Enclave* (1973). *Saturday Night* (1954), his first professional musical, finally had its New York premiere in 1999. Sondheim is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild and the National Association of Playwrights, Composers and Lyricists, having served as its president from 1973 to 1981. In 1981 he founded Young Playwrights Inc. to develop and promote the work of American playwrights aged 18 years and younger. (For information, write to Artistic@Youngplaywrights.org.)

Sondheim on *Being Alive*

Stephen Sondheim graciously shares his thoughts below on *Being Alive* with Debra Baron, Westport Country Playhouse Director of Education.

Debra Baron: Has the work of Shakespeare served to influence or inspire your own work? If so, how?

Stephen Sondheim: I did set "Fear No More," one of his lyrics from *Cymbeline*, and of course he supplied the plot for *West Side Story*. But if I think of any five lines of Shakespeare's, it intimidates me into wanting never to write again.

DB: What is the most pleasurable element of writing or composing for you? What is the most difficult part?

SS: In writing lyrics, those moments when you stumble on an unusual rhyme that's right for the song. In composing, finding the note that's both fresh and inevitable.

DB: How did you first come to know Billy Porter and his work?

SS: I heard Billy before I met him. Both happened at a party where a lot of talented young composers and singers were performing, and Billy's extraordinary voice knocked me out. I then heard him in a couple of cabarets and clubs. In 2002 James Lapine and I wanted him to play the Witch in the revival of *Into the Woods* but it didn't work out.

DB: What did you enjoy or appreciate about *Being Alive*?

SS: What I love about the show is twofold: first, the accompaniments and vocal arrangements by James Sampliner and the Gospel arrangements by Michael McElroy; second, the performers, who seem to be made of music. Listen to the complexity of what they're doing, and you'll be astonished.

DB: What do you hope audiences will leave the theatre with – what feeling, thought, or new appreciation?

SS: I hope the people who know my stuff will like this completely new approach to the songs. I hope everybody else will simply have a good time.



Billy Porter

Conceived and Directed by Billy Porter

*"Instead of complaining
about our stories
not being told,
I'm writing them.
I want to contribute to
making change"*

– Billy Porter

Born William Ellis Porter in Pittsburgh, PA on September 21, 1969, Porter grew up in the tough neighborhoods of East Liberty and Homewood-Brushton. At the age of four, Porter began singing at the Friendship Baptist Church where he says, "I discovered my gift."

But this didn't prove to be an entirely nurturing environment for him; "as a black gay man coming from the Pentecostal Church, I felt sort of judged and condemned," he says. One night, twelve-year-old Porter was washing dishes when he heard Jennifer Holliday sing "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" from *Dreamgirls* on the Tony Awards telecast and he knew where he belonged. He said, "that was the moment I realized what I did and the talent that I had didn't have to exist only in church...and I could actually make a living at it."

In 1991, Porter received a BFA in Drama from Carnegie Mellon University, where he would later become an adjunct professor directing innovative productions of shows such as *Letters from 'Nam* and Sondheim's *Company*. Shortly after leaving school, Porter made his Broadway debut in the ensemble of *Miss Saigon* – and went on to play various roles on Broadway. Temporarily leaving the stage for the music studio, Porter signed a record contract with a major label. The release of his first album did not achieve the wide-ranging success he'd hoped for. Part of it was the lack of marketing push the label put behind its release, as Porter explains "The music industry doesn't know what to do with gay people." Nevertheless, Porter stuck it out in the music business, but found himself strong-armed into compromising on who he was for the sake of having a more mainstream commercial image. "All of a sudden, five years later, there is this mountain of denial, and you are a shell," he says. "I felt like I was bamboozled."

That's when Porter found a mentor who related to his dilemma and supported his drive to genuinely express himself artistically. That person was the producer/director/writer George C. Wolfe – former artistic director of The Public Theater in New York – who directed such productions as *Angels in America* and *Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk*. Porter says of his residency with Wolfe, "he became a very important figure in my life. He gave me a place that I could call home creatively."

In 2005, Porter wrote, directed and starred in a musical autobiography entitled *Ghetto Superstar: The Man That I Am* in which he describes what it's like to be a gay, black, Christian theatre artist who tried to make a career in the music industry. The piece premiered at The Public Theater's Joe's Pub to generally positive reviews.

Interview with Billy Porter – *Being Alive*

Recently, Billy Porter took a little time away from a busy rehearsal schedule for *Being Alive* to speak with Gabriel Davis, Westport Country Playhouse Education Associate.

Gabriel Davis: First: why pair these two masters? Why Sondheim and Shakespeare?

Billy Porter: Growing up listening to Sondheim, I discovered early on that there was a disconnect between African-American performers and Sondheim materials. For a long time there hasn't been a whole lot of interracial, colorblind casting in terms of Sondheim's work, and so I found that a lot of people, a lot of African-American performers don't know the material. So when the time comes to show up and audition, because of the expansion of wanting to cast different kinds of performers in Sondheim, I was finding that a lot of us were unprepared. There's a definite technique and craft to how you approach a Sondheim song, exactly in the same way, I think, as how you approach Shakespeare text. You have to know iambic pentameter, you have to know how to scan the text, and understand where the stresses are and the nonstresses are, and it helps you understand the material better, it helps you get into it better as an actor. So I felt like these two people were both masters of their times. And I also saw a friend of mine at a benefit like ten years ago pair "Something's Coming" and "Tonight" from *West Side Story* with dialogue from the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, and it was just electric. I remembered that, and so that's sort of how it came about. I just wanted to tell a story that was universal, and the themes in Shakespeare and the themes in Sondheim are.

GD: This is a project you've been developing on-and-off for a while – along the way you found supporters and creative collaborators?

BP: Yeah, I've been working on it for about six years, and it's just morphed and transformed into something that's so far beyond anything that I'd imagined at first. I pitched it back in 2001 to a friend of mine who I was just sorta having a conversation with – Jayson Raitt - who introduced me to Susan Dietz who is the producer. The two of them plus Paula Holt are now the commercial producers on the piece, and Susie introduced me to Taz [Westport Country Playhouse Artistic Director] who is a Shakespeare aficionado, who really helped me shape all of Shakespeare's stuff. But the

hugest part of the collaboration has been with my writing partners, James Sampliner who I've worked extensively with and also Michael McElroy. The three of us together have created the musical vocabulary for this piece, and without them I literally would be nothing. The piece has emerged in a very clear and specific way now. We're revisiting the interpretation of the material, and so now it is not just the original versions of the songs. They are funneled through the African-American musical idiom, so we're dealing with gospel, jazz, hip hop, rap, R & B, soul, funk versions of all of these Sondheim songs, which is the other element I think that makes it pop off of the page a little bit more. You've just never really heard these songs quite this way before.

GD: In trying to find songs that fit the "Seven Ages of Man" as you were going through, was that a process that had surprises for you?

BP: I knew a lot of the Sondheim canon. What's interesting - and actually he [Sondheim] said this after having seen the show last year - he has written in so many different styles, his musicals are so diverse in where they're set and musical idioms from *Pacific Overtures* to *Sweeney Todd* to *Company* to *Anyone Can Whistle* to *A Little Night Music*, it's all over the place. He even said it's very interesting because when you try to put a revue together, so often sometimes the music feels like it's all over the place because it IS all over the place. And with this, because there are different stages, and different – you know the Seven Ages of Man represent different stages - it's interesting to hear. You go to different musical places. So I think it has served us very well because there was a lot of material – so much to choose from that it made it fascinating. There was one moment when I was listening to *The Frogs* – Steve wrote a song called "Fear No More" for *The Frogs* – and I didn't even know until after I included Shakespeare "fear no more the heat of the sun" – which is the text that he uses – is from *Cymbeline*. So, the morsel for this idea had already been planted in the '70s when Sondheim wrote that.

GD: To wrap it up, what do you hope audiences will take away with them after seeing *Being Alive*?

BP: I hope that this piece can open up audiences and reach different types of audiences. All types, not even just African-American,

white, black, Asian, whatever. I want it to be for the people. I think that art is for the people, and I want it to, on a very visceral level, communicate the spirit of life and being alive as a human construct across the board.



Costume Renderings for *Being Alive*

Courtesy of Costume Designer Anita Yavich

Suggested Readings

SHAKESPEARE

- *Will in the World* by Stephen Greenblatt
- *Players: The Mysterious Identity of William Shakespeare* by Bertram Fields
- *In Search of Shakespeare* by Michael Wood (companion to the BBC television series)
- *The Shakespearean Moment and Its Place in the Poetry of the 17th Century* by Patrick Cruttwell
- Websites of note include: Open Source Shakespeare (the complete works), Designing Shakespeare (40 years of Shakespearean performances on England's stages) and The Royal Shakespeare Company (England's premier Shakespearean company)

SONDHEIM

- *Sondheim: A Life* by Meryl Secrest
- *Conversations with Sondheim* by Frank Rich (*The New York Times* 200-03-12)
- *Sondheim on Music* by Mark Eden Horowitz

Being Alive: Special Events

Sunday Symposium August 26, 2007

Immediately following the 3pm matinee. Featuring Billy Porter, Peter Filichia, Frank Vlastnik and Eric Grode, assistant editor of *The Sondheim Review*. Free and open to the public. *Please call our box office at 203.227.4177 for exact time.*

Prologue August 31, 2007 at 7pm (30 minutes)

This pre-show, half hour conversation with Artistic Director Tazewell Thompson offers a glimpse into his creative mind and provides details about the production that you can't find anywhere else.

Backstage Pass September 5, 2007

Immediately following the 2pm matinee. Get a first hand look behind the curtain! Playhouse production staff shares the tricks of the trade with you and discusses the set design, lights, props, sound, costumes and other special effects involved in our production of *Being Alive*. *Please call our box office at 203.227.4177 for exact time.*

Thursday TalkBack September 6, 2007

Immediately following the 8pm performance. Free and open to the public. Join the cast members of *Being Alive* to discuss their experience working on the production. *Artist attendance subject to availability. Please call our box office at 203.227.4177 for exact time.*

Suggested Topics of Discussion

- (1) Audiences have been reintroduced to Shakespearean plots through films such as *Ten Things I Hate About You* (a modernized version of *The Taming of the Shrew*) and *Looking for Richard* (the mock documentary of rehearsals of a production of Richard III starring Al Pacino) as well as stylized versions of *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* among others. Examine some of the timeless themes that make Shakespearean plots well suited for contemporary film adaptations.
- (2) Discuss whether or not you feel (as some purist scholars argue) that Shakespearean plots should not be modernized.
- (3) Do you feel Sondheim is a product of the society in which his work has been acclaimed (as commentators have claimed with Shakespeare)?
- (4) Examine the link between the artist and the culture he or she lives in. To what extent does a culture influence and shape an artist's work; to what extent does the artist transcend culture, even shape it? Discuss the influence of culture on popular theatrical stylings in the work of Sondheim, Shakespeare, and contemporary artists like Billy Porter.
- (5) Billy Porter used the Seven Ages of Man from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* as the foundation for the structure of *Being Alive*. Discuss the ways in which Sondheim's music and Shakespeare's text were arranged to support this premise.

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is now open!

Featuring plays from our 2007 and past seasons, including: *Souvenir*, *Mary's Wedding*, *Relatively Speaking*, *Sedition* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Plays now available for purchase at the box office.