

“Someday Just Began”: Directing Stephen Sondheim & George Furth’s *Merrily We Roll Along*

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Elizabeth Frances Sharpe-Levine

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Introduction

When I proposed *Merrily We Roll Along* in March 2011 as the Torn Ticket II (student-run musical theater) Fall 2011 major production, I did so with a small, muffled voice in the back of my head trying to cry out to the voting membership, *Don't do it!* Who, I secretly wondered, would be crazy enough to let me direct this show? As I began my preparatory work for the production over the summer, I continued to ask myself – was I crazy? How could I ever think I would be able to do this? Were people not paying attention when they decided it was a good idea to let me go ahead? I had never felt so out of my depth.

My anxiety did not stem from a lack of confidence in a grand sense, but from a combination of circumstances. *Merrily We Roll Along* is an intimidating musical that begs many questions of anyone attempting to mount a production, especially a student production. How would the actors handle the deeply complex Stephen Sondheim score? Would a group of young performers be able to embody the same characters over a span of twenty years? From a design perspective, how should a set designer go about creating nine distinct locations to satisfy a mostly non-abstract production concept? Should the costume designer attempt to fully costume a cast in attire from nine different years between 1954 and 1976? (The original Broadway production's answer to that last question was a decided no.)

Apart from the concrete challenges, I had personal obstacles to hurdle in my mind. In theory, I met all of the qualifications necessary to mount this production: I had completed the Tufts Drama Department's courses in directing; I had directed a smaller production of the musical *I Do! I Do!* and been happy with the result; perhaps most importantly, I had a longtime passion, both intellectual and emotional, for Stephen Sondheim's work and for *Merrily We Roll Along* in particular. I was poised on the brink of my grandest adventure, and I possessed all the

possible tools for surviving it and emerging triumphant. Nonetheless, there are some things for which you can never be truly prepared until you have plunged in head first, and directing *Merrily We Roll Along* makes the list. I was nervous about collaborating creatively with designers, staging a full-length musical in the round, and effectively leading a larger team and longer process than I had ever before tackled.

Perhaps it seems strange to begin the reflective retelling of this journey with such an extensive elaboration of self-doubt. On the other hand, perhaps it is a fitting response to a show that is about characters who spend their lives plagued by, but fiercely denying, deep self-doubt. There was something intensely personal for me about directing this show at this time in my life. The last moments of *Merrily We Roll Along* find the three main characters at age twenty, literally staring out at the world that is waiting for them. As I wrote in my proposal for the production in March 2011, “[T]his piece of theater is about us. This musical could not be more relevant to the future that every person in this room will be facing very soon. Who can honestly look at herself and say, ‘I know who I will be in twenty years’? I asked myself that question, and I don’t know. That scares me. . . . I want to create a production that both fulfills the great artistic potential of this show, and gives voice to the relevant, troubling, true things that *Merrily* has to say.” To stage this show was to stake a claim on my future self: to refuse to assume that I, like the characters, will have to compromise. *Merrily* – particularly with its original framing device, an aspect of the book that disappeared after the 1981 production – warns that it is naïve to be young and to believe that you are any different from the characters on stage, to dare to believe you will retain your ideals. But in saying so, *Merrily* also challenges its audience to dare in spite of doubt – to redouble their efforts to hold on to who they were and who they wanted to be. As potent a

message as this is for upcoming graduates in particular, I do not think that such a challenge ever ceases to be relevant.

This reflection is an opportunity for me to explore the process of directing *Merrily We Roll Along* and all of its logistical, emotional, creative, and collaborative challenges, triumphs, and discoveries. I will begin by discussing different incarnations of the show. Then, I will delve into the text analysis that drove much of my work, the staging and design challenges I faced, and a summary of the rehearsal process. Finally, I will reflect upon the aftermath of having directed this show and upon the things with which the experience has left me.

The Show: Background, Revision, and Structure

Merrily We Roll Along is a musical about three friends and young artists: Franklin Shepard, a composer; Charles Kringas, a playwright and Frank's creative partner; and Mary Flynn, a writer. Their friendship is sealed with a fierce idealism and a determination to do great and worthwhile things in the world. As the years go by, success and time affect each of the three differently, and they are wedged further and further apart until their friendship ruptures. The catch is that all of this is shown in reverse order: the musical begins in 1976 and moves backwards in time to its final scene in 1955, when everything began. It is a show rife with cynicism and harsh doses of reality; at the same time, it is poignantly beautiful and not entirely devoid of hope or moments of grace.

Written by George Furth (book) and Stephen Sondheim (music and lyrics), *Merrily We Roll Along* was first performed on Broadway in 1981, when it ran for only 16 performances but created longtime devotees in the musical theater world, leading to many professional productions and revisions over the years. The licensed version is one of these revisions, the 1994 production,

itself largely based on the heavily revised 1985 production, in which songs were cut and added and the book was heavily rewritten. Speaking in 1997, Sondheim explained why the musical in its original form was never published: “[O]ne of the reasons that George Furth and I have never – until last year – allowed the script for *Merrily We Roll Along* to be published was that we were not satisfied with it. Then, because of James Lapine’s production in 1985 and then our subsequent changes ... we looked at each other and said: Okay, that’s the best we can do now; this is good now; this is what we want it to be. And then we allowed it to be published.” (Horowitz 122)¹

The most significant departure from the original production in the licensed version is a change in the show’s structure. The 1981 production began with a class of young college students on graduation day singing their school song, “The Hills of Tomorrow.” The writer of the song, Franklin Shepard, has returned to his alma mater to offer words of wisdom to the hopeful graduates. As he speaks to them of the realities of the professional world and the compromises they will be forced to make, his words are drowned out by the students’ protests – they will *not* compromise, they *will* get everything they always dreamed about – and also by the start of the song “Merrily We Roll Along,” which will recur throughout the show (an aspect of the piece that survived revision). Frank’s speech and the song propel the story back in time, and the journey backwards through the life of Franklin Shepard, composer, begins.

In the revised version of *Merrily*, this framing device is gone. (Technically, “The Hills of Tomorrow” was cut even earlier, during the 1985 production at the La Jolla Playhouse.) Instead, the script calls for the orchestral prologue to be accompanied by projections of the main characters over the years, moving backwards in time to prepare the audience for the story’s

¹ Lapine would revise *Merrily* once again for the City Center Encores production in 2012, indicating that the show’s creative evolution has not ended.

reverse chronology: photographs, newspaper headlines, columns, and scraps of sheet music and scripts. Projections specific to each scene are intended to be re-projected prior to that scene, in order to further aid the audience in understanding the timeline.

The change from a verbal, explicit framing device to one instead visual and implied was, in my opinion, a positive one. The original device was heavy-handed and told the audience the show's message before it had shown them. Something is lost in the way of subtlety when the first scene of the show features the main character stating that he regrets his choices. The revised introduction instead emphasizes memory and nostalgia through its scrapbook-like aesthetic, which sets a tone of reflection without laying out any answers.

One notable thing that was lost in the revision is the song "The Hills of Tomorrow." This song was, in the original production, the first example of what I call the show's "emotional continuity," a concept I will explore further in my section on text analysis. Briefly, "emotional continuity" is my way of describing how Sondheim's repetition and variation of certain melodies and musical conceits link ideas, characters, and scenes in a subconscious, subtle, visceral way, just as Furth's detailed book creates a narrative continuity by playing with the effect-then-cause progression inherent to a story told end-to-beginning. "The Hills of Tomorrow" shares the beginning of its melody line with "Good Thing Going" (itself repeated and varied in other places in the score), a song Frank and Charley write together that also comments on their personal working relationship. While the rhythm of the line differs between the two songs, meaning that the average audience member would be unlikely to notice the shared notes, the melody subconsciously links Frank's early song and younger self with his later work. (Such a device would later be used by Stephen Schwartz in the score to *Wicked*, the musical adaptation of Gregory Maguire's retelling of *The Wizard of Oz*, in which the song that ties the two heroines

shares a melody line with *The Wizard of Oz*'s iconic "Over the Rainbow.") While the loss of this clever emotional stroke is regrettable, I see it as a necessary concession to a stronger show opening.

Although I view the revised script as an improvement, it offered immediate logistical difficulties for our performance space: while it is possible to find creative means of projecting images in the Balch Arena Theatre, theater-in-the-round does not make it ideal, and I knew from the beginning that I would not be attempting projections in my production. Instead, the question was: how could I convey what the audience needed to understand about the piece they were about to see? The answer to this question became bound up with my larger thematic vision for the show, which in turn connected to the purpose and tone of the transitional reprises of "Merrily We Roll Along" and the line between the abstract and the realistic moments in the script. I will elaborate on these questions and their interwoven answers in my section on staging challenges.

In addition to staging the opening in as clear a way as possible, I chose to explain the show's timeline in my director's note and made sure the year of each scene was included in the program. I think that the show's structure speaks for itself as an effective means of conveying the story's emotional impact, and that more important than the audience "getting it" on their own is their ability to take in the show without any confusion over the story's logic.

The Text: Character Analysis, Narrative Details, and Emotional Continuity

My focus as a drama student and what I think is one of my greatest strengths as a director is textual analysis. I spent a lot of time writing about the characters, relationships, and story of *Merrily We Roll Along* over the summer leading up to rehearsals. Once rehearsals began, I set aside time during the first two weeks for the cast to come together to talk about the show as a

piece of musical literature. We took apart the characters and themes and delved into the details of the script and score. I received feedback from my cast that our thorough analysis made them feel that they fully understood the play and the characters on an intellectual level. While I know that an intellectual understanding of the material is only the first step to crafting a full performance, I also know that student actors sometimes go through a rehearsal period without ever attaining a full understanding of the piece they are performing. I was also told by my actors that my passion for the material and my desire to delve into it inspired them with a similar passion, and my excitement over our analysis made the play more exciting to them.

When I began my summer work, I acknowledged to myself in writing that a concept could be approached from different directions by me and my designers, and that our different approaches – mine largely textual and psychological, rather than visual and physical – could cohere. For example, one of the ideas that the set designer and I began to work with over the summer was the general shift from warm, gold tones to cool, blue ones over the course of the show. For her, this meant a shift from lavishness and glamour to simplicity and even dinginess. For me, it was more indicative of a shift from the glimmering and somewhat oppressive present to an uncluttered past of clarity and freshness. Thinking about the work from these different perspectives from the start was a big help to me when the design and staging processes picked up momentum in the fall.

Many of the themes and general ideas with which I toyed in the summer evolved into the full concepts I will detail in my staging section. Apart from preliminarily crafting my vision for the show as a whole, I focused much of my summer analysis on delving into the six main characters and their complicated psyches; I continued this work when rehearsals started by having one-on-one character meetings with my actors. The six primary characters are the three

friends, Frank, Mary, and Charley; Joe Josephson, a theatrical producer; Gussie Carnegie, the Broadway star who is married to Joe but leaves him for Frank; and Beth Spencer, Frank's first wife.

Frank is a conundrum. He is not an easy character with whom to sympathize, yet he is the engine of the show. He is not likable, but the audience has to see his selling-out as inevitable, making Frank somewhat tragic rather than merely pathetic. Frank's tragic flaw is his self-preserving impulse to rewrite his own memory in order to justify his choices, thus compromising and modifying his ideals by degrees as he finds himself craving success and status. There are moments in the script when we see him at a crossroads and watch him pick the wrong path, such as the moment in act 1, scene 3 in which he chooses to spend the night with Gussie instead of with Mary and Charley. This is, for Frank, one of those moments when you know what the right thing is but talk yourself into the other. Once you have done that once, you are more and more likely to keep doing it. Frank's is a journey marked by such choices. He lacks the strength to back up his true convictions in the face of various seductions. Frank says in act 1, scene 1 that his single, repeated mistake has been saying yes when he meant no, which is a fairly accurate self-depiction, though this isolated moment of truth is too little and too late for him to recover his past self, making it all the more sad.

If Frank is *Merrily's* engine, then Charley is its heart. He is a dynamo of energy and a ferociously loyal friend, and he does not care what anyone else thinks of him. Unlike Frank, he possesses extraordinary strength of character. If Frank allows his ideals to slip away, and Mary slowly gives up on hers, Charley never grows out of his youthful idealism. He holds onto the clarity of vision that Frank loses, and he suffers for his integrity. When his optimism and belief

in his friend reach their shattering point in the song “Franklin Shepard, Inc.,” the result is simultaneously exhilarating and harrowing.

When I considered Mary, I asked myself what her place was among the three of them. Mary is the person who is able to negotiate between Frank and Charley. She is connected to both of them in her own right, but her presence is also the necessary third ingredient that balances the extreme intensity, and sometimes friction, between the creative partners. Through it all, right up until the day that Frank and Charley’s friendship falls apart, Mary is there holding them together. Minutes before Charley rails against Frank on live television, Mary urges him to “help save [Frank].” When Frank’s marriage dissolves, Mary is the first to declare her love and support for him, and Mary leads the rousing assertion of solidarity that is the act 1 finale, “Now You Know.” Mary is partially, but not critically, defined by her unrequited romantic love for Frank. Throughout the show, she is always yearning, but never sentimentally so. She does not mope. Her private moment of desolation at Frank’s wedding is her sole moment of letting down her guard, and then only in the shadows, literally. Mary is both self-deprecating and proud, sardonic and hopeful; she is passionately loyal and stubborn, and she has moments of raw vulnerability, but only moments. Mary is a fighter, more so than either Frank or Charley.

Joe and Beth both act primarily as foils for other characters in the script: Joe for Frank, Charley, and Gussie, and Beth for Frank. Joe’s most noticeable characteristic in the script is his jovial and slightly awkward attempts at humor, often at inappropriate and fraught moments. For example, Joe shocks Mary and Charley when he says, in reference to the affair his wife is having with Frank, “[H]ow many people know about those two? ... I decided not to know. ... I say let ‘em get it out of their systems. As long as, please God, she don’t leave me.” The actor who played Joe and I discussed this trait as a defense mechanism: Joe has to know more than

everyone else in the room, and he has to be able to joke about it; otherwise, he is an aging and increasingly replaceable nothing in a room full of up-and-comers. Joe draws his pride and his power from his ability to grant access – to his professional world, to his wife – and that power vanishes when he is no longer needed.

The first thing the audience learns about Beth is her pain. It is vital, then, that they also see her strength. The actor playing Beth offered the insight that Beth sees things too late, most significantly Frank's affair with Gussie, yet she is the most practical character in the show.

Though her accomplishments are understated in the script, it is she who supports Frank and their child when he is still finding his feet in the theatrical world. The script is uncharitable towards Beth's concern with money – she encourages Frank and Charley to continue to do commercial shows for Joe rather than pursue the work they truly value – yet as the self-described “family breadwinner” who is nonetheless an embarrassment to Frank amid the sophisticates of New York, her perspective is more than understandable. Beth's strength is manifested in subtle ways: in her firm refusal to lead her life based on her parents' opinions; in her equally firm declaration to Mary that she has to trust her husband; and in her broken but calmly dignified delivery of the song “Not a Day Goes By” during her and Frank's divorce proceedings.

Gussie, like Frank, is seemingly easy to dislike, and so, as with Frank, it was important to me that we locate in her a degree of conscience and doubt. For all that she seduces Frank, both romantically and professionally, Gussie is driven by the fact that she has fallen in love with him. The irony is that, in getting Frank, Gussie is partially responsible for his transformation into a man she does not want. Frank and Gussie share their own particular brand of tragedy, distinct from the pain of watching characters like Charley and Mary fight as hard as they can and lose anyway: Frank and Gussie demonstrate that there is something quietly tragic about watching a

person dig their own grave. Gussie touches something, and it turns to dust. On the other hand, she is extremely manipulative and often shallow, and I did not want to sentimentalize her. But Gussie – who, it is important to remember, started out as Shirley Molinsky, working as Joe’s secretary in order to pay for school – climbed her way into a life that she loved through hard work and ambition, and it is everything that she has. While she is selfish, she is also self-aware. She seizes attention, but she is magnetic.

In addition to offering rich and nuanced characters, *Merrily* lends itself to further analysis through its reverse structure and musical subtext. In examining the text and score with the cast, I divided our analysis into two branches that I dubbed “narrative and emotional continuity.” Narrative continuity was the fairly straightforward collection of plot- and character-related details embedded in the script. Uncovering these details, hidden in the effect-then-cause structure of the story, became almost a game. “Emotional continuity” was my way of categorizing the implications hidden within Sondheim’s musical patterns, repetitions, inversions, and recombinations. Sondheim himself has summarized the score’s unique structure: “[I]f the score is listened to in reverse order – although it wasn’t written that way – it develops traditionally” (Gordon 256).

In *Art Isn’t Easy: The Theater of Stephen Sondheim*, Joanne Gordon elaborates: “Just as the characters begin as mature, assertive adults and move slowly backwards into their innocent, idealistic youth, so the musical structure traces the evolution of tunes and melodic variations, introduced first in their finished form and reaching back to their tentative beginnings” (257). It would take a musical scholar to locate and analyze all the details layered into Sondheim’s score, and I do not pretend to have the vocabulary and theory necessary for full comprehension of its complexity. However, after a rehearsal spent thoroughly examining the script and score, the cast

entered the staging process with a deep and detailed grasp of the material they were about to tackle, and the collaborative process of discovering the many subtle examples of narrative and emotional continuity was an exhilarating one. In addition to the benefit of a thorough understanding of the material, our analysis session got the cast truly excited about the musical with which they were working. As an analysis-fueled director, it was rewarding and important for me to be able to ignite in my actors a similar passion.

Although George Furth's book has its share of problems, it also displays his skill for weaving together a coherent narrative in a non-linear fashion. One part of each actor's character work involved mapping out the character's timeline chronologically. For example, the book on which Mary is working in act 2, scene 4 is the same book she is trying to get published in act 2, scene 2; by act 2, scene 1, it has become a bestseller, and by act 1, scene 1, it is a faded memory and a painful reminder of all the work she has not done since. We see Gussie's reverse progression from Frank's wife to his mistress to Joe's newly-divorced fiancée to, finally, the secretary Shirley Molinsky, pre-name change, trotting silently after Joe; we also see her blossom backwards from a has-been Broadway star out of place in Hollywood to a diva at the height of her stage career. In this way, the reverse-chronology device works in favor of emotional impact: to see the characters at their brightest becomes an exercise in bitter sweetness once we know where they will end up.

Furth's attention to detail was very helpful in mapping out an arc for the smaller roles, allowing the actors in the ensemble to craft a full timeline for their characters. In act 1, scene 1, the bartender Ru tells Mary that he wrote the screenplay for Frank's latest movie; in act 1, scene 2, we see him, star-struck and shy, approaching Gussie to ask her to read it. Tyler is introduced by Frank in the first scene as the man who invented the answering machine, and Tyler mentions

the beginning of his and Frank's friendship in a "crummy little Greenwich Village saloon." In act 2, scene 3, we see Tyler working as a waiter in that saloon and observe his attempt to recruit Joe Josephson as an investor in his brand-new invention. Their interaction's joke – that Joe dismisses the invention as pointless and destined for failure – is less important than its illustration of the path from obscurity to affluence that many of the characters in Frank's act 1, scene 1 world have traveled. This idea informed a lot of the background work that the ensemble actors did for their characters. For example, when the actor playing the movie star Meg in act 1, scene 1 appears in act 1, scene 2 as a make-up artist, the actor and I decided that the make-up artist *was* Meg, on the brink of her big break. In the case of the character Evelyn, Furth utilizes the structure of the play to great comic effect: Evelyn is mentioned repeatedly throughout the play as Charley's wife, but she does not appear until the final scene, when she enters just long enough to shriek and run away, because her roommate – Mary – is with "guys."

There are similarly clever details sprinkled into every scene. Past events are referenced in one scene, then enacted on stage in a later – but chronologically earlier – scene, such as the reporter KT helping Frank during his divorce, Frank's vacation on a yacht, and the development of the film adaptation of Frank and Charley's first musical success. There are also recurring physical quirks that unify younger and older versions of the characters: Gussie's habit of kissing her index finger and then tapping it against someone's nose; Frank's ritual of closing his eyes and swallowing in order to preserve a moment in his memory; and most significantly, the linked pinkies that symbolize Frank, Mary, and Charley's friendship. When Gussie accidentally spills wine on Beth in act 2, scene 2, her similar and explicitly malicious act against Meg with a bottle of iodine in the first scene gives us cause to doubt whether the wine spill is, in fact, accidental.

Some of the references slipped into the script underscore the emotional weight of the story in subtle but powerful ways. In act 1, scene 1, Frank responds to Ru's request for advice with, "Don't just write what you know. (*Points to his head*) Write what you know. (*Points to his heart*)."

In the final scene, Charley lovingly tells Frank that the ability to do this is what makes Frank's music wonderful. In the first two scenes, Mary is shown mixing her cynicism with heavy doses of alcohol, lending an emotional wallop to her line in act 1, scene 3 that she "never drink[s]." When, at the end of the same scene, her anger at Frank causes her to take a swig from a champagne bottle, Frank is directly implicated in Mary's downward spiral. In act 1, scene 4, the mention Beth's father makes of her mother "turn[ing] over in her grave" is uttered in such a blink-and-you'll-miss-it manner that even the actor playing Beth in my production did not realize her mother had died until I pointed it out to her. So nuanced is the script that even lines that are not directly referenced in other scenes intentionally resonate with earlier moments; Furth's writing is constantly responding to itself. When Frank and Charley have their first hit, Frank's line, "I think Charley and I will handle success very well" rings with cruel irony. The most potent instances of such irony come in the final scene. The line Frank delivers to Mary upon their first meeting can only be described as heart-breaking, given her years of pining and the dissolution of their friendship that are to come: "I just met the girl I ought to marry. Did anybody ever tell you, you say all the right things?" The answer is no, no one has ever told Mary that, and the audience already knows – having observed ample instances of Mary's uttering precisely the wrong thing, with results ranging from awkwardly comical to sadly alienating – that no one ever will again. The last scene is rife with emotional impact drawn from earlier details, from the first time the three friends link pinkies to the moment Frank conceives of a show called "Take a Left" – the show he and Charley will never write.

Complementing the narrative continuity of *Merrily* is its emotional continuity, in which the reappearance of melodic or rhythmic strains creates subconscious commentary on or associations between the characters or scenes. Some of these instances are obvious. The recurrence of “Merrily We Roll Along” during each transition creates a musical through-line for the story and propels the action. The theme’s variations also mirror the tone of the story: the reprises tend to slow down and simplify in harmony as the show goes on, just as do the lives of the characters. “That Frank” and “The Blob,” the songs that thread through the party scenes of act 1, scene 1 and act 2, scene 2, are very similar, underscoring the intentionally parallel nature of the scenes. In comparing them, there are subtleties to be found as well. In “That Frank,” one character sings, “I said, ‘Frank, that picture is a watershed.’” In “The Blob,” another character sings, “I said, ‘Joe, this show will be a watershed.’” These lines embody the shift in power between the two acts: from Joe’s Broadway to Frank’s Hollywood. In our production, this idea was taken still further by double-casting the actor who played Joe as Terry, who in “That Frank” sings, “I said, ‘Frank, one day you’ll run my studio.’” Another subtle touch in “That Frank” is the moment in which Frank suddenly sings an up-tempo strain of the final song “Our Time,” applying it not to the idealistic life that song originally envisions, but to the superficial and materialistic lifestyle in which Frank has ended up. (Furth invokes “Our Time” to similar effect in act 2, scene 1, when Frank promises Charley that they will write only one more “commercial” show: “One more. And then it’s our time.”)

Sondheim’s score is a masterwork of subtle strokes, and some instances of emotional continuity are not obviously noticeable, but rather furnish subconscious associations, such as the aforementioned link between “The Hills of Tomorrow” and “Good Thing Going.” In “Opening Doors,” a song that charts the earliest years of Frank, Mary, and Charley’s friendship, the

melody to the song “Old Friends” underscores montages of the three hard at work. “Old Friends” itself contains a strain of an earlier song, with its bridge sharing a melody with “Like It Was,” Mary’s lament of the dissolution of their friendship.” The opening song “Merrily We Roll Along” and the ultimate song “Our Time” are linked through their shared use of the phrase “yesterday is done.” “Good Thing Going,” as one of the few diegetic songs in the show, is presented in various stages of its evolution, even with the exclusion of the melody’s “The Hills of Tomorrow” incarnation. The song is first heard in act 1, scene 2, on a recording performed by Frank Sinatra that is being played on the talk show on which Frank and Charley are about to be interviewed. Next, its melody is accompanied by different lyrics when performed by Gussie as a number from Frank and Charley’s first hit musical in act 2, scene 1. In act 2, scene 2, Frank and Charley perform the song, with the lyrics they intended, for the guests at Gussie’s party. (Of this version, Joanne Gordon insightfully writes that its suggestion of “the withering away of love ... functions as a microcosm of the musical” (260).) Finally, in “Opening Doors,” we see Frank and Charley writing the song for the first time, with Charley singing a still earlier version of its lyrics.²

Perhaps the most complexly layered example of Sondheim’s musical continuity in *Merrily We Roll Along* can be found in the intersection of other songs in the song “Growing Up.” This song is itself repeated and varied several times: its earliest chronological appearance takes place when Gussie sings it to Frank in the scene that plants the seed for their future relationship. Years later, she sings it to him again, immediately after the audience has observed Frank, alone

² Interestingly, this set of lyrics, titled “Who Wants to Live in New York?,” are strikingly similar to the lyrics of the song “What More Do I Need?,” from Sondheim’s earliest solo musical, *Saturday Night*, adding a subtle biographical note to the scene. Another such note occurs in Joe’s response to the song, which criticizes Frank’s work for being too unmelodic – a criticism Sondheim often faced in his career. As a further wink to musical theater audiences in the know, Sondheim has Joe unknowingly hum a snatch of the song “Some Enchanted Evening,” from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific*, as an example of what a Broadway melody should be. Oscar Hammerstein II was Sondheim’s creative and personal mentor.

at his piano, play his own variation of the song. Gussie's version is notable in that it shares its melody with Gussie's section of "The Blob," in which she describes affluent New York society to Frank. This shared melody between the up-tempo "The Blob" and the slow, intimate "Growing Up" draws a connection between the public and private faces Gussie wears; furthermore, her delivery of the song to Frank, as well as Frank's diegetic variation of the song later in his life, indicating that he remembers the interaction *in musical terms*, place Gussie's "Growing Up" on the ambiguous, blurred line between diegetic and non-diegetic. Frank's variation on "Growing Up" is characterized by several significant details. It is, obviously, a reworking of Gussie's song of the same name. The words he sings are based on the lyrics to "Old Friends." His opening chords belong to "Good Thing Going," and he hums that song's melody in between his sung lines. During the bridge, Frank's melody changes so that it imitates the underscoring of "The Blob," which has a similar rhythm to the act 1 finale "Now You Know." The use of "The Blob"'s underscoring indicates Frank's mental shift from his affectionate and slightly melancholic rumination on Mary and Charley to the distracting lure of Gussie and her world; emphasizing this shift is the fact that the bridge's lyrics detail some of Mary's and Charley's more irritating quirks.

Due to the artistry, nuance, and attention to detail that characterize both Furth's book and Sondheim's score, *Merrily We Roll Along* offers infinite material to be mined for subtext and meaning. The work that the cast and I did to mine as thoroughly and comprehensively as possible not only was intellectually exciting, but also formed a strong basis of understanding as we entered the staging process.

Staging: Challenges, Solutions, and Directorial Concept

As I mentioned in my background on the show, a couple of the specific staging and interpretation uncertainties posed by the script proved to have solutions that were interrelated and that tied in to my overarching vision for the show. These uncertainties mainly concerned the parts of the show that are not strictly realistic in time or setting. While the show's structure and its status as a memory play automatically disqualify it from a solely realistic and linear staging, I had strong feelings from the start about respecting the literal, temporal reality within each self-contained scene. With the exception of "Opening Doors," in which several years of the characters' lives are covered in a single scene-song, every scene has a literal time and physical setting. Although the scenes exist within the larger framework of Frank's memory, and although the memory aspect of the play remained vital to me as one of the show's larger themes throughout the design and staging process, I also felt strongly that there should be no distorting effects within the scenes themselves. The script supports such a choice, as Frank is not present in every part of every scene, meaning that his subjectivity cannot become a lens through which the audience views the action.

Based on these stipulations, two questions are raised which have the same answer. First, how does one deal with the abstract sections of the script, particularly the prologue and the between-scenes transitions but also the final scene and "Opening Doors"? Second, how does one indicate Frank's subjectivity without distorting the literal reality of the scenes? The answer to the second question lies in the staging solutions to the first question: the abstract sections become the means of illustrating the framing device of Frank's memory, and "Frank's memory" becomes the short answer to the complicated questions of how to effectively stage: one, a prologue that adequately introduces the show without the aid of projections, and two, the musical transitions.

These interludes must have an emotional and narrative purpose beyond their logistical role as filler for the lengthy transitions required by complex scenic and costume changes.

To summarize: my staging challenges, which became interwoven as I tackled them, were the prologue, the “Merrily We Roll Along” transitions, the final scene, and “Opening Doors”; in addition, these became the places in which Frank’s subjectivity could come across.

In approaching the prologue, I knew I wanted to replace the projections with Frank. From the start, I wanted the audience to understand that this was Frank’s story. I began with the section of the prologue in which Frank is alone on stage. I chose to have Brad Balandis, the actor playing Frank, enter when the music turned to “Good Thing Going,” the aforementioned song that most potently signifies Frank’s friendships and work. Next, the question was what he would do once he got on stage. Before I could answer this question, I had to establish the circumstances of this miniature scene. Although the *scene* lay in the abstract realm, I still wanted *Frank* to be grounded in a specific time and place, even if Brad was the only person who knew it. Since the show moves backwards, I felt there were two choices: either the prologue was a part of scene 1 and took place immediately before that scene’s action, or it was a scene unto itself, taking place in the future after scene 1. I decided on the latter option. It is likely that some audience members saw it the other way, and I think that is okay. One thing I learned time and again during this process is that the audience did not have to have all of the information that the actors and I had – the process could shape the product that the audience saw without every discovery or circumstance being made explicit to them.

With the prologue set after scene 1, the specific circumstances surrounding the prologue had to be set. Scene 1 ends with Gussie leaving Frank. I decided that the prologue would take place several weeks after the first scene. Frank, then, is at a point where the last thing he had that

was worth something – his relationship with his wife – is gone. Beyond that, Brad and I decided that the scene 1 party, in which Frank’s lifelong friend Mary publicly accuses him of throwing his life and talent away, is the breaking point in Frank and Mary’s relationship, and the destruction of the Frank-Mary-Charley friendship bond that began with Frank and Charley’s estrangement is thus complete. (This choice was corroborated for me months later when I saw the still more heavily revised City Center Encores production of *Merrily We Roll Along*, in which the first scene was restructured so that it ended with not Gussie, but Mary walking out, with the brand new parting shot of, “What a fucking waste.”) In short, when Frank enters the stage during the prologue, he is a man who has lost everything. For me, this meant two things: Frank has a drink in his hand. And Frank is drawn to his piano.

In order to set this moment, Brad and I had a one-on-one rehearsal in which we first discussed the circumstances of the scene and Frank’s emotional state during it. Then we got on our feet. I had Brad walk around the empty rehearsal space while I took him on what I call an “image trip” – as he walked, I slowly talked him through the circumstances we had just discussed. While walking, he reacted to these circumstances by playing with the pace, tension, and posture of his body. We continued this process with the prologue music playing. Next, I had him verbalize what Frank was feeling. From there, he transitioned to verbally addressing the other characters in the play, in the way that an emotionally tortured person is wracked by the things he cannot say to the people he has hurt and by whom he has been hurt. This led to the next part of the prologue: the entrance of the ensemble.

Musically, the prologue shifts straight into the opening “Merrily We Roll Along,” which begins with a single ensemble voice and grows until the full cast is singing. The next step in staging the show’s opening was to link Frank’s solo moments with the entrance of the rest of the

cast. The link was Frank's memory. We had Frank's moments alone on stage end with him at his piano, the one meaningful piece of his life that has not fallen away. Seated on his piano bench, lost in his cloud of memories, Frank's attention is suddenly captured by a voice, and when he looks up, he sees the space around him slowly fill with figures.

What are these figures? Are they ghosts? Hallucinations? Figments of his imagination? How does Frank understand them? How do the actors portraying them understand them? Do they have an agenda? Two things were definitely decided: these figures are linked to Frank's memory process, and they are the same as the figures who appear to sing the musical transitions.

The process of figuring out how to define these figures was nearly as long as the rehearsal process; it was a conversation we revisited as a full group time and again as the work took shape. The end result ultimately tied together the prologue, the musical transitions, and the final moments of the show, and it was this: the figures are conjured from Frank's memory, but they are partially independent of it. They do not have an agenda, per se – their objective is not an action, but a state of being. That state of being is the truth: the truth of the past, the truth that memory rewrites. Human beings rewrite the past without consciously meaning to; changing circumstances cause us to re-remember. Sometimes, this rewriting is the psyche's way of protecting itself. Frank's tragic flaw is that he is constantly rewriting his past actions, his past ideals, and his past desires in order to justify his current actions, ideals, and desires, thus digging himself deeper and deeper into a life of compromise. The materialistic and affluent man Frank has become must protect himself from the idealistic man Frank was. There are examples in the script of Frank explicitly rewriting his past self: in scene 1, he says to Mary of his current lifestyle, "Who'd have guessed we'd be standing here? God, we would have been so impressed." This is a lie. The Frank that he was would *not* have been impressed by the shallow and privileged

world of the Frank that he is. The Frank that he is *has* to reimagine his past desires, because if he doesn't, then he has allowed the most important people in his life to slip away one by one – for nothing.

These circumstances, then, mean that the figures are simultaneously of Frank and against Frank. They are called forth from and by his memory, but upon being called forth, they threaten him with the simple fact of their existence, that existence being the truth of the way things were. That truth is idealism, youth, simplicity, hope, passion – qualities that are not inherently threatening or painful, but cast in the light of Frank's current life, they are the most painful and threatening thing he could encounter.

Over the course of the prologue, as the bodies and voices slowly build and fill the stage, Frank walks among them, encountering each in turn and feeling the impact of remembering them. The arc of the music parallels the arc of his emotional experience: as the voices build, so does the panic Frank feels at hearing them, and as the song grows to a climax, so does Frank's feeling that he is being cornered by his past. With the swell of the music swells the past's power to assert itself in contradiction to Frank's rewritten memory. Our choreographer Yessenia Rivas and I worked to craft an opening for the ensemble that physically mirrored what was going on musically and with Frank. At the first musical shift, Yessenia had the figures that started with slow entrances and stationary positions all simultaneously begin to move, jarring Frank, who becomes lost in the movement of the figures surrounding him. Pieces of unified choreography begin to crop up, and a vaguely circular pattern of movement (counterclockwise, always) appears. As this happens, the actors also begin to set in place the furniture of the first scene, so that a logistical necessity became a part of the aesthetic: as the past gains strength, the first scene of the past begins to physically solidify before the audience's and Frank's eyes. At the second

musical shift, at which point the tempo has picked up considerably and the volume and intensity of the music have reached their peak, Frank suddenly finds himself facing off with the entire ensemble. At the moment of musical climax, Frank pushes his way through the crowd of figures, crossing from one end of the space to the other and landing at the home base of his piano. Just as he gets there, there is a percussive beat that signals the final and loudest chorus of the song, and on this beat, the full ensemble jumps and turns, in unison, to face him, before going into a fully-choreographed combination for the final chorus. This first display of fully-choreographed and fully-unified movement is an indication of the past's having reached full and undeniable strength: Frank runs off, and the story can begin.

The transitions between scenes allow the set and costume changes to take place and are marked by reprises of the song "Merrily We Roll Along" with variations. Setting these transitions logistically was one of the biggest challenges I faced. In spite of the overwhelming practical demands, as well as the technical challenges presented by the tight harmonies written into the music, I did not want the transitions to become dead moments. It is easy for the reprises to feel like a theme song, blatantly filling the time needed to move between scenes, but the last thing I intended to do was have the available actors stand there and sing while furniture moved around them. Instead, the transitional moments became tied to the same idea as the prologue: the transitional space turned into Frank's memory space. Frank had a costume change for every scene, so he couldn't be physically present on stage, but we were able to create, with a lot of help from the lighting design, a common atmosphere for the transitions and the prologue. The transitions functioned as a reminder to the audience that something broader was going on around the scenes they were watching. We made certain that before or while the furniture started to move, there were either a few moments of unified movement or a single still figure grounding

the moment while the rest of the actors moved furniture around him. After each new scene was set, there were always at least a few moments of stillness as the actors finished singing the “Merrily” variation. We began by having Yessenia choreograph some simple movement that echoed the prologue in its key gestures and its circular pattern; we then stripped away as much as we had to in order to accommodate practical needs. However, the circular visual and the odd arm reach recalled the prologue and tied the transitions together.

The final moments of the show were among the most difficult pieces for me to stage. I experimented with several possibilities. I tried out and discarded the idea of having the ensemble’s entrance echo their entrance in the prologue; recalling the start of the story so explicitly did not fit with the simple hope that I wanted to characterize most of the scene. I experimented with the ensemble looking out at the audience, but that was not right, either – while I did not want to shrink from the darker implications of the show’s final moments, I also did not want the actors to directly confront the audience. The abstract nature and universal warnings of the show could have justified such a choice, but I wanted the story being told on the stage to stay behind the fourth wall. The ending had to be about Frank. When we finally got it right, the result served to connect the ending to the prologue and the transitions. It brought my larger vision for the show to completion; it was the last piece of the puzzle. It looked like this: the three friends link their pinkies, as called for by the script. They look at each other, smiling, in love with each other and themselves and the moment and the future. Then, Charley and Mary freeze. Frank looks slowly up at the sky and all its possibilities. And the members of the ensemble, who have been scattered across the stage looking up and out as they sing, slowly turns as one to face center and fix their stares on Frank as the lights dim. For me, the story that moment told was this: these figures, these figments, these pieces of the past are first seen in the

play's prologue. In spite of their inherent hope and truth, they are perceived as a threat by Frank, as something too bright for what his life has become. By the end of the play, the audience has seen the full story. They have experienced what Frank has experienced at the play's start. They have adopted Frank's position, even as Frank, moving backwards through time, has come into the position of the audience, unaware of the difficulty in store. These figures of hope and youth have taken on the same ominous cast for the audience that they hold for Frank during the prologue. When they turn to look at Frank, their gaze is a challenge – the challenge of the past pushing back against the future. Frank is not yet aware of it, but the audience is.

One other scene with which I had to experiment and which I restaged several times was “Opening Doors.” The only temporally abstract scene, “Opening Doors” is one long song that comprises the entire scene and fast-forwards the characters through two years. The script calls for tableaux during the chorus that depict the moments in the characters' lives that they rattle off in rapid succession during the verses. The idea of setting multiple tableaux during brief musical interludes seemed clunky and frantic to me, however. Instead, Yessenia worked out a recurring series of movement for the chorus, and I planted the characters in two locations on the stage: Mary in a space representing her apartment, Frank and Charley in a space representing theirs. When we ran the scene, however, I was frustrated by how static it felt. The entire point of “Opening Doors” is that it propels the characters through their most industrious, creatively productive, and possibility-ridden years. Furthermore, Yessenia's choreography had the three characters meeting in the center of the stage for each chorus, but that did not sit well with me, either. My staging was holding the scene back physically; Yessenia's choice to have the characters acknowledge each other was disrupting the momentum of a scene that did not have room for specific, literal interactions between the characters. The phone calls they share in the

scene, the references to their lives that they tell to one another, do not exist in a particular time and place, but rather represent the general development of their relationships and lives during those two breathless years.

Yessenia and I both reevaluated our choices. I realized that it did not make sense to keep the characters in the same place for every verse. If my understanding of “Opening Doors” was based on its lack of concrete time and place, what reason could there be to keep the characters in any one place? I abandoned the idea of having tables or typewriters in their imaginary apartments. Instead, each character had only a rolling chair. Yessenia reimagined the movement component, so that during each chorus, the characters rolled their chairs around the perimeter of the stage. This kept the scene pressing forward and eliminated physical stasis from the staging, and the image of the characters pushing their chairs became a metaphor for their movement through time. When their chairs stopped at a new point on the stage, it was as though the characters were landing at a new point in their lives, so that the scene became, physically, a sort of microcosm of the entire show, with brief moments of literal setting contained within a physically abstract frame.

Apart from conquering the abstract sections and defining my guiding concepts, my staging work was mostly concerned with the logistics of staging a show in the round and utilizing the space in varied ways for the nine scenes. When we ran full acts in rehearsal, I was constantly in orbit, circling the space and climbing blocks and shelves in order to gain visual perspective. Although I do not think of myself as a visual person, constantly viewing the scenes from different angles helped me find assurance. One of the aspects of the final product of which I am most proud is the success with which I staged in the round. One of the challenges was to avoid getting *too* caught up in showing every single moment to every single side of the Arena. I

had to remind myself that certain moments benefit from stillness and that sometimes restraint needs to be the rule. This idea guided me particularly during some of the slower, emotionally intense songs, like “Not a Day Goes By.”

The staging process also required close attention to detail. A few fleeting moments in the script yielded as much directorial journaling as an entire scene. For example, scene 1 ends with Frank screaming, “WHYYYYY??!!” (written and punctuated precisely like that) after an exiting Gussie, who has just left him. It seemed impossible for this moment to play as anything other than melodramatic, but I made three choices in order to prevent it from being *excessively* melodramatic. First, I made sure the lines leading up to it rose consistently in volume, so that Frank’s final scream felt less sudden. Second, I had the actor look at and direct the line straight at Gussie, thereby avoiding the unfortunate possibility of having Frank scream at nothing in particular, or, worse, at the heavens. Finally, the blackout at the end of the scene fell immediately after Frank screamed, preventing the moment from lingering. Such minute details were as important to the staging process as the overarching concepts were.

The Design Process

Before starting work on the production, I saw the design process as one of the biggest challenges I would have to face. I think in words far better than images, especially theoretical images. What began as one of my biggest fears, however, became a source of inspiration that was integrated with – not peripheral to – my directorial and staging processes. Learning how to articulate what I wanted from the designers – the scenic designer, in particular – brought me to a deeper understanding of what I wanted *Merrily* to say and of the ways in which visual elements could support and embody the themes of the show.

My conversations with the scenic designer, Miriam Ross-Hirsch, began in June and continued through the summer. The most complete and organic brainstorming process happened with her. We started from nothing, and she threw ideas at me until I started to throw a few back. We began with the question of a platform. I originally envisioned the final scene of the show, in which Frank, Mary, and Charley begin their friendship on a rooftop, elevated above stage level. Placed in the round, however, this concept posed several problems. A permanent raised level in the middle of the stage would block sightlines and inhibit movement for the rest of the show. This realization led me to stage the final scene on stage level, a choice that opened up the staging possibilities and led to experimentation that I found invigorating and inspirational. It was practical design concerns that guided me to this experimentation. Later on in the process, I sat down with Miriam and Abbie Hill, the lighting designer, to sketch out the staging scheme of every scene, and I walked away with a dozen new ideas. Discovering how the design process could not only complement but directly impact what went on in the rehearsal room was one of the most unexpected and exciting things I learned in the months of working on *Merrily*.

Although we abandoned the idea of a mid-stage platform, Miriam and I agreed that some variation in levels was necessary. Miriam designed a low platform that would extend across one edge of the stage, forming a permanent “stage-within-a-stage” that could serve versatile functions for different scenes. This platform was the only permanent part of the scenic design; every other structure or piece of furniture on stage moved at least once. In scene 1, the platform became part of Frank’s home. In scene 2, it was the soundstage on which Frank and Charley’s interview took place; in this scene, it also allowed the song “Franklin Shepard, Inc.,” which Charley must necessarily deliver without much movement, to be seen by the entire Arena audience. In scene 4, the platform turned into the raised entrance to the courthouse. In the second

act, it served as a literal stage-within-a-stage for, first, Gussie's Broadway number, and second, the Downtown Club cabaret. In "Opening Doors," the only scene in which temporal and physical realism are suspended, Joe Josephson's figurative position "above" Frank and Charley was literalized by placing him on the platform.

A second, smaller, lower, unobtrusive platform was constructed from four wooden pieces that resembled old-fashioned packing crates. They remained covered and mostly unnoticed throughout the show, but in the final scene the platform was broken down into its four components, which were rearranged to create the outline of the rooftop. This final breaking down lent itself to the overall visual concept I will describe below and allowed for the minimalist representation of the rooftop that I envisioned.

During our summer conversations, Miriam and I toyed with several elements that did not end up in the final design. With one exception, these elements were omitted because they had no place in our evolving concept. One of the sub-challenges of working with designers was learning not only how to articulate what I wanted, but also how to say what I did not want. At first, I feared that my impulse to say no pointed to my limitedness as a practitioner of the visually artistic. As the process continued, however, I realized that figuring out what I did not want was helping me to discover what I did want. Some of Miriam's initial ideas involved junk and clutter on the stage, littering the space in a crude physical extrapolation of Frank's mental and emotional disarray. While the notion of a cluttered space survived, Miriam's desire to craft "junk piles" and a chandelier-like, mobile-like junk creation that would hang suspended over the stage did not. Given Miriam's background as an art student, I did not know at first how to tell her I was uncomfortable with this idea. I lacked the vocabulary to express my concerns in design terms. In this case, my solidifying directorial concept informed my conversations with Miriam: as

rehearsals started, I cemented my decision that the scenes be self-contained segments of realism, with the abstract entering only in the transitions. This meant that any scenic elements that were inherently symbolic had no place in the design. The *arrangement* of the scenic elements could and would serve a metaphorical function, but there could be nothing on the stage that did not at some point serve a literal function within a scene. Learning first, how to put this need into words, and second, how to approach a professional conversation about what I, as a director, needed from Miriam, was both challenging and rewarding.

The final scenic design embraced both Miriam's vision of clutter and her desire to include rigging, while at the same time fitting into my need for a realistic assortment of set pieces. The rigged elements comprised three signs that remained stationary and were highlighted at the proper moments through lighting. They allowed Miriam to utilize her talent as a painter and enhanced the scenes to which they belonged. Clarifying precisely what a cluttered space would look like became one more element of the design process that developed symbiotically with my directorial vision; it also provided a partial solution to the logistical challenge of creating nine distinct physical scenes. Constructing the set primarily out of furniture lent itself to the necessary fluidity of the scene changes, and the arrangement of this furniture fulfilled both practical accessibility needs and Miriam's and my creative visions. The overall look of the stage progressed from cluttered and claustrophobic to open and empty. Practically, this meant that nearly all the furniture needed to construct each scene was at hand from the start and could be cleared away when it was no longer needed. From a design perspective, it led Miriam to her ultimate description of the playing space as an "attic of memory." For me, the gradual clearing of the space mirrored the "clearing" of Frank's memories, the slow uncovering of a simpler, unblocked past – a kind of emotional and mental excavation. This idea would come to inform the

costume and lighting design, as well: the bold colors and patterns of the 1970s costumes gave way to lighter and solid colors in the later scenes; the oppressively bright, gold lighting of the first party scene contrasted with the cool, blue dawn of the final scene.

There was one scenic element whose omission from the final design was a difficult disappointment: the trap door. After I abandoned the idea of staging the rooftop scene on a raised level, I settled on a vision of the rooftop being stage level, with the characters entering through a trap door that would indicate their ascension. This image became one of my most prized and most fixed ideas. More than halfway through the rehearsal process, I was told that I could not have a trap door. This incident was unquestionably one of the most difficult for me, and it led to two realizations that were at first frustrating but ultimately valuable. First, that sometimes the blame for a mistake cannot be easily assigned. At first, it was frustrating to me that the fault did not lie in one person's oversight. In the face of disappointment and sadness, the ability to assign blame, even privately, to an individual can appear to be the best means of finding release from the disappointment. I had to come to terms with the fact that a miscommunication between me, Miriam, the technical director Maximus Thaler, and the Drama Department's assistant technical director, Eric Sauter, had led to the current situation. In retrospect, it is not the loss of the trap door onto which I hold, but the determination with which Miriam set about finding a solution with which we would both be happy and the generous time devoted by the Department ATD to putting that solution into practice. The solution turned out to be the construction of a slant-roofed "hut" that rolled out of a vomitorium and jutted over the edge of the stage for the final scene, modeled after the huts often found at the top of stairwells leading to apartment building roofs. My second realization was that no idea, no envisioned moment, is sacred or beyond reimagining. Being forced to reimagine what had become, for me, the most important moment in the show

taught me that compromising one moment does not mean compromising my entire vision, and that settling *on* a second choice is not the same thing as settling *for*.

The last scenic element was the on-stage piano. Many questions cropped up in association with the piano, with three that were most pressing: would the actor playing Frank actually play the piano? How much and by what means would the piano move around the stage? Finally, where would the piano come from? The answers to all of these questions changed over the course of the production process. I initially envisioned several moments of Frank playing the piano, all taking place when Frank was alone with his piano. In the end, I had to scale down these moments for several reasons, most notably the difficulty in hearing the on-stage piano if the orchestra was also playing. In the prologue, I had the actor portraying Frank simulate playing the piano without actually playing. Ultimately, Frank only played the on-stage piano once, but it was at a vital moment: when Frank, torn between his friends and his mistress, voices his confusion in the song “Growing Up.” The song begins with the opening chords of “Good Thing Going.” Frank played these chords as he sang the first lines of the song; the orchestra seamlessly took over. The impact of seeing the conflicted composer in his most natural element, even for a few moments, was powerful.

The piano’s movement had to be rethought several times. Early on, I imagined that the piano could serve a similarly versatile function to the platform, acting as other types of furniture in scenes that did not require it to be a piano. However, as the idea of realistic scenes grew more important to me, this possibility became impractical. Next, Miriam and I planned to move the piano during every scene change, with its location as fluid as those of the rest of the scenic elements. This, too, proved impractical when it became obvious that moving even a small upright piano on wheels required more time and manpower than could possibly be spared during

the logistically demanding transitions. It was not until tech that we decided the piano would have a single location for each act and would move only during intermission. Though this decision rose out of practical considerations, it proved to be creatively sound as well: it simplified some of the staging and served, along with the platform, as a grounding visual element in a constantly shifting physical space.

The final challenge posed by the piano was the problem of obtaining one. Like the piano's onstage location, this, too, changed unexpectedly during tech. We had initially sought the Music Department's permission to use one of the classroom pianos for our week of tech and performances. However, once the piano was in the Arena, the technical director expressed the concern that, although the piano was on wheels, its construction was such that by moving it around the stage on those wheels, we ran the risk of breaking its legs. This concern was one of the reasons I reduced the piano's movement from scene to scene; however, the change in staging was not enough to guarantee the piano's safety. In tech, there is often a fine line between panic and exhilaration when unexpected problems arise. In this case, exhilaration won out: Justin Gleiberman, the show's producer, went above and beyond the call of duty when he devoted half a day to driving several hours in a rented truck to pick up a free piano from a Craigslist vendor. It was this piano that was used in performance.

Of all of the production's design elements, the scenic design underwent the most drastic and elaborate evolution, and the early and ongoing conversations I had with Miriam guided me through my collaboration with the lighting, costume, props, and sound designers. On the whole, my experience working with designers was marked by respect on all sides and a lot of learning. If design was one of my areas of least familiarity prior to directing, I walked away from *Merrily*

with a greater understanding and enjoyment of the design processes and with valuable working relationships having been established.

The Rehearsal Process

When I first began to think about the rehearsal period, my anxiety was that I would not know how to fill ten weeks. Once rehearsals began, however, that anxiety evaporated. As the work ahead became less theoretical and more concrete, and as we faced the challenge of balancing thirteen or fourteen individual schedules, it quickly became clear that I would have to utilize those ten weeks shrewdly and efficiently, while still ensuring that the process felt comfortable and meaningful for everyone involved.

We spent the first two weeks on script analysis, ensemble-building, character work, improvisation, and diving into the music. The score of *Merrily* is extremely complex, filled with instances of multiple voices in counterpoint, tight and dissonant harmonies, and melodic repetitions with subtle but important rhythmic variations. We covered every song in those first two weeks, which gave us an invaluable foundation when it came time to refine and memorize the music in each scene. The music director, Meredith Packer, was a true partner in the rehearsal room. We had worked together previously, and, like me, she had never tackled a show of this magnitude before. As I learned how to guide actors and stage a full-length work, she was learning how to apply her excellent musicianship to vocal coaching. Given the variety of anxieties I was facing as I began work on the production, and particularly given the complexity of *Merrily*'s score, I am grateful, in retrospect, for a music-learning process that was surprisingly free of fretfulness.

We spent the second two weeks on act 1, and by mid-October, the actors were running the first act off-book. Weeks six and seven were devoted to act 2 and to fixing act 1 based on our run-throughs. We had our first full stumble-through in early November, and the two weeks leading up to Thanksgiving were spent deepening character work, adjusting staging and acting moments, drilling music and choreography, and covering the details that had fallen through the cracks.

From the start, it was important to me that the cast have the opportunity to establish close personal connections with one another. For the first rehearsal after our readthrough, I prepared a series of activities and questions designed to encourage conversation and connection that moved beyond the superficial. We did some introductory games like Cross the Circle, in which one person reveals a fact about herself, and the other group members cross to a different space if they have that fact in common. I like Cross the Circle because it is a game that begins as simple getting-to-know-you (“Cross the circle if you have a sister.”) but has the potential to shift into more personal territory (“Cross the circle if you have felt like you messed something up since rehearsals started.”). We did some silly, physical games like Duck Duck Goose and tag in order to get everyone loosened up. We played Rants, a game of release in which, for sixty seconds, every person yells simultaneously at anyone or anything that is making them angry. Then I began an activity in which I had everyone pace around the space. When I called for a stop, each person found a partner. I posed a question, and both partners answered it. Again, the questions moved from straightforward to more personal. Then something unexpected happened: I had a couple of rounds of conversation in which I asked that each person come up with a question for their partner. I noticed that, with these conversations, the energy in the room shifted. Pairs took longer to finish speaking and begin moving again. Instead of moving on to my next activity, I continued

to have them ask each other questions. This went on for over a half hour, until the conversations were lasting up to five minutes. Having a situation like this on the first night of rehearsal – a situation that developed organically and was grounded in a place of real openness and reaching out – felt transcendent to me. When we all walked away that night, it was with the shared knowledge that something important had taken place, and this set a tone that would resonate throughout the weeks to come.

While staging scenes and doing character work, I tried various activities and approaches. *Merrily* lends itself easily to improvisation work: since it spans so many years, there are plenty of experiences and conversations that we know occur at some point but which we never see on stage. In one rehearsal, I had the actors playing Frank, Mary, and Charley enact all of the Sundays referenced in the repeated line in “Opening Doors,” “we’ll all get together on Sunday.” Since the show is so preoccupied with the question of what could have been, I also had the actors improvise certain scenes that never were, such as a conversation between Frank and Charley that could have taken place had Frank chosen his friends over Gussie in act 1, scene 3.

We also used improvisation to flesh out the smaller roles. I took to collectively referring to the characters Tyler, Dory, KT, Scotty, Jerome, and Ru as the “industry pros.” We noticed in rehearsal that these same characters pop up repeatedly, first in Frank’s Hollywood apartment, then in Gussie and Joe’s New York penthouse. From this observation rose the idea that this collection of peripheral characters, in spite of their seeming superficiality, must, first, be good at their jobs in the entertainment industry, and second, have developed relationships with one another over their many years in the same circles. We played a variation on the classic improvisation game “park bench,” in which two characters meet on a park bench for a brief interaction. I dubbed our variation “bar stool,” and it involved different pairs of the industry pros

meeting for an after work drink. The interactions and character traits that were established were not only hilarious, but also helped each actor to develop a full character.

I knew before starting rehearsals that actor coaching was one of my greatest insecurities; today, I still see it as one of my weaker areas. To compensate for that weakness, I experimented with different rehearsal techniques in order to give the actors what they needed to connect to their characters. When Hope Schaitkin, the actor playing Mary, had trouble connecting Mary's acerbic, jaded personality in act 1, scene 1 with her younger version, I had the cast play the act 1 scenes in reverse, so that they ran chronologically. Playing Mary's evolution forward instead of in reverse helped Hope find the character's continuity. I found that Brad had a tendency to put on a "stage voice" when he was acting. After giving him the same note on a dozen different lines, I finally identified the general problem to him; once he understood, I told him he was not allowed to use this inflection at all in act 2, but that he could use it in moderation in act 1. In this way, we harnessed his vocal quirk and used it to mark the evolution of his character.

I had several character rehearsals with the three actors playing Frank, Mary, and Charley. It was important that these three, in particular, establish intimacy and trust. We had a couple of rehearsals that echoed the first, full-cast rehearsal, but which were geared more towards exploring the themes of the show and of their characters' friendship, drawing on personal stories and emotions. When we hit a wall staging the final scene, I took them outside to the roof of the library, where they sang, "It's our time / Breathe it in / Worlds to change / And worlds to win," while actually looking out at the world from a rooftop. After this experience, the scene clicked. Emotional potency was also required by the reprise of "Not a Day Goes By" during Frank and Beth's wedding, in which Frank and Beth sing to one another, and Mary, unseen and apart, sings to Frank. We ran this song over and over again, experimenting with stillness and movement, with

characters looking and not looking at one another, with eyes open and eyes closed. By the end of the rehearsal, I and more than one actor were crying, and the emotional stakes of this moment in the show were fully understood.

What the rehearsal process meant to me beyond its logistical and creative elements is, even now, difficult for me to put into the proper words. In order to do so, I need to provide some context. I sometimes say that my high school theater department “raised me.” I worked in some capacity on every production my school staged, including acting as an assistant director on the middle school’s productions. I also worked at the summer arts program offered through the department, teaching and mentoring children. I consider the teachers that I had there my life mentors, and I continue to value them as indispensable guides and dear friends. In the group of peers with whom I worked for six summers in a row, I found a level of collaborative understanding, trust, and love that I can only hope I have again in my lifetime. When I say that this collection of people and experiences raised me, I mean that it has been from those people and through those experiences that I have learned the most about myself, what I value, and how I want to walk through the world and through a theatrical process.

I learned that in collaborative or creative or personal work, it is important to hold the space. Holding the space means being aware of the energy in the room and supporting it. I learned the value of listening and the value of speaking truthfully. I learned what it means to choose to be vulnerable – to make the conscious decision to share a piece of yourself with the people sitting in the circle with you; I learned the value of receiving what others choose to share. I learned the value of circles: of beginning and ending in them, of hearing every person’s voice. I learned that you have to ask for what you need. In our summer program, we are very intentional about all of these things and about creating a space for our children that is safe and supportive

and that recognizes them for exactly who they are. We will usually debrief an activity by hearing every person's voice; often, we will offer a compliment to each child, or ask them to offer compliments to one another. We forge collective trust and support over the course of the summer, and sometimes, at certain moments, it is the right time for a group to move a little bit deeper together, to share a little bit more, to open their hearts a little bit further. The children do not have a name for these moments, but they are fully aware of them when they happen. The ability to facilitate this kind of space is a skill I have developed through experience. It is more than a summer job; it defines who I am and how I see myself. I carry it into my personal relationships and into the way I strive to interact with the world: with honesty, acceptance, and an open heart.

Directing *Merrily We Roll Along* brought my life up until this point full circle, in a sense. My years at Tufts have transformed me and shaped me into the person that I am today; the people I have encountered and the experiences I have had here have changed me in ways I could never have predicted. These changes are as vital to my self-identity as is the legacy of my summers and high school years. Until *Merrily*, however, these aspects of my life were mostly separate, intersecting only through certain personal relationships. When I began my directing process, I did not and could not anticipate the gift that directing this show would give to me: that the values by which I have come to define myself would also come to define my rehearsal room.

I have already described the indefinable magic that took place in our first rehearsal. Over the course of the process, I was careful to find time amid the flurry and momentum of staging, character work, music, and choreography to return even briefly to the feeling of that rehearsal. I began every evening with five minutes of “gripes and grins” – a simple but meaningful way for us to check in with one another before we began working together, in which each person in the

circle shared one “gripe” and one “grin” about his or her day. At the end of most rehearsals, I left a couple of minutes to hear every voice in the room, in order to check in with how people were feeling about the work they had just done. On a few occasions, I set aside a greater length of time at the end of rehearsal – usually, on the last day of a particularly intense week or after the cast had collectively reached a milestone. This time might be an opportunity for everyone to speak at greater length about where they were mentally or emotionally; a few times, I held compliment circles, in which we devoted a couple of minutes to each person in the room, with the rest of us tossing out observations and recognition of the work the person was doing. After our first compliment circle, several cast members approached me to say that the experience had been both unexpected and wonderful. For me, activities like this allowed for emotional renewal and reinforced an environment of collective support. They might seem simple, and for some people are perhaps routine, but for me, they carried a significance that unified my rehearsal process, my history, and my heart.

What I Carry With Me

Two months after my production went up, I went to see the City Center Encores production of *Merrily We Roll Along*, adapted and directed by James Lapine, in New York City. It was fascinating to see a professional production such a short time after my own and to be able to compare the choices we made and the interpretations on which we settled. At some points, I felt that a moment or a line worked better on their stage. There were also points, however, at which I knew that I had made a different choice and that I preferred mine. For example, although I know that Encore productions intentionally focus on the score and stick to simple staging, the

absence of direction or purpose during the transitions stood out to me, and I felt the momentum of the story flag when they occurred.

In the Encore production, Frank delivered his speech in act 1, scene 2 about Charley's betrayal from Gussie's arms; in our production, I had Gussie hesitate on the periphery of the group at this point, because I saw her as clearly not a part of the moment of crisis happening between Frank, Mary, and Charley. Although Lapine's very streamlined book strengthened the production, and although the third scene is the most likely to drag, I missed the cut moment in which Gussie decks out an imaginary set of furniture in Frank's new apartment, using the rest of the group as props; I think that Gussie's moments of obnoxious yet goofy humor are instrumental in humanizing her. After the reprise of "Not a Day Goes By" that Mary sings at Frank and Beth's wedding, Charley laid a comforting hand on Mary's shoulder, whereas I had always envisioned this moment as a private one for Mary, and I felt that Charley's pity weakened the sad strength she displayed when she sang. Finally, the final image of this production was the three friends not only linking their pinkies, but raising them slowly into the air, which to me felt a bit too heavy-handedly symbolic and sentimental.

There were many very small directorial choices or script edits in the production that spoke volumes and gave me new insights. The slight Texan twang of the Spencer parents told us more about Beth's background than the script's reference to her Houston home could on its own. By having Charley already exiting Frank's apartment during their exchange of "I love you"s and "I miss you"s at the end of act 1, scene 3, this production struck a perfect balance between casual and poignant that I always felt eluded me during that moment. Gussie's line in which she tells Beth to keep her dress changed from a self-deprecating throwaway ("I'm too fat to wear it,

anyway.”) to an acidic dig that ratcheted the scene’s tension to a new level (“It’s too big for me, anyway.”).

The most significant revision to the script was a total reimagining of the final scene: in this production, in a change I later learned was made a week before the opening, Frank and Charley were not lifelong friends, but instead met each other for the first time on that rooftop just as they met Mary for the first time. I found and continue to find myself torn by this change. Logically and structurally, it makes sense. If the beginning is the ending and the ending is the beginning, why not let the ending be the beginning of everything? For those who were unfamiliar with the original ending, I think it very likely that the new one had the strong emotional impact the creative team hoped for in changing it. I had become so close to the original telling, however, that I was unable to reconcile myself to the change in any way beyond the theoretical.

The degree to which I noticed and responded to the choices made in the production really drove home for me the extent to which I had come to know *Merrily We Roll Along*, inside-out and (literally) backwards. Moreover, seeing a production that made different choices from mine reminded me how many clear choices I had actually made; when I was embroiled in my own process, I began to take some of my ideas so much for granted that I forgot they were my ideas. Lapine’s *Merrily* engaged my intellect and, in so doing, led me to a kind of renewed and enhanced self-affirmation two months after my production.

The lasting impression I took from my theatergoing experience was a surprising one. At first I found it disappointing, but after giving it some thought, I came to appreciate it. Throughout the City Center production, I kept waiting to get drawn into the story. I waited for the emotions to hit. I wondered when the tears would come. I wept a little bit during the overture, from the sheer force of familiarity, memory, and simply beautiful music. Instead of becoming

more rapt as the show progressed, however, I became less. I could not turn off my brain. I noticed every changed line and appraised it. I anticipated each upcoming song and knew exactly how many more minutes there were to each scene. When the curtain came down and I was dry-eyed, I wondered if there was something wrong with me, the production, or both. I felt let down. I felt disappointed that a production of a show to which I was so personally connected did not move me. It was only later that I made peace with this unanticipated, initially unwelcome side effect of my directing experience, the seeming inability to be moved. My experience at City Center's *Merrily* was not emotional or cathartic; it was cerebral. I do not think *Merrily We Roll Along* ceases to affect me now that I have directed it. I think it affects me differently. I carry the show in a new, but equally meaningful, way.

While the City Center production was a catalyst for ongoing reflection, I spent a lot of time immediately after my production thinking back on the process. I reflected upon my strengths, weaknesses, and nature as a director. Directing *Merrily* reinforced and increased my confidence in what I felt were my strengths prior to the fall, particularly my ability to analyze a work closely, apply that analysis to other aspects of the process, and bring others into the analysis with me. While I had to work to depart from the cerebral during rehearsals, my penchant for the verbal proved useful in guiding actors to make different choices: I didn't always know how to get them there through organic experimentation, but I was adept at throwing out different adjectives or free associations, at trying out new words until we found the ones that clicked for them. I am also deeply proud that I was able to foster the kind of rehearsal environment that I have learned to value over the years.

Directing this show also emphasized for me some of my shortcomings, especially actor coaching of the physical, emotional, non-analytical variety, which remained my greatest area of

uncertainty in rehearsals and which I still view as one of my weaker points. However, acknowledging this weakness pushed me to experiment with rehearsal approaches I had never tried in my smaller directing endeavors, which expanded me as a director and as a student of theater.

Finally, directing *Merrily* dispelled certain fears of inadequacy that I had going into the process. I learned that I am capable of engaging in enlightened and collaborative design conversations, of experimenting with staging, and of synthesizing multiple conceptual points of access into a coherent and unified vision. Most importantly, I learned that I was not crazy to imagine that I could do this. I have a tendency to apologize for and qualify my work when I am out of my comfort zone. I made a conscious effort from day one of this process not to do that, to instead say to myself: this is your work – so just do it. By the end of the process, I no longer had to tell myself: I grew into the work, owned it, and fell in love with it.

I want to close my reflection on a note of gratitude. The process of directing *Merrily We Roll Along* was unquestionably the vastest, the most exciting, and the most difficult undertaking I have ever faced. I was truly fortunate to have the team that I had working alongside me, from the exceptional designers and rehearsal staff to the patient and superb stage manager, MayaBea Schechner, to the passionate, committed, and open-hearted cast. I had the support, wisdom, and guidance of my advisor, Professor Barbara Wallace Grossman, from the start of rehearsals through the writing of my thesis paper. My professors Downing Cless, Natalya Baldyga, and Sheriden Thomas generously allowed me to solicit their additional perspectives, advice, and feedback. It is thanks to this incomparable network of colleagues, friends, and mentors that I was able to approach this work with confidence, challenge myself as a director, and experience tremendous growth as a student, a leader, and a person.

When I think about *Merrily We Roll Along* today, I think of another musical, *Violet* (Jeanine Tesori and Brian Crawley), and of this lyric from the song “On My Way”: “And as I’m going along / I carry with me / Promises that can’t go wrong / As I travel on my way.” I do not know where my travels will take me when I graduate from Tufts University in one month. But I do know that I will carry *Merrily We Roll Along* and everything that it taught me for the rest of my life. It is ironic, perhaps, to link the notion of “promises that can’t go wrong” with the subject matter of *Merrily*. But I stand by my assertion that *Merrily*’s story is a challenge and a dare to hold onto this time, this place, this moment. My passion for this show and for the theater, a passion that stirs me in deeper and wilder ways than I can put into words, is a promise that cannot go wrong. I believe this. And as I stride forward to face the world, it will be with a determined heart and the fierce thought that my someday is beginning.

Appendix

Cast of *Merrily We Roll Along*:

Bradley Balandis – Franklin Shepard
Dan Pickar – Charles Kringas, Bunker
Hope Schaitkin – Mary Flynn
Jana Hieber – Beth Spencer, Meg
Jenna Wells – Gussie Carnegie
Cailin Mackenzie – Joe Josephson, Terry
Joshua Glenn-Kayden – Tyler, News Anchor, Ensemble
Erica Rigby – KT, Minister, First Girl, Evelyn, Ensemble
Joe Thibodeau – Ru, Mr. Spencer, Ensemble
Julia Lyons – Dory, Mrs. Spencer, News Anchor, Photographer, Ensemble
Wally Napier – Jerome, Pianist, Ensemble
Martha Meguerian – Scotty, Frank Jr., Ensemble

Production Staff of *Merrily We Roll Along*:

Director: Elizabeth Sharpe-Levine
Music Director: Meredith Packer
Stage Manager: MayaBea Schechner
Choreographer: Yessenia Rivas
Producer: Justin Gleiberman
Scenic Designer: Miriam Ross-Hirsch
Costume Designer: Hanorah Vanni
Lighting Designer: Abbie Hill
Sound Designer: Maha Mian
Props Designer: Rebekah Stiles
Technical Director: Maximus Thaler
Hair and Make-up Designer: Corinne Segal
Scenic Charge: Malina Filkins
Costume Technician: Sarah Valentina Diaz
Assistant Stage Manager: Jonathan Wilde
Assistant Producer: Alex Kaufman
Assistant Lighting Designer: Andrew Dempsey
Assistant Sound Designer: Kayla Hogan
Assistant Technical Director: Jessica Crane
Assistant Scenic Charge: Emma Levitt
Assistant Costume Designer: Lisa Fukushima
Assistant Hair and Make-up Designer: Maia Plantevin

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