

Interview with Stephen Schwartz

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Photo by Joan Lauren

Stephen Schwartz has contributed music and/or lyrics to *Godspell*, *Pippin*, *The Magic Show*, *The Baker's Wife*, *Working* (which he also adapted and directed), *Personals*, *Rags*, *Children of Eden*, and the current Broadway hit, *Wicked*. Most recently, he has contributed songs to *Mit Eventyr*, a musical about Hans Christian Andersen currently playing in Denmark. He collaborated with Leonard Bernstein on the English texts for Bernstein's *Mass* and wrote the title song for the play and movie *Butterflies Are Free*. For children, he has written a one-act musical, *Captain Louie*. In film, he collaborated with Alan Menken on the scores for the Disney animated features *Pocahontas* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and wrote the songs for the DreamWorks animated feature *The Prince of Egypt*. He provided music and lyrics for the original television musical, *Geppetto*, and has released two CDs of new songs entitled *Reluctant Pilgrim* and *Uncharted Territory*. Under the auspices of the ASCAP Foundation, he runs musical theatre workshops in New York and Los Angeles, and is also a member of the Council of the Dramatists' Guild. Mr. Schwartz is the recipient of three Academy Awards, four Grammy Awards, four Drama Desk Awards, and a tiny handful of tennis trophies.

Judith Sebesta: In a discussion with Joseph Swain, you stress that you “never saw *Godspell* as a ‘Christian’ show, or indeed as a show about religion.” Instead you emphasize the “formation of a community.” Yet you have returned to religious themes and stories in several works, including *Mass*, with Leonard Bernstein, *Rags*, and *Children of Eden*. A number of histories of the musical, including Swain’s, include your work in sections on religion and the musical. So what has attracted you to these stories?

Stephen Schwartz: Well, I think that all of them deal with big issues that concern people and have concerned them for a long time. They deal with solid issues of personal responsibility and ethics and philosophy. These are things that interest me, and I think that’s what’s attracted me to them. Each of these particular works has a different sort of core question or different core group of issues that it’s dealing with. In that sense, *Godspell*, *Mass*, *Children of Eden* and *Prince of Egypt*, etc. are quite distinctive works. What obviously unifies them is that they are all drawn essentially from Bible stories or in the case of *Mass* from the end of the actual Latin mass itself.

JS: Okay. Do you have a personal philosophy or approach to religious belief or spiritual ideas yourself?

SS: Well, I think everybody does. I think we had a very interesting experience when John Caird and I were in an early stage of working on *Children of Eden*; there was a group of people that had been assembled for a sort of workshop development phase of it and John, the very first day, said to each person—to get to know where we were all coming from—he said, “You know I’d just be interested if we went around the circle and each person talked about his or her own upbringing. What sort of religious upbringing you had, to what extent you subscribe to that, just so we all know where we are, not that it particularly has anything to do with the show itself.” What was fascinating about that was that after about five or six people had spoken it became clear that this was something everyone thought about a good deal. They had given a great deal of thought to this privately but no one ever spoke about it. It’s sort of a taboo subject for contemporary society, but it is something that pretty much everyone has given thought to. It’s odd how it’s really not spoken of except, of course, in cases of people who are members of a church or sect or whatever.

JS: Or if you’re an ex-Catholic like I am, and then everyone talks about Catholic guilt.

SS: Well, exactly, but it was very interesting the extent and the depth to which people had actually thought about this. So that’s what I’m saying: I just think that this is something that all individuals have thought about and have formed some sort of opinion about and so why wouldn’t I?

JS: Related to this idea of themes of the shows you’ve done, I think you can say that from *Godspell* to *Pippin* to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to *Wicked*, and any other shows that you mentioned, your musicals often focus on the “outsider” —or I think you could also say the individual’s exploration of identity or meaning. Does this focus come

from any personal place?

SS: Well, I'm sure they do.

JS: [laughs] Any place you'd like to share?

SS: Artists and writers tend to deal with that topic fairly often because so many of us grew up feeling ourselves somewhat different or somewhat apart from the people around us. I didn't have any particularly overt experiences which some people have had. I had a pretty normal and happy childhood and had a bunch of friends and so on and so forth but I think people who have a sort of artistic—whatever—temperament or point of view of the world will tend to feel themselves somewhat alienated and therefore the whole idea of the outsider and the person who doesn't quite fit in or doesn't belong is something that's attractive as a theme to many writers, I think.

JS: Let me ask a question, then, specifically about *Godspell*. It's still widely performed; I was looking at your website and it lists ninety-one productions in the past four-months (Sept.-Dec. 2005) across the country at universities, high schools, and churches. I read a 2000 article in the *National Catholic Reporter* about your updated version of the show, and it suggests that "simplicity" is the key to its endurance. I was wondering: how do you explain its continuing popularity?

SS: I think again it deals with themes and ideas which are of concern and interest to people and to audiences. I think it deals with them in an entertaining and unusual way. I also think it's the experience the audience has attending a performance of *Godspell* when it's done correctly. By "correctly" I mean the whole idea of the formation of community that happens within—over the course of the evening and how the audience is included within that. That can be a fairly exhilarating theatrical experience or theatre-going experience and I think that's why audiences continue to be entertained and attracted to *Godspell*.

JS: Let's see, how about a question about *Wicked* specifically, to move up more to the present? In an article on *Wicked*, *Chicago Tribune* critic Chris Jones claims that a Fordham University student wrote a twenty-five page thesis on Judeo-Christian themes in the show. And also I noticed in Ben Brantley's review that he called it a "sermon of a musical." You could take that several ways but what I was wondering was did you and your collaborator, Winnie Holzman, foresee the connections between *Wicked* and religion that have been made?

SS: Well, I think we clearly were dealing with the . . . with ethical issues and moral issues and obviously religion comes into play when one is dealing with that. I think that is part of the content of the show. I don't know that I would agree with calling it a sermon because I think it's somewhat even-handed or fairly even-handed in the approach it takes. I think the whole point of a sermon is really not to be even-handed but to take a very strong point of view, but writers have points of view and those are going to show up in their work. I know Mr. Brantley didn't mean that in a complementary fashion when he wrote that but

frankly I think that most things that people write are sermons of one sort or another if they have any moral content whatsoever.

JS: Well, related again to *Wicked*: it's attaining quite a cult following among teen audiences, I noticed. And indeed, throughout your career you seem to have valued young people as audience members (or readers). This is obvious in your work on animated films, and you even recently wrote a musical, *Captain Louie*, specifically for young audiences (and I noticed you wrote a book, *The Perfect Peach*, as well). Why do you feel that it is important to be inclusive of children/teens in your work?

SS: I don't know that it's a question of feeling . . . well, obviously I must feel it's important since I do it frequently. But *Wicked*, for instance, was certainly not geared toward trying to attract any specific segment of an audience, be it teenagers or any other. I think that the characters and relationships in *Wicked* have proven this and the fact that it's about an outsider struggling with her "outsider-ness," if you will, I think these are themes and characters that speak to teenagers and what they are going through, and I think *that* accounts for the popularity of *Wicked*. When I worked on the animated features, which obviously attract a family audience, my collaborators and I didn't really think about gearing them towards a younger audience, we just wrote what we thought was the best piece we could write.

JS: What about in the case of *Captain Louie*?

SS: Now *Captain Louie* is very specifically intended to be performed by and for children. That's a children's theatre piece that began as a commission from a theatre called the First All-Children's Theater, and so obviously it was geared to young audiences and was in fact based on a children's book. And in the case of *The Perfect Peach* that was again a children's book. In those cases the target audience is clear, but I always try not to write down to young audiences, which may account to some extent for the popularity of the work with younger audiences.

JS: Oh, definitely. Is this a part of wanting to build future audiences for the theatre?

SS: Well, I'd love to be altruistic and make that statement but I don't really think about that. I'm just doing work that interests me and try to do it as well as I can and the audiences that come to it make their own choices. I don't have a grand plan about trying to advance theatre and culture with younger people. I'd love to pretend that I did.

JS: Well, speaking of children, I first heard your song "Fathers and Sons" in a college production of *Working* in which I performed back in 1987. I have to say it still brings tears to my eyes when I listen to it and think about my own relationship, even as a daughter, with my father. Your relationship with your own son, Scott [Schwartz, a director] seems close by all accounts.

SS: Extremely close . . . and also with my daughter as well. We're a very close family.

JS: Well, except for incidental music you wrote for Scott's stage adaptation of *My Antonia*, you have avoided working with him. So I was wondering why you made an exception for that one project, and might you again in the future?

SS: The answer to the last question is yes. We . . . Scott and I, when he was first starting out in his career, discussed this and he made quite a conscious decision to be sure that he established his reputation on his own. So he did avoid directing very visible productions of work of mine, and we did avoid working together so that he could become established. Now he is so . . . it's sort of like when acting families work together like the Redgraves. At this point Scott's individual career is quite well-established and therefore I don't think anybody would think that he is getting work simply because his father had connections.

JS: You left Broadway, you've worked in Hollywood and other venues, and now have returned to Broadway again with *Wicked*. Kurt Gänzl claims—I don't know where he got this; I don't know if this was based on an interview with you or what—but he claims that after *Working* you ventured once more into what he calls the "large-scale commercial theatre" with—the word he used was "distaste"—to write lyrics for the short-lived *Rags*. In an interview several years ago for ASCAP you described the hostility of the theatre community toward you which "remains to this day," saying you were "driven from the theatre." Why, then, did you return?

SS: I fell in love with the idea of this project. I thought it was a great idea and Broadway seemed its natural home, and in addition, to do a show like *Wicked* in America which is obviously where I work mostly, there wasn't really any choice but to do it as a Broadway show.

JS: And why is that?

SS: The size and expense. And so that was its natural home and so that's why I wound up doing it. Working . . . I do want to make a distinction between working in the theatre and working in the commercial theatre which I think are two quite different things. I continue to enjoy and have done a lot of work in the theatre and I expect to continue to do so, but for instance, the thing that I did last year, I did over in Denmark. I was working in Copenhagen in a state-supported situation.

JS: Right, that was *My Fairy Tale* [*Mit Eventyr*].

SS: That's right. That's a very different experience. The commercial theatre is a pretty brutal place to work.

JS: *Wicked* was . . . was it initially thought of as a possible film project before stage?

SS: Yes, Universal was developing it as a film when I came across the book and became intrigued with the possibility of doing a musical adaptation of it. Universal had the

rights and basically I talked them out of doing it as a film and doing it as a stage musical instead.

JS: I just have one final question then. On what future projects are you working?

SS: Well, I'm actually working again with Alan Menken on a new live action musical called *Enchanted*. The first few minutes of the movie will be animated, but the rest of it is live-action. That's what primarily the first half of this year is going to be about.

JS: Wonderful!

SS: I hope that you feel like I answered your questions.

JS: Oh, absolutely, thank you so much.

SS: You're so welcome; it was a pleasure to speak with you.

JS: Same here!

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