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Articles

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Climb High

Climb High: Sondheim at the gateway to his career

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Abstract

Sondheim has long identified his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, as one of the most influential figures in his life, both personally and creatively. In one interview, he called Hammerstein ‘a surrogate father’ and disclosed that ‘[h]e taught me how to structure a song, what a character was, what a scene was; he taught me how to tell a story, how not to tell a story, how to make stage directions practical’. The vehicle for this training was a four-part project: Hammerstein challenged the young Sondheim to write four musicals with specific criteria. The first three of these were abandoned before completion but Sondheim wrote a full script, music and lyrics for *Climb High*, working on the project from 1951 to 1953 with the obvious hope of having Hammerstein produce it on the stage (a frustrated ambition). Yet very little has been written about the work and Sondheim himself has been at pains to downplay its importance in his overall output. In this article,

I exploit archival documents from Sondheim's papers at Madison, Wisconsin to shed new light on the process of writing the piece, as well as its many anticipations of Sondheim's mature work. In this way, I will place *Climb High* in the context of Sondheim's creative development: a flawed but fascinating document of a writer at the gateway to his professional career.

Keywords

Sondheim

Climb High

Oscar Hammerstein II

All That Glitters

Mary Poppins

Unpublished musicals

Introduction: The Hammerstein–Sondheim project

Sondheim has long identified his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, as one of the most influential figures in his life, both personally and creatively. In one interview, he called Hammerstein 'a surrogate father' and disclosed that, '[h]e taught me how to structure a song, what a character was, what a scene was; he taught me how to tell a story, how not to tell a story, how to make stage directions practical' (Lipton 1997). As is well known, Hammerstein recognized the young Sondheim's potential and gave him an exercise to complete in order to hone his skills. Hammerstein proposed that Sondheim should write four 'apprentice works: an adaptation of a good play, an adaptation of a flawed play, an adaptation of something not written for the stage and, finally, an original' (Sondheim 2011: 419).^[1]

His first choice was to adapt *Beggar on Horseback*, a play by George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly, which the young composer–lyricist found ‘imaginative, hilarious and virtually flawless’ (Sondheim 2011: 424); it became *All That Glitters* (1949), for which he provided the book plus sixteen numbers. Correspondence with Kaufman reveals he was given permission to have the work performed at Williams College (his alma mater) from 18 to 22 March 1949 (Sondheim was one of the two pianists), but it went no further than that.^[2] Next, he chose to adapt Maxwell Anderson’s award-winning play *High Tor* (1936), which Sondheim liked but thought he could ‘improve’ (Sondheim 2011: 422). Anderson himself was working with Kurt Weill on an adaptation of the play and therefore Sondheim could not take it further (Sondheim 2011: 424).^[3] He then turned to *Mary Poppins*, which he worked on around 1950. He ‘had loved the *Mary Poppins* books since [he] was a child and thought it would be a useful challenge to try to make a coherent whole out of a group of short stories’. In fact, it proved to be too much of a challenge and he abandoned the piece ‘about a third of the way through’ (Sondheim 2011: 422).

Finally, Sondheim started to work on the ‘original’, *Climb High*, at some point between 1950 and 1952. The three scripts in his papers are dated 1952, and a letter from Hammerstein (also in Sondheim’s papers) that discusses the musical is dated 6 August 1953, which indicates that it was a focus for several years.^[4] *Climb High* was entirely Sondheim’s own work: a book and score from his own imagination.^[5] In itself, this makes it a fascinating insight into his creativity, and even if he has subsequently preferred to work on adaptations and collaborate with book writers and directors on matters of structure and thematic content, it is riveting to observe how sophisticated and developed

his theatrical vision was in his very early 1920s, regardless of the work's undoubted flaws. As Stephen Banfield has asked, '[m]ight Broadway's recent history have been different had Sondheim chosen to persevere with a role for himself as overall auteur rather than go along with the collaborative model that he has helped to further?' (Banfield 1993: 25).

Given how much more scholarship has been devoted to the musicals of Sondheim compared to those of any other writer in the history of the genre, it is curious that *Climb High* remains so obscure. Whereas *Mary Poppins*, *High Tor* and *All That Glitters* were abandoned or forgotten, *Climb High* was seriously pursued by Sondheim and had a more personal identity because it was an original piece rather than an adaptation. Yet little has been written about it. Banfield's seminal study of Sondheim's work contains a little under three pages on the piece (Banfield 1993: 23–25), while Steve Swayne devotes just a portion of a chapter of *How Sondheim Found His Sound* to the musical, noting however that it 'deserves a study all its own' due to its 'near-completeness' (Swayne 2007: 143). More recently, Mark Eden Horowitz has published an article on Sondheim's papers related to the first part of his career (including this musical), housed at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research (Horowitz 2015). Horowitz's work reveals the rich potential of the collection, but in general *Climb High* has been relegated to a footnote in musical theatre history.

The main reason for this has been Sondheim himself. He mentions it quite regularly in general interviews about his career and has always firmly characterized it as being situated outside his main body of work. For example, he often relates how the book for the first act of *Climb High* was 99 pages long, which was more than the whole of

Hammerstein's script for *South Pacific* (1949): according to Sondheim, 'Oscar sent my script back, circled the ninety-nine, and just wrote, Wow!' (Lipton 1997). In fact, as Swayne has noted, Hammerstein underlined the number 99 and wrote 'BOY!' (Swayne 2007: 274n.2) – arguably a more patronizing, critical reaction to the book's excessive length than 'Wow!'.⁶ But Sondheim also fails to mention that Hammerstein did more than simply comment on the length of the first act. An annotated copy of the script among Sondheim's papers at Wisconsin reveals that Hammerstein engaged extensively with the work, making dozens of remarks. In many of them, Hammerstein is critical to the point of seeming dismissive.

Perhaps that is why Sondheim too is consistently dismissive of the piece, firmly situating it outside his own canon in his two-volume edition of his complete lyrics by omitting all but one of the songs? He explains:

I don't consider that the phrase 'Collected Lyrics' on the covers of these books obliges me to display all my juvenilia – in particular, school and college songs, and the ones I wrote under the tutelage of Oscar Hammerstein [...] Juvenilia can be fascinating to fans and researchers, but pointless to those less interested in the ex-juvenile who puts it out in public. I have had both those reactions to the catalogs of artists I admire, and I didn't want to take that risk here: I made it clear to the publisher when I agreed to this venture that I had no intention of including anything before *Saturday Night*, which I think of as my first professional work.

(Sondheim 2011: 419)

Branding *Climb High* as juvenilia has perhaps discouraged scholars from reflecting on its importance in Sondheim's development, since why would anyone question the master's self-assessment? But on closer inspection, it is tempting to feel that Hammerstein's incisive comments on the script (which are much more extensive than Sondheim usually

discloses) undermined Sondheim's opinion of the work and led him to undervalue its innovative, original and sometimes breath-taking qualities.⁷

It is also curious that he did not include the lyrics to all three of the songs from the show that have been recorded – 'I'm in Love with a Boy', 'When I Get Famous' and 'Where Do I Belong?'⁸ – rather than only the first of these, in *Look, I Made a Hat*.

Indeed, the lyrics to the last two songs were published in the booklet accompanying the CD release, *Sondheim Sings: Volume II*, which makes their omission from Sondheim's lyric books a flagrantly constructed gesture: they are already 'on display', to use Sondheim's terminology. In addition, it is striking that – regardless of his more recent views on his catalogue – Sondheim left *Saturday Night* on the shelf for around 40 years before it was finally performed (initially thanks to the efforts of Stephen Banfield). It was therefore a long time before it was formally reclaimed as the beginning of his professional work, following the cancellation of its projected original production in the 1950s; for decades, *West Side Story* was consistently regarded as his first musical because it was the first to be professionally produced. As such, *Saturday Night* has only retrospectively become Sondheim's 'first professional work': the earliest of his musicals that he is happy to see in production.

Could *Climb High* too enter the Sondheim canon after the fact? In this article, I reconsider *Climb High* through a variety of archival sources, which mainly comprise piano–vocal scores for the songs, piano scores for various pieces of underscoring, some lyric drafts, a few script fragments, and three complete copies of the script, including the one with Hammerstein's annotations. Exploring aspects of time, genre, style, narrative and self-reflexivity in the work, I propose a re-evaluation of the piece and in particular its

importance to Sondheim's development, arguing that from a certain perspective it marks the beginning of his career rather than the end of his apprenticeship.

Time, form and narrative

Climb High is divided into two acts and eight scenes: not many for a musical of such length, and, as noted above, it is clear from Hammerstein's comments on the script that he considered the piece to be too long. For example, on page 13 he suggests that Sondheim could reduce the opening scene from thirteen to nine pages, and elsewhere he indicates possible cuts in square brackets (e.g. pp. 3–4). In most cases, these comments are obviously motivated by the practical consideration of cutting the show down to size, and it is impossible to disagree with him. But where Hammerstein seems not entirely to have understood or perhaps appreciated Sondheim's vision is in the ambitious narrative style of the work. The first and last scenes are set in the present, and the rest is told in a series of flashbacks, many of them out of chronological order. In a letter to Sondheim, Hammerstein makes it quite clear that this was unacceptable: he refers to the first scene as a 'prologue', when it is actually consistent with the fragmentation of time and action throughout the musical, and he states his wish that the audience could follow the protagonist's journey as a 'conventional "race"' (quoted in [Fordin 1977](#): 306).

Hammerstein's attitude to this subject is surprisingly reactionary, coming from the librettist of *Allegro* (1947), though perhaps the latter's structural weakness and resulting commercial failure was partly the root of his concern for his young protégé, and he overlooks two important models: Weill and Lerner's conceptually innovative *Love Life* (1948), in which time jumps around, and the cinema, one of Sondheim's well-known passions. Indeed, the sophistication of his later structural ideas is already remarkably

developed in *Climb High*, even if he does not yet quite know how to make it work overall. With hindsight, we can see how many of the themes and approaches that would return in *Merrily We Roll Along* in particular were already in place, such as the ploy of showing the audience the end of the story before the beginning. (Of course, *Merrily* proceeds differently, and is inspired directly by its source material in its structure, but the broad implications for Sondheim's career are the same.)

Nor does Hammerstein seem to have understood how successfully Sondheim could have teased the audience with this device, had the musical been staged. In the opening scene, we meet the main protagonist, David, an actor who has decided to become a producer. It is obvious from his **behaviour** that he is the cause of a lot of dramatic tension and is psychologically troubled. The remaining scenes depict his descent from promising student (he played the title role in *Macbeth* at school and was highly acclaimed) to struggling actor, who expects to rise instantly to the top and cannot understand why nobody wants to employ him. The only work he can get is in television commercials, a fact that deeply embarrasses him, and he borrows extensively from his friend Norm and his on-off lover Teddy (whose heart he breaks) in order to present the appearance of affluence. In the final scene, he is reunited with his former girlfriend Christabel, leading to his redemption at the very end, but until this moment Sondheim cleverly leads us to believe that the denouement could be tragic.

He achieves this through two strategies: one, the nature of David's character, which has many of the signifiers of a tragic hero (a self-destructive streak; false confidence; an invented biography); and two, the way the story is told. For example, in Act 1, Scene 3, David is shown with his family, who make it clear they do not approve of

his going to New York to try to become an actor instead of joining the family business (insurance) and give him exactly a year to prove himself. When he returns to the fold after a year (Act 2, Scenes 1 and 2) to ask to borrow some money, his family assumes he has come home for good, and when they cut him off, it seems he is backed into a corner and his fantasies are permanently crushed. Structurally, the return of the original scenario is highly effective in generating tension, something that would later be a key feature of the numerous dual or repeated scenes in *Follies*, *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Merrily We Roll Along*.

David's relationship with Christabel also provides a through line in the work. The opening scene comes to a sudden end when David sees Chris at the party, leading to the first flashback; we later discover that the two were nearly married until Chris left David and went to Mexico without telling him. In the final scene, it emerges that Chris did not know she would see David at the party, and the final few pages of the script depict their unexpected reunion and touching reconciliation. In a further echo of *Love Life*, Sondheim uses a madrigal between Scenes 1 and 2 in Act 1, and Scenes 3 and 4 in Act 2, to comment on this part of the action (this kind of self-reflexive number employed between book scenes was a key device in the Lerner-Weill show). The song is called 'The Lay of a Gay Young Man' and, like the Greek chorus in *Allegro*, it allowed Sondheim to tell the story through a stylized lens of self-awareness; arguably, it is more than simply 'a framing device to set off the present from the past' or a mere 'comment on the story being told', as Swayne suggests (Swayne 2007: 154).

Staging was another important aspect of Sondheim's vision for the work, especially as regards the cinematic transitions from one scenario to another. He has

spoken of the influence of dissolves in both Allegro and Elia Kazan's original production of *Death of a Salesman* on his work generally (quoted in [Swayne 2007](#): 149), and we must add his future collaborator Boris Aronson's designs for *Love Life* to this list as part of the inspiration for the framework for the show. Act 1, Scene 4 of *Climb High* is especially cinematic, combining the use of dissolves with the idea of a montage of scenes and songs that MGM in particular had been exploiting in musicals such as *Easter Parade* (1948) and *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) to present the passage of time fluently and succinctly. Twelve vignettes are presented in this scene, which is titled 'The New York Follies' and staged in the form of a revue; the latter is especially significant for the work's connection back to *Love Life* and forward to *Gypsy* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, but of more importance to Sondheim's career is the obvious sowing of the seeds of the pastiche revue numbers in *Follies* (even if the dramatic intentions and plot of the latter are completely different). What works particularly well in *Climb High* is a sketch that Hammerstein praises in his comments, where David is filming a commercial for cigarettes in which only his hand is visible (1-4-81); the scene is brief and satirical, showing David moved around like a piece of 'furniture'.

This sequence also details David's passage from one producer to another, through a disastrous audition to the revelation that he thinks he does not need an agent in order to get work. The sequence (and the act) comes to an end when Norm refuses to lend David the money to join the Lambs Club (he wants to pretend to be a member of the famous theatrical club in order to give the appearance of being a professional actor), causing him to ring his mother and tell her he is coming home. Sondheim uses the dramatic pressure of the montage to close the act, climaxing with the question of whether he is going home

to quit acting or simply going for a visit to borrow the money. In numerous places (e.g. 1-4-98) Sondheim indicates the use of thematic underscoring, again a (largely if not exclusively) cinematic device used both to telegraph psychological or emotional insights and to maintain the pace of the action; in a more developed form, this would become a key facet of much of his later work (e.g. the use of 'modular forms' to communicate dramatic themes in Merrily; see [Symonds 2014](#): 49; [McLaughlin 2014](#): 145).

Another important device employed in the sequence is the use of placards placed on easels at the side of the stage to indicate the different locations, something that would return in *Gypsy*. Sondheim also suggests the use of an act curtain designed like a series of neon marquees on Broadway, with play-like titles commenting on the plot. These become increasingly satirical, ranging from *The New York Follies* (the sequence in which David's 'folly'⁹ in desperately rushing around New York, trying to get noticed, is depicted) to *Return of the Native: A Familiar Play* (David's return to his family in Act 2). In short, Sondheim's theatrical flair and postmodern concepts regarding framing the presentation of stories on the stage were already assertively in play in *Climb High*. Though he went on to leave these dramaturgical duties to his collaborators in later musicals, it is apparent that they are a theme of his work as a whole because he had developed them by himself in this work from his early twenties. Thus, *Climb High* reveals something that was always obvious but never explicit: that Sondheim's authorship of his musicals goes far beyond the music and lyrics.

The art of making art

From the painter George (*Sunday in the Park with George*) to the performer characters in *Gypsy* and *Follies*, the nature of being an artist, and of making art, is self-evidently a

theme running through Sondheim's career. That makes *Climb High* even more significant for understanding his output as a whole, because its focus on David's struggles as an artist marks the start of his engagement with a theme that would form a lasting interest. But more specifically, *Climb High* provides an early blueprint for the broad idea of *Merrily We Roll Along* of three decades later: David abandons his pursuit of his talent as an actor (artist) to try to make money as a theatre producer, just as Franklin Shepard abandons his career as a composer (artist) and becomes a successful film producer. In both works, the audience is left in no doubt as to the fact that the main protagonist has prostituted his talent for money, and both musicals contain a secondary character who is the protagonist's best friend and a playwright (Norman/Charley), a hardworking foil to the impatient genius. Thus, the questions about the nature of art that Sondheim's work has posed to the Broadway musical, both through the generally challenging nature of his theatre and as the topic of specific works, were part of his intellectual discourse and personal philosophy from his early adulthood.

Climb High is, of course, about a young actor's development, rather than the process of 'putting it together', but it is full of reflections on the pressures of creativity that would later be developed in *Merrily* and *Sunday*. There are several points of tension in David's relationship with his art, all of which contribute to his richly drawn characterization. First, there is the question of his talent, which is explicitly discussed in four of the musical's eight scenes. In Act 1, Scene 3, when David is preparing to leave home for the first time, his family and friends imply they have no faith in his talent. Chuck Bennett, who is a friend of his generation, openly states that he expects David to return in less than a year (1-3-37). He then leads an ensemble number called 'Advice', in

which everyone apart from his grandmother tries to put David off his career choice. Telling him to 'think twice' about his decision, the Altons and Bennetts encourage him to settle instead for an 'honest business' back home (1-3-38). (Musically, the song is based around an unsettled ostinato figure in the bass, anticipating another future staple of Sondheim's style.) Here, David's talent is effectively deemed an insignificant factor in his life decisions: truthfully, his family does not even register that he might have a talent to pursue. Yet his Gran does tell him to give his talent 'a chance' (1-3-42), a lone voice offering a lifeline that he gratefully takes (it is tempting to see a loose foreshadowing of Marie in Sunday in the crucial role of the grandmother).

In a later scene, Norman discusses David with Teddy, before she knows him well. She asks whether David is talented and Norman reassures her that he is, but is too impatient to spend the time to learn his craft (1-4-62). Alone with Teddy, David explains that he is desperate for his talent to be recognized (1-4-71) and in the song 'When I Get Famous' he equates this recognition with freedom. The only problem is that he is more focused on 'acclaim, / Applause, and fame' than on working to fulfil his potential, and this tension between talent and celebrity provides what could be seen as David's primary tragic flaw: he wants to obtain instant genius. The song was recorded on the cast album of the revue Sondheim on Sondheim (2011) as part of an arrangement that also includes the song 'Talent' from Road Show, though the sequence was cut from the revue itself. This juxtaposition of the two songs magnifies the significance of the 'talent vs. fame' trope that appears throughout much of Sondheim's work, for example in the trajectories of Mama Rose vs. Gypsy or Frank vs. Charley.

One of the most emotive and effective aspects of Sondheim's depiction of David is that the latter misguidedly thinks that if he feigns the appearance of being successful, his talent will emerge. For example, in various scenes he is portrayed at Sardi's restaurant and pretends to be known by staff and clientele alike as a member of the **theatre** community (e.g. 1-4-57); in reality, he is an unknown and has to borrow the money to eat and drink there. Even in the face of being shown to a back table or being openly told by Teddy that he does not have to pay for the whole party's bill (they all know he's too poor to pay), David tries to ignore reality and live out his fantasy: he believes that he can simply perform his talent by adopting the **behaviour** of a celebrity. In fact, his actions draw attention to his fraudulence, specifically to the ways in which his impatience and personality have limited the impact and usefulness of his talent. His Gran, Chris and Teddy all beg him to slow down and take his time to learn his art, but he is too fixated on the appearance of being famous to heed their advice.

After a while, David starts to become aware that he is making little progress and is clearly puzzled by his lack of fame and career momentum. At the end of a section of the **'New York Follies'** sequence in Act 1, Scene 4, he asks Teddy whether she thinks he has talent (1-4-83); the scene dissolves to the set of one of his television commercials, and then back to the previous scene in which she responds that she thinks he does (1-4-84). This is another example of how Sondheim's cinematic vision – which Swayne has noted – would have brought a new approach to the Broadway musical: the hanging emotional question about his talent is juxtaposed uncomfortably with a reminder of his banal and artistically unfulfilling current employment, thanks to the 'fade out-fade in' of the staging plan. (See [Swayne 2007](#), Chapter 5, for an excellent discussion of

Sondheim's cinematic approach to theatre.) David's need for constant reassurance and attention is symptomatic of his self-importance and self-aggrandizement, and at the same time it underpins the fragility of his fundamental misunderstanding of the process of becoming an artist: having talent is only the beginning and artistic ability has to develop gradually. Instead, he continues to 'keep up appearances' by spending money he does not have on pretending to live a successful life on the theatre scene (1-4-85). Later in the New York Follies sequence, when as previously noted Norman refuses to pay for David's membership fee at the Lambs Club, he explains that he will continue to support his basic living costs, specifically because he thinks he has talent (1-4-96).

Before the denouement in the final scene – which Hammerstein might consider to be the 'epilogue', since it is a continuation and completion of the first scene (Hammerstein's 'prologue') – the drama reaches its climax in Act 2, Scene 3, when a last flashback takes us to the stage at Burgess College, where David has just finished his triumphant student performance as Macbeth. The plot has finally unravelled so that we can see how its two key themes – David's talent and the far-reaching shadow of his relationship with Chris – stem from the same moment in his life. Bob, the director of the college's productions, urges David to nurture his talent rather than over-reaching himself, and the young actor promises to follow his advice (2-3-46). The moment is especially poignant in light of the audience's prior knowledge of how he has ignored this suggestion ever since, an excellent example of how effective Sondheim's narrative strategy was (something that would recur in Merrily). A few pages later, Chris surprises David by refusing to marry him; he assumes this is because she saw his performance in Macbeth and feels he is untalented (2-3-49). This, of course, has nothing to do with her decision,

but it brings to a climax a dramatic thread that Sondheim keeps alive throughout the musical: that David's self-worth is based entirely on others' perception of his talent, a narcissistic misconception that hinders his ability to 'belong'.

The act of belonging

David's need (and inability) to 'belong' is another aspect of *Climb High* that seems to initiate a recurring topic in Sondheim's career as a whole. In his musicals, Sondheim often asks questions about 'where the pieces fit': for example, in *Merrily* he has the characters confront the fragmented plot directly in the line '[h]ow did you get to be here?'; in a memorable phrase from *Follies*, he states that '[e]verything was possible and nothing made sense', drawing attention to the ways in which life stories do not always reach their expected goals; in *Sunday*, Dot tells George at the climax of their relationship that '[w]e do not belong together'; and the misfit *Sweeney Todd*, the con-artist Mizner brothers in *Road Show* and the fairy-tale characters cast adrift in each others' stories in *Into the Woods* further expand the idea of people, plots and ideas struggling to find their place.

Therefore, it is interesting that both in story and in structure, *Climb High* engages with the theme of belonging: David cannot find his place either romantically or professionally, and the disordering of the scenes deliberately upsets the expected teleological form of the narrative. McLaughlin's observation about Sondheim's postmodern theatrical approach in his last-completed musical *Road Show* seems pertinent also to this early work: '[h]istory is a neat, well-structured narrative; life is frequently a mess, too big to fit neatly inside a single story' (McLaughlin 2014: 35). David's life is a mess, too, and the narrative style of the piece reflects that (which makes Swayne's

reading of this work as 'very Hammersteinian' in its trajectory not entirely persuasive; see [Swayne 2007](#): 148). In this respect, *Climb High* experiments with an approach that Sondheim would later perfect in *Company*. Like David, Bobby drifts from woman to woman, from one friend's house to another, year after year, without ever finding a point of arrival or focus. Late on in *Climb High*, David tells Teddy that she and Chris are alike (2-4-67), unintentionally revealing how interchangeable the women in his life are (elsewhere in the play, he dates two other women); Bobby's confusion between his girlfriends, April and June, in the song 'Barcelona' from *Company* comes to mind. In both musicals, time, scenes and songs whirl by, and the same scenario seems to be on a constant loop, but presented in different ways; its repetition contributes to both protagonists' lack of belonging.

Sondheim sets this up in Act 1, Scene 3 of *Climb High* through perhaps the score's most beautiful song: 'Where Do I Belong?'. The number is sung as David is saying goodbye to his grandmother before leaving for New York for the first time, and she tells him about the difference between joining and belonging (1-3-43). The lyric poignantly depicts David's sense of loneliness, but the music – as heard on Sondheim's demo recording released on *Sondheim Sings: Volume 2* – is its expressive core, with its angular melodic line, characterized by empty-sounding leaps of fifths, sixths, sevenths and octaves that keep pulling heavily downwards, and its Kern-like bridge, in which David sings about revealing his true self at night when nobody is about and hiding from their questions in the daylight. Having planted the seeds of this idea, Sondheim makes it recur at key moments, such as when David first arrives in New York and sings that 'here's' where he belongs (1-4-47); later in the same sequence, when he is shown

pounding the streets from one producer's office to the next (anticipating 'Opening Doors' from Merrily) and the orchestra plays the 'Where Do I Belong?' theme (1-4-94); in Act 2, Scene 2, when Mrs Alton tells him that he belongs at home (2-2-17); and in Act 2, Scene 3, when the same theme is used in the orchestra to segue from Teddy ending her relationship with him to his flashback of the college production of Macbeth (2-3-43).

It also forms the height of the final tableau, when he and Chris stand united, surrounded by the others, and he sings once more, 'Here's where I belong!' (2-4-70), based on the same melodic shape as 'Where Do I Belong?' (the score for the finale is in the Wisconsin collection). Because of this sense of arrival and completion, the show diverges from McLaughlin's summary of the structure of *Company* around Bobby's life of pleasure – '[i]n its repeatability it lacks a point' – and the other couples' 'inability to find the security of a clear meaning in or purpose for their lives' (McLaughlin 2014: 27). *Climb High* is ultimately far less bleak at its conclusion, because it delivers the 'happily ever after' that Sondheim denies in the later work. Perhaps that makes the earlier piece unsatisfying in the end, because it appears to capitulate to conventions of the time (Hammerstein's model) rather than arriving at its natural conclusion; but in another sense it is cathartic, with Chris' unexpected revelation in the final scene that she knows she was as much to blame for their earlier problems as David was (2-4-63) setting the rest of the plot on a new course (another fragmentation, consistent with the show as a whole).

Shedding his fakery is a crucial part of David's journey towards belonging, but it also seems to have been an aspect of the musical that Hammerstein again did not appreciate or understand. Hammerstein was 'frustrated by David' (Swayne 2007: 144), explaining in a letter to Sondheim that the characters 'are getting far better treatment than

they deserve' (quoted in [Fordin 1977](#): 306). Yet David's lack of self-awareness is a major strength of the plot: even if his personality is not inherently appealing, his story is, because of the way that Sondheim tells it. For example, in Act 1, Scene 4, David is sulking to Teddy about the idea of playing *The First Murderer* in a not-for-profit production of *Macbeth*, having played the title role at college (1-4-71). He is dumbstruck to discover that he will not be paid, and on the surface he seems obnoxiously arrogant. Yet Sondheim **humanizes** him, first by making it clear that David is simply naïve and therefore is causing himself pain, and second by leading into the song 'When I Get Famous', which communicates his sincerity. The music for the number is in triple time, perhaps signifying that David is in love with his dream of fame, and as in many of Sondheim's later songs, the music to the verse is no less song-like than the refrain; the melodic line flows freely in a whirling movement. Of course, Sondheim's ability to **humanize** morally **grey** characters through his scores is one of his strengths, most obviously demonstrated in *Assassins* and *Sweeney Todd*. By comparison David is tame, and certainly no murderer, but the possibility of making such a troubled and delusional character the central figure in a musical in the early 1950s reveals just how distinctive Sondheim's conception of his **theatre** already was, barely out of college.

Childhood is the final motif that Sondheim uses in the work to explore David's isolation from those around him, mostly to frame him as immature. This is particularly effective in the context of the above discussions about the ambiguous characterization of David: though his immaturity is superficially tiresome, Sondheim's decision to frame it in the language of childhood converts it into fragility. After the scene in which he is patronized by his family before leaving for New York (Act 1, Scene 3), the first time in

which David is explicitly marked out as a 'child' is in Act 1, Scene 4, when he tries to put the brakes on his relationship with Teddy (1-4-85/86). Alone, she sings 'I'm in Love with a Boy' (recorded on the album *Simply Sondheim: A 75th Birthday Celebration*) in which she refers to him as a 'pup', 'baby' and 'child'. The song's wistfulness is heightened by the word-setting: in the verse, the vocal line is fragmented into small groups of notes, evoking breathlessness, while the delicate refrain is restrained until the final phrase, in which Teddy sings that children 'destroy recklessly'. Sondheim sets this to an octave leap followed by a step up to an E flat, the highest note in the melody, marking the phrase out as the key message of the number (in Italian opera terms, the *parola scenica* or 'word of the scene'). By emphasizing Teddy's sense of distance from the emotionally undeveloped David, Sondheim further underlines the latter's general feeling of isolation, rendering him more sympathetic.

The childhood theme reaches its apotheosis in Act 2, Scene 3, in which three couples (David and Gaye; Norm and Judy; Teddy and Wesley) discuss love, leading to the song 'Not for Children'. The men all ask their girlfriends for money, which they give them, and the women all show irritation because they want to be loved, not used. In the song, the men reject love, saying it is just for children; the women reply that it is not for children because it is dangerous. Sondheim uses violent imagery such as a loaded gun and a briar patch to drive home the contrast (2-3-31/32). Later in the scene, Teddy sings a reprise of 'I'm in Love with a Boy' while Judy reprises 'Not for Children' (2-3-38). The pain of the two women at being the victim of David's petulance and irresponsibility vividly caps the 'belonging' theme in the show: by resisting growing up, David also resists the act of belonging that would make him fully a part of the others' lives. Yet by

evoking the language of childhood – which would return more potently in his later works (‘Children and Art’ in Sunday; ‘Children Will Listen’ in Into the Woods) – Sondheim manages to give David at least some sympathetic depth to offset his fraudulence, self-indulgence and delusions.

Conclusion: Sondheim at the gateway to his career

We have seen how Hammerstein critiqued the book of Climb High extensively, and while much of it was ‘born in irritation’ for him, he also ‘marked some of it as good, not to balance the “bad markings,” but in the interest of truth and fairness’. (Hammerstein’s undated letter is quoted in [Fordin 1977](#): 306.) In that first letter on the musical, Hammerstein is firm in recommending that it not be produced but instead be seen as ‘a very important stepping stone in [Sondheim’s] libretto writing and composing education’ ([Fordin 1977](#): 307). The latter comment is curious because there is no other suggestion that Hammerstein examined the score, and if he did not, he could not realistically have made an assessment of the musical as a whole, given how potent a dramatic agent the music is in Sondheim’s work. We have also seen how Climb High anticipates the later Sondheim musicals from numerous points of view: character tropes; structures; themes; narrative forms; the treatment of time; and both musical and dramatic models. There is even a foretaste of the quotation of Robert Burns’ ‘Here’s tae [to] us. Who’s like us? Damn few’ from Merrily, as it appears twice towards the end of Climb High (2-3-47 and 2-4-69).¹⁰

In his brilliant study of Sondheim’s influences, Swayne rightly notes that ‘[h]ad he lived, it is likely that Hammerstein would not have always been a willing member of Sondheim’s audience [...]’ ([Swayne 2007](#): 145). He could not yet know, as we do, what

a distinctive direction Sondheim would soon successfully push musical theatre in, and therefore his extreme reaction to *Climb High* on paper is neither very useful nor trustworthy (though it is unquestionably interesting). Regarding his young mentee as still an amateur, Hammerstein dismissed the innovation of the show and failed to recognize how the fragmentation of the narrative and the depiction of an unconventional main protagonist could successfully play out, let alone how the two facets could complement each other.

Furthermore, Hammerstein's perspective effectively remains the only one, thanks to Sondheim's regurgitation of the story of his reaction to the script at regular intervals. Yet despite the musical's length and other flaws, it is difficult not to conclude that Sondheim knew what he was doing: he even writes his self-confidence in his vision into the dialogue of the show. In the opening scene, David's friend Tony refers disparagingly to '[a]ll this *Death of a Salesman* stuff' preventing him from having 'a good time'; Teddy rebuffs him by saying '[y]ou can have both' (1-1-11). It is clear from the second surviving letter from Hammerstein on the topic of *Climb High* that *Salesman* had been an important experience for Sondheim, and this is apparent in the show itself both from its tragic theme (which is Hammerstein's main interest) to its cinematic staging (no less of an influence for Sondheim, as Swayne underlines; [Swayne 2007](#): 156). Hammerstein did not recognize it, but Sondheim had already moved on and identified what his contribution to the genre would be. It is understandable that Sondheim has chosen to join Hammerstein in dismissing *Climb High* as irrelevant to his professional life, and his extraordinary longevity inevitably leads to greater emphasis being placed on his mature, successfully staged musicals rather than an unstaged musical written at the suggestion of

his mentor, who was highly critical of it. Yet the numerous ways in which *Climb High* establishes the foundations of his later work suggest that it is no mere footnote to his career, but the gateway into it.

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Notes

1. Hammerstein’s ‘challenge’ came in response to his reaction to [By George \(1946\)](#), Sondheim’s first attempt to write a musical. [Ethan Mordden](#) has noted that Hammerstein himself completed his ‘experiments’ because [Oklahoma!](#) was based on a play with problems, [Carousel](#) was based on a fine play, [South Pacific](#) was based on a non-theatrical source, and [Allegro](#) was an original ([Mordden 2016](#): 4).

2. My thanks to [Geoffrey Block](#) for providing me with a copy of the programme. The letter from [Kaufman](#) is in Sondheim’s papers at the [Wisconsin Center for Film and Television Research](#), [Madison, Wisconsin](#), where the other primary sources referred to in this article are also housed.

3. Several years later, [Anderson](#) worked with the composer [Arthur Schwartz](#) on a television musical based on the play, starring [Julie Andrews](#) and [Bing Crosby](#). It was broadcast on 10 March 1956, just a few days before [Andrews’](#) debut in [My Fair Lady](#).

4. An earlier letter from [Hammerstein](#) to [Sondheim](#) about the musical is partly reproduced in [Fordin \(1977\)](#), but no date or source is given; the content indicates that it predates the letter in the [Wisconsin](#) collection.

5. To be precise, Sondheim revealed to Meryle Secrest the source of the show's concept:

I wrote a show about a guy I knew at Williams who was in a class ahead of me who came to New York and wanted to be an actor, and about how he fucked his way to the top, because he was a charmer and a ladies' man.

(cited in [Secrest 1998](#): 88)

6. As Geoffrey Block has noted, Sondheim would later encounter similar problems with length when he initially attempted to write the libretto for Sweeney Todd (Block 2008: 353).

7. Of note, in 1993 Sondheim spoke positively of the score for *Climb High*:

At that point, I was much better trained in music. [Lyrically] I was still imitating Oscar in terms of emotion. At that age, considering the hothouse existence I'd led, just getting out in the world – I didn't have a lot of insight into lives that weren't like mine. There's very little in the lyrics that I would stand by these days but there's stuff in the music that's not too bad.

(cited in [Gottfried 1993](#): 23)

8. 'I'm in Love with a Boy' can be found on the CD *Simply Sondheim: A 75th Birthday Salute* (Kritzerland, KR20010-8; 2007). The other two songs are on *Sondheim Sings II: 1946-60* (PS Classics, PS9533; 2005).

9. This play on the word 'folly' would also recur in *Follies*, e.g. 'The Folly of Love', 'The Folly of Youth', etc.

10. According to Secrest, this was taught to him by his friend Ford Schumann, a composer and painter ([Secrest 1998](#): 90).

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