

Sunday in the Park with George
Education Guide

Production Dramaturg Sloan Elle Garner

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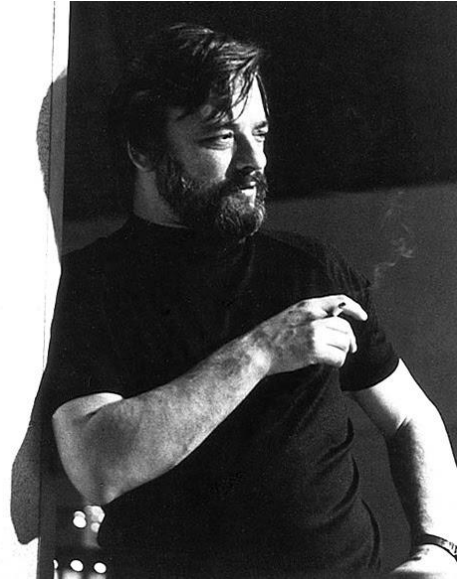
Purpose and Contents

The purpose of this educational guide is to provide basic contextual information and prompts for exploration of the text of *Sunday in the Park with George*. It may be used in a classroom setting or for audience members who wish to review it before or after attending Villanova Theatre’s production. Within, readers will find information on the creators, role doublings, inspirations and influences, a plot synopsis, and resources for further exploration.

Creators

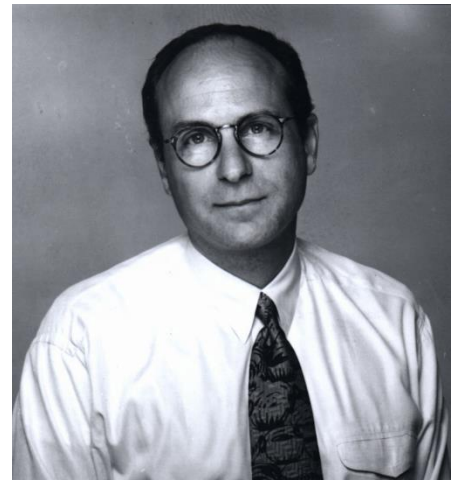
Stephen Sondheim

Stephen Sondheim (March 22, 1930 - November 26, 2021) was an American composer and lyricist. One of the most influential figures in 20th-century musical theater, Sondheim is credited for having reinvented the American musical with shows that tackle unexpected themes that range far beyond the genre's traditional subjects, and that feature music and lyrics of unprecedented complexity and sophistication. His shows address darker, more harrowing elements of the human experience with songs often tinged with ambivalence about various aspects of life. He is the composer of nineteen musicals including *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), and *Into the Woods* (1987).



James Lapine

James Lapine (January 10, 1949 -) is an American playwright, director, and musical book writer. He is best known for writing the books for Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*. He collaborated with William Finn on *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland* (later presented on Broadway as *Falsettos*), as well as *A New Brain*, *Muscle*, and *Little Miss Sunshine* at Second Stage Theatre. On Broadway, he has also directed *Golden Child* (David Henry Hwang), *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Amour* (Michel Legrand), *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and the 2012 Broadway revival of *Annie*. He is the recipient of three Tony Awards, five Drama Desk Awards and the Pulitzer Prize. In 2011, he was inducted into the Theater Hall of Fame. Lapine is a member of the Dramatist Guild Council and, for the last twelve years, has been a mentor for TDF's Open Doors Program. He is also on the board of Ars Nova Theatre.



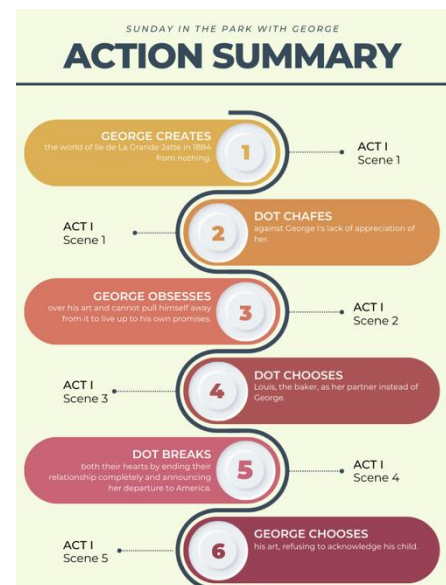
Synopsis

Act I

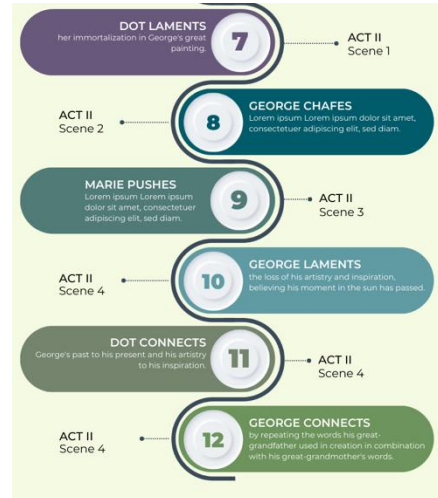
The artist George begins the act of creation, summoning the world of Île de la Grande Jatte, an island just outside of Paris, France, in the summer of 1884 ("Opening Prelude"). As he sketches the island park, his mistress, Dot, tries to concentrate on her modeling while her clothes and George's inattentiveness bother her ("Sunday in the Park with George"). Another artist, Jules, and his wife, Yvonne, harshly critique and mock George's painting, *Bathers at Asnières* ("No Life"). George promises to take Dot out on a date to placate her before George's mother, Old Lady, brushes off his request to draw her. In the studio, Dot prepares for their date, and George paints in his new style, obsessing over the variation of colors ("Color and Light"). He forgets his promise to take Dot out, and when she reminds him, he still chooses the canvas over her. She storms out. On another Sunday in the park, the people of Île de la Grande Jatte gossip about artists' peculiarity and Dot's new relationship with Louis, a baker ("Gossip Sequence"). Dot begins teaching herself how to read, and George takes on the lives of his subjects as he sketches them ("The Day Off"). Dot searches for George to tell him about her new relationship ("Everybody Loves Louis"). Alone once again, George attempts to justify his choosing of his art above all else ("Finishing the Hat"). Dot returns and publicly announces she is pregnant with George's baby ("Bustle"). Back at the studio, the pregnant Dot approaches George in his studio to ask for a painting of her, and Jules and Yvonne visit at George's request to view the painting in progress. Jules deflects George's request to help him get the piece into the next group exhibition. After Jules and Yvonne leave, Dot tells George she is leaving for America with Louis. George does not try to stop her, which Dot uses as further evidence of their relationship being doomed no matter how much they might care for one another ("We Do Not Belong Together"). In the park once more, George sullenly spends time with his mother, who expresses concern about him and begs for him to preserve the world around them with his art ("Beautiful"). Dot brings their baby, named Marie, to the park and George refuses to even look at her. Things heat up on the island as inappropriate relationships are revealed, and eventually the whole island turns breaks into a massive argument ("Chaos"). At Old Lady's behest, George exercises his full creative power over his subjects, arranging them into his famous painting, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* ("Sunday").

Act II

In 1984, the people of Île de la Grande Jatte complain about their depictions in the painting and about the heat caused by the gallery lights in The Art Institute of Chicago



("Hot Up Here"). They speak of George's death and how he impacted their lives ("Eulogies"). Upstairs, the deceased George's great-grandson, George introduces his latest invention, which is inspired by *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and his grandmother, Marie. When she tries to use the little red book her mother, Dot, wrote in to tie her grandson George to the artist Georges Seurat, he shuts her down in front of the audience ("Chromolume #7"). George then schmoozes with investors at a reception party while receiving various criticisms of his work ("Putting It Together"). After the investors leave to have dinner in another room, Marie tells George not to forsake his family ("Children and Art"). The next month, George and his collaborator, Dennis, visit Île de la Grande Jatte to display his chromolume. Dennis reminds George of the little red book, which he has brought after the death of his grandmother. Missing Marie, George reads the notes in the back of the book and bemoans his inability to move through a period of lack of inspiration ("Lesson #8"). Dot appears, summoned by his innate need for her and for connection with his family line. She encourages him, reminding him of his talent and capabilities ("Move On"). The other subjects from the painting reappear and pay George respects as an artist before disappearing again. George reads the final words his great-great-grandmother, Dot, wrote about his great-grandfather, George Seurat ("Act II Finale").



A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte (1884-1886) by Georges Seurat, oil paints

Doublings

In the theatre, the concept of “doubling” is when a singular actor plays more than one role. While *Sunday in the Park with George* does not necessarily require doubling per its character breakdown (as some scripts do), most productions often use doubling because of the large cast. This is useful not only for reducing the number of cast members to a more reasonable size, but also for highlighting thematic overlaps. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, George and George are typically played by the same actor, as are Dot and Marie. The other characters have suggestions for doublings, but different productions make different doubling choices.

Prompts

The 1939 film, *The Wizard of Oz*, is a well-known example of cinematic doubling, in which the actors who play various people in Dorothy Gale’s real life in Kansas also play many of the characters she meets in Oz.

1. Can you think of any other theatre, film or TV examples where one actor plays multiple roles? Why might the writer or director have made that choice?
2. What impact does that doubling have on your understanding or experience with the story?

Below are some of the character doublings for the original Broadway production:

NURSE (to OLD LADY)..... HARRIET PAWLING, a patron of the arts

FRIEDA, cook for Jules and Yvonne.....BETTY, an artist
and wife to Franz

CELESTE #2, another shop girl.....ELAINE, George’s former wife

1. What characteristics do each of these sets have in common? What characteristics are different?
2. Why might the director have paired these roles together?

Below are the doublings Villanova Theatre used for NURSE and FRIEDA.

NURSE (to OLD LADY)..... ELAINE, George’s former wife

FRIEDA, cook for Jules and Yvonne.....HARRIET PAWLING, a patron of the arts
and wife to Franz

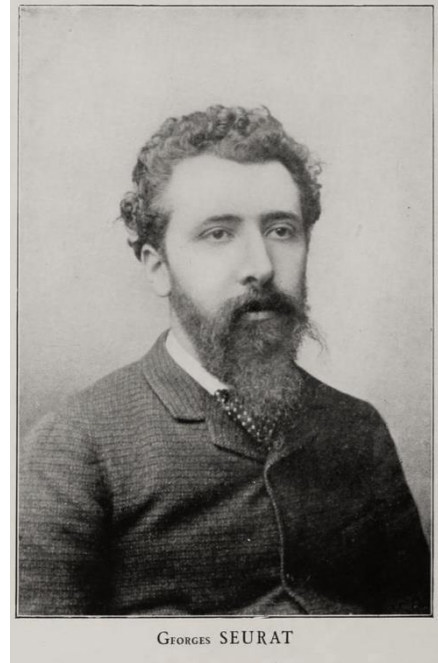
3. What characteristics do each of these sets have in common? What characteristics are different?
4. How did these pairings impact your understanding of the story and its themes?
5. Based on the character descriptions in the script, what pairings would you make for doublings? Why?

Inspiration and Influences

Georges Seurat

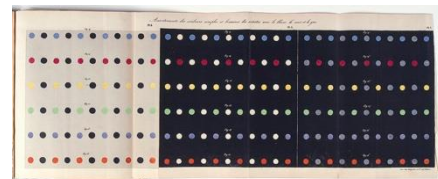
Georges Pierre Seurat (December 2, 1859 - March 29, 1891) was a French post-Impressionist artist who invented the Chromoluminarist (also called Divisionist) art style. He was the youngest child of Ernestine Faivre from Paris and the wealthy Antoine Chrysostome Seurat from Champagne. He lived in various locations around Paris but, as an adult, generally stayed in the Pigalle district. Seurat never married, but he had a long-term secret mistress named Madeleine Knobloch who lived with him and bore both of their children. He died in the home of his parents at the age of 31 from an unidentified illness.

Georges Seurat created several major paintings in his life and created hundreds of preparatory studies, but his most famous by far is *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. While now known for painting, his favorite medium seems to have been conté crayon. The only time his work was ever shown at the famous Paris Salon was in 1883, and it was a conte drawing of his friend Edmond Aman-Jean. After that, Seurat's more cutting-edge work was shown in France and beyond, but primarily at the Salon des Indépendants, which he founded with several other post-Impressionists.



Chromoluminarism and Serialism

Chromoluminarism (also called Divisionism) is a style developed in France during the 1880s, which falls under the larger label of post-Impressionism (also called neo-Impressionism). It was spearheaded by Georges Pierre Seurat and is most commonly associated with his *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. The Divisionists, inspired by scientific discoveries of Michel Eugène Chevreul, Ogden Rood, and Charles Blanc, were trying to use additive color theory to create maximum luminosity in their paintings. The idea was that, by placing two contrasting colors next to one another, the human eye would mix them on their own (rather than mixing two colors manually). Seurat was not technically additively mixing but creating simultaneous contrast, which is what gives his works a shimmering effect.



The late, great composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim attributed much of his success as a musical theatre lyricist to his teenaged tutelage from Oscar Hammerstein II, an iconic musical theatre lyricist. Sondheim famously said of their relationship, "If he'd been a geologist, I would have been a geologist." As part of his training, Hammerstein

tasked him with writing four musicals, and before Sondheim finished them all at the age of 22, he also began taking music lessons from composer Milton Babbitt. Babbitt was a music theorist largely known for his work in Serialism, which is a composition technique grounded in mathematics that utilizes only series of pitches, notes, or rhythms. Although not incompatible with tonal music, it is often associated with atonal music. This incredibly unique blend of both musical influences and teachers is arguably what gave Sondheim his iconic sound, which can sound strange to those accustomed to listening to more traditional musical theatre composer-lyricists. Serialism's extra-mathematical approach to music is not unlike Chromoluminarism's extra-mathematical approach to visual art. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, words and music align and collide to create an aural landscape matching the imagined inner mind of the visionary Georges Seurat, putting Sondheim's mastery of his craft on display in full color.



Resources

The Dramaturg's Website

sites.google.com/view/sundayintheparkwithgeorge

Visual Art at Villanova University

Jennie Castillo, (610) 519-4612

Curator of the University Art Collection & Gallery Director

Valerie M. Joyce, Ph.D., (610) 519-4760

Chair of Theatre and Studio Art Department

Timothy McCall, Ph.D., timothy.mccall@villanova.edu

Associate Professor of Art History & Director of Art History Program

Visual Art in Philadelphia

The Barnes Foundation, <https://www.barnesfoundation.org/>

Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/>

Philadelphia's Magic Gardens, <https://www.phillymagicgardens.org/>

Theatre at Villanova University

Valerie M. Joyce, Ph.D., (610) 519-4760

Chair of Theatre and Studio Art Department, Associate Professor of Theatre

Music at Villanova University

Valerie M. Joyce, Ph.D., (610) 519-4760

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Assistant Professor, Music Director of Graduate Theatre Program