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A Terrible Thing Happened on the Way to the Swimming Pool

An Analysis of the Failure of Sondheim and Shevelove's *The Frogs* in Light of their Success

with *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*

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When looking at the canon of Sondheim work, very few people recognize *The Frogs* as a creation of the musical theatre god, and even fewer would identify it as their favorite. As Ethan Mordden says in his book *On Sondheim: an Opinionated Guide*, *The Frogs* remains conspicuous among Sondheim works because it “lack[s] a cult” (143). On the other hand, despite the fact that it was his first Broadway show in which he served as the sole creator of the score, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* proved to be a strong success for Sondheim, as seen in its receiving of a Tony Award for Best Musical. Despite the innovative academic concept and strong creative team, Stephen Sondheim's creation of *The Frogs* in 1974 with Burt Shevelove proved to be one of his most unsuccessful artistic endeavors due to a number of fundamental weaknesses, and using a comparative lens to look at both the failure of *The Frogs* and the success of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* provides even greater clarity on the reasons why *The Frogs* croaked instead of soared. The major points of comparison between the two shows include the score, the adaptation from their inspired works, the nature and environment of the production, and the challenges encountered during the production.

Before diving into the major points of comparison between *Frogs* and *Forum*, it is important to have a basic understanding of the history of the two shows. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* developed over five years and opened in 1962, winning a Tony Award for Best Musical thanks to the complete score created by Stephen Sondheim and a libretto created by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart (Mordden 49 and Banfield 93). This show helped propel Sondheim to success, and it proved to be a standard, successful work of commercial theatre to premiere in New York City. In contrast, *The Frogs* was developed at Yale

University and was produced by Yale Repertory Theatre after Burt Shevelove and Robert Brustein—Dean of the Yale School of Drama—discussed a recreation of Shevelove’s academic brainchild from thirty years prior. Indeed, in the early 1940s, Burt Shevelove produced a low-scale production of an adaptation of Aristophanes’ *The Frogs* using the glee club and swimming team at Yale (Gardner 2). When the two men discussed having a swimming pool revival in the 1970s, Shevelove asked Sondheim to join in on the project and create some music for the show, which went through a short preparation process and opened in 1974 (Gardner 2 and McDonald 120). This production was far less successful than *Forum*, and to see this, all one needs to do is compare two *New York Times* articles on the show—one produced in anticipation of the show, and one printed after opening night. Though published only two days apart, the tones of the articles have clear differences—the first one, published on May 19, carried a light-hearted, lively tone of excitement, and it included engaging commentary like “as a writer-director, [Shevelove]’s definitely a Banana Split...who revels in the words of Plautus and Aristophanes, and the mischief-making of low comedy” (Gardner 4). In contrast, the second article, published on May 23, was half as long and used a much more sarcastic tone, including comments such as “when one actor forgot his lines, I half expected to see Mr. Shevelove shove him into the pool” (Gussow 2). Clearly, *The Frogs* did not get nominated for Best Revival of a Swimming Pool Musical—it more accurately became a source of mockery within the theatre community, and it certainly became one of the darker moments of Sondheim’s career, as seen in his own personal statement that he considers this show to be “one of the few deeply unpleasant professional experiences” (Mordden 141) in his life.

There were also a number of historical challenges and complications that made the production of *The Frogs* much more difficult to effectively carry out than one might expect. One of these was the short rehearsal process and relatively rushed nature of the process in general

(McDonald 320 and Gussow 2). Additionally, Robert Brustein drew the general animosity of the theatre community, and he particularly did not get along well with Sondheim—in fact, Sondheim refused to meet with Brustein for fear of his overreaching manipulation (Mordden 141-142). This general dislike for Brustein caused dysfunction and conflict within the production team, and Brustein himself instigated additional complications when he invited critics to an underprepared, primarily academic production that actually directly makes jabs at the roles of critics (Mordden 142 and McDonald 327). In combination with several factors discussed later, these complications helped to sink Sondheim and Shevelove's *The Frogs* and banish it for another thirty years.

However, thirty years later in 2004, *The Frogs* did emerge from its watery grave when it was produced at the Lincoln Center. For this production, Nathan Lane played the leading role and also wrote a new libretto (Salsini 6). While not wildly popular or successful, the show did run for 126 performances, and the relative success of this production likely stems from the addressing of several of the fundamental issues that will be discussed later. The production team's ability to perform *The Frogs* inside an actual theatre space, as well as an updated book by Lane and an adapted score that included six additional songs to help fill out the show and add more individual numbers, allowed the show to overcome enough issues to be commercially viable and avoid a purely laughable reputation (Horowitz 1). The fact that the modest success of this single revival is such an impressive feat for *The Frogs* also serves to highlight how its failure sharply contrasted the success of *Forum*, especially in light of the fact that *Forum* has had a number of additional major productions and revivals, including a movie production in 1966, several major productions in the United Kingdom, and two major Broadway revivals in 1972 (actually directed by Burt Shevelove) and 1996, which respectively won two and one Tony Awards (Hutchins 1). The widespread popularity of *Forum* as seen in its ongoing ticket sales and its ability to be reproduced over and over again provides a sharp contrast to *The Frogs*, whose

only revival was a successful salvage attempt by Lane. This contrast only serves to further emphasize the disparate fates of each of these shows on account of the major problems with *The Frogs* and the successful elements of *Forum*, both of which we will discuss later in this paper.

Beyond the basic history of the two shows, it is also essential to understand the reason why these shows act as foils to one another. Perhaps the strongest reason for comparing the two shows stems from the fact that two of the central members of the creative team remain the same across the two productions—indeed, Stephen Sondheim wrote the score for both shows, and Burt Shevelove acted as the sole book writer for *The Frogs* and co-book writer for *Forum*. Beyond this, both plays are comedies (arguably the two most light-hearted plays in the Sondheim canon) based on works from antiquity. Furthermore, both shows break the fourth wall at the opening and require a leading actor who excels at performing in a clownish manner (Given 1). Because of these major similarities, comparing the two works provides the opportunity to shed greater illumination on the reasons for the failure of *The Frogs*. In light of the success of *Forum*, we are forced to acknowledge that certain factors could not have been the final nail in the amphibian coffin—the failure could not have been simply due to comedic tone, basis on ancient work, or partnership with Shevelove. Instead, we will look at a selection of other challenges and distinctions between the two shows as factors for the failure of *The Frogs*.

One of the initial points of comparison centers on the adaptation of the original Greek and Roman works into the musicals created by both Sondheim and Shevelove. While it is true that both works stemmed from works from antiquity, the source material and the method of adaptation differed strongly between the shows. *Forum* derives its plot from a comprehensive review and perusal of the works of Plautus, an ancient Roman playwright famous for his comedic works. Shevelove and Gelbart spent years scouring through the works of Plautus and picking out people, moments, and bits that they found to be effective and funny, and then they

added quite of bit of their own original work to help connect the pieces that they took from Plautus (Banfield 93). Thus, while inspired by the works of the famous Roman playwright, *Forum* constitutes a more original work than a simple translation or direct adaptation. In contrast, *The Frogs* developed as a direct adaptation of Aristophanes' play by the same name—and, while Sondheim added music and Shevelove certainly took liberties to adapt content and change lines, the basic story line followed that of the original play by the Greek playwright. Therefore, this show, while creative, contains much less original content than *Forum*, and, paradoxically, became much more difficult to effectively write because of the inherent challenges that come with more directly adapting a work rather than using works as inspiration. For example, in order to make the piece effective as a musical work, the book has to be pithier while still allowing for the sensible creation of songs within the story line (McDonald 322). Furthermore, the ancient work has to be changed in a way that allows audiences in contemporary times to understand and connect with the parts of the piece that might have become irrelevant, outdated, or inaccessible over time (McDonald 323). A major way through which Shevelove attempted to make this change is through changing the two major playwrights in the story from the Greek playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides to the more familiar playwrights of William Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw—a change that Marianne McDonald describes as being effective “up to a point” (McDonald 327) because it still provides a nice parallel despite their relative lack of similarities and the imperfect qualities of their comparison to one another. Among other changes—such as moving the temporal setting to modernity but leaving the location in “ancient Greece” (Gussow 1)—this alteration of the central characters of the show provides an example of the very direct way that Shevelove used Aristophanes' play as the primary source material and then simply made small adaptations, in contrast to the way that he drew generally from the works of Plautus to inspire *Forum*. The more challenging nature of this form of adaptation provides a crucial

example of one of the factors that complicated the production of *The Frogs* and may have contributed to its failure, in contrast to the success of a seemingly similar show like *Forum*.

Beyond the specific material and the method of adaption, the *style* of the source material also differed between the two productions. While both are ancient playwrights, historians consider Aristophanes to be a playwright from the period of “Old Comedy” in ancient Greece. During this era, playwrights wrote comedies that relied on fantasy, included vulgarity, and told the stories of people in somewhat extreme situations. Perhaps most notably, comic playwrights in this era also included a great amount of social and political commentary and satire (Given 1). In contrast, Plautus created his work in Rome under the influence of what is now termed as “New Comedy” in Greek theatre. This style of theatre, led by the playwright Menander, constitutes a much “safer” form of comedy that tends to rely on domestic situations, stock characters, and a positive, situational form of comedy (Banfield 93 and Given 1). Indeed, Alan McN. G. Little summarizes the differences in these styles of drama succinctly in an article, saying, “Unlike Aristophanes, whose achievement was to illumine crudity of popular drama with the gleams of a high poetic imagination, Plautus was faced with the need of rendering intelligible a nobler form to a crasser audience” (209). In this sense, the very farcical and sit-com style of Plautus provides a very sharp contrast from the more complex form of comedy employed by Aristophanes that mixes wit, farce, and other comedic styles (Salsini 6). Additionally, the historical contexts of the playwrights also add clarity to the reasons for their differences in style and writing. Plautus wrote his plays during a time in Roman history characterized by relative stability and general prosperity, and this explains why his style is more light-hearted and less challenging. In contrast, the fact that Aristophanes wrote his play in the context of the looming Peloponnesian War and the general instability of Athenian democracy explains why his play has more of an intellectual aspect and an attempt to instill moral responsibility (Salsini 6).

In terms of reception by the audiences, the style of Plautus not only provides a less challenging experience for audience members in general, but also more closely reflects the style of comedy that has been most popular in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Stock characters and family-related situational comedies abound in contemporary society, and thus the general format and style of *Forum* is much more appealing to modern audiences than the darker, more complicated style of Aristophanes and *The Frogs*. Indeed, John Given offers that perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of *The Frogs* is the fact that it “feels so unfamiliar because its authors have closely adhered to the unusual model of Old Comedy” (1).

This leads into another major reason why *The Frogs* might have proved to be an unsuccessful enterprise: the richly academic nature of the endeavor itself. Beyond the loftier and more academic style of comedy reflected in *The Frogs* in comparison to *Forum*, there are also a number of other elements of *The Frogs* that made it much more academic and thus, possibly, less accessible to audiences. An obvious factor is the fact that *The Frogs* developed as a creation at a university. This indicates that the show was intended to reach a more academic audience such as students and alumni, and this explains why many critics may have found the show inaccessible and unsuccessful. Another of these factors is the numerous references to theatrical figures added by Shevelove, such as jokes about Bertolt Brecht, Kenneth Tynan, and other theatre artists (Gardner 3). Many people—even highly educated ones—may not recognize these references if they have not devoted a significant portion of study to the theatre, and thus the inclusion of these references adds a degree of inaccessibility to the show and adds an additional air of academia to the production. Indeed, while reviewing the 1974 production for *The New York Times*, journalist Paul Gardner wrote that *The Frogs* “requires a smart audience that appreciates the theatrical and poetic send-ups” (3), and this contrasts the commercial, accessible, and farcical style of *Forum*. While the academic nature and environment of the show may have allowed for more exploration,

it also provides explanation for why the show failed in comparison to *Forum*—the show became more complicated and less accessible (both physically and intellectually).

Another crucially relevant point of difference between *Frogs* and *Forum* is the environment of the production and the scenic design. Both of the original productions staged these shows with a unit set of sorts. With *Forum*, director Geroge Abbott oversaw a set design composed of a Roman city street with the exterior of three homes facing the audience that paid appropriate homage to the Roman scaenae frons. The set did not require any scene changes, and it allowed for the relatively low amount of movement within the production (Mordden 50). On the other hand, *The Frogs* took place in the Payne Whitney Gymnasium, or the university swimming pool at Yale. This was a massive space—the swimming pool itself measured a 75-foot length and a 42-foot width, and the gymnasium could sit 2200 people (with 1600 spaces available to audience members for this performance). The actors not only performed in the pool itself, but also used the pool deck, as well as an area set up with platforms in front of a canopied backdrop (Gardner 2). This choice of scenery had a largely artistic and historical motivation—the huge gymnasium closely resembled a Greek theatre where Aristophanes' version of the play would have originally been performed, and actually allowing the frogs to swim in water provided an added depth to the literal storyline and the artistic presentation of the piece (Gardner 2).

This clear motivation did not excuse the chosen environment from intense criticism and devastating complications, however. Some criticized the space for its appearance, describing it as “an idle shimmering forestage” (Gussow 2) and implying that it detracted from the rest of the performance. With regard to complications, one of the most obvious and troubling issues was the terrible acoustical qualities of the gymnasium. Sondheim reflected later how he and Tunick discovered that they could not effectively create rich harmonies for the production due to the fact that the voices in the space echoed so heavily (McDonald 331). Sondheim struggled with more

than just the harmonies, however, and he reportedly commented, “How am I going to write music for an echo chamber?” (Gardner 4) at one point during rehearsals in the gymnasium. Despite Shevelove’s insistence that the bodies of audience members would improve the sound quality, the terrible acoustics of the swimming pool space created trouble both for the writing and the performing of this piece. The logical issues and complications of using the swimming pool space did not end with poor sound quality, however. Beyond acoustics, choreographer Carmen de Lavallade also struggled to teach the swimmers how to dance effectively in the water, and her choreography was also later criticized for being “too confined” (Gussow 2). Furthermore, the amount of splashing and getting in and out of the water caused the performance area to become wet, and this caused many of the performers to slip and fall during the performance (McDonald 320). The amalgamation of all of the complications and negative qualities of this type of staging environment certainly created a distraction and also detracted from the other positive qualities of the production, and this provides another reason for why *The Frogs* proved unsuccessful in contrast to *Forum*, which used a simple set that enhanced the comedy of its script and the performance of its actors.

Finally, the two productions differ in their overall musical composition and in the way that Sondheim’s trademark elements make appearances in the score. In both productions, Sondheim included key elements that reflect the typical description of his scores—for example, as in most of his musicals, repetition appears as a notable element in both *Frogs* and *Forum* (Banfield 119 and McDonald 326). Furthermore, each of the shows also has some characteristic Sondheim elements that are emphasized more than others. In *Forum*, Sondheim includes motifs and parallel structures (Banfield 113), whereas in *Frogs*, Sondheim includes more musical allusions and the absence of resolution (McDonald 328, 330). What matters most, however, is not which specific musical elements Sondheim included in which musical—instead, the most

important thing is how each score respectively impacted the audience members that listened to it.

Sondheim has often said that “content dictates form,” and this is clearly demonstrated in the way that he created the score for both of these productions. What is fascinating, however, is that the form dictated by the content *Forum* results in a score that is much more exciting to audiences and true to the person of Sondheim than the form dictated by the content in *The Frogs*. In *Forum*, the content of the show is extremely farcical and relies heavily on stock characters within the storyline. Because the show is such a strong form of farce, Sondheim felt that he should deviate from the typical form of musical composition that he engaged in previously. Instead of following Hammerstein’s model (as he had previously and would subsequently) that relied on emotional and thematic movement within the songs in a musical, Sondheim instead chose to add more of a disconnect between the songs and the story than typical (Mordden 50-51). Indeed, most of the songs in *Forum* act more as a break from the high-energy, hysterical actions of the libretto, but this choice not only keeps the show from being exhausting, but also makes it much more comical and enjoyable at the same time. Indeed, while the music and story are interconnected to a degree, Sondheim does not link them as intimately as in most of his works—instead, most of the songs serve to warm the audience up to the characters in the show (Mordden 51). Due to the show’s heavy reliance on stock characters, however, this method proves effective, and the score allows the elements of the farce to shine brighter and seem funnier (Banfield 96). Thus, the way that Sondheim deviates from his typical composition within *Forum* not only proceeds directly from the style of the show, but also allows the audience to enjoy the show even further and appreciate the score to a higher degree.

Meanwhile, though the form of the score of *The Frogs* still flows out of the content of the production, the incorporation of this distinct style of score did not land as successfully with audiences. One strong piece of evidence for Sondheim’s adherence to the “content dictates form”

mantra within *The Frogs* is the fact that Sondheim incorporated within his score rhyming and verbal elements like those found in ancient Greek works (McDonald 322). While perhaps not a particularly conspicuous element of the score, this fact demonstrates that Sondheim still worked in a dedicated fashion toward this project, and thus it demonstrates that the failure of the show did not stem from his own lack of effort or of understanding of the production.

An element of the score that flowed from the content of the play and was distinctively less popular, however, was the overarching lack of songs sung by a single or a small handful of characters. Perhaps the most distinctive feature in the score of *The Frogs* compared with the rest of the Sondheim canon is the dominant presence of a chorus (Horowitz 1). Sondheim prefers to write songs for individual characters and typically disdains the use of a chorus, saying that it characterizes a “peasants-on-the-green form of operetta and opera writing, where suddenly everyone is singing the same thought” (Horowitz 1). However, given the fact that *The Frogs* came directly from Greek theatre where the chorus played a huge role and individual characters played much less significant roles than they do today, a heavy emphasis on songs sung by the chorus flows directly out of the content of the play. Nevertheless, an appropriate link between content and form does not guarantee popularity of the score, and it seems that many found the score less engaging because of the dominance of the chorus, as seen in the addition of individual musical numbers for certain characters in the adaptation of *The Frogs* in 2004 (Horowitz 1).

Perhaps Stephen Banfield provides the most insightful summary in comparing these two shows when he comments on *The Frogs* by saying that “far from treating the songs as vaudevillian ‘respites’ from a hectic New Comedy action, as [Sondheim] had in *Forum*, in this obeisance to Old Comedy he builds up what can only be described an authentic world, verbally comic yet ritually strange and impressive through its music, which steers well away from Broadway” (Banfield 53). This divergence from a typical Broadway score helps to explain why

it might not have been as successful as *Forum* or some of Sondheim's other Broadway scores—though both *Forum* and *The Frogs* have a unique score that is innovative, the innovations found in *The Frogs* proved to be much less popular.

In the end, to get a true sense of the development of *Frogs* and of *Forum*, we need look no further than the comments of Stephen Sondheim, who has been cited saying that he believes that *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* is “the best farce ever written” (Banfield 91) yet hardly has one remotely positive thing to say about his experience working on *The Frogs* at Yale in 1974. Indeed, despite the creative ideas and earnest motives behind Shevelove and Sondheim's partnership on *The Frogs*, their efforts largely fell short and resulted in a production that ultimately drowned. Looking not only at the unique challenges that this production faced, but also at the way that it compares with Sondheim's experience working on *Forum* provides a telling look into some of the key factors that may have influenced the demise of the tainted Yale production, such as the difficulty in adapting Aristophanes' work, the academic nature of the play, the subpar performance space, and the different elements of the score. When all of these factors combine, we understand that, despite some specific similarities on a superficial level, *Forum* and *Frogs* constitute very distinct and different shows with opposite fates. Perchance John Given of *The Sondheim Review* provides one of the most accurate and memorable descriptions of the disparate ways that *Frogs* and *Forum* have been received by audiences: “*A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* feels like an old friend, one you can visit years later and still understand exactly where she's coming from. *The Frogs* feels more like your freshman roommate: You got along well enough, but in the end he was just too strange” (Given 1). Perhaps there is a glimmer of hope in the partial redemption of the Sondheim prodigal *The Frogs*, but the original production simply landed as an academic experiment gone awry, particularly when seen next to the astronomical success of *Forum*.

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