

Pausing on a Sunday: What Kind of Secular is the American Musical?

Kathryn Lofton



Still from a [video](#) of Bernadette Peters performing “Sunday,” Stephen Sondheim, 1993.

- 1 Scholarship on the American musical rarely discusses religion save as a spectacularized subject of certain **Bible productions**, of **satire**, or as an ethnic identifier (**Jewish**) for a large number of librettists.¹
- 2 The work of Stephen **Sondheim** (1930-2021) allows a close look at the sound, feeling, and sexuality of the American musical’s secularism.² Of particular focus is this song, central to *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), which follows the assemblage of the **Seurat painting**, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884). Celebrations of Sondheim invariably use this song as the climactic choral assembly. (This performance, held **at Carnegie Hall** on June 10, 1992, is one of many such instances.)
- 3 The musical in which this song appears includes archetypal depictions of the modern artist and his attendant gendered capacities and failures. The song appears as a resolution at the end of both acts. Sondheim would point out: its lyric is a single sentence; it is a description of a process; it includes a word, “forever,” that **he observes** makes him cry.³

Citation Guide

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Notes

1. Henry Bial, *Playing God: The Bible on the Broadway Stage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); Jake Johnson, *Mormons, Musical Theater, and Belonging in America*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

2. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Stephen Sondheim," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, April 7, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Stephen-Sondheim>.

3. Stephen Sondheim, *Look, I Made a Hat: Collected Lyrics (1981-2011) with Attendant Comments, Amplifications, Dogmas, Harangues, Digressions, Anecdotes and Miscellany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 6; James Lapine, dir., *Six by Sondheim*, HBO Documentary, 2013.



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