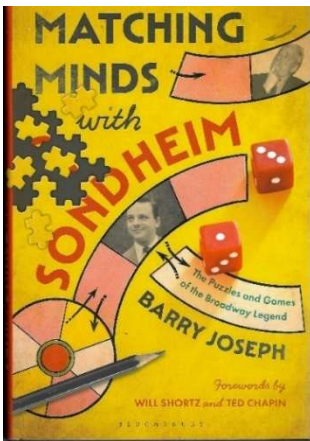


BOOK REVIEW

Matching Minds with Sondheim by Barry Joseph

ISBN 978-1-4930-8583-5; 353pp; hardback; RRP £26.99



There are probably two main audiences for this book. Those that know of Stephen Sondheim's work as a composer and lyricist and are interested in his associated ephemera; and then there are those that know him also through his contribution to the world of crosswords. Both should be well-satisfied with what is a comprehensive and explorative review of Sondheim's love of games and puzzles in all their forms.

The book is divided into five main chapters, supported by a variety of epilogues and appendices, including seven barred thematic cryptics (or 'variety puzzles' as our American colleagues would have them), accompanied by detailed solutions. The chapters each focus on a separate genre of Sondheim's puzzles and games; parlour games, treasure hunts, board games, crosswords and physical puzzles.

Sondheim identified three principles on lyric writing: "Less is More", "Content Dictates Form" and "God is in the Details" – "all in the service of Clarity without which nothing else matters." The author here identifies similar principles in Sondheim's games and puzzles, those of 'generosity' (making the solver feel good about themselves), 'playfulness' (create delight at every opportunity), and 'mentorship' (lead the solver by the hand, to go from what they know, to where they need to get to). I am sure many members will have found puzzles (probably including some in these very pages) that suggested the setter had lost sight of these laudable essentials.

There are many charming anecdotes throughout the book. One that caught my attention was the fact that during the creation of *West Side Story*, Leonard Bernstein wanted to work together with Stephen in the same room, whereas Sondheim's work ethic was very much to work alone. A compromise was struck over their shared love of *The Listener* crossword, which they would eagerly tackle every Thursday together providing a rationale for the collaborative work on the musical that followed.

As well as solving Listener puzzles, Sondheim was a regular submitter to the Ximenes clue-writing competition (scoring 3 VHCs and 14 HCs along the way), as well as a noted compiler in his own right. Sondheim had a total of 42 puzzles published in *The New Yorker* magazine between 1968 and 1969, many of which can now be found online. This is fortunate, as the only edition of his long out-of-print spiral bound book, "*Stephen Sondheim Crossword Puzzles*" is available online currently for US\$3,000. So rare in fact is this 'holy grail' from the Sondheim memorabilia, that the compiler himself was unable to secure a copy for his own collection during his lifetime.

Readers of Derek Harrison's excellent book, *The Apex Letters*, will recognise the interactions between Sondheim and Apex as well as two of the seven puzzles presented here (unfortunately, also replicating the same errors in the Sweeney Todd one).

One of the joys of this type of book is finding nuggets that inspire you to go off exploring different tangents. For example, I was well aware of the works of several US cognoscenti in our field – the likes of Will Shortz, Eugene Maleska, Emily Cox and Henry Rathvon (not least from their appearances in our own pages), and have recently become more familiar with puzzles by Trip Payne and Henry Hook, but there is much joy in discovering an untapped vein, such as Frank Lewis and Mark Harpin, the latter being particularly admired by Sondheim.

One epilogue details the 'great dispersal' of Sondheim's collections including his games and puzzles through a ten-hour auction by Doyle's on 18 June 2024, grossing more than US\$1.5 million, of which nearly US\$400,000 related to his collection of around 1,800 games and puzzles.

Another appendix provides the rules for some of the parlour games outlined in the first chapter, which should provide more than enough alternative party entertainment, for those wishing to host their own Sondheimian games nights.

There is also much sound advice provided in the appendix titled, "Twelve Tips for Clue Crafters", including the delightful mantra specific to a particular puzzle, (but which should surely be adopted more widely), "Don't use Google. It will not be as helpful as you think." Similarly salient guidance for 'fairness' and against the inclusion of excess verbiage comes with, "Every word has to work to solve the clue."

Even if your primary interest in this book, is simply the section on crosswords, that should be enough on its own to warrant purchasing a copy, but the piquing of curiosity will most assuredly lead you to other areas of Stephen Sondheim's fascinating enthusiasm for our, and similar, pastimes, where he was clearly, also a maestro.

Keith Williams - December 2025

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