

The *Follies* score plays out in two distinct musical idioms. There are book songs (Stephen Sondheim refers to them as character songs<sup>1</sup>), sung by the protagonists Ben, Phyllis, Buddy and Sally; and there are the pastiches, affectionate tributes to American popular song between the two World Wars. The book songs were, in the context of 1970s Broadway, highly innovative. Nobody else was writing anything like them for musical theatre: conversational vocal lines poised between recitative and aria, with inventive accompaniments instead of humdrum oom-pahs and oom-pah-pahs. Sondheim's songs pointed to a new direction for young composers who, if they'd wanted to try their hand in commercial theatre, had hitherto found themselves hemmed in by nostalgic Broadway traditionalism, visceral rock, or short-breathed pop. Here instead was a way forward which offered musical intelligence and artistic ambition. Sondheim had hinted at what he could do in earlier shows such as *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Anyone Can Whistle* and *Company*, but the book songs of *Follies* — *Don't Look At Me*, *In Buddy's Eyes*, *Waiting for the Girls Upstairs*, *Too Many Mornings*, *The Right Girl*, *Could I Leave You?* — were something else again. They were sung monologues, dialogues and sometimes whole scenes, stuff for actors to get their teeth into. Admirers invoked Schubert, Schumann and Wolf, Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell, as well as contemporary playwrights such as Stoppard, Pinter, and Miller. The term 'musical dramatist' was applied to him<sup>2</sup> in an attempt to capture his ability to unite musical and dramatic forms. There were detractors, of course, such as Clive Barnes of the *New York Times*, who asserted that Sondheim's "words are a joy to listen to, even when his music is sending shivers of indifference up your spine."<sup>3</sup> But separating the strands of Sondheim's work does it an injustice. What is extraordinary is how he brings them together, making a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. *Waiting for the Girls Upstairs* is a superb example: a wealth of dramatic information within a satisfying musical structure.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Finishing the Hat*, Virgin Books 2010, p.200

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Ned Sherrin, sleeve notes *Side by Side by Sondheim* London cast album RCA Victor 1976.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, 5th April 1971