A Little Feast

A retrospective of Stephen Sondheim's best work shines brightly at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. by Lisa Schwarzbaum

These are desperate times; "a vengeful big-
boy tale an eminently practical baker before the
two cook up a scheme to grind murdered ten-sional
customers into profitable meat pies. in Stephen Sondheim’s crowning musical masterpiece, Sweeney Todd. Desperate, yes, but remarkable times, too. Now,
time to explain the striking juxtaposition of color-coded terror alerts emanating from Washington, D.C., by day with the concentrated explosions of color and light bursting from the Kennedy Center in that same town this night! The Sondheim Celebration now under way through August presents six of the great composer-lyricist’s theater mastering, spanning nearly a quarter century: Sweeney Todd (1979) retreads with Company (1970) and Sunday in the Park With George (1984) through June, while Merrily We Roll Along (1981), Passion (1994), and A Little Night Music (1973) move in between July and August. Kennedy Center president Michael M. Krzec has said he first had the idea more than a decade ago to explore the work of a single theater artist, and there’s something especially right, and startling, about this way of honoring this 72-year-old American theatrical master in his town at this time. Isn’t it rich? The Kennedy Center celebration is a meditation on Sondheim’s profound and revolutionary contributions to the form and content of musical theater—his subject matter powered by feelings, his charac-
ters fractured by conflicting desires, his music and lyrics prob-
ing, commenting, questioning. But in these desperate times, this retrospect is above all a moment to be grateful for the concentration of so much Ameri-
can theatrical creativity and resourcefulness, marshaled in the service of an uplifting and joyous communal event.

Part the waving flags and the nervous publicists, it turns out, there’s a bewitching, audience-
pleasingolt being committed in the nation’s capital. Sondheim’s got company! None are well-
known—John Stamos Mitchell and Christian Borle, to name two, play harbor and baker in Sweeney. But most of them are
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