

# The Music Theatre International Study Guide For



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## SUNDAY in the PARK with GEORGE

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Music and Lyrics by **Stephen Sondheim**

Book by **James Lapine**



# Table Of Contents

<b>About</b> Sunday In The Park With George . . . . .	3
<b>The Characters in</b> Sunday In The Park With George . . . . .	5
<b>Plot Synopsis</b> . . . . .	7
<b>Themes and Topics to Explore</b> (Questions and Assignments) . . . . .	13
The Visual Artist . . . . .	13
The Artist in Society . . . . .	14
Impressionism . . . . .	15
Modern Art . . . . .	15
The Artist and Interpersonal Relationships . . . . .	16
The Painting . . . . .	17
Family Trees . . . . .	17
<i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> as a Theatrical Metaphor for Seurat’s Masterpiece . . . . .	18
<i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> as a Metaphor for the Struggles of Contemporary Broadway Authors and Composers . . . . .	18
<i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> as a Musical Theatre Work . . . . .	19
The Musical Theatre Elements of <i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> . . . . .	20
Create Your Own Musical . . . . .	21
Critical Analysis . . . . .	21
<b>Appendix</b> . . . . .	22
About the Creation of <i>Sunday in the Park with George</i> . . . . .	22
About the Creators . . . . .	22
Impressionism . . . . .	24
Seurat . . . . .	25
<b>Resources</b> . . . . .	27



## **About SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE**

In his paintings more than a hundred years ago, Georges Seurat challenged his audience to experience the art of painting from a new perspective. In their musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, which opened on May 2, 1984 at the Booth Theatre in New York, composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim and librettist James Lapine created an equally challenging concept for their audience.

*Sunday in the Park with George*, which is a show about a visual artist created by theatre artists, is a theatrical reconstruction/fantasy of the work of Georges Seurat. Among the issues the show addresses are the nature of the creative process, the limitations placed on interpersonal relationships by artistic commitments, and the danger of artists responding to fads rather than respecting their own impulses. The show examines the creation of a single painting, Seurat's masterpiece, "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." This huge work, which is composed entirely of thousands of tiny dots in red, blue, yellow and their complements, took the artist two years to complete. Considered one of the world's greatest paintings, it has hung for many years in the Art Institute of Chicago. It depicts a crowd of bourgeois 19th-century Parisians who represent all ages and stations in life as well as a wide variety of relationships. The artist has portrayed them in a park in shimmering color and light under parasols, bustles and high hats.

The musical *Sunday in the Park with George*, which is entirely fictitious, used Seurat's life as its inspiration. The first act begins with a blank canvas and ends with a remarkable recreation of his masterpiece. During this act, which takes place on the island in 1884, we see the authors' vision of how Seurat created his painting and share their conjectures about who the Parisians strolling through the island park on the Seine might have been. We follow the troubled relationship between George and his mistress Dot, watching it unravel as George explores a new art form, pointillism. His exploration reaches its zenith as he creates his painting of a typical Sunday in the life of his characters. At the end of the act we see the finished painting.

In Act II the authors examine how Seurat's painting has impacted future generations and how art, like love, can reverberate through time. We are in New York in 1984. The painter's great-grandson, a modern day conceptual artist and multi-media sculptor also named George, is in a state of creative bankruptcy. Although he is a consummate salesman of his own work, the process of making art has lost its meaning for him. His faltering artistic vision and confidence are restored after a visit to La Grande Jatte where the impressionistic setting that inspired his great-grandfather's work has been

replaced by cubist architecture. George, the contemporary artist, is encouraged by the spirit of his great-grandmother Dot to stop worrying about what others think and “just keep moving on.” By connecting with his own past, he is able to find a direction for his future.

# **The Characters in SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE**

## **ACT I**

GEORGE - An artist

DOT - His mistress

AN OLD LADY - George's mother

HER NURSE

JULES - An artist

YVONNE - Jules' wife

A BOATMAN

CELESTE #1 - A shop girl

CELESTE #2 - Another shop girl

LOUISE - The little daughter of Jules and Yvonne

FRANZ - The coachman to Jules and Yvonne

FRIEDA - The cook to Jules and Yvonne

A SOLDIER

MR. & MRS.- An American couple

LOUIS - A baker

A WOMAN WITH BABY CARRIAGE, A MAN WITH BICYCLE, A HORNPLAYER,

A BOY BATHING IN THE RIVER, A YOUNG MAN SITTING ON THE BANK,

A MAN LYING ON THE BANK

## **ACT II**

GEORGE - An artist

MARIE - His grandmother

DENNIS - A technician

BOB GREENBERG - The museum director

NAOMI EISEN - A composer

HARRIET PAWLING - A patron of the arts

BILLY WEBSTER - Harriet Pawling's friend

BLAIR DANIELS - An art critic

ELAINE - George's former wife.

A PHOTOGRAPHER, A MUSEUM ASSISTANT, A VISITING CURATOR, ARTISTS,  
THE MUSEUM'S PUBLICIST, A WAITRESS



## Plot Synopsis

### ACT I

George, a tall artist with a dark beard who wears a soft felt hat, enters an empty white space which is framed around the edges. He sits at an easel with a drawing pad and box of chalk. He turns to the audience and says, "White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: bring order to the whole through design. Composition. Balance. Light. And harmony." As he speaks, the scene is transformed into a grassy-green expanse of park. The sun rises as the cut-out form of a couple appears.

Dot, a young woman who is in love with George, enters in 19th century dress. George turns her profile towards the audience and begins to sketch her. She fidgets and complains about being uncomfortable holding her pose and asks why they had to get up so early. George replies that they had to catch the light and she moans. She obviously wants him to pay attention to her and he is absorbed only in his painting. When George erases a tree from his pad, it disappears from the stage. We realize that he is creating the picture we see onstage on his pad.

An old woman and her nurse appear. The old woman is unhappy that her favorite tree has disappeared from the park. The nurse tells her that the structure they see in the distance is the tallest structure in the world, a tower (the Eiffel Tower) which is being built for an International Exposition.

Dot tells George he is the topic of gossip because he has been seen drawing monkeys at the zoo. She sings "Sunday in the Park with George," expressing her restlessness at being a model and her discontent with their relationship. However, she acknowledges his great skill as a painter. He ignores her words, giving her orders as if she were an inanimate object.

George observes the old lady and her nurse; several young boys on a riverbank; and Franz, a servant who stops to speak to the nurse. He extends his right arm and frames them into a frozen image. Jules, another artist, and his wife Yvonne enter and view George's composition. They sing "No Life," a song which is highly critical of George's concept for his painting. As they finish the characters in the "painting" come back to life and leave the stage. Jules and Yvonne exchange idle chatter with George and avoid commenting on his work. They leave and Dot expresses her disdain for them. George says that Jules is a fine painter. George sends Dot off. She reminds him they have plans to go to the Follies. He attempts to draw the old lady's picture and we learn that she is his mother. She says he must draw her another day and does not appear to recognize him.

George and Dot are in his studio. Dot is musing over the fact George paints all night while she would rather dream. George is working on the huge canvas that will become "A Sunday Afternoon on the Grand Jatte." He sings "Color and Light" lost in his world of order, design, composition, tone, form, symmetry, and balance. Dot comments that none of her clothes seem to fit her correctly and wishes that her features and body were more appealing. She longs to be in the Follies. George continues to commune with the characters in his painting and to pay little attention to Dot. He becomes aware of her waiting for him only when he smells her perfume in the air. He wonders what she sees when she gazes in the mirror. She wonders what he sees in the painting. They engage each other's attention and agree that they could look at each other forever. The rare moment of connection passes as George refuses to go to the Follies with Dot because he must finish painting a hat. She stalks out.

On another Sunday in the park, George sketches a boatman who stands near a cut-out of a black dog. The old lady and the nurse have been joined by two girls named Celeste #1 and Celeste #2. As George talks with the boatman, Dot passes through the scene with Louis the Baker. The women onstage gossip about the fact that Dot has obviously taken up with another man because she is pregnant and needs someone with an income to care for her. Jules and Yvonne appear and Yvonne joins the women in the song "Gossip." They gossip about George's affairs with other women and his peculiar behavior. The Boatman responds by calling the gossiping women Sunday hypocrites. Jules says that there is talk of including George's paintings in an important group show. He and Yvonne both say "never."

Dot enters and sits down to study her reading lesson. The Boatman speaks gruffly to Louise, who is Jules and Yvonne's little girl. George corrects him. Enraged, the boatman leaves. George proceeds to sketch the dog.

George speaks to Dot, who has moved out of his studio. He says it has "been quiet there." Louis appears with a treat he has baked for Dot. George steps away quickly. Dot and Louis leave. George sits down and resumes painting the dog. George sings "The Day Off" in the dog's voice expressing the dog's point of view of a Sunday in the park. The Nurse, Franz, Frieda, the boatman, the soldiers, the two girls named Celeste, Yvonne, Louis, Jules and Louis join in the song. The two girls named Celeste begin fishing. They soon attract the attention of two soldiers, one of whom is a cutout. Franz, the servant and Frieda, the cook, sit on the grass. The little girl pesters them and they send her away, insisting it is Sunday and they are not working. Jules and George discuss George's work. Jules tells George to forget experimentation and to spend his time meeting prospective buyers and enjoying life instead. The boatman tells George that artists can't really know the people they paint. He accuses George of painting what is true with one eye and what suits him with the other.

Dot enters and sings "Everybody Loves Louis," explaining that she has found a good man. Louis is not what she had in mind, but she is choosing him. George has George. She and Louis need each other. Mr. and Mrs., two American tourists, appear with pastries. They decide they hate France and only want to go home. However, they want to take a pastry chef with them.

George sits at his easel, painting and reflecting on Dot's decision to leave him. He sings "Finishing The Hat" realizing that he can never completely give himself over to a relationship without having his art get in the way. Yet he yearns for someone who could understand his obsession.

Dot comes to ask George for the painting of her powdering herself. She says that she is expecting their baby in two months and plans to marry Louis. Jules and Yvonne arrive. As George and Jules look at George's work, Yvonne and Dot, who have always had little use for one another, converse about their respective situations. George attempts to excite Jules about his revolutionary use of color. He has painted in red and blue, yet the eye perceives violet. His colors are mixed by the eye, not the palette. Jules accuses him of trying to be a scientist instead of a painter. Jules says he knows George wants to be included in the next group show. He says he will have to consider that possibility.

In his disappointment that Jules has not immediately seen the merit in his work, George forgets about Dot's waiting in the next room for him until she reappears. She tells him that she and Louis are going to America. He says she will not like it there and returns to his painting. She is outraged at his lack of a caring response to the news of her plan to leave France. They sing "We Do Not Belong Together." She implores him to ask her not to go. He cannot do that on her terms. She says she must move on. She leaves him standing alone in a spotlight.

George draws the old lady in the park. She now seems loving and warm towards him. They share memories, but they are not the same memories. They each see their shared past differently. They sing "Beautiful" in which she longs for all the things that are disappearing from the landscape of her life and he tries to revise the existing world on his canvas.

The soldier and Celeste #2 enter. They are joined by Mr. and Mrs. He carries a huge steamer trunk. She carries an armload of famous paintings. They are followed by Louis and Dot, who carries her baby, Marie. Dot brings Marie to George. She again asks for the painting he did of her. He says he has repainted it with another model. He refuses to look at his child, saying Marie now belongs to Louis. Dot starts to leave, unable to speak. George says he is sorry. Dot and Louis exit.

George's mother says she has worried about him all his life because he was "always in some other place—seeing something no one else could see." He says he has a new woman in his life now and she says no matter who the woman in his life may be, she is always the same woman. She urges him to "connect, George. Connect."

Jules and Frieda the cook appear. They are looking for a spot in the park where they can share a moment of stolen passion.

The two girls named Celeste and the soldier appear. Yvonne, who is searching for her daughter Louise interrupts a rendezvous between Franz and the nurse. Louise reports that she discovered her father, Jules, and Frieda together. Yvonne accuses Jules of being unfaithful with Frieda. A fight ensues between Jules, Yvonne, Franz, and Frieda. Jules fires Franz and Frieda. Everyone else gets involved in fighting in the middle of the stage. George and the old lady watch.

George says "order" and the everyone begins to take positions on stage at his direction. He has ultimate power over them. As he says "design...tension...balance...harmony," they create the picture we know as "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." George adjusts trees, cut-outs, and people on the stage/canvas to create a perfect picture. The company sings "Sunday" describing the world inside the picture. George rushes about making small adjustments. On the final chord, the completed canvas flies in painted on a scrim. The lights go down slowly as the image of the characters fades behind the painting with George standing in front.

## **ACT TWO**

We return to the entire company on stage in the painting as we left them. They sing "It's Hot Up Here," a tense review of the miseries they are each experiencing frozen in position on a canvas. They leave the stage one by one, exchanging their reactions to George's sudden death.

The lights change and we are in a different world. It is 1984 and we have travelled to the auditorium in the museum where George's painting now hangs. George, a contemporary artist, enters pushing Marie, his grandmother, in a wheel chair. Dennis, George's technical assistant, pushes in a control console.

George, the artist of 1984, is an inventor-sculptor. An immense white machine rolls on which is his post-modern invention, Chromolume # 7. George explains that he has been commissioned to do this work in commemoration of Georges Seurat's painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte." George and his grandmother review the history of Georges Seurat. Then the Chromolume # 7 is activated. Music swells. Brilliant shafts of strobe light appear. Colors fill the stage creating a pointillist

effect. The machine begins to produce images from the painting when it suddenly explodes. George explains that there is an electrical problem. "No electricity, no art."

Marie and George resume their narration as the Chromolume resumes. Marie reveals that she believes Seurat is her real father. She displays the small red book that Dot used to write in as proof. The Chromolume sends lasers bursting through the audience.

The painting "A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" flies in. We are at the museum reception honoring George.

The guests include Bob Greenberg, the museum director; Naomi Eisen, a composer; Harriet Pawling, a patron of the arts; Billy Webster, Naomi's friend; Charles Redmond, a visiting curator; Alex, an artist; Betty, another artist; Lee Randolph, the museum's publicist; and Blair Daniels, an art critic. They argue among themselves about the validity of the Chromolume as art. George networks with the crowd, singing "Putting It Together." He appears to excel at the part of being an artist that his great-grandfather did very poorly. He is an expert at the "art of making art." As he moves from one group to another, he replaces himself with a cut-out likeness.

George's former wife Elaine appears at Marie's side. Marie tells some of the guests that she and George plan a trip to France where he will do a presentation on La Grande Jatte with the Chromolume. The art critic, Blair Daniels, begins to lecture George about his lack of originality and failure to move beyond the Chromolume concept.

Blair and Marie talk about the Seurat painting. Marie informs Blair that the shape commonly thought to be a baby carriage is actually Louis' waffle iron. Marie tells Elaine that there are only two things in life that are worthwhile to leave behind: children and art. Elaine tells George that she thinks Marie is tiring and will take her to the hotel. They embrace fondly. Marie, alone in front of the painting sings "Children and Art." George joins her and she continues stressing the importance of family. Elaine wheels Marie off. George stares at the painting and repeats the old lady's words from Act I, "connect George. Connect."

George and Dennis are on the Island of Grande Jatte. It is now covered with high rise buildings. The tree where the old lady loved to sit is all that remains of the old landscape. As they discuss the installation of the Chromolume, Dennis says that he is quitting his work with George because he wants to do something new. George says that he too needs that in his life. He wants to create art that he cares about.

We learn that Marie has died. George has brought her red book with him. Dennis leaves and George begins to read the notes in the back of the book. He sings "Lesson #8." "See George remember how George used to be. Stretching his vision in every

direction. See George attempting to see a connection. When all he can see is maybe a tree—the family tree.” He continues reading “George is aground. George has outgrown what he can do.” Dot appears.

Dot says George is reading her book. She speaks to him as if he were her lover, George. She thanks him for all he tried to teach her and asks him about his work. He tells her he has nothing to say in his work and she tells him that he has to stop blocking himself and “Move On.” Suddenly Dot and George are singing together, completing the love song that they were never able to finish in Act I. She gives George of 1984 the power of his great-grandfather to explore his own vision.

The old lady appears and asks George if the island is what he expected. He replies that the air is rich and full of light. The old lady leaves and George begins to recite his great-grandfather George’s words, “Order. Design. Tension. Composition. Balance. and Light.” Dot helps him to read the word “harmony.” The characters from the original painting stroll in among the new buildings that represent the present. They stroll off. Dot leaves as a blank white canvas descends. George says “White. A blank page or canvas. His favorite. . . so many possibilities.”

## Themes and Topics to Explore

Our study guide includes a wide-ranging list of themes and topics which are suggested by issues raised in *Sunday in the Park with George*. Avenues for exploring each theme and topic are suggested in the form of *Questions* - designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the shows, and *Assignments* - designed to be researched and written out of class.

### The Visual Artist

#### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Composer-lyricist Stephen Sondheim has said, “I care a lot about art and the artist. The major thing I wanted to do in the show was to enable anyone who is not an artist to understand what hard work art is.” Do you think the authors of *Sunday in the Park with George* accomplished this goal?
- What elements of craft does a visual artist have in common with a musician or dramatist? How is a painting different from a play or musical composition? How is a painting the same as a play or musical composition?
- How has the plight of the artist changed between Georges Seurat’s day and his great-grandson’s time? How has it stayed the same? Seurat is portrayed as a poor artist who would have a hard time supporting a family. How do contemporary visual artists make their living? If you wanted to be a painter today, how would you support yourself?
- Seurat is depicted as attempting to forge a technique which was viewed with suspicion and provoked anger from his contemporaries. Why do you think his experimentation produced this response?
- Why are artists sometimes ignored in their own time and then greatly admired in later eras?
- George, the artist in 1984, works with other collaborators in creating his art while Georges Seurat is very much a loner. Do you think Georges Seurat could have been an effective collaborator?
- What contemporary art forms in the visual and performing arts are collaborative? What do you think the advantages of collaboration might be? The drawbacks?
- George’s mother says she has always been concerned because he seems to be in “some other place seeing something no one else can see.” Is this a state common to all artists?

## ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Pick an artist from any period in art history. Learn about his or her life. Look at pictures of his or her paintings. Select a painting you particularly like. Learn everything about the painting that you can.
- George, the artist in 1984, in Act II builds up his public image “dot by dot” with persistent self-publicizing to guarantee the support of patrons for his expensive compositions. How does this compare to the situation of George the artist in Act I? How does it impact George in 1984?
- Compare the negative response to Seurat’s work when it was introduced to a similar response received by another innovation at any point in art history.
- How does George, the artist in 1984, reawaken and stretch his artistic vision in Act II?
- In the musical, the character of the boatman argues with Seurat, Dot is constantly protesting his using her for a model, and other characters voice similar complaints. What is the relationship between an artist and his models? Does he care about them or see them as fodder for his compositions? How do artists in other art forms use other people in a similar way?
- George is called to task by an art critic in Act II for repeating himself. To what degree do art critics impact the careers of contemporary artists? Was this also true in the time of Georges Seurat?

## The Artist in Society

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Is being an artist as important and respected a job as being a lawyer or physician? Should it be?
- Seurat chronicled the life of middle-class people in his work. In the days before photography, how else could a visual sense of a way of life be recorded?
- Georges Seurat was criticized for painting the common people by his fellow artists? Why do you think this was the case?
- Is depicting the social truth of a society in order to preserve it a responsibility of the artist in today’s world?
- What can a work of art tell us about a society that a film or videotape cannot?
- Does the role of social recorder and commentator remain a valid role for an artist? Is playing such a role an artist’s responsibility or should art be merely decorative?



### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- In recent years there has been much controversy about the role of the National Endowment for the Arts making judgments about the suitability of art for public funding. Research these controversies and discuss whether you think such judgments constitute censorship. If so, is this right or wrong? How do you think Seurat would have reacted to such censorship?
- Should the government support the arts? Why? Why not?
- Explore the history of artists who have used their art as a forum for social comment. Choose one of these artists and research their lives. Did they pay a price for their social comment?
- Explore a contemporary artist or photographer who comments on our society through their art.
- If all the visual artists were to disappear overnight from our society, how would the society be impacted? How would you personally be impacted? Would your answers also apply to the sudden disappearance of all theatre artists? Dance artists? Musical artists?
- The museum director in Act II speaks of building a high-rise apartment house over the museum to make money. Is this kind of activity really happening? How are museums supported in America? Are they in trouble?

## Impressionism

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Research Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Jean Baptiste Armand Guillaumin, Berthe Morisot, Paul Gauguin or Mary Cassatt. Describe their contributions to impressionism as a form. How did their lives or artistic vision differ from or complement Seurat? Does this artist's life story or any portion of it suggest a dramatic work, musical theatre piece, or film? Describe a work that could be created from this artist's life.
- Research the history of impressionism. Where did Seurat fit into this movement? How was he received by his fellow impressionists?

## Modern Art

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is modern art?
- What type of artist is George, the artist of 1984, in Act II? Do you consider him to be an artist on the same terms that his great-grandfather George was? Why or why not?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore some recent movements in modern art. Report on them, describing how they are taking the form forward in time.
- Explore the life of a modern artist whose work interests you. Has their work been easily accepted?
- Can you find actual parallels to the Chromolume concept in the modern art of the early 1980's?
- George's aged mother describes the Eiffel Tower which she watches being built as an ugly representative of the fast-arriving modern age in design. George replies that "All things are beautiful, mother. Pretty is what changes. What the eye arranges is beautiful." What does he mean?

## The Artist and Interpersonal Relationships

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is the meaning of the fact that Seurat appears almost oblivious of the two people closest to him, his mother and Dot?
- Seurat had a problem giving emotional support to others because of his involvement with his work. Do you think the problem of giving personal relationships as much time and attention as art is a problem with most artists?
- What blocked George's relationship with Dot? When do they finally understand each other?
- What does George mean in Act I when he says "I am not hiding behind my canvas. I am living in it"?
- Dot expresses unhappiness with herself because George will not pay attention to her. She dreams of ways she could begin to matter more. Have you ever blamed yourself for someone else's treatment of you?
- Is Dot blameless in the failure of her relationship with George? Are they equally unaware of each other's needs?
- Are there other kinds of professions that produce the kind of obsession which drives George?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- At the beginning and ending of the show, George is embracing not a person but an empty white canvas that he loves for its many possibilities. Comment.
- Analyze the song "Finishing The Hat." What do we learn about George in this song? What does he mean when he sings about how he "watches the rest of the world from the window?"

## The Painting

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- The painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island La Grande Jatte” has become part of the consciousness of everyone who has seen it in the past century. Discuss how painters live on through their work.

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Write your own story based on the painting “A Sunday Afternoon on the Island La Grande Jatte.” Research the history of the painting. Read a biography of Seurat to learn more about his process in creating it. How was it received in its own time? Under what circumstances was it sold to an American museum?
- Research pointillism as a technique. Find other examples of works created with the technique. Explain the optical theory behind it.
- Pointillism was an example of scientific principles gaining over romantic principles. How else was this happening in Seurat’s day?

## Family Trees

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- George, the artist in 1984, is greatly changed when he begins to connect with his family roots. How much do you know about your ancestors? How did you learn what you know about them?
- What do you find that you have in common with these ancestors?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- The contemporary George’s discovery of family gives him a sense of oneness with his personal past and a sense of direction for his future. Can you think of a time when something like this has happened in your own life? Describe the experience.
- Discuss your ancestors with members of your family. Ask if there was someone on your family tree who shared your own interests. Write an imaginary description of this person in the setting of the time during which they lived.
- What is the importance of tradition? How does it contribute to contemporary George’s expanded awareness of himself?
- When George’s mother speaks of the tower as an encroaching menace to the tree, what does the tree symbolize? What will be lost when the tree is gone?

## **Sunday in the Park with George as a Theatrical Metaphor for Seurat's Masterpiece**

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- What is a metaphor?
- Discuss the fact that the characters in the piece are rather one-dimensional and in some cases are portrayed by cut-outs made of cardboard. Are we meant to care about these characters? Why or why not?
- Why are we moved at the end of Act I? Because of the plot developments? Because we have seen harmony created? Because we have seen an artist accomplish his vision?

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Discuss the possibility that the characters in the musical, like the characters in the painting, were seen by their creators as little more than forms to be manipulated.
- Discuss the ways in which the entire musical is a metaphor for the sea of floating dots that make up the painting itself. How do the creators of the musical use music and language in ways that, like Seurat's brushstrokes, are meaningful only when perceived in a thoughtful observer's mind?
- The boatman tells George that the artist portrays his characters both in terms of what is true and what suits the artist. How have the authors of the musical used the characters in the painting to both reveal what is true and what suits their needs?
- Imagine you are Seurat. You come back to life long enough to see a performance of *Sunday in the Park with George*. Write a letter to a friend describing your feelings.

## **Sunday in the Park with George as a Theatrical Metaphor for the Struggles of Contemporary Broadway Authors and Composers**

### QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- Compare the difficulties of George, the artist in 1984, to the challenges confronting musical theatre creators. What problems do they share in the areas of collaboration, huge budgets, and the need to compromise because of factors in the current marketplace?

## ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- The authors of the musical try to make the case that the artistic passion of cerebral artists such as George Seurat and *George*, the artist in 1984, can be as powerful as the sweepingly sentimental passion of romantic painting or more conventional musicals. Are you personally reached as powerfully by a musical like *Sunday in the Park with George* as you are by a more conventional musical? Why or why not?
- Trace the career of Stephen Sondheim as an American musical theatre artist. How does it compare to Seurat's experience as an artist?

**Sunday in the Park with George as a Musical Theatre Work**

## QUESTIONS/DISCUSSION IDEAS

- How is this work different from the Broadway musicals which preceded it?
- There is no dance in this musical. Why? Do you agree with the author's choice? Where would you have placed dance in the musical? Why?
- Re-tell the story that this musical tells. Is the story the most important thing in this musical? Why or why not? Are themes more important than characters or plot?
- Which is more important in this musical, visual and musical imagery or drama?

## ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Explore Stephen Sondheim's musical references to the modern French composers whose revolution in musical paralleled that of Seurat and the other post-impressionists in art.
- How does Sondheim capture the sense of Seurat's painting style in musical rhythms?
- Seurat used 11 basic colors. Stephen Sondheim used repeated musical motifs and key words and phrases throughout the work to create an aural picture of Seurat's color scheme and technique. Find examples of this in the musical. (For example, the words "connection," "move on," "Sunday," "tree," "color and light" and the repeated musical phrases that travel with them.)
- Trace George and Dot's continuing love song throughout the show by finding fragments of it in the songs "Sunday in the Park With George," "Color and Light," "We Do Not Belong Together," finally in "Move On" at the end of Act II. How are the themes of their relationship threaded through a series of scenes covering one hundred years? Listen for other such examples of threaded themes in the piece.

- How do the songs “Putting It Together” and “Finishing the Hat” relate to each other?
- What are some of the ways this musical blurs the lines between show music and serious music? Between entertainment and art?

## The Musical Theatre Elements of Sunday in the Park with George

Look at each musical segment of the show.

- Discuss the manner in which each musical segment contributes to the narrative, mood, and presentation of characters in the show.
- What do we learn about the world in which the action is taking place in the musical segment?
- What do we learn about the larger themes of the show in this musical segment?
- Can you find another place in the show where a musical segment might have been placed? What would it be about? What kind of music would it have?

## Musical Elements

### ACT I

“Sunday In The Park With George”  
“No Life”  
“Color and Light”  
“Gossip”  
“The Day Off”  
“Everybody Loves Louis”  
“Finishing The Hat”  
“We Do Not Belong Together”  
“Beautiful”  
“Sunday”

### ACT II

“It’s Hot Up Here”  
“Chromolume #7”  
“Putting It Together”  
“Children and Art”  
“Lesson # 8”  
“Move On “  
“Sunday” (Reprise)

## Create Your Own Musical

- Select a painting that you like. Write a story about it.
- Plan a musical theatre work based on your story.
- What role would music play in your work? What kind of music will your characters sing?
- Will your work include dance? How will dance be used?
- How will your musical be relevant to today? Where will it be set in terms of time and place? Would you use a contemporary setting or set it in its own time and place?
- Outline your musical scene by scene.
- Make a list of the characters.
- Make a list of musical segments you might include.
- Try to write the first scene.
- Try to write a lyric or melody for one of the musical segments.

## Critical Analysis

### ASSIGNMENTS/RESEARCH AND WRITING PROJECTS

- Write a review of a performance of *Sunday in the Park with George*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:
  1. Did the show hold your interest? Why?
  2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience? Was there a narrator? What was the dialogue like?
  3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a single story or multiple stories? How did the multiple stories connect? Was anything about the story unexpected? How did the show begin and end?
  4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
  5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add to the meaning of the show?
  6. Discuss the effectiveness of the performers.
  7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
  8. Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

## Appendix

The following background material on the creative team who wrote *Sunday in the Park with George*; the process of creating the show; Georges Seurat; impressionism; and the resource lists are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

### About the Creation of SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

*Sunday in the Park with George* was the first collaboration between James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim. Initially the team was exploring the concept of a show based on a theme and variations rather than a linear story. They searched for an existing image on which to base their theme and variations and settled on Seurat's painting which seemed to be the setting for a play with the missing figure of the artist as the main character. As the work evolved, a narrative was suggested by Seurat's life and the characters on the canvas.

A workshop of the show was presented in October, 1983, at Playwright's Horizons, an off-Broadway theatre dedicated to supporting the work of promising playwrights. The show was then produced by the Shubert Organization, Emanuel Azenberg, and Playwright's Horizons on Broadway where it ran for 540 performances.

*Sunday in the Park with George* was nominated for 10 Tony Awards and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

### About the Creators

STEPHEN SONDHEIM wrote the music and lyrics for *Assassins* (1991), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Sunday In The Park With George* (1984), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Pacific Overtures* (1976), *The Frogs* (1974), *A Little Night Music* (1973), *Follies* (1971; revised in London, 1987), *Company* (1970), *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964) and *A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Forum* (1962), as well as the lyrics for *Do I Hear A Waltz?* (1965), *Gypsy* (1959), *West Side Story* (1957), and additional lyrics for *Candide* (1973). *Side By Side By Sondheim* (1976), *Marry Me A Little* (1981) and *You're Gonna Love Tomorrow* (originally presented as *A Stephen Sondheim Evening* on March 3, 1983) are anthologies of his work as composer and lyricist. He composed songs for the films *Dick Tracy* (Academy Award, 1990) and *Reds* (1981), the score for *Stavisky* (1974), songs for the television production "Evening Primrose" (1966), co-authored the film *The Last of Sheila* (1973) and provided incidental music for Broadway's *Twigs* (1971), *Invitation to a March* (1961)



and *The Girls of Summer* (1956). He won Tony awards for Best Score for a Musical for *Into the Woods*, *Sweeney Todd*, *A Little Night Music*, *Follies* and *Company*. All of these shows won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, as did *Pacific Overtures* and *Sunday in the Park with George*, the latter also receiving the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1985.

Mr. Sondheim was born and raised in New York City. He graduated from Williams College, winning the Hutchinson Prize for Music Composition. After graduation he studied theory and composition with Milton Babbitt. He is on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, the national association of playwrights, composers and lyricists, having served as its president from 1973 until 1981, and in 1983 was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1990 he was appointed the first Visiting Professor of Contemporary Theatre at Oxford University.

JAMES LAPINE co-conceived with William Finn and directed *Falsettos* for which they won the Tony Award (Best Book) in 1992. In 1990 *Falsettoland*, the second part of *Falsettos*, won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical. In 1988 Mr. Lapine won the Tony for the book of *Into The Woods*, as well as the Drama Desk Award (Book), and the New York Drama Critics Award. The London production of *Into The Woods* won the Evening Standard Award and the London Critics Award for Best Musical in 1991. For *Sunday in the Park with George*, Mr. Lapine won two Drama Desk Awards for Book and Direction, the New York Drama Critics Award for Best Musical, and the 1985 Pulitzer Prize For Drama with Stephen Sondheim. The London production of *Sunday in the Park with George* won the Olivier Award for Best Musical. In 1980, *Table Settings*, which he wrote and directed, won the George Oppenheimer Playwriting Award. In 1979, he wrote and directed *Twelve Dreams* (Public Theater). In 1978 he won an Obie Award for his first production, *Photograph* by Gertrude Stein, which he adapted and directed.

Mr. Lapine's extensive directing credits include: *A Winter's Tale*, 1988 (Public Theater); *Merrily We Roll Along*, revised version, 1985 (La Jolla Playhouse); *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1982 (Delacorte Theatre); and *March of the Falsettos*, (the first act of *Falsettos*), 1981 (Playwrights Horizons). In film he has directed *Life with Mikey* (1993) and *Impromptu* (1991). In 1988 he directed *Into the Woods* for PBS American Playhouse.

James Lapine was born in Mansfield, Ohio. He received a B.A. History from Franklin and Marshall College, and an M.F.A. Design from California Institute of the Arts. Prior to moving into the theatre, he worked as a professional photographer and graphic designer, as well as an architectural preservationist, at the Architectural League of New York before moving full-time to New Haven and designing graphics for the Yale Repertory Theatre and teaching design at the Yale School of Drama.

## Impressionism

Impressionism was the leading development in French painting in the last part of the 19th century. The main figures in the movement, which was a reaction against romanticism and the academic tradition, were Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissaro, and Alfred Sisley. These artists shared a common approach to using color range and brush strokes when painting outdoor subjects.

The term “impressionism” is also used to refer to the work of those artists who exhibited their work in a series of group shows which were held in Paris. The most famous of these shows was held in the studio of the photographer Nadar in the spring of 1874. Among the artists exhibiting at Nadar’s studio and other group showings between 1876 and 1878 were Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, Jean Baptiste Arman Guillaumin, Berthe Morisot, Paul Gauguin, and the American artist, Mary Cassatt.

The name “impressionism” was taken from a painting by Claude Monet called “Impression: Sunrise.” This painting, which was created in 1872, was a view of the port of Le Havre in the mist.

Monet selected the title to refer to the painting’s sketchy style, which conveyed an impression of its subject matter without providing complete visual details. However, the name “impressionism” was seized upon by critics to describe a visual impression stamped on the senses rapidly and fleetingly, depicting a specific moment in time. Monet, Renoir, Pissaro, and Sisley painted outdoors, recording the quickly fluctuating conditions of light and atmosphere in the context of their individual responses to nature. They used a wide variety of brushstrokes and a palette of colors that allowed them to depict both actual shapes in nature and the impact of light upon their surfaces.

The term “impressionism” is also used to indicate painting that showed a concern for subjects of an informal, pleasant nature and a technique that created an impression that is casual and spontaneous. The works of painters such as Degas, Morisot, and Edouard Manet fit into this category.

By the early 1880’s, the feeling of unity that had brought the impressionists together began to dissolve as the result of factions and rivalries. Each artist increasingly took his or her own direction, carrying their interests into new dimensions of technique and content.

But the impressionist movement continued to have a tremendous impact on French painting and on the art of other countries well into the 20th century. Through developments such as neo-impressionism and post-impressionism in the 1880’s, impressionism influenced modern art in areas such as the loosening up of brushwork, a concern for the two-dimensional surface of a painting, and a use of pure, bright colors.

## Georges Seurat

Georges Seurat (1859-1891) began painting as a teenager in his middle-class Parisian home. In the wake of impressionism in the 1880's, Seurat developed a new style of painting called pointillism or divisionism which was based on scientific findings on color. He found by painting tiny particles, color next to color, that at a certain distance, the eye would fuse the specks optically, giving them greater intensity than any mixed pigments.

In 1880, he was attracted to the impressionists' technique and began his study of color theory and the science of optics. An artist who defied conventional perspective and conventional space, Seurat started creating small paintings of peasants and workers. He developed a smudgy technique using Conte crayon as his medium.

"The Bathing Place," which he painted in 1883 was his first major painting. It depicted an impressionistic subject, a group of people relaxing during an afternoon excursion on the banks of the Seine. The painting has a shimmering quality and a suggestion of cut-out flatness and frozen static poses. From 1883 on, Seurat concentrated on creating very large paintings capturing the bourgeois lifestyle in Paris.

His painting, "On A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte," which he created between 1884 and 1886, was the inspiration for the musical *Sunday in the Park with George*. Before creating this masterwork, Seurat executed more than 200 sketches and oil studies for it. The painting, which now hangs at the Art Institute of Chicago, is so large that it resembles a mural.

La Grande Jatte was an island that was a favorite recreational spot for the Parisian middle class. The park is located on a long thin sliver of land in the middle of the Seine that is now a suburb of Paris. In the painting, the subjects appear to be isolated by their recreational activities on the Island rather than drawn together by them. "On a Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte" was shown at the eighth and last Impressionist Exhibition. Because of its inclusion in the show, Monet, Renoir, and Sisley withdrew their submissions. The painting was placed in a small room to the side of the main hall, too dark for the painting to truly be seen. While the painting was initially ridiculed, the technique of pointillism utilized by Seurat in this painting was adopted by a group of his followers, the neo-impressionists, and was eventually used widely in early 20th century art.

Seurat refined the technique in his own later work; he used less naturalistic shapes and colors and introduced a theory of aesthetic harmony based on line as well as color. He created six more major paintings before his death, but never sold a painting in his lifetime.

In his personal life, Seurat was the most secretive of men. Even his best friends never met the woman he lived with. On the only occasion he was known to draw or paint himself, he took great pains to do it from the back. He left behind no diaries and his friends have little to say about him in their own diaries and other writings. This anonymity was an extension of his belief that it was the painting and not the painter who was the focal point of the artistic process.

Among the information that is known about his life is the fact that he met a woman named Madeleine Knobloch at a carnival booth while working on his painting "The Sideshow". She became his mistress and gave birth to their child a year later. A short time after that, Seurat developed a persistent sore throat and choked to death in 1891 at the age of 31; his son Pierre died shortly after of the same illness. His mother, whom he visited every night for dinner, only learned of the existence of Madeleine and Pierre a few weeks before Seurat's death.

## Resources

### Impressionism

Dayez-Distel, Anne. *Impressionism: A Centenary Exhibition*.

Dustan, Bernard. *Painting Methods of the Impressionists*.

Kelder, Diane. *The French Impressionists and Their Century; The Great Book of French Impressionists*.

Herbert, Robert. *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*.

Leymarie, Jean. *Impressionism*.

Mathey, Francois. *The Impressionists*.

Moffett, C.S. *The New Painting*.

Nochlin, Linda. *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*.

Pool, Phoebe. *Impressionism*.

Rewald, John. *The History of Impressionism*.

### Seurat

Broude, Norma. *Seurat in Perspective*.

Courthion, P. *Seurat*.

Dorra, Henri and Rewald, John. *Seurat*.

Herbert, Robert L. *Seurat's Drawings; Seurat*.

Homer, William I. *Seurat and the Science of Painting*.

Rewald, John. *Seurat: A Biography*.

Rich, Daniel Catton. *Seurat and the Evolution of "La Grande Jatte."*

Russell, John. *Seurat*.

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She has a string of musical lyricist-librettist credits: *On the Swing Shift* (Manhattan Theatre Club), *Heidi* (Theatreworks USA) and *Follow the Sun* (Hudson Guild), among others. She just completed work on *Love Comics*, a musical interpretation of the romance comics of the 1950's and '60's, with David Evans. Ms. Schlesinger also is working on *O'Henry's New York*, as well as writing lyrics for a new musical based on Frank Baum's *Queen Zixi of Ix*.

She is also the author of recent non-fiction works published by Random House/Villard, William Morrow, Avon Books and the Princeton Book Company.

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