



Victorian
Opera



SUNDAY

IN THE PARK

WITH GEORGE

EDUCATION RESOURCE
GENERAL

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

A masterpiece comes to life

In 1884, a twenty-five year old French Impressionist named Georges Seurat began work on *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, an idyllic park scene that would eventually become an icon of late 19th century painting.

Sunday in the Park with George is a joyous musical theatre retelling of a visionary artist's creative process. Seurat's much-loved painting comes to life, revealing the lives and loves of its subjects, and exploring the 'art of making art' across generations, from 19th century Paris to 20th century Chicago.

Following its Broadway opening, legendary conductor Leonard Bernstein declared it 'brilliant'. A year later *Sunday in the Park with George* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Sunday in the Park with George | Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine
 20 – 27 July Playhouse, Arts Centre Melbourne

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.
 Book by James Lapine.

Originally Directed on Broadway by James Lapine. Originally Produced on Broadway by The Shubert Organisation and Emanuel Azenberg.

By arrangement with Playwrights Horizon, Inc. New York City which produced the original production of *Sunday In The Park with George* in 1983.

By arrangement with Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd Exclusive agent for Music Theatre International (NY).

SYNOPSIS

Act One

In 1884 George is completing his masterpiece which is simultaneously the backdrop and the feature of the musical. The characters in the painting come to life and discuss their relationships with each other and their thoughts and feelings. George is so obsessed with his work he neglects his mistress Dot, the main character of the painting. Dot then leaves George for a pastry baker, Louis and emigrates to America.

Act Two

The second act is set in New York in 1984, one hundred years later where George (Seurat's grandson) is working with light sculptures. He is suffering from an equivalent of writer's block and is also struggling with the modern art world where his creations are dependent on commissions and patronage.

At the end of the musical, George makes a pilgrimage to Paris where the painting in Act One is set. Dot appears and helps George to put his life together and move on.



Figure 1: Georges Seurat, French, 1859-1891, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* -- 1884, 1884-86, Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in. (207.5 x 308.1 cm), Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.

CREATIVES

Conductor

Phoebe Briggs

Director

Stuart Maunder

Set & Costume Designer

Anna Cordingley

Lighting Designer

Niklas Pajanti

Sound Designer

Jim Atkins

CAST

George

Alexander Lewis

Dot/Marie

Christina O'Neill

an Old Lady/Blair Daniels

Nancye Hayes

Nurse/Mrs. an American couple/Harriet Pawling

Dimity Shepherd

Jules/Bob Greenberg

David Rogers-Smith

Yvonne/Naomi Eisen

Antoinette Halloran

Boatman/Charles Redman

John Brunato

Celeste #1/Waitress

Olivia Cranwell

Celeste #2/Elaine

Carrie Barr

Louise/Boy

Monique Heath/Emily Chessum

Franz/Mr. - an American couple/Dennis

Lyll Brooks

Frieda/Betty

Noni McCallum

Soilder/Alex

Matthew McFarlane

Trumpeter/Lee Randolph

Jeremy Kleeman

Louis/Billy Webster

Nathan Lay

Young Man/Photographer

Kirilie Blythman

Man lying on bank/Museum Assistant

Daniel Todd

Orchestra Victoria



Figure 2: Christina O'Neill (Dot) © Martin Philbey

BACKGROUND

The making of a masterpiece

Sunday in the Park with George

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine

Broadway Musical

Opened Booth Theatre, 2nd May, 1984 ran for 604 performances

10 Tony Nominations

Pulitzer Prize in 1985, only the sixth musical to receive that honour

After the first performance of *Sunday in the Park with George*, critics acclaimed the work as being creative, ground breaking, a culmination of past musical theatre innovations and a rejection of them. As the curtain rises, the audience is immediately captivated by the gradual appearance of the backdrop which is a painting comprising 50 statuesque figures who are not looking at each other. It is this painting by Seurat that is the inspiration for the plot, and the story evolves as these characters in the painting come to life. The story revolves around George Seurat's obsession to paint his Neo-Impressionist masterpiece *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. The musical is about the inner life of the artist.

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Stuart Maunder

This quirky, Pulitzer Prize winning, 'impossible to define' work is not a biography of Georges Seurat; (so little is known of this artist's life that the details would scarcely provide fodder for a full length musical), rather *Sunday in the Park with George* is, at its essence, an examination of what makes artists tick, how and why they must create.

In the second half of the Nineteenth Century, Georges Seurat pushed the boundaries and forced the Art Establishment to look at the world through new eyes. In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine have created a work which asks audiences to look at the Broadway musical in a new way.

And Sondheim delights in breaking the rules. When one reads the libretto of *Sunday in the Park with George* it is often difficult to see where the songs finish and the words take over. This is not a conventional musical in the Rodgers and Hammerstein sense. From the first moments we are in the hands of the painter, we must take him for our guide. Trees disappear at his will, dogs talk, scenes merge. Just as Seurat created dozens of miniature studies before tacking his monumental painting so we experience these little snapshots of Parisian life. We meet various members of Parisian Society with all their arguments, liaisons, insecurities, jealousies and sense of longing. We also experience his tempestuous relationship with his love and muse: the model Dot.



Figure 3: Victorian Opera *Sunday in the Park with George* – George & Dot
 Illustrations © Anna Cordingley

But ultimately all these ideas, issues and conflicts remain unresolved. They all pale into insignificance and all exist just to provide inspiration for the creation of one of the greatest Neo-impressionist paintings of all time: Seurat's masterpiece *A Sunday on La Grand Jatte*. All that counts is the work.

Although the relationship between George and Dot is at the heart of the piece *Sunday in the Park with George* is not a conventional love story, indeed we have to wait four generations for the relationship built and destroyed in Act 1 to find some sort of resolution. Rather what we have is a love affair with art; with the act of creation of art. We experience in a very real way the bliss of the creator, the intense concentration, the sheer hard work, the craft, the passion, the desire:

***'To make things that count,
things that will be new.'***

And then the realisation that:

***'Anything you do,
let it come from you.
then it will be new.'***

To many *Sunday in the Park with George* is the most autobiographical of Sondheim's canon, and even though the man himself may not have concurred it is not a major leap to see the parallels between creator and his subject. Seurat created works that to the art world of his time were considered cold, difficult, unconventional, not commercial. How often have we heard the words of 'No Life', the second song in *Sunday in the Park with George* leveled at Sondheim himself?

***'So drab, so cold.
and so controlled.
no life.
all mind, no heart.
no life in his art.
no life in his life—
no life.'***

Sondheim brings the same intense, systematic intellectual precision to the composition of his words and music that Seurat brought to his paintings. Studied up close, both the paintings and the musical reveal the precision and meticulous attention to detail, the technique of the artist. Viewed from a distance, or experienced as a whole in the theatre what is revealed is a perfect and complete vision; satisfying and edifying.

Sunday in the Park with George shows us that ordered passion of the creative artist can be just as fulfilling as traditional romantic passion. In addition 'Sunday' delights in arguing that one must 'move on', past recreation of the familiar, the safe.

The final lines of *Sunday in the Park with George* provide Sondheim and Lapine's challenge to us all:


***'White. A blank page or canvas,
His favourite.
So many possibilities'***

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The Wall

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE COUNTDOWN
42 DAYS TO GO...
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Weather held out enough for us to do a special *Sunday in the Park with George* shoot at the Royal Botanical Gardens with our very own Dar (Christina O'Neill) - here's a behind-the-scenes snap



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A MASTERPIECE COMES TO LIFE

Sunday in the Park with George depicts a magical snapshot of imagined stories of the characters depicted in the famous painting, *A Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, including a love affair between the artist and his long-suffering muse, Dar - the woman in the foreground carrying the parasol.



Georges Seurat, French, 1859-1891, *A Sunday on the Grande Jatte* - 1884, 1884-86, Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in. (207.5 x 308.1 cm), Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.


"What we have is a love affair with art: with the act of creation of art."
Stuart Maunder, Director



© Martin Phillips

COSTUME SNEAK PEEK

Beautiful Illustrations from Set and Costume Designer, Anna Cordingley



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the [Education "Wall"](#) to download:

- *Sunday in the Park with George* Music Resource
- *Sunday in the Park with George* Arts Resource
- *Sunday in the Park with George* Theatre Studies Resource

With thanks to Dr Sharon Lierse for the research and preparation of this resource pack.

CONTACT US

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Victorian Opera Education Program is generously supported by the Victorian Opera Education Syndicate.