The First Two Pages: "If You Can Find Me" by Jeffrey Sweet

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An Essay by Jeffrey Sweet

Most of the time, I'm a self-starter. Years ago, I was intrigued by the number of great actors, writers, and directors who came out of a small cabaret theater in Chicago. I wanted to read a book about it. But it turned out that nobody had gotten around to it. Being young and impulsive, I decided to write it. I had never written a book before, but I had published a few interviews, so it seemed like a logical move. The book, an oral history of the founding of Second City called *Something Wonderful Right Away,* came out in 1978, and it still has a life. I heard Stephen Colbert and Mike Birbiglia talking about it on a podcast a little while ago, and that was a happy surprise. I've also written more than two dozen produced scripts for the theater. Except for a project involving the adaptation of a play to a musical I was asked to join, all the others came out of either characters I dreamed up or real people whose stories I wanted to tell (most recently a play called *Kunstler*, about William Kunstler, the famous radical lawyer).

But once in a while, I get an invitation. And the story, "If You Can Find Me," exists because Josh Pachter asked me to write it. I was a little surprised. I haven't written short fiction since a handful of stories for *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock* in the 1970s. Josh had also been writing stories (he still does) and we

occasionally met back in those days when we coaxed our words out of Underwoods. (Remember typewriters?) We hadn't been in serious contact for years until he told me about his ongoing series of editing anthologies of new short stories inspired by great songwriters. This time, he decided to focus on a musical theater writer. And not just any musical theater writer, but the dominant musical theater writer of the postwar era, Stephen Sondheim.

Sondheim's first two produced Broadway shows were for the ages. He wrote the lyrics for *West Side Story* when he was 27, and that was followed by writing lyrics again for *Gypsy* (currently running in a smash revival starring Audra McDonald and Danny Burstein on Broadway). After that, with the exception of an unhappy collaboration with Richard Rodgers on *Do I Hear a Waltz?* and the occasional odd assignment, he wrote music and lyrics both for the subsequent string of classics—among them *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overture*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, *Assassins*, and *Passion*. Josh's idea was to have one story for each show, with a story keyed to one of the songs in that show. He asked me which song from which show I wanted to tackle. I think my choice surprised him. I passed up all of the famous titles for one of the most obscure works in Sondheim's catalogue.

In the 1966-67 season, ABC broadcast a series of hour-long specials called *ABC Stage '67*. Each episode was a stand-alone piece. There were a certain number of misfires, but a handful of the projects were remarkable—an adaptation of Truman Capote's *A Christmas Memory* featuring Geraldine Page in a luminous performance, Sam Peckinpah's adaptation of Katherine Ann Porter's *Noon Wine* that made such an impact that Peckinpah was given the chance to make a little movie called *The Wild Bunch*, and an arresting John le Carré tale called *Dare I Weep, Dare I Mourn* starring James Mason. The series tried producing some musicals, too. Most them didn't work. Except for one. That one was a corker.

It was the story of a poet who decides to live in a department store. He plans to hide by day and enjoy his private world by night. Except he discovers that there are other people who have been living in the store since the Depression. It's called *Evening Primrose*. It's based on a story by John Collier, the script is by James Goldman (who wrote the book for *Follies*), and Sondheim wrote the score. It's available on DVD and often can be found on YouTube.

I was 16 years old when I first watched Anthony Perkins, playing the poet, emerge from hiding to sing about the life he anticipated living in his new domain. The music began, and I was instantly hooked by the insistent vamp and the soaring melody. The song was called "If You Can Find Me, I'm Here." So that's the song I chose.

The task was not only to write a story but to drop in a fair number of inside jokes for Sondheim enthusiasts. I decided, too, that I would have the climax of my story set in a department store. I also wanted to signal that it would be in a comic mode.

As it happens, I knew Sondheim. I wasn't in his inner circle, but he was president of the Dramatists Guild for a time, and I have served on the Dramatists Guild Council for a long time. There were lots of conversations before meetings, and we exchanged a stream of correspondence up to three days before his death. As much of the world knows, he was a fan of crime stories (he wrote a few, in fact). I'd like to think that being the catalyst for a new volume of fictional mayhem would please him.

I'm going to copy the beginning of the story with comments in brackets. Sorry if this comes across like a comedian explaining their jokes, but...

> Toni Bates [I'm referencing Anthony Perkins and his most famous part, Norman Bates here.] did not anticipate that getting hired to play a criminal on a true-crime TV show would lead to her being kidnapped. By the real-life criminal she'd been hired to play.
>
> Well, technically by the guy the real-life criminal sent to kidnap her.
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> But she had to concede that, if you *had* to be kidnapped, it was a plus to be kidnapped by someone who, as he was putting a hood over your head, said in a soothing tone, "Don't worry, she just wants to talk to you." Toni would have asked "Who?" if he hadn't also put duct tape over her mouth.
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> *Careful*, she said to herself. *Mustn't get excited*. ["Careful, mustn't get excited" is one of the lines from the song, "If You Can Find Me.]

As she was trying to will her pulse rate back to normal, it occurred to her that what was happening was probably connected with her appearance in an episode of the TV show *Perps*.

Other reactions to her performance had been less extreme.

"Wow!" said Viv, who usually sat next to her in acting class. "You come across so nice in session, but I turn on the tube and—wow! You are an unadulterated genius!" ["Unadulterated genius" is another quote from the song."] Others were similarly complimentary, and Toni was pleased. It meant that she had caught something of the essence of Charmian Collier, ["Charmian" is a reference to Charmian Carr, the actress who played the female lead in *Evening Primrose*. "Collier" is a reference to John Collier, the author of the original story.] is something of her unpredictability, her danger, her humor. It meant she had created the illusion that she was somebody else, somebody radically different from herself—which is the whole point of acting, yes?

And playing the part had been fun. Fun to wear the outfit Collier wore—a copy, anyway, of the tweed jacket and Peter Falk mask—during the re-enactment of the robbery. And fun to make the defiant gesture—blurred when it ran on broadcast, but clear and in focus on streaming—as she disappeared into the perfectly timed getaway car with no license plates.

And as if the fun weren't enough, there was the check, which would cover her rent for the next few months. So all told, Toni's experience with the project had been a happy one.

Until, that is, she was duct-taped, hooded, and abducted.

As she was being spirited away, Toni remembered a text message she had received shortly after the broadcast. Three words: "Not good enough." The sender identified only by the initials "C.C." At the time, she'd thought it was a lame joke perpetrated by a friend. Now she had cause to reevaluate that assumption.

I'm setting up a few things here. One is that Charmian uses masks of celebrities as part of her heists. Another is that she makes her getaways in cars without license plates. Both elements will reappear in the last paragraph of the story.

I know I'm not saying anything new, but if you know what your ending is going to be, part of the task is to put images and other elements into place in the beginning that you can pay off by referencing them in the end.

But then, this, too, is referencing Sondheim. Often the last line of a Sondheim song is a twist on a phrase or an idea planted in the opening lines. To return to such an element at the end cast in a new light gives a sense of tightness and inevitability to a piece.

And as I type this, I can hear Sondheim say, "Well, yes, Jeff, of course."

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Jeffrey Sweet's plays mostly premiered when he was resident playwright at Chicago's Victory Gardens Theater; they then have been seen in theaters around the country and stages around the world. *The Value Of Names And Other Plays* (Northwestern University Press) is an anthology of some of them. He has also written books on Second City (*Something Wonderful Right Away*), a play development center (*The O'Neill*) and playwriting (*The Dramatist's Toolkit*). He has taught in schools large and small and currently runs a playwriting workshop online; for info, write jeffreysweet.playwright@gmail.com.