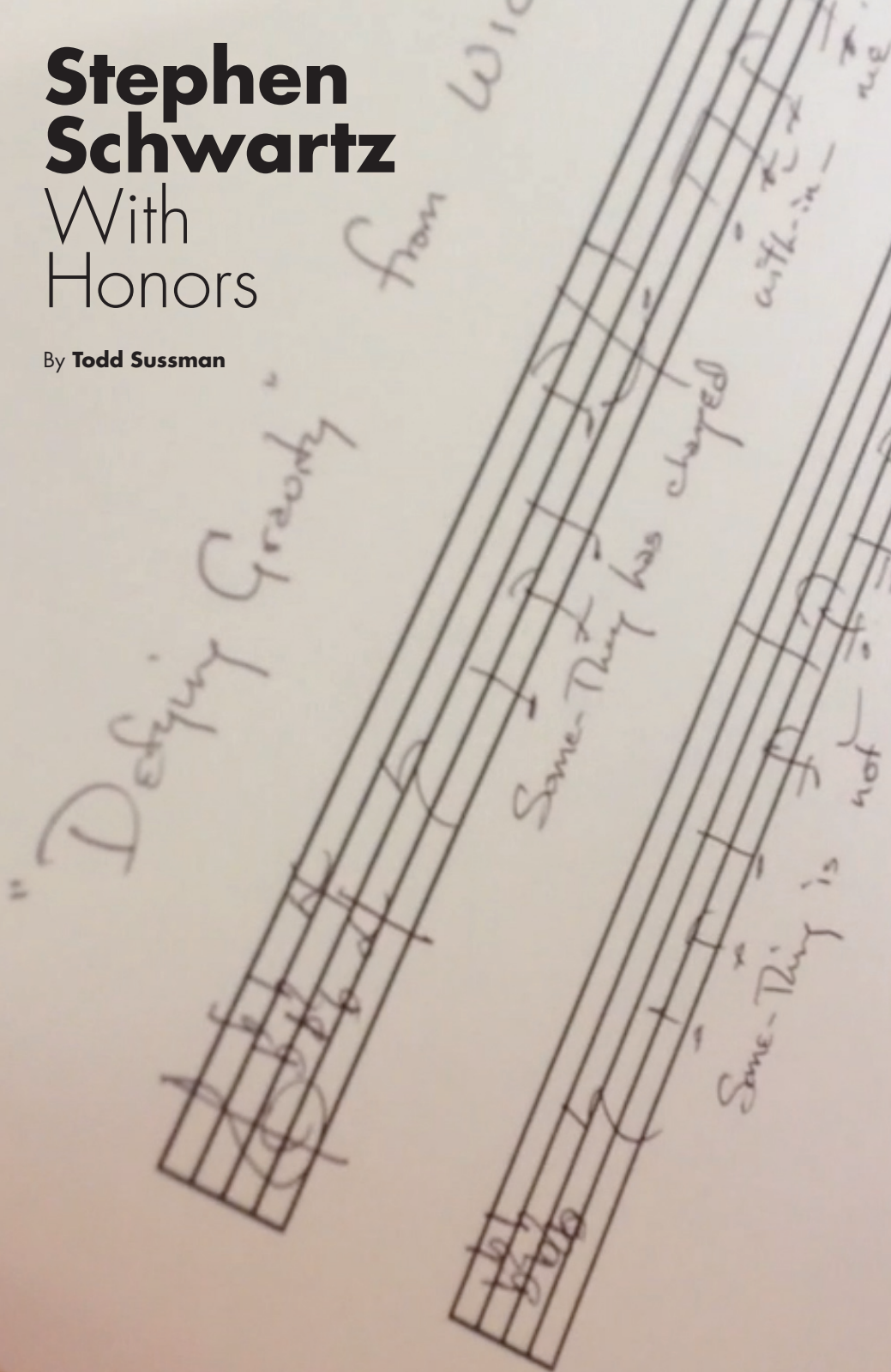
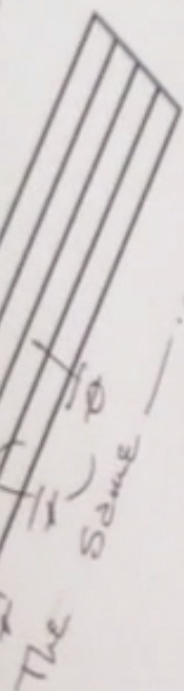


# Stephen Schwartz

With  
Honors

By **Todd Sussman**





The Same...  
Stephen Schwartz



**H**e has no shortage of awards. Now, his Oscars, Grammys, Golden Globe, and Tony (just to name a few) are going to have some more company. Stephen Schwartz is 2022's recipient of the American Songbook Association (ASA) Lifetime Achievement Award. In the sixth decade of a remarkable career, this sought-after composer and lyricist

is still adding to his body of work. It is an awe-inspiring catalog, cherished by audiences (and, of course, performers) across the globe.

He was an early wunderkind whose pop-influenced songs for musicals (*Godspell*, *Pippin*, and *The Magic Show*) helped Broadway change its tune—literally. His songs for animated films (*Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *The Prince of Egypt*) celebrate cultural diversity, compassion, and hope. They continue to resonate with all age groups.

And then there is *Wicked*. You can't just call it a hit; it is a bona fide mega-smash, generating more than \$1 billion in ticket sales—and that's just on Broadway. Fans have embraced this show and Stephen's songs, including "The Wizard and I," "Popular," "Defying Gravity," and "For Good," with unprecedented devotion.

This page (from top) Stephen Schwartz And with Hugh Jackman Jane Krakowski Adam Guettel Julia Murney Joel Grey Winnie Holzman Opposite page (from top) Stephen with Ben Vereen Leonard Bernstein Kristin Chenoweth

In our in-depth interview, Stephen shares the insights and inspirations behind his unforgettable music, which is permanently etched into the American Songbook.

**Todd Sussman**  
Congratulations on



you have written, and how they have become the soundtrack of so many lives, what runs through your mind?

**Stephen Schwartz** Thank you.

It's quite an honor. I really appreciate it. Those of us who become writers do so at least partly because we have an urge to communicate our feelings, thoughts, and philosophies

and share them with others. The fact that people have responded to my work is enormously gratifying because that's the goal of being a writer.

**TS** Who are your musical influences?

**SS** There are multitudes, but under these circumstances, let me mention only those who are also considered part of the





American Songbook. Certainly from Motown, Holland/Dozier/Holland, and then a lot of the great singer/songwriters like Paul Simon, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, Mary Chapin Carpenter. The list goes on and on. And then of course some of the great American musical theater writers: obviously Rodgers and Hammerstein, Bock and Harnick, going back to Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern, coming up to Stephen Sondheim. They're among the writers whom I admire greatly and who have been influential on my work.

**TS** With *Godspell* (1971) and *Pippin* (1972), you stood out among a new generation of songwriters. What do you remember about that time?

**SS** Although one wasn't aware of it right at the time, a transition was happening in musical theater. The kind of music that was being written was transitioning to more pop music—that is, the kind of music one could hear on the radio. But musical theater was slow to catch up and was still mostly retaining the sound from the golden age of the '40s, '50s, and '60s—what we would call “show music.” There was controversy

at that time as to whether one could do the job in terms of portraying characters and furthering story using pop music. Now, of course, pretty much all musical theater is pop, but at the time, there

were many critics and cognoscenti who resisted the use of pop music in musical theater beyond in more of a revue format, like *Hair*. For a show like *Pippin*, which was a book show with characters, using pop music wasn't universally accepted yet.

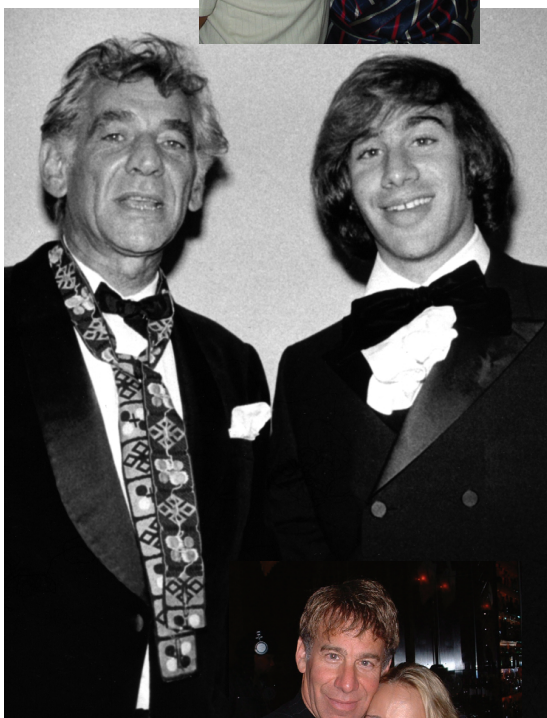
**TS** “No Time at All” (from *Pippin*) reminds us that life goes by all too soon. Yet you wrote that one when you were in your early 20s. What is your process to put yourself in a character's shoes in order to write a song?

**SS** I would say it's similar to what an actor does. When I was a drama student at Carnegie Mellon, I studied

acting and was especially influenced by Meisner technique and what's called

the Neighborhood Playhouse school of acting. Like an actor, I try to find

*Continued on page 50*



Mark Chester

the character within myself and write from that point of view. Many people have spoken to me about "No Time at All," wondering how as a young man

*When I was going through my conversion to pop music in the early '60s and I first started hearing Motown songs, Diana Ross and her voice were—I just fell in love with that sound. Then years later, I was on a plane and ran into Diana Ross, and she sang 'Corner of the Sky' to me on the spot. I couldn't believe she knew the whole song by heart.*

in my early 20s I could write in the character of a woman in her 60s. But to me, it was really no different than writing for other characters who don't on the surface seem to have much in common with me. I just try to become the character and then see through his or her eyes.

**TS** In the '90s, you moved your focus from Broadway to animated films and created some of the most memorable music for that genre, collecting three Oscars in the process. Is writing for animation like writing

for a Broadway show?

**SS** It is similar, at least as the animated musical came to be defined in the '90s, because it was essentially reinvented by Howard Ashman, who came from musical theater. Basically, what Howard did was to transplant the process of writing musical theater to animation. But, of course, there are differences. First, there tend to be fewer songs in movies.

Whereas a show may have 20 songs in it, animated musicals tend to be somewhere in the range of five or six. So the songs really have to serve as tentpoles to the stories. The selectivity for what to musicalize is greater. Also with movies, by definition the characters are in motion. Therefore, you don't want to have a song where the character just stands still and sings, which can be the most effective moments in a stage show. You have to envision what the animators are going to be showing during the song. I have a joke based on *Pocahontas*: If a character is going to sing a ballad, she better be going over a waterfall in a canoe.

**TS** I remember the first trailer for *Pocahontas* was devoted solely to "Colors of the Wind" as a way to draw the audience in. That song clearly encapsulated the whole meaning of the film.

**SS** Actually "Colors of the Wind" is the very first song that was written for *Pocahontas*, and it was the first song that Alan Menken and I ever wrote together as a team. I wanted to begin with that song for exactly the reason you cite.

*Pocahontas* was so much about the clash of civilizations and trying to look at our world from the Native American point of view. I did an enormous amount of research for the movie, but especially for that song. I was able to get hold of a couple of books of Native American poetry and read those. Also, there's a famous letter written by Chief Seattle to Congress when America was basically betraying all the treaties we created

with Native Americans. His letter expressed the need to protect the land and the air and warned what would be lost if we didn't do so. It's extremely eloquent. I was very influenced by those words and that philosophy when writing "Colors of the Wind."

**TS** When you accepted your Academy Award for "Colors of the Wind," you singled out the Native American poets and wisdom keepers, namely Chief Seattle, as your inspirations. Your speech aligned with a primary message of the song and film. That was very touching.

**SS** Thank you for that. To me, it was giving credit where credit was due.

**TS** You wrote a line for "Colors of the Wind" that I continue to marvel at:

"You can own the Earth and still, all you'll own is earth until." That says so much, yet so concisely.

**SS** Thank you. The funny story is, that was not the original ending of "Colors of the Wind." Though I'm

"I don't think the word 'skull' belongs in this song." Because I believe in collaboration, after fussing a little, I abandoned the triple rhyme and ultimately came to realize Alan was right. So I was very happy to find the lines you've cited, "You can own the Earth and still..." I am very fond of using words that mean more than one thing, which I know makes me difficult to translate, but it fascinates me about the English language. A word like "earth" which means both "our planet" and "dirt" is an appealing word to me because of the double meaning.

**TS** Your work is enjoyed by a global audience of filmgoers and theatergoers. How do you feel about your songs also finding a home in cabaret? "Meadowlark"

(from *The Baker's Wife*) is a fine example.

**SS** I love the medium of cabaret. It's such an intimate and personal medium.



Scott Whitrow



embarrassed to admit it, I originally wrote another lyric for the ending:

"For your life's an empty hull  
'Til you get it through your skull  
You can paint with all the colors  
of the wind."

I was looking for a triple rhyme and trying to find words that would rhyme with the stressed syllable of "colors." It was Alan Menken who said,

People who really know how to do cabaret are so skilled, and they're performing in a different way than for musical theater. I would tell theater friends of mine who were putting together cabaret shows, if you can possibly go see Andrea Marcovicci, do it, because you will see someone who is a complete master of the medium. In the sort of warm intimacy that she has with the audience, it's almost like being in her living room, and yet she maintains a clear sense of boundaries. Of course I've seen many others who are also great at cabaret, and when you see a show by someone who really knows how

From left  
Stephen Schwartz  
with  
Andrea Martin  
Eugene Levy  
Benj Pasek  
Justin Paul

to use the medium, there's nothing like it. Obviously, the fact that some of my songs have found a home there with many performers gives me a lot of pleasure.

**TS** Have you seen any of the cabaret shows that pay tribute to your work?

**SS** Yes. I've seen quite a few of them. That's always a strange feeling, to be

honest. Whether they're done extremely well or not, it's a little bit like drowning and watching your life pass before your eyes. It's hard for me to be objective because I can't help remembering how songs got written, what the specific circumstances were. I'm having a different experience than the audience.

**TS** "We Are Lights" (also known as "The Chanukah Song") is a gorgeous song you composed, with words by Steven Young. Was that song written for a choir?

**SS** Yes, it was written for Judith Clurman's choir. Judith is a friend of mine who's a wonderful choral director. Her choir was doing a program for the lighting of the Christmas tree at Lincoln Center.

The program was going to be telecast, and she wanted to do a Chanukah song, so she reached out to me. I felt there are countless Christmas carols—many of

which I love, of course—but other than "Dreidel, Dreidel, Dreidel" and Adam Sandler's funny song ("The Chanukah Song"), there really aren't many Chanukah songs. We could use some more, so I was

happy to take on the assignment.

**TS** Have you heard Kristin Chenoweth's new recording of "We Are Lights?"

**SS** Yes, I've been excited about it since she told me she was adding it to her holiday album, *Happiness is...Christmas!*, and I've finally had a chance to hear the recording. Kristin is not only one of my

favorite performers, but one of my favorite people in the universe. I think her recording of "We Are Lights" is beautiful—tender and heartfelt and uplifting for a holiday season when we all especially need some uplift! It was lovely to hear a song that was originally written as a choral piece sung so radiantly as a solo. And by the way, the string arrangement by



Matthew McCauley is gorgeous, too! To paraphrase something else Kristin once sang, I couldn't be happier with it.

**TS** While we are on the topic of recordings, I love Diana Ross' vocal of "Corner of the Sky" from 1974 (*Live at Caesars Palace* album).

**SS** She's so amazing. I grew up being a hugely obsessed fan of Diana Ross and the Supremes. When you asked about my musical influences from the American Songbook, the first one I mentioned was the songwriting team of Holland/Dozier/Holland from Motown, who wrote virtually all of the Supremes' songs. When I was going through my conversion to pop music in the early '60s and I first started hearing Motown songs, Diana Ross and her voice were—I just fell in love with that sound. I remember being a teenager and forcing my parents to take me to see the Supremes at the Deauville in Miami Beach, where we used to go

These pages  
Above  
Stephen Schwartz  
with  
his son, Scott  
Opposite page  
(from top)

And with  
Rupert Holmes  
Trevor Nunn  
John Buchino



every year to visit my grandparents. Over New Year's, you can imagine how expensive it was! But I was that kind of fan. Then years later, I was on a plane and ran into Diana Ross, and she sang "Corner of the Sky" to me on the spot. I couldn't believe she knew the whole song by heart. Needless to say, that remains one of the highlight moments of my professional life.

**TS** Back to Broadway, what is the most inspired casting choice you recall for one of your shows?

**SS** It's obvious to name Kristin Chenoweth or Idina Menzel or Ben Vereen, who transformed the shows they were cast in. But I'm thinking of a relatively recent casting choice—Rachel Bay Jones as Catherine in the Diane Paulus-directed revival of *Pippin*. Rachel was older than the way Catherine is customarily cast, to the point where we actually added lines about it to the show. But she was so amazing in her audition, we felt we had to cast her, and I feel that she redefined the role in terms of her comedic approach and then how heart-breaking she was. It is one of

the most amazing reinventions of a character I have ever seen.

**TS** I must ask you about *Wicked*. The show transcended being a hit to become a worldwide phenomenon.

Why do you think this show resonated and became so universally beloved?

**SS** I believe the difference between a hit and a phenomenon has to do with the zeitgeist at the time the show arrives.

It doesn't really have to do with the show

itself. *Wicked* is the story of a relationship between two women, and the story of an outcast who is shunned because of the color of her skin. It came at a time when those two issues were very much in the forefront of what people were thinking

about. After years and years of bromances, suddenly having a show which centered around two strong women and their relationship just happened at the right time, in the way that *Hamilton*, which is

a great show that I think would always have been a hit, came at a time where things about it made it a phenomenon.

**TS** How did you celebrate *Wicked's* success?

**SS** It's not that I had a day where





somebody bought me a cake. Every day is a celebration of *Wicked*'s success. The producer Marc Platt's wonderful wife, Julie, is very fond of calling *Wicked* "the gift that keeps on giving." Every day I am grateful for the show and for what's happened to it around the world and the fact that I got to be part of this.

**TS** I read that you identified strongly with Elphaba, the green witch in *Wicked*. What do you and Elphaba have in common?

**SS** I think it's the sense of otherness,

song yet, but I know what it's going to be and what it's going to be called if it goes forward. But of course I'm not at liberty to share any more than that right now.

**TS** In the spirit of "No Time at All," is there any still-unfulfilled wish or endeavor on your bucket list?

**SS** Well, I still have not had the opportunity to write a score for an original movie musical, one where I am doing music and lyrics. That's on my bucket list. I've also talked to choreographers from time to time about

creating the music for a dance piece. I've always been intrigued by the ability of dance, like music itself, to evoke emotion without words. And there are stories I am interested in telling, or rather being part of the telling, that



Nathan Johnson

of feeling oneself as not entirely fitting in to the culture and society and trying to wrestle with the question of how much of oneself do you give up or change in order to do so. I think it's something a lot of people in the arts struggle with.

**TS** The film version of *Wicked* is now in pre-production. Have you written new songs especially for the film, to musicalize a moment not in the show?

**SS** It looks as if there is at least one sequence that is going to require a new song, because it's an important sequence that isn't in the show. We're not really far enough along to know if it's going to remain part of the movie or not, but at this point it exists. I haven't written the

I am working on or considering for musical theater. I think when you're a writer, there's always stuff ahead of you. Well, maybe not always. Harper Lee wrote one great book and that was it. But I feel I still have stories, characters, and ideas that I'm interested in exploring. So I don't know what's ahead specifically, but I hope and believe there's lots more. ○

#### Editor's note

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