

Cultural Daily

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Theater in the Time of COVID: The Apples and Sondheim's 90th

David Sheward · Friday, May 1st, 2020

With Broadway, Off-Broadway and regional stages closed due to the Coronavirus pandemic, theater artists have adapted to the new normal rather than waiting in limbo for a return to their traditional venues. Playwright Richard Nelson has taken his fictional Apple family into the current world of social distancing and videoconferencing and delivers a poignant and insightful portrait of how we live now. His 70-minute work *What Do We Need to Talk About* subtitled *The Apple Family: Conversations on Zoom*, is probably the first play written to be performed on the platform which has become the main means of live communication in a quarantined world.

We first met the Apple family in *That Hopey Changey Thing*, which took place on the play's opening night, the evening of the 2010 midterm elections. Set in a living room in Rhinebeck, New York, the Apple siblings, their aged uncle, and the boyfriend of the youngest sister debated politics, theater, art, education, and the big struggles and little details of everyday life. There were three subsequent plays, *Sweet and Sad*, *Sorry*, and *Regular Singing*, all presented by the Public Theater, each taking place on a significant day in the life of America. Nelson then wrote three plays about another Rhinebeck family, the Gabriels, and one about a third, The Michaels (another one of the last group is reportedly in the works.)



(Clockwise from upper left) Jay O. Sanders, Maryann Plunkett, Sally Murphy, Laila Robbins and Stephen Kunken in *What Do We Need to Talk About?*

Credit: The Public Theater

Reuniting the original cast, this new piece sensitively documents our national moment of grief, panic, fear, and loneliness. Premiering over the Public's website and its YouTube channel, the actors perform their roles from their homes. The Apples are still coping with the various tragedies and setbacks which were still raw wounds in the earlier plays as well as new ones. They squabble like children and counsel each other, physically separated yet reaching out for connection. Marian, a grade-school teacher, remains heartbroken by the death of her teenaged daughter. Barbara who teaches high school English, is recovering from a near-fatal bout with COVID. Her brother Richard is staying with her and contemplating retiring from his job with NY Governor Andrew Cuomo's administration after he has made his last alimony payment. Jane is struggling with her writing career and nursing her partner Tim, quarantined in his bedroom due to the virus. He's also lost his old profession of acting and his new one, managing a restaurant. Uncle Benjamin has passed away but makes a ghostly appearance via tape recording (Jon DeVries provides the resonant voice.)

As in the preceding works in the Rhinebeck panorama, Nelson wisely avoids vitriol. Donald Trump is barely mentioned and then dismissed. Instead, the playwright concentrates on the urge to join with community in a time of horrific uncertainty. In a story-telling game, each character relates a moving tale which reveals much about their fears and hopes. Included are a funny presidential anecdote, a family scandal, and a novel interpretation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*. There are also moments uncomfortably close to our reality. This occurs when Tim speaks of the recent death of a fellow actor. When the name is revealed—the real-life Mark Blum—the artifice of performance slips away and it seems we are watching real people.

The cast, directed with a light touch by Nelson, is subtle and understated in their depiction of the prickly yet loving relationships among the family. Acting to laptops requires small gestures and intimate nuances and they know to calibrate their emotions accordingly. Laila Robbins buries Marian's sorrow deep within, allowing it peak out occasionally like a frightened wild animal. Jay O. Sanders skillfully captures Richard's uncertainty and ambiguity about his family and career while Stephen Kunken expresses Tim's tight-lipped acceptance of the bad hand life has dealt him. Sally Murphy beautifully captures Jane's striving to please and searching for her vocation. Maryann Plunkett conveys Barbara's despair and isolation with seemingly minimal effort and maximum powerful effect. The two most shattering moments are hers. When she simply states, "I thought I was going to die...I needed to say that," the others are frozen and silent, caught in devastating and slippery territory. After everyone else has logged off, Barbara is left alone staring at herself in a blank computer screen and an uncertain future, like the rest of us.



Meryl Streep, Christine Baranski and Audra McDonald in *Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration*.
Credit: Broadway.com

On a more positive note, a plethora of Broadway performers came together online to celebrate the 90th birthday of the most influence musical theater songwriter of his era, Stephen Sondheim. The event, titled *Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration*, presented by Broadway.com as a fundraiser for ASTEP (Artists Striving to End Poverty) had some technical issues when it premiered on April 26, but it's now available on YouTube and it is gorgeous and spectacular yet intimate and casual at the same time. The stellar cast is informally dressed, performing from a variety of settings including libraries, bedrooms, studies, even bathrooms. The poignant lyrics and complex yet affecting music take on added significance in the current circumstances, particularly the title song as soulfully performed by host Raul Esparza. The sweet number is from a little-known TV special called *Evening Primrose* about a group of misfits hiding in a department store. The character singing yearns to be released from isolation and into the outside world. Even sadder is Laura Benanti's moving rendition of "I Remember" from also from *Primrose* in which the same person recalls the simple pleasures of walking outside. When Chip Zien and Bernadette Peters from the original cast of *Into the Woods* achingly warble songs of hope despite chaos, it evokes tears and fears. When the show opened in 1987, the menacing giant destroying the fairy-tale kingdom was seen as a metaphor for AIDS, now it's another illness, just as deadly and divisive.



Bernadette Peters in *Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration*.
Credit: Broadway.com

Other highlights include Christine Baranski, Meryl Streep and Audra McDonald boozing it up in

bathrobes for “The Ladies Who Lunch” from *Company*; Mandy Patinkin singing “Lesson #8” from *Sunday in the Park with George* a cappella with his dog in his backyard; Ben Platt and Beanie Feldstein as a separate-but-together duo act of “It Takes Two”; Randy Rainbow putting his own hilarious spin on Mrs. Lovett’s “By the Sea” from *Sweeney Todd*; Patti LuPone tenderly delivering “Anyone Can Whistle”; and Neil Patrick Harris wickedly camping it up for “The Witches’ Rap” with his two children. That’s just a small sampling of the riches offered.



Performers in the finale of *Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration*.

Credit: Broadway.com

Paul Wontorek is credited with the monumental task of directing this delightful crazy quilt and the finale is a rousing tribute to the resilience of the theater community with dozens of Broadway stalwarts ranging from 11-year-old Iain Armitage of *Young Sheldon* to 74-year-old Andre De Shields of *Hadestown* belting out “I’m Still Here” from *Follies*, the ultimate survivor song.

What Do We Need To Talk About: Premiered April 29 on The Public Theater’s website and its YouTube channel, streaming until May 3.

Take Me to the World: A Sondheim 90th Birthday Celebration: Premiered April 26 on Broadway.com, streaming now on YouTube and Broadway.com.

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