



**TRANSCRIPT OF SHELDON HARNICK AND RICHARD CHRISTIANSEN INTERVIEW  
APRIL 29, 2006 | THE THREE ARTS CLUB**

---

TRANSCRIBED BY TRACY DOMERACKI | EDITED BY KAREN A. CALLAWAY AND LARA GOETSCH

---

**Before *Fiorello!* opened at TimeLine in May 2006, Richard Christiansen, the former chief critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, interviewed Sheldon Harnick, who wrote the lyrics for the musical. Following is a transcript of the entire interview.**

**PJ Powers:** And now for the main event of the day. Obviously we've been throwing a lot of superlatives at these gentlemen's way, but I'll throw just a couple more. I said the word gentlemen earlier when I introduced these men and it is the truest word I can give because not only are they giants and legends of the American theater but they are also extraordinarily generous and kind and men of conviction and integrity and I am overwhelmed to have befriended both of them and for them to have befriended myself and our company.

If you don't have your own copy yet of *A Theatre of Our Own*, Richard's masterful book chronicling — There's, there's a copy back there. Hold that up, Juliet. *(audience laughs)* If you don't have it, get out from underneath a rock and go buy it. It is a must have for anyone who cares about the theater or the city of Chicago or both. Memorial Day is coming up if you are looking for gifts to give for that person who's hard to shop for. It's available at Border's and Barnes and Noble's and probably every other bookstore, right, Richard. Actually I sent a copy to Sheldon a couple weeks ago. As a native Chicagoan, I knew that he would be interested, and he told me that he read the thing cover to cover and was just, just blown away by it, so go buy Richard's book. He's given us enough plugs over the years, I'm giving one back to him. *(audience applauds)*

And I can't even really give an introduction to Sheldon, his body of work is so impressive and extensive. I think you'll get a flavor for that in his discussion with Richard, so I won't even attempt.

It is my pleasure to introduce two gentlemen of the theater, Richard Christiansen and Sheldon Harnick.

*(audience applauds)*

**Richard Christensen (RC):** Thanks a lot. We're wired for sound, but if you have difficulty hearing us, please let us know. It's my great pleasure to be able to talk to Sheldon Harnick, whose Broadway career is extraordinary, but, who lest we forget, is a Chicago boy, born and raised in Chicago, went to Carl Schurz High School and after service in the Army returned to Chicago and went to Northwestern University, where he got his bachelor's degree in music, majoring in violin.

**Sheldon Harnick (SH):** That's right.

**RC:** Can you still play the violin?

**SH:** Yes, a bit, a bit. *(audience laughs)* But there's very little time for that.

**RC:** Did you have any ideas of becoming a performer with the violin at all?

**SH:** No, I was never that good. *(audience laughs)* My ambition at one time was, I thought it would be heaven if I could be in the second violin section of a second-rate symphony someplace. *(audience laughs)*

**RC:** Well, for awhile he played in the Henry Brandon Orchestra, which some of you may remember was a very popular dance orchestra around Chicago. You played in that didn't you?

**SH:** Yeah, at the Edgewater Beach Hotel.

**RC:** Sure. And after graduating from Northwestern he headed for New York because he wanted to work in the theater, but while at Northwestern he had done work for the Waa-Mu Show and actually wrote songs for the Dolphin Show, the water show, and last night, as some of you may know, he was inducted into the Waa-Mu Hall of Fame at Northwestern University for his work at Waa-Mu. His first Broadway show, that I can recall, was *New Faces of 1952*.

**SH:** Well, I had one song in that.

**RC:** Yeah, and it was a fantastic song, which I still remember. It played the Shubert and it was called "The Boston Beguine" and I remember Alice Ghostley, a wonderful, wonderful comic actor. She played sort of a repressed woman who had a sexual adventure at Boston, isn't that right?

**SH:** Well, that was the problem. She hadn't read the right book, so she was unable to have a sexual adventure. *(audience laughs)*

**RC:** But I remember there was one line where *(singing)* "We went to the da-da, that's a little bar there"

**SH:** *(speaking the line)* "We went to the Casbah," that's right, "that's an Irish bar there." Yeah.

**RC:** *(singing)* "That's a little bar there." *(speaking)* Anyway, amazing how these things get a hold of you after all these years. In 1956, he met a fellow young Broadway striver, Jerry Bock, and they formed an alliance which is one of the great alliances in music theater in the United States. The first show that you did together was something called *The Body Beautiful*.

**SH:** Right.

**RC:** Tell us a little about that.

**SH:** Well, a publisher named Tommy Volando already had signed Jerry Bock, and Jerry and a partner that he'd met, I think, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, uh, Larry Holofcener. They had been working, and they got their big opportunity to do a show for Sammy Davis, *Mr. Wonderful*.

**RC:** Mm-hmm.

**SH:** And I was never entirely sure what happened, but apparently under the pressure of their pre-Broadway tour, Larry froze. He was unable to do the work that was necessary, and they brought in another lyricist. And although the show was a big success because of Sammy Davis and a good score, they broke up. So that Jerry was looking for a new lyricist.

**RC:** Mm-Hmm.

**SH:** And his, and his publisher, Tommy Volando, paired me with Jerry and somehow — to me, it's miraculous — he managed to get a producer to take a chance on a team that had never written before. And we got the job to do the score for this musical, *The Body Beautiful*. Unfortunately it was about a subject that I cared nothing about. It was about boxing, and that's not a favorite sport of mine. But as young writers are, I was very hungry and so I accepted, with alacrity. I accepted the job. I did a lot of research. And, um, I learned a lot from the show. The main thing I learned was that I was writing not from my heart and my experience, I was writing from my memory of what other shows were. So that when I wrote love songs they weren't what I thought about love, they were what I thought I should be writing about love, even though my publisher was saying, "Sheldon, um, write from your own experience." I didn't listen to him. So the score, it had some good things in it. But we were a quick flop. As I've told many people, "We ran five weeks. We would've run six weeks, but there was a blizzard." *(audience laughs)*

**RC:** Well, that's showbiz!

**SH:** But, the, uh, opening night — I had switched back and forth between the two licensing companies, ASCAP and BMI, when I joined BMI because Jerry Bock was in BMI, and at that time if you were an ASCAP writer, if you wrote with a BMI writer, ASCAP would not honor your royalties. So I went to BMI, and it was the first time that BMI had had a Broadway show. So they had a huge table at Sardi's, and after the show Jerry Bock and his wife, Patti, and I went to join the people at this table. And it was very festive table, a lot of people. And then the first review came out, and it was terrible. And about half the people from the table just got up and drifted away. Then the second review came out and it was equally terrible, and the rest of the people drifted away. And there were Jerry and Patti and I sitting at this long table with a white tablecloth, and I suddenly understood the nightclub's comic's thing about going snow blind from seeing nothing but white tablecloths. And the thing that made the evening ultimately successful — although I wouldn't know this for awhile — was that the producer Harold Prince came over. He was a friend of the set designers, the wonderful set designers who had done our show, the Eckarts, Bill and Jean.

**RC:** William and Jean Eckart.

**SH:** Yeah, they were terrific. They were — the scenery was the best thing about the show. *(audience laughs)* No, that's not true. There were two wonderful comic performances by Jack Warden and a man named Bill Hickey. Um, anyway, Hal came over, the Eckarts introduced him, and he was very honest, as he always is, and he said, "I can't say that I like the show, but I was very taken with your work." And that was important to us. And within a year, we were working for him, so, on *Fiorello!*, so that was a very important meeting.

**RC:** Yeah, well, I wanna talk [about] *Fiorello!*, at some length — but, uh, the Bock and Harnick collaboration lasted, what, through nine shows, was it?

**SH:** No, unfortunately, it was six or seven. Yeah.

**RC:** But, including, of course, *Fiddler on the Roof*, which is revived every other month, it seems to me.

**SH:** The sun never sets on it.

(audience laughs and applauds)

**RC:** There also, there also was a little show called *She Loves Me* with Barbara Cook. (audience applauds) Harold Prince's first time out as a director, was it not, *She Loves Me*?

**SH:** Not really. Hal had been a producer, and then there were two things I had seen him direct. He directed for the Theatre Guild, I think it was. He directed the play *The Matchmaker*, and Jerry and I had seen it. He did a wonderful job. Then there was a musical that was in terrible trouble called *A Family Affair*, starring Shelley Berman and I think it was Jim Goldman, and John Kander, who wrote the score. Hal was called in to try and fix it, and he almost did — it was difficult, but he almost did. So that Jerry Bock and I were very high on his talent, and when we did *She Loves Me*, our producer, Larry Kasha, said, "You know who I would like to direct this is Gower Champion." We said, "Great!" So they called, he called, Champion and Champion said, "I would love to, but I have other commitments." And at that point Jerry and I said, "Why don't you take a chance on Hal, we'd think he'd be wonderful for this show." And Larry did. Uh, two days later, Gower called back and said, "I'm free. I can do the show." And we thought it would be ethically wrong to do this to Hal, so we said let's go with Hal. I'm glad we did. I'm glad. He was wonderful.

**RC:** It was a lovely show based on "The Little Shop Around the Corner"...

**SH:** Right.

**RC:** ... and it has...

**SH:** That's what I call it, and I think the title is actually "The Shop Around the Corner." Yeah, but because of *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

**RC and SH:** (in unison) Oh, *The Little Shop of Horrors*.

(audience laughs)

(then, simultaneously)

**RC:** The Shop Around the Corner.

**SH:** The Little Shop Around the Horrors.

**RC:** Another great song that keeps coming back, (singing) "Ice cream. He gave me ice cream." Wonderful, wonderful song throughout *She Loves Me*.

You collaborated, of course, with other people in the theater, Joe Raposo with *A Wonderful Life* and Richard Rodgers in *Rex* about Henry VIII. But, of course, the big center of the career for Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick was *Fiddler*, but *Fiorello!* was their first huge hit. Opened in 1959 in New York, it ran for almost, just short of two years in New York. It played Chicago in 1960 at the Shubert Theatre here with a touring company. And since it played downtown at the Shubert, I can't recall a single production that I have seen in Chicago, which is amazing to me because it is such a good show. The songs are wonderful. The story is great. It has a great vitality to it, partly because of the central character. But this was long before *Evita*, before anybody had decided to do a musical about a person of political importance. I'm curious, Sheldon, whose idea was it anyway to do a musical about Fiorello H. LaGuardia?

**SH:** Well, it started with a director, Arthur Penn. Arthur had been asked to do a television documentary about LaGuardia. And as he was doing his research — and he was, I think, going to write it also — as he discovered how colorful LaGuardia was in many ways including his use of language, he began to feel that there would be a musical in this. So he took it to Harold Prince and his then-partner Bobby Griffith, and they agreed. Um, and they let Arthur be the book writer. But months went by, and Arthur, who was a wonderful — and is a wonderful — director, was not a wonderful book writer and what was developing, was developing very slowly. And, uh, Griffith and Prince were not happy with what he was writing, so they finally reached an agreement with him where he would retain the financial interest in the property but he would withdraw as writer.

So they went to George Abbott — Hal Prince shared an office with George Abbott; in fact, Abbott had been Prince's mentor — and at first Abbott was not interested. He didn't think that a political figure was right for a musical. In fact, somebody had asked him to do a musical about Jimmy Walker, who had been mayor of New York, and one would have thought Walker would have been a more natural subject because there was something of the song-and-dance man about Walker. In fact, he had written a hit song, "Will You Love Me in December (As You Do in May)?" But, uh, when Abbott read biographies of Walker, he realized that Walker was essentially a weak man, who was surrounded — although he was not corrupt himself — he surrounded himself with politicians who took advantage of him and were corrupt, and Abbott had the same kind of integrity that Fiorello did. He wasn't interested.

But Hal explained to Abbott, he said, "Look, George, there are two wonderful love affairs in his life. One is he married the beautiful girl of his dreams, who died not too long after they were married. He was heartbroken. And then, ultimately, he married the loyal secretary who had worked for him for years and who adored him from afar and they got married, Marie." So that intrigued Abbott, uh, the fact that there were two love stories. And he agreed to do it.

And thank goodness he did, because our book writer was Jerome Weidman. And Jerome Weidman was a wonderful novelist but inexperienced in the theater. And what Weidman brought to it meshed with what George Abbott brought to it, and together they did a terrific book. I was not part of this. They hired Jerry because Jerry had a successful credit. Jerry Bock had written the songs from *Mr. Wonderful*. And one of the great things about George Abbott was that he loved working with young talent, people who had perhaps not made it yet.

So I got a call from Hal asking if I would write four songs on speculation — wouldn't get paid for them, but it was an opportunity to see if I was the right writer for this show. And having worked with Jerry on *The Body Beautiful*, I found myself loving the experience. I agreed. We did — they had the book as it existed at that time. They said, read the book and you'll see marked, there are four places where we would like you to try songs. One of the places was a going-away party for Fiorello in 1917. Fiorello, one of the interesting things about him, he was one of the first members of the brand new American Air Force and he became a pilot. So there was a party, a going-away party, and they wanted a song that would sound like an Irving Berlin song of the period for people to dance to. And Jerry wanted to work with me, so he wrote four tunes and he brought them to me. And he said, "Which one do you like?" And I listened to them, and I said, "I like that one." And he said, "Oh, good, that's my favorite, too."

But, um, we almost didn't get the job. We went in to audition our four songs for Griffith and Prince, and the first song we did was "The Strike Song." They bought that. They said, "That's wonderful." Then we did a song, which was a song of service rivalry. It was supposed to be performed at the going-away party, and it was a song where the soldiers and the sailors and the members of the fledgling Air Force insulted one another, and they didn't buy that song at all. Then there was another song, which I don't

remember what it was. But we played that, and they didn't buy that. And I saw my life just going down the drain.

Then we did "Till Tomorrow," which was the Irving Berlin waltz, and I made a dreadful mistake. It was a lyric that was kind of uncharacteristic of me. I always think of it as a kind of lace valentine. And my reputation, such as it was, depended on revue material that was kind of edgy. That's what Griffith and Prince knew me for, in fact. When they offered me the chance to write these four songs on spec, Hal was very blunt. He said, "We don't think you're right, but we think you're talented. So we want to give you the chance to try for this. The reason we don't think you're right is that we think what this show needs a very *haimish*, a very warm score and what we know of your stuff is edgy." So anyway, I'm singing the lyric to "Till Tomorrow" and I was looking at Hal, and I got to one of the lacier parts of it and I made the mistake of smiling. So we finished the song and Hal said, "Now this is a put on, this is not real, this is satire." And I said, "No, it's not! No, it's not! (*audience laughs*) This is really supposed to be 1917. It's that kind of a song." He said, "No, it's not."

And to my rescue came Bobby Griffith, who was older than Hal, and he said, "Hal, you don't remember these songs as well as I do, I'm from that period. This is, this sounds like..." And they had this big argument. And I'm listening, thinking, "I hope Bobby wins, I hope Bobby wins." (*audience laughs*) I didn't know what was going to happen. And then there was a ring at the doorbell. It was our choreographer, Pete Gennaro. So Hal said, "Don't say anything, don't say anything." And Pete came in, and he said, "Pete, I'm gonna have the boys play the song for the going-away party. It's called "Till Tomorrow." Tell us what you think." So we played it and this time I didn't smile, and we finished it and Pete said "Oh, my God, it's 1917. It's Irving Berlin." And Hal said, "Kid, you've got the job."

*(audience laughs and applauds)*

**RC:** But you were — you have to admit, you were strange choice for a lyricist. You were a Chicago boy with no real New York experience.

**SH:** Well, that was what was so interesting to me. Hal later told me he and Bobby had [a] talk about it. They did not want a New York lyricist. They were afraid that somebody from New York might make it too inside, and they figured somebody from out-of-town would see LaGuardia in a way that would appeal to other out-of-towners. So that the fact that I was from Chicago was in my favor. And, 'cuz all I knew about LaGuardia, when I was invited to do the show, was that he used to ride on fire engines to fires wearing a fireman's hat, and I knew that he had conducted the New York Philharmonic 'cuz he was a musician, and I knew that he had read, during a newspaper strike, he had read the comics to the children. And that's all I knew about him.

**RC:** Read Dick Tracy over the radio. Yeah.

**SH:** Right.

**RC:** Long before the days of television. He was — everybody in the country knew that he had read the funny papers to the people in...

**SH:** Yeah, and as I read about him, I really fell in love with him. His rock-bottom integrity. We later discovered that people who knew him said you used the word "tyrannical" and he was a tyrant.

**RC:** Mmm-hmm.

**SH:** One of them said, “The man’s a fascist, but he’s on our side.” (*audience laughs*) I have to tell you the experience we had ’cuz it was wonderful.

We met his second wife. She was still alive, Marie. She lived up in Riverdale. She had an agreement in her contract that she had to approve the show, otherwise they couldn’t go forward with it. So while we had written about six songs, and they had most of the book if not all the book, we had to go to Riverdale and Jerry Bock and I auditioned it. So we went there, and it was a very formal meeting with Marie LaGuardia. She was nervous. We were nervous. Um, and Hal began to describe what the story was and we would do songs. And, um, before we started she said, “You know his first wife, Thea. Everybody said she was gorgeous. She wasn’t that gorgeous.” (*audience laughs*)

Anyway, we did about three songs, and from time to time I would look at her and I saw her face clouding over and I didn’t know what was wrong. And suddenly she stopped, and she said, “Wait a minute, who is this Neil, his assistant? There was no Neil in his life. Who was Ben Marino, the politician — there was no Ben Marino.” And Hal said, “Marie, we had to get permission from you. From anybody who was a real figure, we would have to get their permission to put them on stage, if we had to do that we’d never get the show done. So Neil is a composite. Ben Marino is a composite. All these people are composites.” And then the cloud lifted from her face, she said, “Oh, okay, now I understand. Start over.” (*audience laughs*) But she said, “First, let’s have a drink or two.” (*audience laughs*) So we had a couple of drinks, and then we did the score, and she was beaming throughout the whole thing. And after every third song we have a drink. (*audience laughs*) And when we finished she said, “It’s wonderful, and by the way, Thea was gorgeous.” (*audience laughs and applauds*)

**RC:** This was, this was the show that made a star out of Tom Bosley, who played Fiorello in the original production. And, well, he was not very well known before this.

**SH:** He wasn’t known at all. That’s again, a reflection of this extraordinary faith that George Abbott had both in his abilities, his confidence in himself as a director and also his confidence in his ability to recognize talent. Tom came in to audition — we’ve never heard of him. According to his bio, he’d never been on Broadway, but he’d worked all around the country for 10 years, so he had experience. And he looked like Fiorello. He was what people tend to forget, is that when Fiorello was a young man, which he was at the beginning of our play, he was not the corpulent figure he was later. He was not as skinny, but he was slender. And, uh, Tom not only looked like him, but he wasn’t a singer but he sang, and I love that kind of performer — somebody who’s musical and basically an actor, because they bring to a song, usually, much more than just somebody who’s only a singer can bring. So Abbott hired him.

During rehearsals, it turned out that Tom, the way Tom worked, and the way Abbott worked were at cross purposes. Abbott tended to give line readings to the actors: This is the way the line should be read, should sound. Tom didn’t work that way. And for actors who don’t work that way, it’s very difficult. And Abbott, I think, was ready to fire him. But we had taught Tom “The Strike Song,” and we auditioned it for Abbott and he said, “That’s great,” and he said, “Well, if you guys can teach him to sing, I can teach him to act.” (*audience laughs*) Tom later said the only way that he could do it was to go study the scenes, use his own techniques and approach the scenes honestly. And then when he would come in, as it happened, because what he was doing was honest, his readings were exactly what Abbott wanted. So it all worked out ’cuz Abbott — when I started the show, all I knew about Abbott was that he was, quote, “The King of Farce Comedy” and I thought he’s probably, uh, anything for a laugh and it was just the opposite. In his own way, he was Stanislavskian, everything was to be done honestly. I was standing in the wings once when Abbott was there, and an actor came off and said, “Mr. Abbott, I’ve lost the laugh in this scene. What am I doing wrong?” And Abbott said, “I don’t care about the laugh,

but you're not playing the scene honestly. Play the scene honestly, and if the laugh comes back that's terrific, if it doesn't, too bad, but play the scene honestly."

**RC:** Pretty good advice.

**SH:** Yes.

**RC:** You talked about an act of faith in casting Bosley, I think TimeLine had an act of faith in casting PJ (*audience laughs*) as Fiorello, which he is about to justify.

**SH:** We had another actor in the show, who Margie and I became friends with, a man named Howard Da Silva.

**RC:** A great man.

**SH:** Yeah. When Howard auditioned, he had a chip on his shoulder because he had been blacklisted, and we were sure that we also were not going to use him. And Abbott, who I also believe was a Republican, Abbott didn't care about the blacklist. He cared about actors. And he looked at Howard, and he thought, "He's perfect for this role." [Ben Marino] And Howard didn't believe it when he got the call saying, "You're cast." And he became like a puppy around Abbott, he just followed him around, and it restored Howard's career, 'cuz he was scraping rock bottom at that point, but it restored his career. We all wondered whether the show would be picketed by the Red Channels people or anything. We weren't. Everybody loved Howard. Um, and he bought a house, and his career took off again.

**RC:** Yeah. And he had a great song, "The Little Tin Box"

**SH:** (with RC) "The Little Tin Box." Yeah. Howard was another one of those people who is not a singer, but essentially very musical. And he was just a joy to work with as a lyricist because he realized every nuance that that I didn't even know was there. (*audience laughs*)

So, when "Little Tin Box" was written out of town, we had — I think, our first stop was New Haven, and then the second stop, if I remember right, was Boston. It might have been Philadelphia. Anyway, while we were in New Haven, we had a scene in the second act — uh, the character that Dora was singing about, the cop [who] goes on to become a corrupt Tammany Hall politician, and he's given the contract for all of the garbage collection in Manhattan, and he buys a penthouse. There was a scene in the penthouse with a lot of politicians and some gangsters, and we had written a song, a period song called "What to do 'Till the Bootlegger Comes," and it worked. It was fun. But Abbott looked at the scene, and he said, "I'm not sure that this scene accomplishes anything. So we're gonna cut that song, we're gonna make the scene shorter. And we'll go to a scene which gets us into what's the meat of the show in the second act."

There was an investigation of Jimmy Walker's regime and they discovered all the corruption in the regime, and when the next election came along, Walker was voted out and LaGuardia was voted in. But there was a scene we wanted to do about the impending investigation by Judge Seabury, and I remembered, when I got the job, one of my acquaintances in New York, who was a wonderful man, wonderful, wonderful writer named Burt Shevelove. If you know his name it's 'cuz he was the co-book writer with Larry Gelbart for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. But Bert was a scholar and a student, and he said, um, he said, "Go to some second-hand stores and see if you can locate a sixth volume, uh, history of things of popular history in America: the songs, the dances, the clothing, the sports, that kind of thing. It's called 'Our Times,' and it's by a newspaperman named Mark Sullivan."

So I did find this set of books, and when I was reading the period that covered the period of our show, about Fiorello; there was also information about the Judge Seabury investigation.

And there was a photograph of one of the people who's testifying, and the caption of it was "Little Tin Box," and it mentioned that this man, while he was on the stand and he was asked where he got all this money he put in the bank, he said, "Well, my wife is very frugal, and she has this little tin box she puts everything in, in the kitchen window, and she saves from the money and puts in the money, and that's where it came from." So that phrase stuck with me, "little tin box." And when we had to write a new song, I thought, "That's a great title for this song." Um, and I had, I wanted to start writing it and Jerry Bock was not available — he had gone to the movies. I knew where he went. And I thought, well, I would love to write to music 'cuz the music would give me the form for the song. And I remembered the song about service rivalry that we'd written and [that] had been rejected. And the thing I had liked about this song is that it had a lot of 16<sup>th</sup> notes in it; there was room for a lot of words. *(audience laughs)* So... *(audience laughs, scattered applause)*

I wrote three choruses, and, but I didn't — there was nothing in the existing music that would give me the actual chorus, "little tin box, little tin box." So, I went to meet Jerry when the movie broke and he said, "Hi." I said, "We wrote a song tonight." And he said, "How was my music?" *(audience laughs)* And I said, "I believe you'll like it." So we went back to his hotel room, where he had a piano, and I showed him what he had done. And he loved it. He said, "Okay, let me work on the rest." And he called me about five in the morning and I came down and he played me the chorus, and I said, "It's terrific." So the next day we auditioned it for Griffith and Prince and our choreographer Pete Gennaro and for Abbott and they said, "Yeah, This is good. This is okay." Which was not the response we were hoping for. But they rehearsed it, and they put it in.

And I must say Howard Da Silva and the politicians; they were very enthusiastic about the song. So they put it in, and it worked. It was nice. And I was a little disappointed in the response, I thought it was a better song than that. But Griffith and Prince said "Okay, we'll leave it in the show." About three performances later, I went to the theater and Howard was just coming off stage and he said, "Sheldon, Sheldon, we stopped the show! We stopped the show!" I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yeah!" So I watched the next performance, and they stopped the show again. And it kept stopping the show. What had happened was what always happens. When they first performed it, although they knew it they were not at ease with it. There was a little tension, invisible tension, about it. Will we get through it without blowing a lyric? What's gonna happen? Will the audience like it? There was tension. Over the next few performances, they relaxed, and as they relaxed, the audience relaxed because that tension is contagious. And by the third performance everybody was relaxed, and they loved it and it stopped the show.

**RC:** Sure. And it will again.

**SH:** *(laughs)* From your mouth to God's ears, as my people say.

*(audience laughs)*

**RC:** The art of writing lyrics for a Broadway show is something so special. I'm thinking of a lyric for "Till Tomorrow." It's very simple: "Twilight descends. Everything ends. 'Till tomorrow."

**SH:** Mmm-hmm.

**RC:** And yet it's so beautifully paired with that Irving Berlin-type music. Can you define a little bit, in general, what makes a good Broadway song lyric? What goes into it? Why it's special. And maybe even some examples of good lyrics that you know.

**SH:** Well, "Till Tomorrow" is a good example. *(audience laughs)*

**RC:** Yeah, yeah, it is. Absolutely.

**SH:** By the way, that song grew from one word. My model for that song was an old song I grew up hearing, *(singing)* "Just a Song at Twilight."

**RC:** *(singing along)* "...at twilight."

**SH:** And I loved the word "twilight." And I thought that's what I would like the song to start with. And so it grew from that "twilight descends." And the rest of it was just trying then to develop that thought — uh, it's a going-away song, but we'll meet tomorrow.

It's very hard to define what makes a lyric work because, as I've discovered, rhyme is not always that important. I like, I myself like, meticulous rhymes, but audiences don't care that much about meticulous rhymes and they will accept the false rhyme if the lyric it's part of is effective and if the music is good. I think I'm more equipped to say what constitutes a good lyric in the kind of shows I write, rather than a show like *Mama Mia*, for instance, which, frankly eludes me. *(audience laughs and applauds)*

That's actually not true. It doesn't elude me. I know why it's successful: It's because the ABBA songs are extraordinarily successful. I, myself, tend to find them a bit mechanical, but I recognize that they are successful and that there is a great hunger on the people who go to the theater to have music that they know and like. But the kind of shows I like do have meticulously constructed lyrics, rhymes that are not false and that are true rhymes that really reflect what the characters are, what the characters would be saying in those moments that are truthful. For instance, in *Mama Mia*, one of the things that doesn't disturb the audiences, at all, and disturbs me, is that they've taken a song, a popular song, and they have not bothered to rewrite the lyrics so that they flow smoothly into the dialogue. A song will end and then go into dialogue and really doesn't connect with what's just been said. It doesn't bother the audience. They accept the arc of the story, and it's perfectly acceptable to them. To me, it's not. When I go see a show, I like to see something that shows me the lyricist has thought a lot about what's being said and what's being felt. Then, on top of that, I look for freshness of language and the avoidance of cliché. So I think those are the elements: freshness of language, construction, honesty. That kind of thing.

Then there are the so-called "jukebox shows." They're something else because they are hit songs; more often than not, [they] are well constructed. They may not have true rhymes. They may rhyme "fine" with "time," things like that, and that doesn't matter in the pop world. But what comes to mind — I was given a book, I'm not sure it's even published yet, but I was asked to provide a quote for it. And it's a book by two scholars of American music and the whole book is the stories behind songs, some of which are pop tunes, some of which are show tunes, some of which are movie songs. And as I was reading the book and reminding myself of how many, many songs there are that we all know and love. And they were quoting the lyrics — I thought, jeez, I have become unwittingly condescending towards the lyrics in some of these songs and I shouldn't be, because they are beautifully constructed and the men who wrote them were true professionals.

**RC:** Well, it's one thing for a single person to write the music and lyrics.

**SH:** No, I was married at that time. *(audience laughs)*

**RC:** No, I mean Irving Berlin and Cole Porter and so on. But a question that always fascinates us who go to see theater is the collaboration between a very talented composer and a very talented lyricist. You know — how did that work with you and Jerry Bock? Did the words come first or the music? You know the...

**SH:** Ah, when Jerry and I worked — I worked with him in a way I've never worked with anybody else. There are composers, like Joe Raposo, you mentioned, who was the — up until he died, he was the co-musical director for *Sesame Street*. And we collaborated on a couple of things. Joe, in our collaboration, always had to have the lyrics first. When I wrote *Rex* with Richard Rodgers, it turned out that because Rodgers had had a stroke he was no longer able, oddly enough to write music first, so with him all of the lyrics had to come first. I've worked with Marvin Hamlisch, who maintains that he is not very good at setting lyrics and therefore he likes to write all the music first. It turns out that that's not true. He can set lyrics beautifully, but he doesn't think of himself that way. Jerry Bock, on the other hand, can write music first or set lyrics beautifully. He's a wonderful editor because he's also a good lyricist.

But the way we worked — which I have never worked, and have not worked, that way since — once we knew what the source material was — and in the case of *Fiorello!*, it was the book that they had written up to that point and it was also all the research we had done — Jerry went into his studio, studied the material and began to write songs which he thought reflected one of the characters and one of the situations. And he would work on a song 'till he finished it enough that he was happy with it. Then he'd put it on tape. When he had anywhere from eight to 16 songs, he would send me the tapes, and by that time I had ideas for songs that I wanted to work on. So I'd listen to the tape and each song was prefaced with something like "I think this is for Fiorello," "I think this is for Thea." Uh, and every once in awhile there'd be a song [where he] said, "I don't know what the hell this is, but I like it." So on every tape there was invariably, maybe one or two songs, and that was a measure of Jerry's generosity. He didn't expect that I would set everything on the tapes. He was happy if there were one or two songs that inspired me, and there always were. So I would start writing to those songs. And, of course, when the music exists, then the lyricist does not have to worry about the form. The form is inherent in the music. And that's the way we always started a project.

When we split up, I got curious myself 'cuz people always asked us which comes first, the music or the lyrics. And Jerry's answer to that was always, "The book." So Sammy Cohn's answer to that was, "The paycheck." (*audience laughs*) I was very curious about how often lyrics had come first, how often music came first. So, as best as I could recollect, I went through all the shows we had done and cataloged. And it turned out, to my surprise, 50/50.

What would invariably happen was that, at a certain point, I would have an idea for a song where I didn't want to be constrained by the music. I wanted the freedom to just write, because — especially a song that might have three choruses. I would finish one chorus. Then, in doing the second chorus, I would come up with lyrics that had a different metrical form than the first chorus. So then I'd have to go back and make sure the first and the second choruses were metrically similar. And similarly with the third chorus, I might have to re-carpenter the whole song. And I didn't want to have to do that to music, so that I would write lyrics first. And then I discovered how good Jerry is at setting lyrics.

We had, when we started working — I didn't realize that we were feeling each other out as people. And I didn't realize how sensitive both of us were to the fact that what we were writing might not be accepted as just professional work, but as reflections of who we were. So that if I wrote something and Jerry didn't care for it, it wasn't that he didn't like it 'cuz he didn't think it was right for the show, it was a direct reflection on me, he didn't like me. So we were very thin skinned. And luckily the argument didn't happen until we were about four or five songs into the show. I don't remember what the song

was, but he said it in a way that I thought was all wrong. And it's very hard to describe why you don't think the music is right 'cuz music is so subjective, where lyrics are very objective. You can take a lyric and say, "This lyric doesn't — it's not grammatical, look what you did here, there's no subject, there's no predicate." With music, you can't do that. You can say, "Well, it goes up here, or I think it should go down." So we had an argument about the style of this — I know what it was. It was a song called "Politics and Poker." And Jerry had set it as kind of like a foxtrot. And I was fighting — and we had such a big fight. We both said, "Let's call it quits for today." I went home. And he called me the next day, and he said, "After I calmed down, I thought, 'I still think he's wrong but let me see if I can set it another way.' And he found this wonderful kind of mock-Verdian way of doing it, this big, Italian hurdy-gurdy waltz — and it was wonderful. So we got past that moment. But in our collaboration, we had very few arguments, mostly because the fact that we were good collaborators was also a reflection of the fact that we thought the same way.

**RC:** Yeah, sure.

**SH:** We were on the same wavelength.

**RC:** And you were pals.

**SH:** Yeah, the very first collaboration I had — uh, by the way, this I think may interest you. My hero when I moved from Chicago to New York was Yip Harburg, E.Y. Harburg, because I had seen, uh, [that] one of my classmates at Northwestern was a comedienne who went on to have a nice career in television. A woman named Charlotte Rae. (*audience applauds*) She would be very happy to hear that applause. Charlotte, around 1948 — Charlotte had gone to New York on the Christmas holiday, and when she came back to school she gave me, she loaned me an LP. She said, "Sheldon, I saw this show in New York, it's called *Finian's Rainbow*, and you must hear this." So I took it home and I played it, and I thought the music was wonderful but it was the lyrics — it was the lyrics that were so playful. And yet I thought, along with the playfulness, they are saying something of importance. And for the first time I thought, "Now there's — if I can do that, that would be a career worth following.

So when I came to New York — and one of the reasons I came to New York was Charlotte had gone on before I had and she wrote me a letter. She said, "I'm looking for material to do a club act and, to my surprise, I have not found as much first-rate writing talent in New York as I thought I would." She said, "I think you could have a real career in New York because you don't have first-rate writing talent either." (*audience laughs*) No, she didn't say that. That's the lyricist discipline in me. And so that was very important to me. And I came to New York, and there were other reasons that brought me there. I met Charlotte, and she wanted me to write something for her act, which is not what I wanted to do. I wanted to write for the theater. But I felt obligated to Charlotte because she had been influential in my making that decision.

And I had an experience I've never had again. I woke up at three in the morning with a lyric and music going through my head. And I wrote it down and went back to sleep. And when I woke up, I thought, "I think I wrote a song last night." (*audience laughs*) So I looked at the page thinking, "I wonder what it's like?" 'Cuz once before, I was fast asleep, I woke up and thought, "I have solved the riddle of the universe. I have solved the riddle of the universe." And I wrote it down on my bedside tablet, and I went back to sleep. And the next morning I woke up and I thought, "Last night, I solved the riddle. What is it? And I looked, and it said, "orange trees." (*audience laughs*) So, I looked at this lyric I'd written, expecting it to say something like "orange trees" and instead it was wonderful. There were three choruses of a terrific song. It needed a fourth chorus, but the fourth chorus was inherent in the first three. It was called "The Shape of Things," and it was kind of a Frankie-and-Johnnie song told in terms

of geometrical shapes. So I sold it to Charlotte, and she used it for years, very successfully. Then she was picked to be in *New Faces of 1950*, Leonard Sillman's production, and she auditioned for the show. He couldn't raise the money, so then it was *New Faces of 1951*. And she kept auditioning, and they still couldn't raise the money. Then it was *New Faces of 1952*. And by that time a director/writer by the name of Abe Burrows had come to one of the auditions and had fallen in love with Charlotte's talent, so he stole her from the show and put her into something else, and she took my song with her. And luckily I had started working on "The Boston Beguine" so that went into that show [*New Faces of 1952 and sung by Alice Ghostley*].

**RC:** Well, the beat goes on, and the fun never stops with your shows. I think there's a possibility now that *The Apple Tree* might be coming on Broadway in a full production.

**SH:** Well, I don't know if Chicago has something like this, but in New York there's a series called *Encores!*, where they do concert versions or — originally the idea was to do shows that were not successful, but [were] by successful people and that had something going for them and usually that meant a good score and a weak book. And they found that there was a big audience for this. They started with, I think, two or three performances. Now they do five, and they can fill the theater. So they did *Apple Tree* last spring, a year ago [2005], with Kristin Chenoweth, who was perfect for it. And we had hoped it would come to Broadway. The problem has been that Chenoweth has commitments and can't commit to more than six months, and they found they haven't been able to raise money 'cuz the investors don't think they'll get their money back in six months. So it may not happen. We're not sure, yet, but it may not happen.

**RC:** But we're still hoping. It was the *Encores!* production directed by Gary Griffith, who is a Chicago boy.

**SH:** I first ran across his name at *Encores!* The first show he did was an operetta.

**RC:** *New Moon*.

**SH:** *New Moon*. Yeah, and I looked at it and thought, "Boy, I don't know who this guy is, but he's good. This could be a caricature, and instead he has found a way to make you see it as it was conceived and still look at it as affectionately as something that's very dated." He walked a very fine line, and I thought, "He's good." Then the next show he directed was at *Encores!*. I think it was a Gershwin show called *Pardon My English*, which was just a silly show, and yet he found a way to capitalize on the silliness and have you accept it. And I thought, "He's really good." When we did *Apple Tree*, I was hoping we'd get him, but I had no input in that. But he was the one who was picked and he was wonderful, just wonderful. And, in fact, two weekends ago, I did a program at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association] in New York. I was host. I picked out 20 songs by using other people's lyrics. They were lyricists of my generation or younger. And the music director, who's a wonderful music director named Rob Fisher, who's worked closely with Gary, and he got him to be our director, and he's just a joy to work with.

**RC:** What were some of the lyrics that you picked out for that YMHA program?

**SH:** Well, although all the lyricists were nominally my age or younger — There were, I told the audience, there would be two exceptions because they were such profound influences on me. We started with a Gilbert and Sullivan song. We did "The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring." And then the next one was from *Promise* — Oh, and by the way, the other guideline was that they all had to be American and they all had to be written for the theater. So the next song that we did was "I'll Never Fall in Love Again" from *Promises, Promises*, which turned out to be not only a pop hit but a wonderful lyric. And

some of the others I had — there was a birthday party for Steve Sondheim at the Symphony Space in New York. I had been invited to sing a song from *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, a song called “Free,” which I did, which was great fun. So I repeated that. I also — my other exception was Yip Harburg. I did “Something Sort of Grandish” from *Finian’s Rainbow*.

**RC:** “Sugar candish.”

**SH:** We did a song of Amanda McBroom’s, which I think is a great lyric, a song called “The Rose,” and that was done with two women. We had a showstopper, the “You’re Nothing Without Me” from *City of Angels*. We closed the first act with “I Am What I Am” from *La Cage Aux Folles*. We closed the second act with “New York, New York” by Kander and Ebb. Those are some of the songs. And then there were two songs that I loved and that I thought, no one knows these songs. One was a song from a flop musical called *Is There Life After High School?* by a very gifted writer named Craig Carnelia, and it was a song called “There’s a Kid Inside.” And the other was a song — there’s a writing team, Richard Maltby and David Shire. They’ve written two brilliant revues of their songs. One was called “Closer than Ever.” The other song was “Starting Here, Starting Now.” And if those CDs are still available, if you’re interested in theater songs, they’re wonderful. I took a song called “One of the Good Guys,” and it stopped the show. And there was a review in the Times by a very respectful reviewer, Stephen Holden, and he singled out those two songs. He said, “These were put under the microscope, dusted off and turned out to be authentic gems.” Which pleased me a lot.

**RC:** Well, Sheldon, you are an authentic gem — and, thank *you* so very much.

*(audience applauds, with a standing ovation)*