

Midlife and the Artist's Soul

There is a wonderful documentary film called *Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened*. Lonny Price directs the story of the 1981 Broadway premiere of Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along*. The show flopped and closed after 16 performances. The documentary uses film footage from the casting process and rehearsals of 1980 and 1981, along with many interviews with the cast, Stephen Sondheim, and Hal Prince. It is an interesting and moving film, especially for a performing artist.

The film struck a special chord in me because the people from that cast are my age. Hearing their stories about the excitement of being in a Sondheim show, most of them on Broadway for the first time, and then learning where they have gone since, was emotional.

When I was very young, I was enchanted by show business. I wanted to be an actor or a stand-up comic. As my teens went on, I focused on classical instrumental music. From my mid-teens until about 10 years later, my goal was to get at least one graduate degree in flute, an orchestra job, and a college or conservatory teaching appointment. Getting a professorship seemed like my professional pot of gold.

I received a reality check while working on my master's degree and teaching assistantship. I saw that academia was not quite as fabulous as I thought it was. There were many compromises and politics that disillusioned me. I am very thankful that I had that opportunity to learn more about college teaching before going for a doctorate.

During the second year of my master's I took an ethnomusicology course that made me aware of some of the many ways in which people outside of the Western classical tradition experience music. I was suddenly perplexed about my allegiance to the conservatory model of musical education. Why did I think this was my path? What other possibilities were available? Why did I feel anxious all the time doing this "thing I love"? Did I really love it?

I described earlier in this book how I got back into singing by taking a break from the classical scene for a while. The hiatus helped me to find a good relationship with music again. Still, watching *Best Worst Thing* stirred up feelings about hope, inspiration, and aspirations that were upsetting. How much of what we accomplish is an unsatisfactory compromise compared to what we hoped for? Are dreams worth the trouble?

Excerpt from *Sane Singing: A Guide to Vocal Progress*
by D. Brian Lee

The actor Jason Alexander was cast in his first Broadway role in this production of *Merrily We Roll Along*, and he is featured in the documentary. Thirty years after his Broadway debut, he says that he often remembers the line from *Pippin* where a character says "I thought there would be more plumes." Jason talks about that line in relation to his career and the disappointments and disillusionments he has experienced.

Perhaps when we are young, we tend to think that everything will be amazing, perfect, and inspirational. Then with the years come challenges and failures, and our outlook changes. Most of us don't reach our youthful goals, and many of those who do are disappointed. It is virtually impossible and also practically unethical to tell a young person these things, so we must let them try.

Maybe if I had kept moving in a certain direction, not changing course so much, I would have achieved more. Maybe I would have had a higher professional status or higher-caliber performing experiences. Or maybe the best is yet to come. I know that at this age, I no longer judge people who haven't made it big. The definition of a successful life is very personal. Being a successful artist (which I can't even define anymore) isn't better than being a good teacher or mother or librarian or soldier. How stupid I was in my youth to think that these occupations could be judged and ranked!

It is harder than hell to keep going sometimes, but persistence seems to be a huge part of maturity's job description, so let's deal with it. Stagnation is certainly worse!

Regardless of your occupation, if you value love and beauty, and can add those things to the world a little or a lot, you are doing fine.