Music figures heavily in establishing Black Swan’s atmosphere of foreboding. “It became clear that this was a tremendously musical film,” says Robert Kraft ’76, president of Fox Music, who was involved in the relevant decisions for the Fox Searchlight Pictures release. “You have Tchaikovsky’s incredible ballet music and a fantastic original underscore written by [English composer] Clint Mansell. I was in London with Darren for every minute of the orchestral recording. It was glorious. It sounded as beautiful as I had dreamed.” Mansell explains that he wanted the Swan Lake music to haunt Nina during her stormy passage. “Tchaikovsky’s score is so wonderfully complex,” he says. “It tells the story in every note. But modern film scores are more subdued, more minimalist if you will, so I had to almost deconstruct the ballet.” Aronofsky adds, “Clint took Tchaikovsky’s masterpiece and turned it into scary movie music.”

The dark beauty of the Russian master’s score infuses Black Swan with its magic. Filled with themes of ego and alter ego, images of mirrors, and paradoxes of the psyche, Black Swan itself explores aspects of the art that created it. “There are lots of ideas about the artistic process in the film,” Aronofsky says. “There’s a struggle between control and letting go. In any craft, you have to learn to do both.”

Composer Stephen Sondheim (left) and librettist John Weidman in 2010. The copies of Playbill showcase two of their collaborations, Pacific Overtures (1976) and Assassins (1990).

**Storytelling with Sondheim**

*Librettist John Weidman writes books for the best.*

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**Act I:** John Weidman ’68 spends the first 13 years of his life in Westport, Connecticut, where he plays Little League baseball and dreams of turning pro. Then he realizes: “There are no major league players from Westport.” His revised attitude about the future: “Wait and see.”

**Act II, Scene 1:** Weidman (wide-man) at Harvard. His father is a writer (the novelist and dramatist Jerome Weidman, author of I Can Get It for You Wholesale), so it’s only natural that he befriends Timothy Crouse ’68, the son of playwright Russel Crouse, who coauthored the book for The Sound of Music. In 1966, on a lark, they write the Hasty Pudding show A Hit and a Myth. (“Nothing seemed at stake. And we got to go to Bermuda.”)

**Act II, Scene 2:** Weidman graduates. He extends his “Wait and see” credo by applying to law school. Facing the draft, he chooses not to attend Yale immediately, and instead teaches for a few years at a New York public school. Then he heads to New Haven to join Clarence Thomas in the Yale Law class of 1974.

Certainly that the law is not for him, Weidman writes two letters, seeking an internship. The first goes to Bowie Kuhn, commissioner of Major League Baseball, who blows him off. The second—with a postscript: “I have an idea for a play about the opening of Japan; can we talk about it?”—goes to Broadway producer-director Hal Prince. Weidman: “At Harvard, I majored in East Asian history—I thought I knew something no one else did. I had no ambition to write a play. I had no training. I just thought: I can do this while I’m at Yale.”

**Act II, Scene 3:** Prince meets with Weidman for 15 minutes before giving him a contract (and $500) to write the play. In the summer of 1973, Weidman completes a draft of Pacific Overtures. Prince decides it needs to be a musical—and convinces Stephen Sondheim to turn the play into one. Weidman: “It was so surreal I didn’t stop—at least not too often—to think
Although I was only leaving the house for a few minutes and only to run a few errands (mail a couple of bills; pick up an iced coffee at the local bagel shop), and although it was a perfectly ordinary day, like hundreds of others that unfold in any year, year after year, something was no longer the same. Before the door had even closed behind me, the familiar world outside immediately seemed—unexplored. That comes closest to describing the unexpected sensation that had arrived. “Fresh” and “new” were part of it, but only a part, even though there were undoubtedly now some things present that hadn’t ever previously appeared on my block, such as the particular play of light on the buildings across the street, and the array of zigzaggy clouds in the sky overhead, and the patterns formed by the various groups of people walking by.

But it was the familiar objects, the ones that were still what they had always been, that seemed the most transformed. It wasn’t as if they had changed shape or color, but they now seemed charged with purpose, beckoning, calling out, and almost glowing or shimmering, with each detail etched in the sharpest kind of focus. Each thing I looked at seemed now to have a story curled inside it, and to represent something that many people from many places and times had thought about over long periods and with great care and deliberation and a kind of intelligence that takes generations to accumulate and then get sifted through and refined and pared down. The corner mailbox, for instance. I live in Greenwich Village, in New York City—have done so for most of my life—and the corner mailbox has been there for as long as I can remember.

Battered, blue, durable, unprepossessing—already obsolete some might say. Square on the bottom with a rounded top and a squeaky pull-down handle that needs a certain decisiveness to open and close, it was something I’ve often used but had never at any time given the kind of close examination that it in fact—what? needed; deserved; wanted? Wanted—that seemed as close to it as anything. I was at the moment wide awake in a way that reached out in all directions. Awareness and attention had been intensified, reorganized, redeployed, and I was abruptly eager to know more.

In an era of headphone-wearing, smart-phone-watching pedestrians, utterly unattuned to their surroundings, Tony Hiss ’63 makes the case for mindful, aware attention to one’s environs—even the most ordinary ones. His new manifesto, In Motion: The Experience of Travel (Knopf, $26.95), follows by many years—and generations of enabling, distracting technology—he is The Experience of Place (and his beloved New Yorker railroad wanderings, with Rogers E. M. Whitaker, collected as All Aboard with E. M. Frimbo). From the beginning of chapter 1, “Deep Travel,” a revelation outside the front door:

Visit harvardmag.com/extras to see interview clips with John Weidman and clips from Assassins and Sesame Street
Weidman is equally intrigued; their collaboration becomes Assassins. Weidman: “I was a Camelot kid. After Kennedy was shot, I went to Washington and stood on the sidewalk as his cortege passed by. And I thought—as Steve did—how can one small man cause so much grief? We opened at Playwrights Horizons and were mostly vilified, but I’ve never enjoyed anything as much as working with Steve on that.”

Sondheim: “Ordinarily, I start reading the librettist’s work after he has written one or two scenes, but John never offered to show them to me. I assumed that John’s reluctance to show me what he was writing came from uncertainty. I should have known better from the man who wrote Pacific Overtures. Within five minutes of reading, I knew the reason for John’s hesitation in showing me what he was writing: far from uncertainty, he knew exactly what he was doing, and he was on a white-hot roll.”

Act III, Scene 4: Assassins (1990) polarizes reviewers, as does Road Show (2008), his third collaboration with Sondheim. Other shows provoke no ambivalence. He is nominated for the Tony Award for best book for a musical three times (Pacific Overtures, Big, and Contact), and wins a 2000 Tony for the dance musical Contact. For his Sesame Street work, he wins a dozen Emmys. And, for a decade, he’s president of the Dramatists Guild. He is one of only three writers to have had several collaborations with the great Sondheim.

The Critic’s Turn: In March, Anything Goes will be revived on Broadway, with Joel Grey and Sutton Foster—in a theater named for Stephen Sondheim. Completes a circle, doesn’t it? Weidman shrugs it off; unlike many theater people, he seems to have no ego, no urgent drive, no need to be noticed. From his 2008 Harvard class report: “The success my career has afforded me, both psychic and material, has not been spectacular, but it has been substantial and, more importantly, enough for me.” Unspectacular? “That’s the first time I wrote intimately about myself—ever. And it’s not false modesty. That’s an entirely accurate description of how I feel.” Then what’s the payoff? “I like writing dialogue. I like the solitary part. I like collaborating. I just really enjoy the work.”

—JESSE KORNBLUTH

American Ratification
The great experiment in constitution-making by JACK RAKOVE

Imagine that, a few years from now, Americans are suddenly plunged into a constitutional crisis. Imagine an economy still muddling in recession; a government rendered inept by the complete collapse of the Senate as a serious institution of deliberation or a continued division between House and Senate; a conservative Supreme Court gripped by a passion to restore the pre-New Deal version of the Commerce Clause (which treated commerce merely as the physical movement of goods across state lines); a militant Tea Party movement convinced...