

Most non-native species—wheat, soybeans, oranges, tomatoes, rice, apples, and irises, for instance—cause no trouble. The danger comes from plants that are “invasive,” a term that is difficult to define because so many imponderables can turn nice plants nasty. For nearly 50 years, Floridians put Asian fig plants in their gardens without incident. A few years ago, the figs suddenly began spreading. It turned out that the plant’s natural pollinator, an Asian wasp, had followed its host to the United States.

Invasive non-native species in the United States date back to the 19th century and before. Ben Franklin brought in Chinese tallow for the production of candle wax; it now overruns bottomland forests and wet prairies in the South. In the 1880s the federal government imported carp; the so-called “wonder fish of Europe” turned out to be a worthless predator here. Ornithologists returned with European house sparrows that rapidly fattened on agricultural crops. Belatedly, restaurant owners put sparrows on the menu, a New York newspaper claimed they made excellent pot pie, and the state of Michigan offered a penny per dead bird. Still the sparrows flourished.

The prize for introducing the greatest number of non-native species goes to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. By 1923 it had introduced more than 50,000 exotic plants, among them crabgrass. Today, an agency within the Department of Agriculture is responsible for checking the millions of ships, plants, and packages that may be transporting larvae, bugs the size of a comma, seeds, even microscopic pathogens. Naturally, aliens sometimes slip through. Serrated tussock, a noxious weed, arrived in packages of seeds from Argentina via Wal-Mart. The Asian tiger mosquito, a carrier of several deadly diseases,

came in a shipment of used tires.

After decades of ignoring or underestimating the invasion by non-native species, citizens have begun to take action. The Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society, and even the Garden Club of America (a longtime holdout) now support the crusade, and many gardeners are switching to native plants. Still, powerful forces stand in the way of change. Congress remains largely unaware of the problem. Animal activists protest whenever a creature, however harmful, is killed. For fun or profit, people still smuggle in dangerous species as pets: tarantulas, geckos, hissing cockroaches. Nurseries resist changing their inventory of invasive plants—such as purple loosestrife, now among the nation’s most destructive—because they’re easy to grow and thus easy to sell.

Devine believes that the menace can be contained. But how? “Biocontrol,” the deliberate introduction of the predators and parasites a species leaves at home, has not worked well so far, mostly because the agents end up attacking species other than their targets. Pesticides do the same; companies like Monsanto produce wide-spectrum chemicals to maximize profits. And global warming may exacerbate the problem, the author observes: species now confined to southern climes, such as fire ants and “killer” bees, will likely travel north as the temperature rises.

Calm but not blasé, amused by the attendant ironies but never flippant, Devine observes closely and writes with dramatic intensity. He makes such a compelling case for the problem that only his optimism about its solution seems unwarranted.

—A. J. Hewat

Arts & Letters

STEPHEN SONDHEIM: *A Life*.

By Meryle Secrest. Knopf. 480 pp. \$30

Sondheim is the pre-eminent musical dramatist of our time, and not merely because there are no competitors for the title; he would wear the crown even in a stadium of rivals. Now in his late sixties, he merits the tribute Secrest has paid him, a full-scale life in print.

Sondheim was born in 1930 in New York City, grew up on the West Side of Manhattan in upper-middle-class privilege, and went to private schools and Williams College. He

was the product of a troubled marriage—an ineffectual father who one day simply walked out on his difficult wife to live with another woman—and his childhood would send him into permanent analysis as an adult. He found encouragement for his musical talent from the lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, a mentor and a second father.

By the time he was 25, Sondheim was working with Leonard Bernstein on the lyrics for *West Side Story*. He wrote the lyrics for other shows (*Gypsy*, to the music of Jule

Styne, and *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, to the music of Richard Rodgers), but he aspired to be composer as well as lyricist. From that ambition came three decades of marvelous scores for Broadway, as well as fame, riches, influence, and, quite late, love. Not all the shows were successful, but the recorded scores have a contained and absolute life apart from the fate of the productions that introduced them.

Art isn't easy, sings the cast of *Sunday in the Park with George*, and neither are artists. This is not exactly news (even Homer probably wanted better wine and a softer pillow from his hosts), but it is the largest truth delivered by Secrest's biography. In the creation of a Broadway musical, many of Sondheim's collaborators over the decades (Bernstein, Rodgers, Jerome Robbins, Harold Prince,

Ethel Merman) butt egos like billy goats. That such insecure, petty, jealous, backstabbing folks produce work that gives great pleasure to others is one of life's enduring mysteries.

Sondheim himself is, in the biographer's telling, closed, demanding,

arrogant, overly sensitive, mean, repressed, awkward—and brilliant, charming, and companionable too. The unattractive personal traits become the treasurable subjects of his art, as in *Sunday in the Park with George*, where he is clearly the model for Georges Seurat, the artist obsessed with “finishing the hat” in a painting at the cost of living a normal life.

There is no music in Secrest's book, of course, and the ingenious lyrics meant to sit upon the music—Sondheim once rhymed *raisins* with *liaisons* and made their conjunction poignant—look merely plain upon the page. What's interesting about Sondheim is his work, not his work habits, and an hour spent listening to any one of the scores, particularly *Company*, *Follies*, *Sweeney Todd*, or *Sunday in the Park with George*, will work more magic than all Secrest's dutiful chronology. The

daily Sondheim is here; the Sondheim who matters, and who will be remembered when everyone has forgotten that he did not get on with his mother, is elsewhere.

—James Morris

DIFFERENCES IN THE DARK.

By Michael Gilmore. Columbia Univ. Press. 192 pp. \$22.50

Imagine John Wayne under West End lights, and you begin to understand the vast divide between the English stage and the American movie set. Gilmore undertakes far more than a simple compare-and-contrast exercise in *Differences in the Dark*, his compact exploration of the theater and the movies as symbols of their respective national characters. These forms of entertainment didn't evolve as they did by accident, he argues. Rather, they reflect and even explain each country's history and politics.

Developing his case through 30 or so subdivisions bearing such titles as “Abundance and Scarcity,” “Climate,” and “Jews,” Gilmore first establishes the relationships between entertainment and nation. He aligns the movies with Americans' individualism, hunger to conquer new physical frontiers, and rapture for technological advance. British theater, by contrast, protects community and collective memory from the encroachments of a high-tech (and often Americanized) world.

Beyond these generalizations, well-supported and persuasive as they are, Gilmore plumbs the specific differences between the two media. In one essay, he suggests that despite their love of nature, Americans “wanted their wilderness ‘conquered,’ the frontier ‘tamed,’ and the physical world improved upon.” By appearing so realistic, “the cinema imports antinaturalism into mass culture under the cover of nature.” The English, by contrast, embrace nature through their love of gardens, grass tennis courts, and live rather than celluloid dramatic performances. While these miniarguments exhibit occasional weaknesses— isn't the British garden the ultimate symbol of “wilderness conquered”?—most display the author's insight and creativity.

Gilmore's larger ambition is to draw movies and drama into political spheres. He explores the influence of Britain's class hierarchy on its theater and the effects of racial discrimination on American cinema since D.

