# Stephen Sondheim’s final musical Here We Are premiere sparks new theatrical dialogue at National Theatre



# A Celebration of Creativity: Stephen Sondheim’s Final Musical "Here We Are"

In the bustling rehearsal room of London’s National Theatre, a palpable excitement mingles with the pressure of artistic expectation as the cast of *Here We Are*, Stephen Sondheim’s final musical, navigates the challenges of this intricate production. The atmosphere is electric, filled with an edge of hilarity, as performers like Jane Krakowski and Jesse Tyler Ferguson work to perfect their timing. The director, Joe Mantello, guides the ensemble through a delicate dance of dialogue and choreography, equating the task to patting one’s head while rubbing one’s stomach—a testament to the complexity embedded within Sondheim’s masterful score.

The musical, which had its world premiere off-Broadway in October 2023, is an exhilarating collaboration between Sondheim and writer David Ives, blossoming after a seven-year journey that tragically concluded with Sondheim's passing at the age of 91. Despite this somber backdrop, the production received acclaim, with critics declaring it one of the most sought-after tickets in New York at the time. Ferguson recalls a profound sense of envy while watching the premiere, highlighting the significance of performing at the National Theatre: “It feels like a dream,” he admits.

*Here We Are* draws its narrative inspiration from two surrealist films by Luis Buñuel—*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and *The Exterminating Angel*. The story revolves around a group of affluent friends whose brunch plans spiral into a series of absurd and fantastical events. Mantello remarks on the influence of absurdity in Buñuel’s work, stating, “The only explanation is there’s no explanation.” In this creative space, artistry transcends reality, allowing whimsical elements such as faux snow to fall unexpectedly, contributing to the magical atmosphere from the very first act.

Critics have noted that the characters within the musical serve as caricatures of late-capitalist excess. From a morally ambiguous industrialist to a celebrity plastic surgeon, each role is filled with vibrant personality, accentuated by the charm of the cast. This decision to cast captivating actors forms the core of the show’s essence. As Mantello observes, the audience’s patience is tested in delightful ways, mirroring the characters’ increasingly absurd dilemmas.

Yet *Here We Are* is not without its controversies, particularly regarding its unique structure that sees Sondheim’s music abruptly cease in the second act. Ives engages with this aspect openly, comparing it to classical works that bear the marks of unfinished genius. “Should Mozart’s *Requiem* be silenced because of Süssmayr’s posthumous contributions? Absolutely not,” he argues, bolstering the show’s artistic integrity amid discussions of its readiness and completeness.

As the production moves into its London premiere, beginning April 23, 2025, at the National Theatre’s Lyttelton Theatre, the ensemble prepares to adapt Mantello’s inventive staging from New York. The artistic direction incorporates novel elements, including suspended restaurant sets that add a whimsical touch to the performance. Lead actors, such as Martha Plimpton and Denis O’Hare, are discovering fresh comedic interpretations of their roles, ensuring the show remains dynamic and evolving with each performance.

Ferguson emphasises the contemporary backdrop against which *Here We Are* will be presented in London, suggesting that current socio-political anxieties resonate eerily with the show's themes. “Some of the fears expressed in the musical are now a reality,” he states. This new lens through which the audience will engage with the material promises to enhance both the humour and poignancy of the experience.

The personal connections between the cast and Sondheim add an extra layer of emotion to the project. Krakowski fondly recalls her initial meeting with the composer at age 14, exemplifying how deeply Sondheim’s work has shaped the musical landscape for many. Ferguson’s brief encounter with Sondheim left a lasting impression—“Those are the only two words I ever spoke to Stephen Sondheim,” he reflects, showcasing the reverence held by this generation of performers for the man who revolutionised musical theatre.

As audiences anticipate the UK premiere, the legacy of Sondheim continues to loom large. Mantello observes that British audiences often engage more critically with performances, allowing for discussions that evolve beyond the stage. “We’re there to ignite conversations,” he explains, setting the stage for *Here We Are* to become a significant part of the Sondheim canon, which has historically taken time to be fully appreciated.

Ultimately, as Ives proudly declares, *Here We Are* is already part of that canon, and to see it brought to life on the stage of the National Theatre is a celebration of both Sondheim’s enduring genius and the rich tapestry of storytelling that musical theatre represents. Indeed, as the title suggests, “Here we are”—a moment ripe for reflection and appreciation in the world of theatre.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/08/stephen-sondheim-final-musical-here-we-are-national-theatre), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/4010e4f6-1033-4857-adb4-f46cdc8db04a)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/08/stephen-sondheim-final-musical-here-we-are-national-theatre), [[4]](https://www.ikonlondonmagazine.com/stephen-sondheim-final-musical-here-we-are-uk-premiere-cast-announced/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/here-we-are/), [[5]](https://lovelondonloveculture.com/2025/03/08/news-full-casting-confirmed-for-stephen-sondheim-and-david-ives-here-we-are/)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/08/stephen-sondheim-final-musical-here-we-are-national-theatre> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/here-we-are/> - The National Theatre's official page for 'Here We Are' provides comprehensive details about the production, including performance dates from April 23 to June 28, 2025, at the Lyttelton Theatre. It features information on the cast, creative team, ticket pricing, and assisted performances. The page also offers insights into the musical's inspiration, drawn from Luis Buñuel's films 'The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie' and 'The Exterminating Angel', and highlights the collaboration between Stephen Sondheim and David Ives.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/4010e4f6-1033-4857-adb4-f46cdc8db04a> - An article from the Financial Times delves into the creation of Stephen Sondheim's final musical, 'Here We Are'. It traces the project's origins back to 1982, its development in 2010 with playwright David Ives and director Joe Mantello, and the challenges faced, including creative blocks and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The piece also discusses the musical's themes, its world premiere at The Shed in New York in 2023, and its upcoming UK premiere at the National Theatre.
4. <https://www.ikonlondonmagazine.com/stephen-sondheim-final-musical-here-we-are-uk-premiere-cast-announced/> - Ikon London Magazine announces the principal cast for the UK premiere of Stephen Sondheim's final musical, 'Here We Are', at the National Theatre. The article highlights the involvement of Jane Krakowski, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, and Martha Plimpton, marking their debuts at the National Theatre. It also mentions returning cast members from the New York production, including Tracie Bennett and Denis O'Hare, and provides details about the production's direction by Joe Mantello and its inspiration from Luis Buñuel's films.
5. <https://lovelondonloveculture.com/2025/03/08/news-full-casting-confirmed-for-stephen-sondheim-and-david-ives-here-we-are/> - Love London Love Culture confirms the complete casting for the National Theatre's revival of Stephen Sondheim and David Ives' musical, 'Here We Are'. The article lists the full cast, including Tracie Bennett, Denis O'Hare, Rory Kinnear, Chumisa Dornford-May, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Richard Fleeshman, Harry Hadden-Paton, Cameron Johnson, Jane Krakowski, Martha Plimpton, and Paulo Szot. It also provides a brief overview of the musical's plot and creative team.
6. <https://www.londontheatrenews.co.uk/news/full-cast-announced-for-sondheims-here-we-are-at-the-national-theatre> - London Theatre News announces the full cast for Stephen Sondheim's final musical, 'Here We Are', at the National Theatre. The article details the returning cast from the New York production, including Tracie Bennett, Denis O'Hare, and Rory Kinnear, as well as new additions like Chumisa Dornford-May, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Richard Fleeshman, Harry Hadden-Paton, Cameron Johnson, Jane Krakowski, Martha Plimpton, and Paulo Szot. It also provides information about the musical's inspiration and direction by Joe Mantello.
7. <https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/theatre-news/news/further-casting-announced-for-final-sondheim-musical-here-we-are> - London Theatre reports on further casting announcements for Stephen Sondheim's final musical, 'Here We Are', at the National Theatre. The article highlights the addition of Chumisa Dornford-May, Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Richard Fleeshman, Harry Hadden-Paton, Cameron Johnson, Jane Krakowski, Martha Plimpton, and Paulo Szot to the cast. It also provides a brief overview of the musical's plot, inspired by Luis Buñuel's films, and mentions the production's opening date at the National Theatre.