

BLACK ORCHID BANQUET, DECEMBER 6, 2014

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY STEPHEN SCHWARTZ

Thank you to Ira Matetsky, Rebecca Stout Bradbury, and the rest of the Wolfe Pack for inviting me to be your speaker this evening. It can't have gone unmentioned on previously that public speakers don't tend to fare too well in the world of Nero Wolfe. They have a propensity to wind up poisoned or bludgeoned with a wrench. Of course there is the opposite instance of master chef Louis Servan, whose speech at the Kanawha Spa to Les Quinze Maitres is met with "nods and smiles and brows lifted, applause here and there, and once in a while a 'bravo.'" Of course I won't hope for that, especially since his speech was in French, but I will hope at least to avoid the wrench.

But to stay in French for one word, I have been a devotee of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe books for over fifty years. It took me a little while to discover him, and a little while longer to appreciate him. When I was in junior high school, my first mystery was *A Pocket Full of Rye* by Agatha Christie. What I liked most about the book was the puzzle – trying to figure out who did it from clues hidden in plain sight. My adolescent brain also liked that the murders fit a pattern, in this case the nursery rhyme "Sing a Song of Sixpence." The artificiality didn't trouble me – reading the books was like playing a game. I quickly became an addict and read all of them, to the point where I can still probably tell you who did it in all eighty-one of her books.

But having made my way through all of the Agatha Christies, I started to look for other detective fiction that could satisfy my new craving. I discovered Ellery Queen, whose books also revolved around murders in highly improbable patterns – more nursery rhymes, Biblical passages, etc. But even at that age, I recognized that while the whodunit aspect was fun, they weren't very well written and were engaging only as puzzles.

Eventually someone recommended I give Nero Wolfe a try. Being a methodical fellow, I decided to start with the first one, *Fer de Lance*. And at first, I was put off. He wasn't cute and fluffy like Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot, or a sympathetic nice guy like Ellery Queen, he didn't know everything about obscure minutiae like Sherlock Holmes. He was cantankerous and lazy and actually didn't want to solve anything unless there was money in it. His attitude is best summed up when someone asks him, "What do you think?" and he replies, "Thank heaven, it isn't my problem, and I don't have to think." What kind of detective was *that!*? And the murder itself, although a puzzle of course, wasn't part of a clever pattern that promised other juicy murders following some literary structure.

But then, a little ways into the story, I came across a scene in which, as part of Nero Wolfe's investigation, a salesman of golf clubs is brought to demonstrate his product to Wolfe. As you may remember, the salesman becomes as exasperated with Wolfe as, in a way, I was feeling – his laziness, his lack of rudimentary knowledge about something as culturally commonplace as golf – and he expresses it condescendingly. And I read Wolfe's response to this salesman:

“You know, Mr. Townsend,” Wolfe murmurs to him, “It is our good fortune that the exigencies of birth and training furnish all of us with opportunities for snobbery. My ignorance of this special nomenclature provided yours; your innocence of the elementary mental processes provides mine.”

Of course I laughed out loud. And as my affection and appreciation for Wolfe grew, and as I devoured book after book, I quickly fell in love too with the other regular characters. Needless to say Archie with his wit and humor and ability to report verbatim (which I occasionally try to emulate, always with little success). Is it embarrassing to report that we actually named our dog “Archie”? But there was also Lily Rowan and Fritz and Theodore and Inspector Cramer and Purley Stebbins and Doc Vollmer and the whole crew.

And I realized an interesting thing: Although Rex Stout’s books were on bookstore shelves in the “Mystery” section, what made me a complete Nero Wolfe aficionado really had nothing to do with the mystery, the “puzzle” aspect, itself. Let’s face it – more often than not, the identity of the murderer is of comparatively little interest. Take for example *The Mother Hunt*, which I believe you discussed last night.

There are four possible suspects, and eventually we learn which of them is guilty, but really, do we care that it’s not one of the three others? Couldn’t it just as easily have been any of them without it ruining in any way our enjoyment of the book? No, what makes the book one of my favorites is Wolfe’s behavior – how he arrives at a stratagem for flushing out the real mother, our amusement when he is forced to flee his home, and of course his customary pithy sayings, such as “Nobody ever gets to the real why of anything,” or “Nothing is nonsense that is concerned with the vagaries of human conduct.” I would have surrounded those two examples by saying “quote/unquote”, but as Wolfe tells us in that book, “You know quite well that locution is vile.” Unlike most other mysteries, where once one has read them and the identity of the culprit is known, one tosses them aside, the Rex Stout books can be read again and again with no diminution of pleasure.

It’s the vividness of the characters that make them such treasures. Think for a moment at how clear a picture we have of Nero Wolfe. There’s a reason I chose to wear the yellowest shirt and the brownest jacket I own tonight. Has any of us ever read the description of Wolfe deep in thought without closing our eyes and pushing our own lips out and in? When Wolfe is speechless with fury, haven’t all of us joined him in making little circles on the arm of our chair with our index fingers?

Now when I was a kid first reading the books, I was also a kid with an ambition: To write for musical theatre. And I submit that the lessons of what makes Rex Stout’s books nonpareil is an invaluable one for those who would create musicals. Because in the end, what makes a classic musical is the same two ingredients: character and language. No one really cares about the plot.

I recently saw a revival of the musical *Allegro*, by Rodgers and Hammerstein, arguably the greatest writing team in musical theatre history. The show failed originally, and while it has been given a fine new production, in my opinion, sorry, the show is still terrible. What’s interesting is that it was written in between two other shows that remain classics, *Carousel* and *South Pacific*. The difference is clearly not the talent of the writers, nor their ability to write compelling scenes and songs. The difference is that in the successful musicals, the characters are specific and memorable – all musical theatre fans know Billy Bigelow and Julie Jordan, Nellie Forbush and Emile DeBecque, but in their middle show, the writers focused so much on unconventional structure, social commentary, and a parade of plot, that they forgot to create characters who weren’t bland and stereotypical. Think of other great musicals, such as *My Fair Lady* – we pretty well know from the beginning what’s going to happen, but it’s Higgins and Eliza we are interested in. I try to remember that lesson too, and I would suggest that

the success of *Wicked*, for instance, has little to do with the plot, the sheer amount of which we struggled with, but with Elphaba and Glinda and how specifically and vividly we strove to bring them to life.

Language, as I've mentioned, is the other factor – the pleasure of as rich and expressive a language as English used to its wittiest and most elegant effect. Let me quote a few other Wolfe-isms, drawn essentially at random:

“I can excoriate stupidity, and often do, but moral indignation is a dangerous indulgence.”

When someone appeals to his sense of justice and humanity, he replies: “Few of us have enough wisdom for justice or enough leisure for humanity.”

When irritated because he and Archie have been slow to figure out a problem: “I am a brainless booby. Neither of us has any right henceforth to pretend possession of the mental processes of an anthropoid. And I have dared for nearly thirty years to exercise the right to vote. I have the brain of a mollusk!”

The importance of language of course also applies to musical theatre – think of the pleasure we take in the lyrics of Lorenz Hart, Stephen Sondheim, Yip Harburg, Frank Loesser, etc. In some ways, we don't really care what they are saying, we just enjoy how they say it.

I could of course go on, and probably already have for too long. But it is difficult for me to temper my appreciation for Rex Stout and his inimitable creation, Nero Wolfe, nor my gratitude both for the entertainment they have provided me and the inspiration as a writer. Wolfe even offers a good piece of advice for a writer in the afore-mentioned *The Mother Hunt*, when he says, “It is my conceit to expose myself to reproach only from others, never from myself.” For a writer, this means to do the best work you can in your own eyes, and try not to second-guess yourself worrying about the opinions of others. Good advice, difficult to follow, but important to try.

And he also sounds a warning to writers, when he says: “Maintaining integrity as a private detective is difficult; to preserve it for the hundred thousand words of a book would be impossible for me, as it has been for so many others.”

It's clear to all of us tonight that, however difficult Nero Wolfe might have imagined it, it certainly was not impossible for Rex Stout, who maintained his integrity for many millions of words. I thank him, and I thank you for giving me this opportunity to do so in public.

Stephen Lawrence Schwartz (born March 6, 1948) is an American [musical theatre](#) lyricist and [composer](#). In a career spanning over four decades, Schwartz has written such hit musicals as *Godspell* (1971), *Pippin* (1972) and *Wicked* (2003). He has contributed lyrics for a number of successful films, including *Pocahontas* (1995), *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), *The Prince of Egypt* (1998; music and lyrics) and *Enchanted* (2007). Schwartz has won the [Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Lyrics](#), three [Grammy Awards](#), three [Academy Awards](#) and has been nominated for six [Tony Awards](#).

[Wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Schwartz_\(composer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Schwartz_(composer))