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THEATER REVIEW | 'COMPANY'
Revisiting Sondheim's Odd Man Out

Actors double as an onstage orchestra in John Doyle's production of "Company" in Cincinnati, which stars Raúl Esparza.

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

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CINCINNATI, March 18 — A classic musical is reconfigured as a pop concerto for orchestra and single man in the latest reconsideration of Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's "Company" at the Playhouse in the Park here. Modern marriage is presented as a bickering duet not just for prickly romantic partners but for musical instruments, too, in this sleek stylish production from director John Doyle in which the evening's 14 performers double as an onstage orchestra.

This unusual concept isn't likely to stun New York theatergoers with its novelty. For Mr. Doyle's shattering production of Mr. Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's "Sweeney Todd," staged in precisely the same manner, has already taken the theater season by storm. (The Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park's artistic director, Edward Stern, had invited Mr. Doyle to choose a show for his theater even before the Broadway version of "Sweeney Todd" had been confirmed.)

But the new collaboration between this hot British director and the celebrated American composer and lyricist proves that the success of "Sweeney" was not a fluke. Mr. Doyle has admitted that his fresh method of renewing old musicals was initially born of economic considerations. This scintillating production of an earlier Sondheim musical, which stars a terrific Raúl Esparza as the famously diffident, chronically single Bobby, affirms that necessity has indeed mothered a reusable tool for theatrical reinvention, not a quickly exhausted gimmick.

If Mr. Doyle's "Company" is not the revelation that his "Sweeney Todd" unquestionably is, it is because of qualities in the material itself, not a failure of imagination. "Sweeney Todd," despite its macabre subject matter, is a straightforward narrative musical, an old-fashioned comic melodrama that was distilled by Mr. Doyle into

a stark, almost unbearably dark musical poem on the subject of blood-lust.

"Company," by contrast, was stark and stylized from the start. Originally directed by Harold Prince (as was "Sweeney Todd"), it is a revue-like theatrical essay on emotional ambivalence, in which the actors double as a chorus commenting on the action — or rather the inaction — of the enigmatic Bobby, the central character whose married friends are all "sorry grateful" to cherish for his single status.

In Mr. Doyle's version, the performers simply add musical duties to their dual roles, playing instruments when they are not required to be either singing or trading barbed banter. This poses less of a challenge for the performers than it did in "Sweeney Todd." In that musical, book and score are fully integrated; in "Company," Mr. Furth's book scenes alternate with Mr. Sondheim's piercing songs about the tenuous satisfactions of romantic commitment. The new-model "Company" is thus more similar in sensibility to previous productions of this much-revisited musical than Mr. Doyle's "Sweeney Todd" is to its predecessors.

Still, there are new insights to be harvested. To begin with, Mr. Doyle has succeeded, as not all directors do, in cleanly divorcing "Company" from the era in which it was written and set, the frazzled days of the late 1960's and early 70's, when the fissures in the American marriage were first being widely discussed.

The show's look is clean-lined and contemporary. David Gallo's set is a polished wood square that evokes in sharp outline a Manhattan loft apartment of today. A baby grand piano, a trio of clear plastic ottomans, and a single Grecian column with a radiator as a skirt are the minimal furnishings. Ann Hould-Ward's costumes are contemporary, character-specific variations on basic black. The shadowy lighting by Thomas C. Hase is a symphony of spotlights, isolating and uniting the men and women of the musical as needed.

Certainly the book by Mr. Furth still contains a few antiquely "with it" patches, but some minor updates, like a reference to Prozac, modestly help to disguise its date-stamp. (Interestingly, almost nothing in Mr. Sondheim's lyrics feels remote.)

And Mr. Esparza, giving what may well be the richest and strongest performance of his career, remakes the challenging character of Bobby as a seductive, moody figure who might easily be found coolly sizing up the offerings at one of the oversize, overcrowded pan-Asian eateries frequented by single women who continue to cavort like the gals from "Sex and the City." Bobby, eternally age 35, is, after all, a 35-year-old prototype of that show's ever-unavailable Mr. Big.

Mr. Esparza inflects Bobby's wry considerations of his married friends' emotional dilemmas with slashes of dark humor slung straight at the audience, suggesting at times the mischief-making of Jon Stewart at his most deadpan. But his splendid singing throbs with an ardor that expresses the intense confusion under Bobby's veneer of semi-contented solitude. (This version concludes Act I with "Marry Me a Little," cut from the original production.)

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Meanwhile, the new metaphor that Mr. Doyle's modus operandi brings to "Company" modestly amplifies the central themes of the musical. As they march along the stage's periphery or sit silently on stools at the side in cool contemplation, the married characters are making music with — or at least at — each other.

In songs like "The Little Things You Do Together" and the second act opening medley of "Side by Side" and "What Would We Do Without You?," the lively new orchestrations, by Mary-Mitchell Campbell, find the various couples communicating in musical notes, sometimes in happy harmony, sometimes in more complicated patterns. These wordless colloquies hint at the subterranean levels of congeniality that marriage can bring, which are articulated less regularly in Mr. Furth's often sour book. We are reminded that for many long-partnered pairs, speech is only the most public of many modes of communication, and it can be a misleading one.

At other times Mr. Doyle's choreography wittily turns the musical instruments into physical embodiments of the characters' emotional baggage, or in the case of the flight attendant April (an intriguingly dry Elizabeth Stanley), actual baggage. At the end of the post-coital scene that includes the melancholy "Barcelona," Ms. Stanley picks

up the gleaming tuba that's been deposited on one of the ottomans and hoists it on her shoulder like a carry-on bag, soldiering forward with this lonely symbol on her arm. As Joanne, half-embalmed in booze and sophistication, Barbara Walsh adds musical accents to "The Little Things" by tapping the rim of her cocktail glass with a silver tong.

Ms. Stanley and Mr. Esparza's delicate duet is a highlight of the production. Other standout sequences are the frenzied premarital jitters of Heather Laws's Amy, nicely tempered by the quiet compassion of Robert Cunningham's Paul, and the exuberant performance of "Side by Side," with Bobby as the drum major of a marching band incongruously made up of smartly dressed urban sophisticates. Although few of the performers place a unique stamp on their sometimes sketchy roles, all are fine actors and singers and, more impressively, mobile and apparently hard-to-rattle musicians.

Until he takes up a cymbal to add some percussion to "Side by Side," Mr. Esparza's Bobby remains, pointedly, an onlooker rather than a participant in the making of the evening's music, vocalizing aside. When, in the show's waning moments, he sits down at last at the piano and plays the opening chords of the climactic "Being Alive," Mr. Doyle's method helps massage a famously tricky transition, finding in Bobby's belated immersion in music a symbol for profound psychological change.

Music is, after all, the medium in which the men and women in Mr. Sondheim's shows best express their complicated humanity. Bobby's unwillingness (or inability) to play a note, in the context of Mr. Doyle's production is a poignant comment on his stunted emotional state. How apt, then, and how moving, that his release into the rough waters of committed love should be accompanied by an attempt to translate the movements of the mind and heart into melody, harmony, rhythm. For Bobby, the door has been opened to an unforeseeable, possibly painful future, but also to states of sublime feeling that only music can describe.

Company

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim; book by George Furth; directed and choreographed by John Doyle; music

supervisor/orchestrator, Mary–Mitchell Campbell; sets by David Gallo; costumes by Ann Hould–Ward; lighting by Thomas C. Hase; sound by Andrew Keister. Presented by the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Edward Stern, producing artistic director; Buzz Ward executive director. At the Robert S. Marx Theater, 962 Mount Adams Circle, Cincinnati; (513) 421–3888. Through April 14. Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes.

WITH: Keith Buterbaugh (Harry), Matt Castle (Peter), Robert Cunningham (Paul), Angel Desai (Marta), Raúl Esparza (Bobby), Kelly Jeanne Grant (Kathy), Kristin Huffman (Sarah), Amy Justman (Susan), Heather Laws (Amy), Leenya Rideout (Jenny), Fred Rose (David), Bruce Sabath (Larry), Elizabeth Stanley (April) and Barbara Walsh (Joanne).