

Posted: Mon., Mar. 20, 2006, 3:07pm PT

Company

A Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park presentation of a musical in two acts with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and book by George Furth. Directed and choreographed by John Doyle.

By CHRIS JONES

The cast of 'Company' picks up instruments in the Cincinnati Playhouse's production of the Stephen Sondheim tuner.

As news of John Doyle's striking, revelatory and thoroughly compelling Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park staging of "Company" percolates back east along the Ohio River, one nagging concern will rise immediately in the acidic stomach of every Gotham producer. Is it too soon after "Sweeney Todd" for Broadway to host yet another Sondheim musical in which actors double as musicians -- especially when the demon barber has yet to go beyond the critical plaudits and bring home any real bacon? That's a reasonable fiscal concern whenever you're reviving Sondheim -- another hundred Philistines did just get off of the train, after all. But creatively speaking? Bring Bobby darling on home to New York. And fear not. Doyle's work-in-progress "Company" positively drips with complexity and creativity.

Here's why the "Sweeney" issue isn't a creative problem.

"Company" and "Sweeney" are two works of diametrically opposite style. And while Doyle's core idea -- that Sondheim's themes can be fully expressed emotionally when actor and musician are one -- remains this production's greatest asset, its echoes here are strikingly different. Nothing is repeated.

Whereas "Sweeney" was full of distinctive visual ideas and sounded like the work of a very post-modern orchestra, this "Company" feels more like a rather terrifying house party made up of people whose verbal ripostes just happen to be best expressed by thumping on a xylophone. Or venting down a flute. Or bitching on a violin. Or tapping out a little ode to their spouse on a piano, cocktail in one hand, knife in the other. To his great credit, Doyle understands the essentially domestic, internal and, above all, the normative quality of "Company." The people remain real.

And as the various women in his life and the troubled married couples with whom he socializes swirl around Bobby, musical instruments of social intercourse in hand and mouth, the whole takes on a deliciously personal quality. You get the sense they're all in Bobby's head. Or one's own head. Or in one's own marriage. And that, above all, is what a decent rendering of "Company" must achieve.

When Cincinnati Playhouse producing artistic director Ed Stern first contacted Doyle, the British helmer with what's rapidly becoming a signature Sondheim concept, "Sweeney" had yet to hit on Broadway. That's presumably how Doyle was snagged for a resident production that was intended to be just that. Since then, of course, there was a seismic shift in the Sondheim landscape, with Doyle regarded, all of a sudden, as the master painter du jour. In essence, the CincyCincy production has become a Broadway tryout in which any actor would kill to be cast. "Making his Cincinnati debut" is the first line of almost every bio.

Actually, none of these performers are indispensable -- although the casting demands are, to say the least, extensive. The performances are mostly just solid, and on opening weekend, there was more tripping over lines, notes and whatnot than one would ideally see. For sure, all of the stakes are not yet high enough, especially early in the show, which is far too much of a light stroll.

"Company" is slow to come out of the apartment.

Given the nature of this Cincy semi-thrust, David Gallo's set (an ambivalent semi-domestic, semi-concert space dominated, brilliantly, by a period radiator) does present the danger of too much movement around three sides of a square, a repetitive staging trap into which Doyle falls, early on at least.

But there are some blistering moments to come -- especially Barbara Walsh's version of "The Ladies Who Lunch," which takes that thankless, over-exposed song and finds utterly new levels of truth. The post-sex "Barcelona," performed standing-up, is also both powerful and counter-intuitive (thanks in no small measure to Elizabeth Stanley's unpretentious April). "Getting Married Today" plays like a delicious, funny, agonizing scene with every lyrical shade on full display. And all those famous "Bobby" harmonics on the overture have a deliciously spooky quality, as actors' voices echo around the theater in ways one has never quite heard before.

Throughout the show, considerable pleasure is to be had by "Company"-philes from the freshness of the orchestrations and the way in which the emotional truths of the show are enhanced by a character picking up a musical instrument. There's a whole other dimension on offer with this particular title, because people really do play music to each other at social and theatrical gatherings. That creates an ease with this idea that Doyle beautifully exploits.

With the possible exception of Walsh's Joanne (who taps a triangle from time to time), you don't get the sense that anyone isn't carrying weight in the orchestral department. Even Raul Esparza's Bobby sits down to play the piano when we finally get to "Being Alive," which is designed to show that music flows into his fingers at his moments of greatest vulnerability. It is a lovely touch.

If Esparza goes to New York with this show, his performance likely will divide the Sondheim fanatics. It all depends how arch you like your Bobby to be. If you see him as a

cipher, a confused sweetheart of a regular single dude who is set atwitter by all that prattling pressure, Esparza won't be your man.

If you see the central character as more of a self-knowing cynic than he lets on, you'll probably be willing to go where Esparza and Doyle clearly want you to go. Given that Bobby could well be gay anyway, this interpretation is most certainly justified by the material. And it is exquisitely sung.

For all Doyle's innovations, his single greatest strength remains his ability to present -- in played and sung form -- simple moments simply. "Sorry-Grateful" is perhaps the best example here. Like most of the other numbers in "Company," that song (and Doyle) merely presents a paradox. Our love lives are all full of them. All we need is to make the connection. Throughout this show, Doyle delivers most assuredly on that most important count of all.

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).

Sets, David Gallo; costumes, Ann Hould-Ward; lighting, Thomas C. Hase; sound, Andrew Keister; orchestrations and musical supervision, Mary-Mitchell Campbell; production stage manager, Suann Pollock. Opened Mar 17, 2006. Reviewed March 18. Running time: 2 HOURS, 20 MINS.