

# Company

Stream-of-consciousness cross-section of marriage, 1970.

Music and lyrics: Stephen Sondheim. Book: George Furth.

Original Lead: Dean Jones. Director: Hal Prince.

A paradox: Sondheim is the disciple of Oscar Hammerstein, and he grew up in the Rodgers and Hammerstein era. Yet *Company*, arguably the most Sondheim of shows, is the musical that, more than any other, definitively ended the Rodgers and Hammerstein regime, with its straightforward structure made of dialogue scenes that build in power till they burst into song, emotionalizing the characters. *Company* offers songs interfering with dialogue scenes, commenting on them. Sometimes the songs emotionalize an idea rather than a character, and sometimes the songs get mischievous rather than emotional.

*Company* is: bachelor Robert, the five couples he pals around with, and his three girl friends—but we can't anticipate from that simple breakdown where the songs will fall or what they'll express. More than most musicals, *Company* is a surprise. Three husbands introduce "Sorry-Grateful," a touching ballad about one's ambivalence in sharing life, and Robert himself sings "Someone Is Waiting," another touching ballad. You could have guessed as much. But "The Little Things You Do Together" springs out at us as if from nowhere; its cue is a husband and wife physically fighting. (They're actually trying out her karate moves. But still.) This number doesn't specify anyone or guide narrative. It observes. And "The Ladies Who Lunch" is yet more removed from the action. A titanic "je ne regrette rien" from one of the wives, it's really a specialty spot that momentarily turns *Company* into a revue instead of a story show.

But *Company* isn't a story show. It isn't a revue, either. It has a book, and, to complete the paradox, it is very much under the influence of *Allegro*. So *Company* doesn't end the Rodgers and Hammerstein era? Indeed it does: because *Allegro* was Rodgers and Hammerstein's UFO, as the French put it.\* In their canon, *Allegro* itself defied the Rodgers and Hammerstein genre. That format demands "fourth wall" realism (even in *Carousel's* closing fantasy scenes), while *Allegro* is gestural theatre, using performers in deliberately unreal ways. Somehow, Hammerstein never could fit all the *Allegro* pieces together successfully, but Sondheim, Furth, producer-director Hal Prince, choreographer Michael Bennett, and set designer Boris Aronson "fixed *Allegro's* second act" in *Company*. For here was a show that combined all the elements of the musical—in both writing and staging—into a whole as smooth as a pane of glass.

What is *Company*? It's fast and trim yet something of a saga, a sweeping look at Robert's life among his dates and coterie, continually asking him, Why are you alone? Now, who exactly is the "company"? Is it Robert's friends, the couples? Is it his girl friends? Is it the troupe putting on this very show, so unlike the usual ensemble in a musical? Where are the cute boys and girls of the chorus, some superb singers and some superb dancers, cleverly blended together to look like singer-dancers? Prince cast the couples to *look* like couples—lived-in and "real," not confident show-biz pros or singer-dancers. Or is the company Robert himself, the permanent third wheel in a succession of scenes, the guy who comes over for drinks and chat: *your* company?

It's an easy role to cast, Robert, but difficult to play. He's in his thirties, handsome, fit, magnetic: one of the most basic types in the casting pool. However, he is passive in his scenes with the couples while they variously support, provoke, resent, and understand each other. They're the colorful figures, the energy that drives the show forward. Robert is, by comparison, a mystery. One character likens him to the Seagram Building—impenetrable without x-ray vision—and another says she sometimes catches him "just looking and looking." They love him, they depend on him, they crowd him, they urge him. In certain ways, Robert is a direct descendant of *Allegro's* protagonist, Joseph Taylor Jr.—a fine fellow who lets life happen to him instead of creating one for himself.

That is, until *Allegro's* climax, when, for the first time, Joe Taylor breaks out and chooses the way he wants to live. This moment is likened to a little

\* As "objet volant non identifié," literally "unidentified flying object" but, idiomatically, the work unlike the other works in a creator's oeuvre.

boy's learning to walk—his late mother and grandmother appear as they did early in Act One, when little Joey took the first steps of his life. Similarly, Sondheim sees Robert as a youngster, goofing around in life till, at the end of *Company*, in the song “Being Alive,” he attains maturity. In an interview with Robert Sokol in *The Sondheim Review*, Neil Patrick Harris (who played Robert in a New York Philharmonic staging in 2011) said Sondheim told him that *Company* is about “a boy becoming a man.”

In other words, Robert isn't afraid of commitment: he's simply enjoying himself in a state of total freedom. Many Sondheim characters live in a form of slavery—frustrated wives in *Follies* and *A Little Night Music*, much of the population of Japan in *Pacific Overtures*, the working class in *Sweeney Todd*, the artist heroes of *Sunday in the Park With George*, Seurat a slave to his art and his great-grandson a slave to the politics and commercialization of art. And *Forum's* Pseudolus is literally a slave. So Robert is unique, moving with absolute liberty through his world, helping out, refereeing, superintending the recreations. As Harris put it, “He's sort of a talk-show host.”

Right. But then, as all of *Company's* information clicks in, Robert realizes that his freedom is compromised by a worrisome solitude. Liberty has become a prison. In “Being Alive,” he asserts a new attitude: now he wants to be half of a union, difficulties be damned. Another of those eleven o'clock songs that, in Sondheim shows, is less a star turn than a moment in which the entire work revolves on its axis and reverses its energy (as in *Gypsy's* “Rose's Turn,” *Anyone Can Whistle's* “With So Little To Be Sure Of,” and *A Little Night Music's* “Send in the Clowns”), “Being Alive” moves Robert, step by step, with encouragements from his “company” (Joanne's “You're not a kid any more”; Amy's “Want something! Want something!”), to the realization that he can't live on friends. He needs romance, a best friend...marriage. In John Doyle's 2006 Cincinnati staging (later seen on Broadway), the performers played the instruments of the reduced orchestration themselves. Robert was the exception—to this moment. For now Raúl Esparza, the Robert, sat at the piano to accompany his own “Being Alive”: a compelling objective-correlative for what is happening in the action. Music is love. Robert plays music for the first time: Robert learns to love.

That may sound a bit fanciful, but then *Company* itself is an almost imaginary piece, a sort of “realism-but.” To return to Neil Patrick Harris' interview with Robert Sokol: Sondheim told Harris that, on one level, *Company* takes place entirely in Robert's mind. He sings, in the title number, about “All those photos up on the wall,” and *Company* shows us what he's thinking as he looks at those photos. This musical is a dream, a collage of impressions. Thus, the other characters can irrupt into the action any time they want to: none of it is really happening. All we know for certain is that Robert is this amazing guy and everyone wants to know him.

So it's all the more ironic that, just after the show opened—on April 26, 1970, at the Alvin Theatre—the Robert, Dean Jones, wanted to quit the company (that word again, taking on many extra meanings) because of personal problems. He was going through a divorce, which made the material dangerously real to him, and Hal Prince replaced him with Larry Kert. The original Tony in *West Side Story*, Kert had worked for Prince again in *A Family Affair* (which Prince directed, taking over during the tryout) and as a replacement Cliff in *Cabaret*. So Prince knew that Kert, though a wonderful singer, was a less than compelling actor. With more time at his disposal, Prince might have looked harder for a new Robert. But Jones was very unhappy and anxious to leave. So Prince made a deal with him, which ran something like: Give me an opening night so that the critics see the show at its best, and I'll let you go within two weeks.

Then Kert took over, leaving something of a blank spot in the center of the work. Even so, the notion of an attractive and sophisticated bachelor, so utterly reconstructed from the Curlys (in *Oklahoma!*) and Sky Master-sons (in *Guys and Dolls*), only emphasized how new *Company* was, how fresh its attitudes. I single out Curly and Sky precisely because they, like Robert, are seen as very active in their respective communities, Curly's cowboys in a "cold" range war against the farmers and Sky's gamblers and touts of Damon Runyonland. Robert, too, claims a community, but it's the fractured world of knowitall New Yorkers, one that—you'd think—wouldn't "sing" as easily as Curly's wild west or Sky's cartoon outlawry. Again, that only made *Company* all the more special: intense and persuasive. If Dean Jones had been appearing as Curly or Sky, he might easily have played out his contract, for those roles are, however interesting, utterly untroubled. Curly and Sky know who they are; Robert only thinks he does.

As it was, Larry Kert was glad to play such a charismatic character, and he certainly looked the part. I knew a bunch of gay men who developed crushes on Kert at least partly because George Furth had given him a remarkably charming persona to fit into. I even knew one man who waited outside the stage door and knocked out an affair with Kert starting that night. *Company* was, all told, extremely glamorous, for all its "real" people in plain clothes. It was Manhattan, smart talk, wisecracks, and *now!* sex rolled into one.

Many people who are not professional writers used to take up writing as a hobby, or to articulate feelings about their lives, or just for relaxation. Being an actor, George Furth took up writing plays, and that's how *Company* got started, as a series of one-acts in which various third parties would interact with various married couples. Most of Sondheim's shows in his Prince era began life in a form different from the one they ultimately attained.

*Follies* was a murder mystery (actually a who'lldoit rather than a whodunit), with none of the Ziegfeldian pageantry. *Pacific Overtures* was a straight play. *Sweeney Todd* was going to be through-sung.

And *Company*, also a straight play, lacked Robert. Having trouble with his script, Furth turned to Sondheim, who showed it to Prince, who heard a musical in it. Somebody then came up with the idea of making the third parties a single individual—a thirty-something bachelor who is taken on a voyage of discovery in the world of heterosexual bonding. But Sondheim and Furth retained Furth's original structure of serial sketches rather than invent a linear narrative—though that wouldn't have been difficult. You start with Robert in his place of work, making plans to see one of the couples, and they reveal something that clicks on the plot-starter tab, leading to more scenes with more couples. Add in a designated sweetheart, making Robert half of a First Couple in the manner of the King and Mrs. Anna, or perhaps *Candide* and *Cunegonde*...

But why not originate a format? *Company* has no First Couple, no official Robert romance beyond, it appears, a one-night stand with a stewardess. Of his two other girl friends, one does little more than break up with him, and the other simply meets him on a park bench and then accompanies him on one of his couples visits. *Company's* ending isn't wedding bells: instead, it's Robert's reaching the maturity of wanting to—as they used to call it—Settle Down.

This is a surprisingly gooey conclusion to the most innovative of shows; all it needs is a Neil Simon father thundering that Robert is a “bum” because he isn't married. There are no fathers in *Company*; there aren't even any children, though there are references to them. And Robert has no place of work. We don't even know how he makes his living. Furth's libretto strips away all the earmarks that particularize a story, because there isn't a story. *Company* disintegrated the musical's habitual framework that tells us who everybody is: a student prince in Heidelberg amid glee-singing classmates, the waitress he loves, and the class system that separates them. A crippled beggar, his woman, her brutal ex, a crafty dope peddler, and the rest of the ghetto of prayer and jubilation in *Porgy and Bess*. A matchmaker and the “well-known half-a-millionaire” she's after, along with a Second and even Third Couple, in *Hello, Dolly!*

Not in *Company*. We don't know who anyone is, and no sets slip in and out to tell us where we are. All we saw (in the original production) was a high-rise apartment building, complete with elevator, that functioned as a kind of ant farm of high-end Manhattan life. Most interesting, Furth's dialogue is more playful than informative, pointed yet mysterious. It doesn't explain anything—for instance, how does Robert know these people?

Where did they meet? Is he on gala terms with all of them equally, or is there one husband, one wife, that he simply puts up with?

He does seem particularly drawn to Amy, the bride who, in “Getting Married Today,” gives way to genuinely frantic jitters at the thought of being legally involved with the man she has been living with in—we imagine—bliss. It’s a key scene, because Robert impulsively proposes to Amy himself—and that appears to soothe her anxiety. “You have to want to marry *somebody*,” she tells him, “not *somebody*.” And she hurries off to meet her other half at the church, and the first act ends almost immediately thereafter, pointing up this lesson in love: the marriage thing is scary, contagious, pervasive. Couples saying, “I do” are ubiquitous, and not only because of social pressures or economic benefits.

But why did Robert propose to Amy and not the unattached women he knows? What’s the history of Robert and Amy? Furth gives no clues, and that’s no accident, because *Company* cuts to the chase in every scene. This explains why the show’s every revival plays like a new piece: it has no baggage.

Then there’s Furth’s oddly skewed dialogue, redolent of Manhattan smarties reveling in their bons mots. Some might call it mannered, but it’s the opposite: purified. Robert’s friends are always blurting out what most people think but don’t say. This is in contrast with Robert, who’s an open-sesame of feelgood clichés. It’s as if he keeps trying to grab hold of the show, to twist it into a more typical musical, one that doesn’t confront you with your demons. Then, in the work’s most telling scene, the last of the “couples” sketches, it is Robert who suddenly does the blurting out, sitting in a night spot with the worldly Joanne. He is finally completing his voyage from carefree child to grownup, with a sense of responsibility and, by marriage contract to come, officially giving and being given to in turn. It sounds nice. And he’s scared.

Before we quote him, let’s consider whether or not Furth was influenced by the Broadway airings, in the 1960s, of Harold Pinter’s plays, for, like Furth in *Company*, Pinter leaves out the explanatory details that reassure an audience but defy realism of character. Many playwrights, even today, puppet their players into delivering contrived expository lines, little synopses of what they’re up to. It’s akin to one character’s telling another, in scene one, “Oh, I’m so resentful of my job at the pickle factory that pays for my younger brother’s education but is certain to provision guilt and antagonism in the style of Arthur Miller directed by Elia Kazan, with Tonys for all of us.”

But some of the interaction in *Company* does bear a Pinteresque feeling, as characters talk *around* the apparent subject rather than within it. In Pinter’s *The Homecoming* (1965), a Canadian university professor visits his London family with his wife, who, at the play’s end, stays to become the

family's prostitute while her husband departs for home. No, *really*? In fact, she is a prostitute. He has just hired her off the street to *impersonate* his wife in order to express his contempt for his seedy relatives, coaching her in a couple of facts—they have three kids and they've just been in Venice—to give her credibility.

Of course, Pinter never states this in so many words because the professor and his "wife" wouldn't state it, either. But a careful reading of their first scene, when the two are alone in the family house, makes it unmistakable that they don't know each other:

RUTH: Can I sit down?

TEDDY: Of course.

RUTH: I'm tired.

(Pause)

TEDDY: Then sit down.

(She does not move.)

This hardly sounds like two people who have been living with each other for years. On the contrary, it sounds like two strangers, she so uncertain about this odd gig that she has no idea what she is allowed to do. And would the wife of an academic with career and standing—a doctor of philosophy, no less—want to prostitute herself for anyone, much less her husband's degenerate bloodline?

There's just enough of this in *Company* to make us wonder, comparably, how well Robert really knows these wonderful friends of his. Let's go back to his scene with Joanne—and, remember, she's the really edgy member of the "company." With a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other, she fixes Robert with a look as sharp as the butterfly collector's needle, and Robert goes into a tensely rambling monologue, which ends:

ROBERT: Whew! It's very drunk out tonight. What are you looking at,

Joanne? It's my charisma, huh? Well, stop looking at my charisma!

JOANNE: (still staring; no change in position or voice) When are we gonna make it?

Or consider *Company*'s opening scene, when Robert comes into his apartment to be met by a surprise party. He starts verbally overcompensating while his friends answer "lifelessly," intoning in ghostly chorus:

ROBERT: Thank you for including me in your thoughts, your lives, your families. Yes, thank you for remembering. Thank you.

THE COUPLES: You don't look it.

A double meaning: he states his age and they respond with the indicated cliché. But he *hasn't* stated his age. He has expressed gratitude for their being in his life *and they say he isn't really grateful at all*. So what kind of relationships are these, anyway? Is this Furth's revelation that the intimacy available in urban American civilization is fragile and elusive, even unattainable? We think *Company* says that marriage is difficult, but it says also that friendship is difficult as well.

As a seasoned actor,\* Furth knew instinctively how written dialogue would play. Limiting this discussion to American writers of the twentieth century, let us observe that the playwrights who outlast their era, such as Clifford Odets or Tennessee Williams, create dialogue that plays. S. N. Behrman wrote dialogue that doesn't, which is why he is seldom revived, despite his great success in the 1930s and 1940s. Just to confuse the issue, Eugene O'Neill's early expressionist works (like *The Hairy Ape* and *The Great God Brown*) play well, but the grander yet still expressionist *Strange Interlude* does not. Later, *The Iceman Cometh* plays well even with some awkwardly self-conscious writing, but the following *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* plays magnificently from start to finish.

And so does *Company*, partly because the score does not blend into the book any more than the book "blends" into the lives it presents to us. The entire show is skewed, brilliant, lopsided in the way Furth and Sondheim approach the material. For instance, how does Robert know Larry and Joanne? They're an older couple, Larry a successful businessman (I guess), affable and easygoing and Joanne the typical Elaine Stritch role: a mean-girl sophisticate. And of course Stritch was the original New York Joanne—but that puzzles us all the more. Elaine Stritch and Robert are an extremely unlikely mix. Robert might have met Larry in some professional connection, but would they have become buddies? And, given that Robert doesn't appear to enjoy being analyzed, wouldn't he have been put off very early on by Joanne, who is as invasive as a colonoscopy? She rips into him in that aforementioned nightclub scene with "Jesus, you are lifted right out of a Krafft-Ebing case history" and then hits him with that "When are we going to make it?" line, throwing Robert and *Company* itself off its pins.

But is Joanne really coming on to Robert? She gives him a potential passion slot—two o'clock at her place, when Larry is at the gym—but we're not sure exactly what is happening in that transaction, except that it leads directly to the climax of the show, when Robert "makes it" to his moment

\* Furth's acting career never reached breakout, but he did achieve a limited immortality in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, as Woodcock, who stands up to Paul Newman and Robert Redford when they rob a train. Twice. FURTH: "I work for Mr. E. H. Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad, and he entrusted me..."



of self-discovery and more or less walks out of the forest of apartments and “extra man” socializing and becomes, at last, himself, setting aside the toys of youth to reach the most old-fashioned possibility in musical comedy, the solo in which someone we like pours out his heart to us. Being alive, losing my mind, what’s the use of wond’rin’?. Messages that essentialize with such illumination that entertainment becomes enlightenment.

Robert has a few of these numbers—“Someone Is Waiting” and (added to the 1995 Roundabout revival and now a part of the show) “Marry Me a Little.” They stand apart from the other songs, which tend to jut into rather than materialize out of the action. In *Contradictions*, Hal Prince specifically cites as the inspiration for this odd use of the music the English director Joan Littlewood’s staging of Brendan Behan’s *The Hostage* (1958), an indescribable farrago set in a Dublin boardinghouse. Seen in New York in 1960 in the Littlewood production, *The Hostage*, says Prince, “maneuvered currents of realism and fantasy compatibly in one play,” which makes it sound a bit like *Company*. (Even if Behan’s raucous farce-melodrama includes very disparate character elements, from flaming queens and prostitutes to outright crazies, and, further, deals with Irish Republican Army terrorism, while *Company*’s milieu is that of the serenely middle class.) *The Hostage*’s musical numbers, Prince continues, “erupted from rather than grew out of moments. They had the abrasive effect of attacking when you least expected, creating such life.”

We’ve already remarked on this aspect of *Company* regarding “The Little Things You Do Together,” and it is one of *Company*’s salient features. Some might think of this as Brechtian, despite Sondheim’s distaste for Brecht’s style. In fact, the songs in Brecht’s plays are usually performance pieces—specialty numbers, like those in Kander and Ebb’s *Chicago*. But that’s not how *Company* uses its songs. The *Company* score is, for the most part, naturalistically integrated with the *Company* continuity. The trick is that you never know just who is going to sing about what till he or she has already started the number—creating, as Prince said of *The Hostage*, “such life.”

In fact, *Company* is the show that introduced the mature Sondheim style in song. There is, for example:

One: The “playwrighting” plot number, in “Barcelona.” This is in effect a dialogue scene turned into music, on the morning after Robert has enjoyed a sexual encounter with a stewardess. Made almost entirely of an exchange of very short lines, the song catches his sleepy trance and her wistful regret with an eerie realism. A much more elaborate version of this type of composition is the opening of *Into the Woods*, a vast rondo in which a number of plotlines are initiated, united by the refrain of the title melody, the whole thing taking up fifty pages of vocal score.

Two: The pastiche number, in “You Could Drive a Person Crazy.” This one brings us back to the days of close-harmony “girl groups,” as they were termed. Usually sister threesomes—the Boswells, the Andrewses—they sang everything from slow-dance ballads to raveups but were often best known for novelty songs with a unique hook in the lyrics, as with the German tang of the Andrews Sisters’ “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen” or the combination of war and jitterbug in “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy [of Company B].” *Company*’s equivalent offers Robert’s three girl friends—Kathy, the would-be homebody; April, the stewardess, a bit of an air-head; and Marta, the hipster (“The pulse of this city, kiddo, is me”)—in a jump blues, given as a performance piece complete with a bow at the end. Sondheim’s scores often delve into pastiche, perhaps most dazzlingly in the opening of *Pacific Overtures*’ second act, “Please Hello.” A playwrighting number as well, it treats the diplomacy of international emissaries engaging with a Japanese official: an American, to a Sousaesque march; a Brit, in Gilbert and Sullivan patter style; a Dutchman, in a waltz clog to the clacking of wooden shoes (on Japanese temple blocks); a Russian, in a wail of the steppes in f minor; and at last a Frenchman, in an Offenbachian cancan.

Three: The showstopper solo, in “The Ladies Who Lunch.” Perhaps it was inevitable that Joanne would have something special to sing, as Elaine Stritch was known as much for her voice as for her expertise in tart badinage. But her number stands apart from the rest of the *Company* score; it almost doesn’t even belong in the show. An ironic eulogy for the kind of woman Joanne might have been were she not utterly nonconformist, it does not relate to the show’s theme, as the other songs do. It’s simply great music-making, though it does demand a top-notch singer, confounding Hal Prince’s wish to cast realistically rather than theatrically. Later Sondheim showstoppers are rooted in a work’s scenario—*Follies*’ “I’m Still Here” and “Could I Leave You?,” for instance. *Sunday in the Park With George* offers, in “Finishing the Hat,” an artist’s credo that encapsulates not only the show but, arguably, Sondheim’s canon as a whole: in the artist’s life, the art comes first.

Four: The ingeniously verbal comic number, in “Getting Married Today.” Sung by Amy, frantic at the thought of graduating her love affair to marriage, this one puts the singer through several verses of lines jammed together, feverishly hurtling forth with scarcely a second’s breath break. There are funny lines within it, but the central jest is watching Amy zooming along while trying to keep her diction apt and her air intake indiscernible. Typically for Sondheim, this is also another playwrighting number, for Amy’s hysteria is packaged with a church-choir soloist backed by choral Amens and snatches of dialogue from Paul and Robert and Paul’s own rather clueless vocals. Interestingly, Amy’s lines in this musical scene are her only real solo opportunities in the *Company* score, yet we

infer that she is the only woman of the couples whom Robert could love as a husband. (His proposal comes later in this scene, and a cut number, “Multitudes of Amys,” emphasizes his attraction to her.) Thus, an important character never gets her Wanting Song. She would in a conventional show, but *Company* is so unconventional that we don’t know how important Amy really is: because Robert doesn’t, despite his proposal. This is another reason why *Company* gives the director and his troupe so much to play: the piece is deliberately left blank or ambiguous here and there, leaving the actors to choose what to project, how to specify.

Indeed, *Company* truly is an actors’ musical; few other musicals give the crew so much to explore. Take Sarah and Harry, the dieter and the drinker who end up in a karate fight. Is this a Strindbergian war of the genders, or just edgy play in the James Thurber manner? Or David and Jenny, who spend their scene smoking tokes with Robert until . . . well, is it until David makes her stop against her will or until he senses that she *wants* him to stop her?

Again, all this interpretive room links *Company* to the postwar spoken drama, to, say, Sam Shepard or Edward Albee. But it also looks back to Oscar Hammerstein, for many of his characters can be tilted by actor’s choices. Why is *Oklahoma!*’s Laurey so ambivalent about Curly? Is *The King and I*’s Mrs. Anna a progressive or a scold? *Company* marked a breakaway from the musical *As It Was*, but also from Sondheim’s work before it. This title initiated Serious Sondheim, when he—as I’ve said—intellectualized the musical. It already was art, but from now on it would be controversial.