

'SWEENEY' TOUCHES DEFTLY REINVENT SONDHEIM CLASSIC

By CLIVE BARNES

Rating: ★★★★★

November 30, 2006 -- CONFESSIO time: I've never been completely happy with Stephen Sondheim's "Company," which exuberantly returned to Broadway last night in director John Doyle's inventive reinvention.

We've become accustomed to British directors coming and, for better or worse, reshaping our dear American musicals. But as we saw with Doyle's wonderful "Sweeney Todd" last season, like those strippers in "Gypsy," he's a guy with a strangely workable gimmick.

He completely does away with the orchestra and has his actors blow their own trumpets - and play any other instruments called for by Mary-Mitchell Campbell's amazingly resourceful orchestrations.

I first saw Doyle's unique methodology in a London production of Gilbert & Sullivan's "The Gondoliers." Then came "Sweeney," and now "Company." Next year, Doyle's due to mount "Lucia di Lammermoor" for Scottish Opera. It possibly won't be over until the fat lady blows her horn.

There's a lot to praise in "Company," especially Sondheim's compelling music and lyrics. Looking back, this was the musical in which Sondheim became indisputably Sondheim - and the Broadway musical theater would never be the same again.

But musicals don't live by their scores alone. There's the book, which, although it won George Furth a Tony Award, had my then-colleague, the late Walter Kerr, "feeling rather cool and queasy."

Yet the fact remains, from the ambiguous, eternal bachelor hero Bobby on down - apart from the sweet little stewardess who needs to get to Barcelona - it's difficult to feel sympathy for any of them.

The book, which was updated for the 1995 London production, is explicit, in a way it wasn't in 1970, about Bobby, who's now more or less an uncloseted bisexual.

Yet it remains a series of sketches about communication and marriage, sustained, albeit shakily, by a fantastic score.

The original staging had an elaborate setting by Boris Aronson, which the modest yet stylish set by David Gallo can hardly match. Ann Hould-Ward's costumes are ordinary at best, **although Thomas C. Hase's spot-on lighting is highly imaginative.**

The role of Bobby has always been problematic. He's a cipher, and Raul Esparza, who plays a mean piano in the finale, goes through the show looking as though he's smiling bravely through a terminal case of dyspepsia.

He sings beautifully and has star quality, but like his last musical, "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang," this one doesn't bring it out.

All the performances - including Barbara Walsh in "Ladies Who Lunch," who sensibly realizes that you can't escape from the Elaine Stritch original, and imitates her impressively - are splendid, but I particularly loved Angel Desai, Elizabeth Stanley and Kelly Jeanne Grant, who have a great saxophone trio worthy of some philharmonic.

All are remarkably good, especially under the circumstances. Fancy auditioning for Hamlet and being asked if you can play the fluegelhorn.

COMPANY

Ethel Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St.; (212) 239-6200.