

Broadway

Company

(Ethel Barrymore Theater; 1,046 seats; \$111.25 top)

By DAVID ROONEY



Raul Esparza, center, anchors the cast of "Company," John Doyle's pared-down reimagining of the Stephen Sondheim tuner.

A Marc Routh, Richard Frankel, Tom Viertel, Steven Baruch, Ambassador Theater Group, Tulchin/Bartner Prods., Darren Bagert, Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park presentation of a musical in two acts with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by George Furth. Directed by John Doyle. Musical staging, Doyle. Musical supervision and orchestrations, Mary-Mitchell Campbell.

Robert - Raul Esparza
Joanne - Barbara Walsh
Harry - Keith Buterbaugh
Peter - Matt Castle
Paul - Robert Cunningham
Marta - Angel Desai
Kathy - Kelly Jeanne Grant
Sarah - Kristin Huffman
Susan - Amy Justman
Amy - Heather Laws
Jenny - Leenya Rideout
David - Fred Rose
Larry - Bruce Sabath
April - Elizabeth Stanley

After yielding the most singularly exciting musical theater experience on Broadway last season with "Sweeney Todd," the collaboration of director John Doyle and composer Stephen Sondheim has spawned another arresting revival with "Company." The 1970 show about the metropolitan angst of marriage and commitment is not quite in the same masterwork league as the demon barber saga and so doesn't equal that production's startling impact. But its nonlinear structure makes this less plot-driven musical more naturally suited to Doyle's signature presentation style, with the actors doubling as musicians. The complete fusion here of character, song and score is illuminating.

Based on 11 thematically related one-act plays by George Furth, who penned the book, this breakthrough musical cemented Sondheim's reputation as an innovative artist capable of reinventing the form with a cynical modern edge.

While plenty of dark material had already surfaced in shows through the '60s, "Company" arguably marked the first time that upper-middle-class Manhattanites -- the prime demographic for Broadway theatergoing -- were confronted in a musical with the frustrations of their own lives. Depicting New York as a "city of strangers" struggling to connect or stay connected, "Company" took a further step away from the frothy-tuner mold, presenting relationship woes, solitude and alienation with trenchant insight and biting wit.

Funny, melancholy and moving, Doyle's elegantly spare production is set in no specific time. Via certain lyrics and such period staples as a pot-smoking scene, it remains rooted in the 1970s but bristles with anxieties that feel entirely contemporary.

With one or two exceptions, this is not the youngest, sexiest "Company" cast ever assembled, but the older ensemble pays dividends. These are jaded married couples and battered dating-scene refugees, after all, either beyond the first flights of passion or rendered too cautious and fearful by experience to embrace it.

From the moment the cast steps onto David Gallo's minimalist-chic set, their harmonies on the obsessive "Bobby" refrain echoing in some ghostly chamber of the mind, it's clear Doyle is not planning a party.

As Robert, the central figure marking his 35th birthday by pondering why he's the only one of his circle not married, Raul Esparza strikes just the right balance of easy charm and circumspect distance, alone even in a crowd of friends. He's a deeply ambiguous mass of swirling contradictions -- confused but self-knowing, seductive but standoffish, vulnerable but heavily armored, open to love but ambivalent. And Bobby's sexual identity is called more directly into question here than perhaps ever before.

Esparza has been hovering on the brink of Broadway stardom for some years, and this is a terrific role for him with his sad-eyed, brooding good looks, wry humor and passionate singing voice. In the past, he has often cranked up the vibrato a little strenuously, but he's in fine, controlled voice here -- robust at times, soft and sweet at others.

Esparza's "Marry Me a Little" is especially moving, with Bobby desperately talking himself into the notion of commitment if not the object; his "Someone Is Waiting" harnesses the pain and panic of isolation; and he conveys mixed feelings of tenderness and dishonesty in "Barcelona," Bobby's doleful morning-after duet with flight attendant April (Elizabeth Stanley), in which a grand piano takes the place of the bed.

Bobby's friends and lovers are played by a tight ensemble that circles him in ways that are caring, invasive or both. The nature of the show pretty much precludes star turns, but Angel Desai's "Another Hundred People" nails that quintessential New York song; Heather Laws lands every laugh in the mile-a-minute "Getting Married Today" with amazing speed and clarity; and Barbara Walsh is bone-dry as brittle, world-weary Joanne. She reveals the emotional hunger beneath the character's hard shell and adds fresh nuances to "The Ladies Who Lunch," a song indelibly associated with Elaine Stritch.

As was notably shown in Sam Mendes' 1996 Donmar production, "Company" is a concept musical that lends itself to a scaled-down presentation, composed of vignettes that build to a deeply ambiguous ending. The actors-as-orchestra scheme also adds surprising new textures to the characters.

The ensemble express themselves and communicate with each other through their instruments, either in synch or disharmony as couples. Trumpets and flutes begin to seem as logical an accessory for these sophisticates as a handbag, cigarette or cocktail. The latter actually becomes a percussion instrument for Joanne in her backhanded ode to connubial bliss, "The Little Things You Do Together." In a droll touch, the doo-doo-doo-does traditionally sung by Bobby's trio of frustrated flings in "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" are played by the girls on saxophones. Given the musical demands on the cast, the dance number "Tick Tock" has been understandably dropped.

Doyle's concept works splendidly in the emotional climax, when Bobby, heretofore not allocated musical duties, expresses his release and newfound openness by tentatively sitting down to play piano in "Being Alive," stirringly sung by Esparza.

As artificially enhanced orchestras become more prevalent, there are distinct rewards in watching Sondheim's marvelous numbers -- there's not a weak song in the show -- brought to life. Working this time with orchestrator Mary-Mitchell Campbell, Doyle again fosters a rich appreciation of the specific roles of strings, brass, keyboards or percussion that's not always apparent from the pit.

As in the director's "Sweeney Todd," the blocking here takes precision to new levels as the actors maneuver their instruments around Gallo's stylish set dominated by a central column and plexiglass cubes, with swivel chairs on an elevated platform behind. Compensating for the switch from the semi-thrust stage for which the production was conceived at Cincinnati Playhouse, a parquet square provides a false thrust around which the ensemble pace like satellites in Bobby's troubled head.

Costumer Ann Hould-Ward's variations on basic black cocktail wear and Thomas C. Hase's moody, sepulchral lighting contribute to give the production a striking, contemporary look.

Set, David Gallo; costumes, Ann Hould-Ward; lighting, Thomas C. Hase; sound, Andrew Keister; hair and wigs, David Lawrence; production stage manager, Gary Mickelson. Opened Nov. 29, 2006. Reviewed Nov. 26. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.

Musical numbers: "Company," "The Little Things You Do Together," "Sorry-Grateful," "You Could Drive a Person Crazy," "Have I Got a Girl for You," "Someone Is Waiting," "Another Hundred People," "Getting Married Today," "Marry Me a Little," "Side by Side by Side," "What Would We Do Without You?" "Poor Baby," "Barcelona," "The Ladies Who Lunch," "Being Alive."

