

# 'Company': Original and Uncompromising

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**PERHAPS** you remember Alceste, that fellow in “The Misanthrope” who was dead certain that his friends and acquaintances, one and all, were dolts and deceivers ever, and that the best he could do with them was bid them a firm good-bye. Well, if he'd ever written a musical comedy, it would probably have looked like “Company.”

As a musical comedy, “Company” is entirely worthy of an Alceste. It is brilliantly designed, beautifully staged, sizzingly performed, inventively scored, and it gets right down to brass tacks and brass knuckles without a moment's hesitation, staring contemporary society straight in the eye before spitting in it.

Dean Jones, curly-haired, hairy-chested, unwed and wisely wary, is 35. There are birthday candles on the cake to prove it, there are friends to stare at him in ominous silence before breaking it to whisper a hollow wish for happiness. Mr. Jones has many friends, all married, all wanting him to be married (“That's what it's really all about, isn't it?”), all available whenever he drops by to offer him cinnamon in his coffee and !bourbon far into the night.

Mr. Jones does drop by, spends the entire evening at the Alvin dropping by in fact. He visits Sarah and Harry (Barbara Barrie and Charles Kimbrough) to find Harry sweating over the cocktails he himself daren't touch. Harry's on the wagon, has been for a year and a half, and Sarah, looking like one of those marshmallow chickens you find in Easter baskets, is dieting, which makes her a “food voyeur.”

She is also studying karate (Miss Barrie has a magnificent chop, and is otherwise admirable, if a good girl to stay away from) and when Harry can be lured from his agonized sniffing of drinks he's whipping up for other people, his wife can toss him to the floor with ease. They're a candid couple, and a preoccupied couple, and when Mr. Jones, over protests, finally says good night to them, they stand and stare at each other in empty, aching unspoken hostility.

Visiting Susan and Peter (Merle Louise and John Cunningham), Mr. Jones discovers that they are divorcing, though with an eye to living together, singly, still bending out over their terrace for a glimpse of the East River. Jenny and David (Teri Ralston and George Coe) are, when the doorbell rings, sharing the after effects of “grass,” though he goes under while she goes high (incompatible, even when stoned). Amy and Paul (Beth Howland and Steve Elmore) cannot get along because he is too loving while she burns the toast, and Joanne and Larry (Elaine Stritch and Charles Braswell) are living out their lives in discotheques, he whooping it up all alone on the dance floor, she at a table measuring pickups through heart-of-stone eyes. Misery, you might say, loves “Company.”

Mr. Jones wants no part of marriage or, as a song says, of “The Little Things You Do Together,” (“Neighbors you annoy together, children you destroy together”), but he's willing to listen to—he can not escape — the finger-wagging advice, in buzzing overlapping rhythms, of his matchmaking friends. Only trouble is, when he asks how any of them feels about being married, he gets an at best ambiguous and at worst despairing answer. “You're always sorry, you're always grateful.” a trio of furrowed brow husbands carols to him (in quite a nice little lazy beat song), ending with a dying “you're always alone.”

The mood is misanthropic, the view from the peephole jaundiced, the attitude middle-aged mean. That, of course, is a highly original stance for a Broadway musical to be taking, and the fact of the matter is that just about everything else in “Company” is equally original, equally uncompromising. Boris Aronson's steel-gray structure (which at first looks like the prison setting for “The Last Mile,” no doubt appropriately) becomes, as director Harold Prince sends his people skittering through space, a breath-taking mobile, an interlocked Tinker-Toy of rippling platforms, sighing elevators, spun-glass spindles for dancers to chin themselves on. Mr. Prince's own work is immaculate: jog trotting waiters spin past tables without colliding, or without taking orders, like jagged metal

figures on a children's game board; the entire company dissolves and reassembles at will in the heavens, malicious gods and goddesses changing shapes as cumulus clouds do.

Stephen Sondheim has never written a more sophisticated, more pertinent, or—this is the surprising thing in the circumstances — more melodious score; and the lyrics are every bit as good (“You'll always be what you were/Which has nothing to do with—all to do with— her”). To dress the songs, and to drive them in hiked shoulder sidesteps straight across the stage, choreographer Michael Bennett has applied endlessly inventive high-pressure patterns; often he uses entirely traditional devices, say straw hats and canes, in provocative new ways, letting the hats slash the air and the canes slap the floor to stress the harshness of what is being stomped out (“Side by Side by Side”).

Songs and dances pop up out of nowhere to assert themselves independently. We see very little of Pamela Myers, who looks like a bullet and sings like a subway rail; but we see her long enough, as one of the girls Mr. Jones occasionally dates, to be bowled over by the brass-band bravura of her “Another Hundred People.” We have no opportunity to tumble to dancer Donna Mc Kechnie until she mysteriously appears from some where inside Mr. Aronson's high steel splinters to begin the astonishing gyrations that serve to describe the fling Mr., Jones is having with an attractive and beddable nitwit en route to Barcelona.

(Nudemongers take note: Sex is more accurately and more excitingly summoned up in Miss McKechnie's limber metaphors than it would have been in any amount of bared shoulder bedplay by the principals. Dandy.)

And, while we are thoroughly aware of Elaine Stritch from the beginning (Miss Stritch has what funny lines George Furth has chosen to write, and she stands alone in the group in making no pretty pretenses about the pleasures of matrimony), we are still not prepared for what happens to us and to the theater when she reaches a left-field snarl, complete with a snappy, snide foot-tap, called

“The Ladies Who Lunch.” Miss Stritch spends a good bit of the evening in haling cigarette smoke; what smoke she exhales during the song I don't know, but it is hers alone and it is scathing. A great number, perfectly done.

All of this is exemplary. Now ask me if I liked the show. I didn't like the show. I admired it, or admired vast portions of it, but that is an other matter. Admiration stirs in the head; liking sends out its signals somewhere lower in the anatomy, the pit of the stomach maybe, and grad ually lets you know that you are happy to have been born, or to have been lucky enough to have come tonight. I left “Company” feeling rather cool and queasy, whatever splendors my head may have been reminding me of, and there is a plain reason for that. At root, I didn't take to Mr. Jones's married friends any more than he did. I agreed with him.

They're not a bunch you'd care to save, or even spend a weekend with. The fact that the entertainment doesn't mean them to be doesn't help much: it has integrity, I had a slight case of aversion. Nor did Mr. Jones himself, first-rate performer that he is, solicit my fatherly, brotherly or crti cal sympathies. Thé part is barely roughed in: he's mainly an eavesdropper; there isn't really much he's looking for, or not getting.

The girls he spends his bachelorhood with (his friends sing “Poor Bobby, all alone” while he, in mesmer ized slow-motion, nuzzles a lass bedward) are wenches of no particular quality or char acter (though three of them do yodel their way splendidly, using ocarina notes I haven't heard since the Duncan Sis ters left us, through a tune called “You Could Drive a Person Crazy,” and Susan Browning is fetchingly dry as she sings “Barcelona”). One of his conquests puts it right on the line. “I'm so boring,” she says, a fact he discovers to be true once he's had her. On the whole I had difficulty in — what do you call it? — empathizing.

“One is lonely and two is boring” is, in short, Mr. Jones's summary of his own experience, and the evening occupies itself with justifying his conviction. That doesn't make the evening boring: It makes it, between musical shots in the arm, overinsistent and lemony. Perhaps the whole thing is just too single minded, like *Alceste*. In any event, its aura as well as its aftertaste is a middling one, somewhere between arid and energetic, dyspeptic and dynamic, farewell and hail. Personally, I'm sorry-grateful.