

I Was Skeptical.’ How Sondheim Agreed to Change ‘Company.’

Days before he died, Stephen Sondheim and the director Marianne Elliott chatted about a Broadway revival of his 1970 musical. With a gender swap, it has a “different flavor,” he said.



By Michael Paulson

Dec. 1, 2021

ROXBURY, Conn. — Had I known what was about to happen, I would have asked so many different questions. But I didn’t, and, presumably, neither did he.

It was Nov. 21, a lovely fall Sunday, and I had driven to rural Connecticut to talk with one of the greatest figures in musical theater history, Stephen Sondheim, about a Broadway revival of his seminal concept musical, “Company.”

We chatted about the show with its director, Marianne Elliott, who joined us for the interview. We talked too, about an unfinished musical he was hoping to complete (“Square One,” adapted from two Luis Buñuel films), his work habits (“I’m a procrastinator”) and his health (“Outside of my sprained ankle, OK”). And he showed us a few rooms in the house, which he had used for years as a weekend getaway, and where he had spent most of his time during the pandemic.

Five days after our conversation, Sondheim died. He was 91.

What stands out, as I think back on that afternoon? Every time I looked up, I saw a big, bold “Company” artwork, a multicolored print, by Deborah Kass, with the words “Being Alive” — the title of one of the show’s biggest songs.

There was the black standard poodle that joined us in the kitchen as I was tested by a Covid concierge, and then stopped by to visit as we began the interview; Sondheim explained that he had had two, Willie and Addie, named after the brothers in his last finished musical, “Road Show,” but that Addie had recently died.

The house was a treasure trove, jam-packed with artifacts: set pieces from “Sunday in the Park With George,” a suspended clock face rescued from a London synagogue, orreries and Japanese trick boxes, a portrait by Annie Leibovitz and posters from international productions of his shows. Then I spotted the Stephen Sondheim action figure. “That was sent to me,” he said, laughing. “I thought it was hilarious. At first I was horrified. Then I was flattered.”

Larry Kert as Bobby and Susan Browning as April in the original Broadway production of “Company.” Friedman-Abeles/The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Gender flip: Katrina Lenk as Bobbie and Claybourne Elder as Andy in the revival of the show, now on Broadway. Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

“Company,” with music and lyrics by Sondheim and a book by George Furth, first ran on Broadway in 1970 (and won the Tony for best musical the following year). The nonlinear show is about a single person, just turning 35, feeling pressure to settle down from paired-off friends.

The current revival, which changes the gender of the protagonist (the male Bobby is now the female Bobbie), is now in previews and is scheduled to open on Dec. 9, following a lengthy pandemic delay. Over the course of 90 minutes, we mostly talked about the new revival, but he also offered flashes of insight about theater and theater-making.

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

Let's talk about why you decided to revisit "Company."

STEPHEN SONDHEIM I revisited it because Marianne wanted to. I was a big fan of Marianne's. I was skeptical. Then she did a workshop, and videoed it, and there was a young cameraman there who had never heard of the show. When Marianne told him about what the show was originally, he said, "You mean it worked with a guy?" And then I knew that we had a show.

MARIANNE ELLIOTT I'd always loved "Company." I'd never seen it actually, but I listened to it quite a lot.

But if it was set now, it feels like it would have more potency if it was with a female Bobbie, because a male Bobby who is 35 now, who has clearly got a lovely life — lots of friends, lots of girlfriends, obviously doing quite well, an apartment in the city — nobody's going to be pushing him into getting married. They'd probably just slap him on the back and say, "Have a great time." But for a woman at 35, obviously, it's quite a threshold. There's going to be a lot of pressure on her from her friends to make a wish that she will actually "sort her life out" and settle down and get married and have a family, maybe.

You had turned down a proposal for an all-male "Company" with a gay Bobby, directed by John Tiffany.

SONDHEIM Yes. There were certain scenes that worked really well, and certain scenes that just seemed forced. Actually the scenes that worked best were what we call the girlfriend scenes. But the marriage scenes didn't really work well.

So why did you say yes to this one?

SONDHEIM My feeling about the theater is the thing that makes it different from movies and television is that you can do it in different ways from generation to generation. Just as you can have many different actors play

Hamlet, you can have many different ways of looking at a show without distorting it. And also, shows change their life according to what is going on in the world around them. “Assassins” now has an entirely different and ominous quality to it because of what’s going on with guns and violence. “Company” has a different flavor than it had before feminism really got a foothold.

ELLIOTT I wish more people thought that way. Because theater is ephemeral. It is about the now. Even if you set it in another period, it should have something to say to the now.

SONDHEIM What keeps theater alive is the chance always to do it differently, with not only fresh casts, but fresh viewpoints.

Were there ways besides gender that you wanted to reset the piece?

SONDHEIM It’s not just a matter of changing pronouns, but attitudes. Marianne went and looked through all of George Furth’s early drafts to find out if something was useful, and she did — there are short passages in the piece that are out of George’s notes, not out of the script he wrote.

ELLIOTT We read everything he’d ever written, trying to get into his head. We were very keen that it had to be faithful to the original.

SONDHEIM Getting into George’s head is quite a task for anybody. He had a really original head.

What was the trickiest lyric to adapt?

SONDHEIM There are words and little phrases here and there, but there are no big changes. I suppose the biggest change is in “Someone Is Waiting” where it’s a list of men instead of a list of girls.

What about the music? One of the sounds that’s closely associated with the score is that of a busy signal.

SONDHEIM It's just a musical theme now — it doesn't signify a busy signal. If you didn't know, you'd just think it was a vamp. There was no point in throwing it out, because it's integrated into the score, and it's a wonderful sound to open the show with.

ELLIOTT We use the clock quite a lot — the ticking clock through all of the transitions. In our head, we were thinking more of a clock than a busy signal.

How did you think about the sexual situations — a man with three girlfriends versus a woman with three boyfriends?

ELLIOTT I do think it might be tricky today for a man to be sleeping with a woman and not really wanting to hear what she has to say. But if you change it the other way around it's less offensive.

Lenk in a scene from the show. "The image of all of them crowding that small room," Sondheim said, "gives a whole other meaning to the title, 'Company,' cause they're

You also wrestled with how to handle an exchange between Bobbie and her friend Joanne. In the original, Joanne propositions Bobby; in this version, Joanne makes a different suggestion.

SONDHEIM That was all Marianne’s idea. That was another thing I was skeptical of, but she really wanted to try it.

ELLIOTT I suppose I was interested in who Joanne was, and her self-destructive behavior. She’s much more fragile than she shows herself to be. What’s the worst thing she could possibly do?

How did the two of you collaborate?

SONDHEIM We just went over it scene by scene. And I would change, and Marianne would, taking some of George’s lines. And she’d say, “We’ll, that’s OK, but I wish it were more this,” and I’d say, “That’s OK, but I don’t quite understand what she’s feeling.” That kind of thing.

[One of the last decisions Elliott and Sondheim made was to change the gender of one of Bobbie’s friends, replacing an Amy with a Jamie, so there is now a same-sex couple in which one person is having wedding day jitters.]

ELLIOTT When I was auditioning in London, I couldn’t find the person [to play Amy]. I also felt like this woman wasn’t now, wasn’t a very modern woman. So then I did a crazy thing — I asked a friend of mine, Jonathan Bailey, who was in the workshop playing P.J., “Would you mind just coming in and trying something for me? It’s a bit crazy.”

SONDHEIM I didn’t know that.

ELLIOTT We worked for maybe an hour and a half, and it wasn't perfect, but I felt (gasp), this is exciting, there's a potential here. So I then immediately got on the email to Steve, and I said, "Steve, you have to be sitting down. You have to be having a glass of wine in your hand. And take a deep breath, but I'm going to say something to you: I think possibly we should change Amy into a man." And Steve's reply sums him up, really, as a collaborator. He basically said, "Marianne, you need to be sitting down, you need to have a glass of wine in your hand, you need to take a deep breath: I think it's a great idea."

Is there something about same-sex relationships that made that work?

SONDHEIM: Well, it's contemporary. This makes it so much "of today." The whole cast takes it for granted. It's just, "Oh, those two guys are married." It's what people would do today.

ELLIOTT I don't know whether this is modern or not, but there's something about a woman saying to a gay guy, "Oh, God, we're both getting older, let's just you and I get married," in a sort of flip way, that feels quite real, but then it becomes more serious.

SONDHEIM The great key line — I'm going to paraphrase it — is "Just because we can get married, doesn't mean we should," and that sums up everything about the gay aspect of marriage. That's such a prescient line.

During the life of this show, you got married.

SONDHEIM Yes, but not because of the show. Actually a good friend of mine was contemplating getting married back in 1970. He saw "Company," and he said, all right, I'll try it. He got divorced three months later. So I don't send prospective grooms and brides to see "Company."

Does the change in gender change the way you see the show?

SONDHEIM Not the way I see the show. The way I see what it's about, sure.

How does it change the way you see what it's about?

SONDHEIM It just tells me something about the way people live today, as opposed to the way that people lived in 1970.

So many people have ideas about how to change or update classic shows. How do you decide what the limits are for you?

SONDHEIM You're asking a general question. I couldn't possibly answer that. But most of the shows that I've written, if not all but "Company," don't require or ask for a change. Maybe to improve something, but not to change it because the world around it has changed. An awful lot of shows that I've written are period pieces anyway. You don't have to change "Sweeney Todd" to fit the contemporary world, or even "Night Music."

Marianne, I wanted to ask you about directing a musical, because most of your career has been plays. This is your first big musical?

ELLIOTT It's my second — I did "The Light Princess," that Tori Amos wrote.

How is it different from a play? What are you learning?

ELLIOTT It's more collaborative. You can share running the room, which means that it's not always about you running the minutiae of the moment. Sometimes it's nice to be able to sit back and see it as a whole. It just enables you to think much more creatively, much more objectively, much more about the overall.

SONDHEIM But isn't the essential difference between directing a play and directing a musical that musicals are out front, they're presentational, whereas a play is not presentational, it's about the characters interacting.

ELLIOTT Yes, that's true. I suppose the thing about this particular musical though, as you've always said Steve, it was written for actors, so that helps me. I like music, but I'm not highly educated in terms of music. But I can say things

like, “Why does she have a long note there, and why does she go up on the line there, and not keep to the melody? Why is it held?” And with Steve’s stuff, there’s always a psychological reason.

SONDHEIM I always approach writing a song from the actor’s point of view. I try to get into the character the way an actor gets into the character, and then write from that point of view. So that means I pay attention to each consonant and each vowel, the way you would if you were writing a play.

ELLIOTT It really does tell you something psychologically.

SONDHEIM Music, of course, does that wonderful thing of suggesting an emotion. You don’t have to spell it out. It makes such an impact on an audience.

“It’s fantastic to come back and do a show, in the year after the pandemic, to do a show that is absolutely the antithesis of being locked down,” Elliott said. Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

This production of “Company” began its life with a run in London. Was there anything you saw there that you decided to change for New York?

ELLIOTT I wanted to make it really clear that it was all about the moment when, at her birthday party that she’s going to have, she’s going to have to blow the candles out on the cake. I also wanted to make it clear that in my head — I mean, this is not in my head, this is actually as it’s written — it’s all in her head as she’s waiting for this blinking surprise party to turn up. As she’s drinking, on the bourbon, she’s probably hiding under the stairs thinking, “What’s going to happen?” And she drifts from thought to thought to thought. So it’s not necessarily a narrative, but there’s logic from one thought to another thought to another thought, which then takes her to the place of “Being Alive.”

SONDHEIM That’s why it’s not a revue. It has the form of a revue, but it’s not. It’s a play.

ELLIOTT Yeah. And I wanted to make that clear. So the “Alice in Wonderland” features more heavily here than it did in London.

SONDHEIM And also you wanted to restage “Another Hundred People.” That’s a complete restaging of what was in London.

Why?

ELLIOTT Well, I didn’t think it worked particularly well in London.

SONDHEIM No, it didn't. And of course, it wasn't written to be a group number — it was written as a solo. And so Marianne had to invent something — I don't know exactly why you wanted a group number, but it's nice to have one there.

ELLIOTT I wanted it to look like she was being taken through the streets and the alleys and the corners and the highs and the lows of New York, and also, through, possibly even, an app. So it has connotations of her walking, but also connotations of her going through a dating app.

SONDHEIM This is New York's solo.

ELLIOTT That's a great way of putting it: New York's solo. Every single scene, New York is mentioned. They all have something to say about New York. And it's fantastic to come back and do a show, in the year after the pandemic, to do a show that is absolutely the antithesis of being locked down, because everybody is crammed in her apartment — all her friends — and also to do a show that is about how fantastic New York is.

SONDHEIM The image of all of them crowding that small room, at the beginning, gives the show an entirely different flavor than it's ever had before. It gives a whole other meaning to the title, "Company," cause they're smothering her. That's something it's never had before. It's all friendly, and full of love and warmth, and they're smothering her.

You had a few previews before the pandemic and shut down for a year and a half. How did that affect you and the show?

SONDHEIM It made us so happy! What a great question! Never been happier to have a show close after a week!

ELLIOTT (laughing) With a great advance!

I have to say, it was pretty awful. I hated the pandemic. Absolutely hated it. I felt like I was kicking like a horse against the stable door: “Let me out!” But it was worrying as well, because we wanted to come back. We were a very strong company. We all really believed what we were doing. And suddenly we were totally scattered across the globe.

SONDHEIM And like other shows, we were just getting the steam up, when the door slammed.

ELLIOTT There’s quite a lot of post-traumatic stress going on, I think, and that will continue to go on in humans just generally, so coming back into rehearsal after having been isolated was quite a thing. It felt like everybody knew each other. There was a trust there, an understanding. And when you’re playing a married couple, you can’t buy that, you can’t direct it, you can’t act it. It’s either there or it isn’t there.

SONDHEIM The appropriate word is, it was a company.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section AR, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Sondheim Reveled In New ‘Company’