

Proctors, Schenectady, NY

Company. Book by George Furth, Score by Stephen Sondheim. Directed by Marianne Elliot.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“You could drive a person crazy”

If, like me, you love the show “Company” which pushed songwriter Stephen Sondheim into the forefront of American Musical creators way back in 1968 then this recent Broadway edition, now on tour starting in Schenectady at Proctors, will be something of a disappointment to you. If, however, you have never seen a performance of the original concept then you might well enjoy this show thoroughly. What the creators of this version don’t seem to realize is a simple fact of reality: the psychologies of men and women are radically different in general and though a woman may at times react to the facts of her life just as a man might do, it is difficult to make an audience believe that in just over two hours. Even the restoration of the original first act closer, “Marry Me a Little,” cut early on in the original run, doesn’t quite fit the character of Bobbie, formerly Bobby.



Britney Coleman as Bobbie

In truth, very few of her songs feel right in a female voice. Bobby, the man, has lived to the age of 35 without making a solid commitment to a woman. That is both understandable and very acceptable for a man of the 1960s. For today’s Bobbie, though, at the age of 35 she is almost an outcast, devoid of close women friends who would suspect her of fishing in their romantic ponds and almost constantly under the very lecherous thumbs of their aging husbands. This is not the case in this show where all of her friends, basically, of both genders are honestly devoted to getting her married, settled and happy as a clam in soft sand. The idea worked for the male Bobby; it doesn’t for the female Bobbie.

The show is peopled with high talents, men and women who can perform wonderfully when the material fits them. However, even in the slimmest moments of truth and devotion there is generally a feeling that the words

and actions do not fit the situations all that well. Both Bobby(ie)s imagine the “surprise” 35th birthday party they ultimately avoid. In this case the reality of it is disturbing, for her friends are truly friends and she hurts them deeply by not showing up. It makes for a very unhappy ending to the musical. These folks don’t deserve this treatment. In Bobby’s case in the original version his avoidance of the party seemed like an only option for getting away from the incessant pressure to grow up and face the marital music.

Britney Coleman does a very good job playing the role of Bobbie although at times her singing voice takes on a shrill edge that supports her on-stage age, but is disagreeable and almost painful. She looks good, moves well and plays her role with conviction. If our hero could be a woman she is a very good and logical choice as a physical type. I just wish I understood why her character is what she is - it is never made clear in a musical comedy book with great and funny lines but that provides no character development for “Bobbie.”

Her part-time boy-friend Andy, an airplane steward (replacng April who slept with Bobby) is played aggressively by Jacob Dickey and their duet, “Barcelona” falls flat when it reaches its climax because Bobbie’s intentions are never clear.

Among the best moments in this show is the wedding breakfast of Paul and Jamie, a gay couple (no Amy, but there’s Jamie). The trio “Getting Married Today” is broadly played by Matt Rodin as Jamie, Ali Louis Bourzgui as Paul and Marina Kondo as the Priest.

The role of Joanne, an older, wealthy friend on her third marriage, was originated by the fabulous Elaine Stritch who made the part a tour-de-force comic hit but whose final song, “The Ladies Who Lunch” has become a stand-alone classic. In this production the role falls into the talented hands of Judy McLane who has softened the character in spite of her bitterness inflected lines. This is clearly a very talented woman who is defeated by her big song which she sings well but doesn’t perform to its angry and bitter nature. Perhaps no one can ever do it better than Stritch and there is no blame attached to that.

The rest of the cast deliver nicely in their roles. Furth’s comedy book gets a good delivery by the company and the songs are well sung. Marianne Elliot has kept the show lively and in motion and she never dwells on the emotional difficulties of transforming a 35 year old man into a woman approaching middle-age. Liam Steel’s choreography is okay but it too feels a bit too limited. The sets, designed by Bunny Christie are boxy and limiting. The costumes designed by Christie don’t do much to define the characters. Neal Austin’s lighting design saves many moments but it too falls short of the pepper that this salty tale requires. Keith Caggiano provides the finest sound design I have ever experienced at Proctors.

This must be listed among the most interesting shows of the season, but sadly also one of the least successful. I wish it well on its tour; I hope it brings in bigger houses than the one that attended on the night I saw it.

+ 10/12/2023 +

Company plays at Proctors in Schenectady through October 14. For tickets go to proctors.org.