

A History of Gayness Tied to Sondheim's *Company*

As often as Sondheim squashed conspiracies of Bobby's gayness in *Company*, one thing remains true, the conversation hasn't ended. This connection of thoughts has yet to be severed because by the very nature of the libretto, the show deals with marriage and relationships, and the definition of a "wholesome family relationship" has changed dramatically since its original 1970 debut.

Stephen Sondheim justifies many of the stories he writes by saying those are the stories he is well equipped to tell. As a white gay Jewish man from the upper west side, he is pretty familiar with that niche type of person, and we see much of himself and his life emerge in his characters. This is an inevitable truth of artists and their art, especially when the artist is so notable; viewers make the connection. Just as Sondheim wrote somewhat meta characters of himself in *Sunday in the Park With George* and *Merrily We Roll Along*, viewers can interpret Bobby as a reflection of Sondheim, a gay man struggling with his own identity (Shewey). Additionally, there seems to exist another connection in the case of *Company*, each of its productions and revivals has come at a pivotal time in terms of gay rights activism and marriage equality. This poses the question- how has the time period of each revival contributed to the conversation of Bobby's gayness? Does this conversation affect Furth and Sondheim's initial vision for the message and purpose of the show?

1970 Revival

Beginning in 1970 at the time of *Company*'s first release and performance, LGBT Americans and New Yorkers were in a unique transitional period. Throughout the 1960s, although some minimal progress was made, there was still a large separation between the urban cultures of gay and straight people. In fact, LGBT individuals could not even be served alcohol in public as mandated by liquor laws (History.com). A turning point and a breaking point was reached in June 1969 with the riots and demonstrations at the Stonewall Inn. As the nation's first major protest for LGBT rights, this was a catalyst for many more influential events that occurred across the next decade, but in the early years that followed, a lot of gay

people approached the event with discomfort or ignorance (Rosen). Visibility of queerness was beginning to increase in the media, for example *Cabaret* made its debut in 1972, but political and legislative change took longer to enact and didn't appear until later in the decade, causing a difficult dilemma of expression in fear of continued persecution. It was a sort of "what now?" situation. And this is where *Company* fell in the timeline of events.

In an interview with Sondheim at the time, he described "[Company is] about the true generation gap, 30 to 55, the generation caught between two quite contrasting attitudes towards permanent commitment... how difficult it is to be married and how much more difficult it is not to be married." He also remarked that "since he himself is just 40, unmarried, and a much-invited guest, he feels especially close to *Company*." So it's easy to see pieces of the writer in the main character of this piece. Another instance eerily tying gayness into the narrative of the show involved one of Sondheim's muses- the fabulous Elaine Stritch, coining the iconic role of Joanne. It was known by many that she had somewhat of a scandalous affair with actor Rock Hudson, who was a big hollywood star who constantly had to hide his gayness. [INSERT CLIP]

So where can we see queerness in the show itself? George Furth initially wrote what would be *Company* as a series of one-act plays featuring a man peering into the lives of many neurotic married couples. Later, Bobby would be born as a 35 year old bachelor living lavishly in New York City, one who could have any woman he wanted- so why doesn't he want one? One explanation lies in the possibility of Bobby being gay. His internal struggles of commitment could be construed as more of a confusion towards his own sexuality and what exactly it is he is looking for. His three girlfriends, April, Marta, and Cathy have incredibly contrasting traits, indicating that Bobby doesn't have a "type" and can't seem to pinpoint what he wants. His fear of commitment could be exacerbated by his fear of coming out, or coming to terms with who he really is. This experience of confusion and fear relates directly to the LGBT community in the early 70s, and the struggle that Sondheim himself was most likely enduring, not being out of the closet

yet. New York audiences were able to recognize the reflection of that struggle in the show and in Bobby, leading them with a lingering question of his sexuality (Shewey).

The Original Broadway Production of *Company* ran for a healthy 2 years, the same years of the first two pride parades in New York, and it won 6 Tony awards including best musical. Additionally, Sondheim began to become accepted as a household name and acclaimed composer, not just a lyricist (Gottfried).

1995 Revival

25 years pass and a lot happens for the LGBT community. Another revival of *Company* is put up in 1995 after a pivotal decade -- the progress of the 1970s turned into the tragedy of the 80s and the AIDS epidemic, something no one could ignore. The previously mentioned Rock Hudson was the first major celebrity to die from AIDS at age 59 in 1985. The 2nd ever march on Washington for LGBT rights became the first ever national coverage of ACT UP. In 1992, legislation was passed allowing gay and lesbian couples to register as domestic partners, granting them some of the rights of marriage. "Don't Ask Don't Tell" was passed in 1993 allowing gay people to serve in the military as long as they kept their sexuality a secret (History.com).

As gay visibility increased in the media, Broadway audiences and critics continued to raise questions about Bobby's sexuality. Sondheim and Furth consistently refuted this idea from critics and in the 1995 revival, they supported the reintroduction of a cut scene in an attempt to squash these conspiracies and confirm Bobby as straight (Stoddart).

[INSERT SCENE]

1970 audiences were not yet ready for this type of open, vulnerable conversation between men. However, by the 90s, people were more accustomed and prepared to see Peter ask the question. The AIDS crisis

caused a sort of “homosexual panic,” a finger-pointing craze mostly directed towards young men who lived lavish lifestyles with little responsibility, much like Bobby (Stoddart). This was a product of a time of great fear, but entering the 90s, once people knew more about the epidemic and the science, the conspiracies became less and less acceptable and tolerance increased. Audiences attempting to define Bobby as gay were essentially following this pattern, and thus this could have been very frustrating or troubling for Sondheim. Perhaps it seemed almost unfair to assume that Bobby would be gay, as those types of accusations were exactly what the world needed to move away from.

However, by addressing the possibility of gayness in this scene directly, Furth inadvertently put the question of Bobby’s sexuality into people's minds instead of removing it. Audience members who had never considered this notion were now posed with the question directly: “is he or isn’t he?” (Gottfried) The scene, between Bobby and Peter, depending on the directorial choices, can make a huge statement. For example, it could be interpreted that Peter is attempting to seduce Bobby, as Joanne does later in the show. Embracing this parallelism could add to the conversation of marriage and feeling trapped versus wanting to explore, especially because Peter is soon to be a divorcee. Could his desire to explore, with men or women, be a part of the reason for the divorce?

Sondheim publicly came out in 1998, in Meryle Secrest's biography. In his eyes, his gayness did not define him or make up a large part of his life. He commented “I’m just another ordinary neurotic fellow...it included homosexuality, but you know, it was not being open to let somebody else into my life.”

Perhaps Bobby could be gay, but the essence of the story remains: it is about a man who is "not open to let somebody else into [his] life" (Sondheim). However, we can’t ignore that commitment functions differently in a queer context-- there is first the layer of self acceptance and community acceptance. Bobby’s struggle to feel accepted by his friends could be exacerbated by the fact that they all want him to fit a certain “husband mold” in a heterosexual marriage that he is not meant for. Art mirrors the artist here

as Sondheim dealt with the same struggles in his own personal life. Did his discomfort with his being gay for so long prevent him from forming a meaningful connection? And when he did finally come out, was it too late?

2006 and 2020 Revivals

Entering the 21st century, *Company* has become more relevant than ever. Marriage and committed relationships may often be viewed as "old-fashioned" making the idea of a single bachelor much less taboo, at least for a man. However, the importance of marriage as a right was emphasized by the legal debates of gay marriage. Leading up to the 2006 revival, Massachusetts was the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2004, and leading up to the 2019 revival, same-sex marriage was ruled legal by the supreme court in 2015 (History.com). This provided an opportunity to revive *Company* in a more inclusive way and depict the many shapes and forms a modern marriage can take. Additionally, the choice in the 2019 revival to cast the traditional Bobby as Bobbie, a 35 year old single **woman**, allowed for an updated discussion of hookup culture, and what it means for a man versus a woman to be reluctant to commit. The single bachelor story no longer holds the same effect in a modern context, but a single woman, juggling boyfriends, embracing her sensuality, and exploring her sexual maturity, is powerful, to say the least. What's more, it is completely relatable for female identifying audience members of all ages to have their best friends (and family) be constantly pressuring them to settle down and find love.

In casting Bobby as a woman, there are a number of newfound layers to the societal pressures placed on her to get married. In a world where she is being told to conceal her sensuality, she still must know exactly what she is looking for in a potential partner. Little is mentioned of her line of work, but in our society, it is always a question of an apparent "tradeoff" for women choosing between a career and a family-- perhaps part of the scrutiny Bobbie receives from her friends is because she prioritized her work

and is able to live affluently. Additionally, Bobbie has an internal pressure from simple biology; the number “tick tock” refers to her body clock and her fleeting time to have children.

Director Marianne Elliot also made a point to include gay couples, as the norm of what a "wholesome marriage" looks like has changed so drastically in the past ten years. The iconic “Not Getting Married Today” is now performed by a man, Jamie instead of Amy. The entire script has been updated and revised, all with the blessing of Sondheim himself. It is interesting to note that where the character of Joanne normally attempts to hit on Bobby before “Ladies Who Lunch,” Elliot’s revival paints the relationship between the two characters as more of a sisterhood, or even adding a maternal side to Joanne (Gilbert, 2018). Where there was an opportunity to make Joanne and Bobbie both overtly queer, Elliot opted not to. Obviously, we don’t know her exact reasoning behind this choice, but one possibility could be that it would distract from Lupone’s big moment or that their sudden gayness isn’t backed up in the text.

Adding gay couples, genderbending Bobby, addressing queerness or not, every revival of company holds the same story at its core- even Sondheim himself has made sure of it. Although our understanding of the protagonist may be complicated in new ways, in essence, he/she experiences the same arc in terms of feeling **willing** to have a meaningful relationship with one other person. Elliot shows us that no matter what type of marriage we discuss, people experience the same sorry/grateful struggles.

Works Cited

Gilbert, Sophie. "An Updated 'Company' for an Era of Single Women." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 29 Nov. 2016,

www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/11/company-sondheim-sexual-politics/508895/

Gilbert, Sophie. "A Classic Sondheim Musical Gets a Thrilling Twist." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 19 Oct. 2018,

www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/10/rosalie-craig-and-patti-lupone-shine-in-a-gender-flipped-company/573262/.

Gottfried, Martin. *Sondheim; Photographs by Martha Swope and Others*. H.N. Abrams, New York, 2000.

History.com Editors. "Gay Rights." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 28 June 2017,

www.history.com/topics/gay-rights/history-of-gay-rights.

Rosen, Rebecca J. "A Glimpse Into 1970s Gay Activism." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 26

Feb. 2014, www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/02/a-glimpse-into-1970s-gay-activism/284077/.

Shewey, Don. "Is He or Isn't He?" *The Advocate*, 7 Jan. 2007.

https://www.donshewey.com/theater_reviews/company.html

Stoddart, Scott F. "Queer Sondheim." *The Oxford Handbook of Sondheim Studies*, edited by Robert Gordon, 2014. *Oxford Handbooks Online*.

Stritch, Elaine, and John Lahr. "Elaine Stritch: At Liberty." 2002, New York, Broadway.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4lid-dBKYQ>

Wolf, Matt. "A Gender Swap Makes Sondheim's 'Company' Soar." *The New York Times*, The New York

Times, 25 Oct. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/10/25/theater/sondheim-company-london.html.

