



SHORT AND SWEENEY
 (1) Todd's Mitchell and Baranski;
 (2) *Company*'s Keira Naughton,
 Kim Director, John Barrowman,
 and David Pittu; (3) *Sunday in
 the Park With George*

A Little Feast

A retrospective of Stephen Sondheim's best work shines brightly at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center. by Lisa Schwarzbaum

THESE ARE DESPERATE times," a vengeful barber tells an eminently practical baker before the two cook up a scheme to grind murdered tontorial customers into profitable meat pies in Stephen Sondheim's crowning musical masterpiece, *Sweeney Todd*. Desperate, yes, but remarkable times, too: How else to explain the striking juxtaposition of color-coded terror alerts emanating from Washington, D.C., by day with the

concentrated explosions of color and light bursting from the Kennedy Center in that same tense town by night?

The Sondheim Celebration now under way through August presents six of the great composer-lyricist's theater musicals, spanning nearly a quarter century: *Sweeney Todd* (1979) rotates with *Company* (1970) and *Sunday in the Park With George* (1984) through June, while *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Passion* (1994),

and *A Little Night Music* (1973) move in between July and August. Kennedy Center president Michael M. Kaiser has said he first had the notion more than a decade ago to explore the work of a single theater artist, and there's something especially right, and stirring, about *this* way of honoring *this* 72-year-old American theatrical master in *this* town at *this* time.

Isn't it rich? The Kennedy Center celebration is a meditation on Sondheim's profound and

revolutionary contributions to the form and content of musical theater—his subject matter powered by feelings, his characters fractured by conflicting desires, his music and lyrics probing, commenting, questioning. But in these desperate times, this retrospective is above all a moment to be grateful for the concentration of so much American theatrical creativity and resourcefulness, marshaled in the service of so uplifting and joyous a communal event.

Past the waving flags and the nervous politicians, it turns out, there's powerful, audience-pleasing *art* being committed in the nation's capital. Sondheim's got company! Some are well-known—Brian Stokes Mitchell and Christine Baranski, to name two, play barber and baker in *Sweeney*. But more of them are

terrific, bench-strength pros—versatile performers working with directors invigorated by the challenge of shaking off memories of famous productions that have gone before.

The first trio of plays brims with archetypes of Sondheimian ambivalence. In *Sunday in the Park*, it's professional—about the obsessive passion of creativity that so often makes human connection difficult, if not impossible, played out in the fictional tale of 19th-century French painter Georges Seurat. Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters established the template for the artist and his model-mistress, Dot; now Raúl Esparza (fresh from Broadway's *Cabaret*) and the larklike Melissa Errico (wasted in such sitcoms as *Ed* and *The Norm Show*) confidently occupy a sparer, subtly modernized stage. And in doing so, they cut more sharply to the heart of the matter: Art isn't

easy, and artists aren't either.

In this clarified production, directed by Eric Schaeffer (who is also artistic director of the entire Sondheim Celebration), a new logic is established between the first act, set in the 19th century and the second act, set in the 20th. And Errico finds a new depth and tender wisdom in the difficult second-act character of Marie, George and Dot's daughter who's now an old woman comforting her modern-artist grandson in his artistic agonies.

In *Company*, meanwhile, personal ambivalence is all. An unsettling mood piece about the terrors of committing to another person (and the sadness of not), Sean Mathias' astringent, witty production turns out to be the surprise of the trio: While perfectly establishing the groovy-'70s-bachelor-pad vibe of the time (brilliant set design by Derek McLane and costumes by Catherine Zuber simultaneous-



ly orient and disorient), Mathias nails the story of these swingers as the saddest, most rueful fable of Smug Marrieds and their Singleton friend ever told. Shiny, unfamous stage star John Barrowman plays noncommittal Robert with all the handsome hollowness required. Lynn Redgrave (a marquee name) fearlessly bites into the role made famous by Elaine Stritch, singing "The Ladies Who Lunch" and making this haunting, angry toast to mortality her own. (Alice Ripley—star of the Broadway cult hit *Sideshow*—

steals the show, as every actress ought to in the role, with her rendition of "Getting Married Today.")

And then, finally, Sweeney Todd. The Demon Barber of Fleet Street. The quintessential Stephen Sondheim musical, about the razor-sharp line of ambivalence slashing between love and murder. Speaking as a gay man, I...oh, wait, that's not me. Nevertheless, this is the perfect American musical, nothing less, in an authoritative production directed by Christopher Ashley. And there are moments, as Mitchell and Baranski stretch to their full powers singing "A Little Priest," when dazzled theatergoers may find themselves weeping with gratitude. When pleasure is offered this generously, it deserves to be beamed back with no ambivalence whatsoever. *Sunday in the Park With George*: **A-** *Company*: **A** *Sweeney Todd*: **A**

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