

Los Angeles Times

SONDHEIM'S 'COMPANY' COMES CALLING -- 22 YEARS LATER

By DON HECKMAN, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES
July 28, 1992

Elaine Stritch looks tired. And stressed -- very stressed.

It's past 4 a.m. in a Columbia Records recording studio, and the musical theater star has just finished her fourth or fifth unsuccessful attempt to record the Stephen Sondheim song "The Ladies Who Lunch." In the control room, Sondheim, a weary glaze in his eyes, slowly shakes his head from side to side.

Stritch listens to the playback, her face tensing with frustration, stares up at the monitor speaker and finally lets out a long, pained cathartic roar: "Oh, shut up!"

This remarkable moment is preserved in a new laser disc and videocassette, "Original Cast Album: Company," filmed by renowned cinema verite film director D. A. Pennebaker at the May 3, 1970, recording session and scheduled for release today. It is the first in a planned series of musical theater-related productions from RCA Victor Video.

Incredibly, it has taken more than two decades for the film to reach the broad popular market. This despite the fact that "Company" was a watershed production for Sondheim - a theater work that won six Tony Awards and established the composer-lyricist as Broadway's preeminent talent. Within the 10 years after "Company" opened, Sondheim created music and lyrics for "Follies," "A Little Night Music," "Pacific Overtures" and "Sweeney Todd."

The "Company" cast was an all-star list of established and emerging musical comedy performers: Stritch, Barbara Barrie, Beth Howland, Charles Kimbrough, Pam Myers and Donna McKechnie, with choreography by Michael Bennett and direction by Harold Prince.

Why has it taken so long for "Original Cast Album: Company" -- a film that, by its very absence, began to acquire a near legendary reputation -- to be released?

Shot as part of a failed TV project, the film has been available briefly from time to time, in other, limited formats. It was shown last year on cable TV's Learning Channel. The first showing was a theatrical version that debuted at the New York Film Festival in September, 1970.

According to Craig Zadan, the video's executive producer (and Sondheim biographer), interest was so strong that "mobs of outraged theatergoers were turned away after waiting in line for several hours. Festival officials panicked, the police riot squad was summoned and a second showing had to be scheduled."

Last year, the New York Shakespeare Festival at the Public Theatre screened it for a few weeks. "And that was it," says Zadan. "For the most part, it's simply been out of circulation for 22 years."

The real distribution plan originally was aimed at television syndication.

The idea of doing an in-the-studio film documentary during the cast recording was that of film producer Daniel Melnick, who at the time was working for the late David Susskind's Talent Associates.

"The way it got started was that Melnick went to Eastern Airlines and got a commitment for financing," explains Zadan. "But a few days before the recording session, all the money was pulled out, abruptly."

"It seems that the Eastern people had finally gotten around to seeing the show and were very disturbed about a number called 'Barcelona,' in which Susan Browning, as an airline stewardess, sleeps with Robert, the Dean Jones character. They said they were very upset, not because the airline stewardess slept with him, but because she missed her flight. And that was the end of their financing."

Melnick managed to persuade Chrysler-Plymouth to take over sponsorship, almost literally at the last minute.

"When I first got together with Melnick and the others," recalls Pennebaker, "they seemed to think we'd all make a lot of money out of making a TV series of these things. But I wasn't so sure about that. I'm not too certain about the value of doing any more than one of anything."

Pennebaker's instincts were accurate. "Original Cast Album: Company" turned out to be one of a kind. The project quickly disappeared from view. "Of course it did," adds Pennebaker. "You can't just go out and expect to tear these things off."

It has taken a great deal of legwork by Zadan and Pennebaker's chief administrative officer (and son) Fraze Pennebaker to bring the project to fruition.

"The funny thing is when I contacted them," says Zadan, "the Pennebakers had the same thing in mind and had been working on getting releases from the various participants. So I called RCA because I knew they are now the premier cast album recording label, and they have a great deal of Sondheim catalogue. They thought that the idea of starting a line

of theater videos was a good idea, so we went forward, creating a sort of marketing marriage between RCA and Pennebaker.

"But the real clincher was that Sondheim loved the idea, because he's always been into the educational aspects of the theater. He thought it would be terrific to get the video to the theater departments of colleges and high schools to demonstrate not just how a cast album is done, but to show some of the detail of the score itself."

RCA's new video version has been made from a newly struck print and includes carefully upgraded stereo sound. Zadan's only disappointment has been the impossibility of adding some of the original outtakes.

"Unfortunately," he explains, "all the footage that was not used in 1970 was sent to Talent Associates, which of course is out of business. The footage, if it survived at all, has disappeared."

What remains is an amazing display of music in the making. In the long run, original cast albums are all that remain of some of the theater's most stirring musical moments. The stresses and strains inherent in capturing those moments -- usually in a tense, demanding recording session held the first free day after the opening -- has never before been illustrated in such penetrating fashion.

For Stritch, her struggle with "The Ladies Who Lunch" still resonates as a powerful memory.

"The only thing that was on my mind was that I just couldn't get that damned song right," says Stritch. "It's such a hard number to do in a recording session -- to get the full meaning of those lyrics across. You can't come on that strong, as you always tend to do when you're tired. And I was tired. I was exhausted."

"I looked like Margaret Rutherford doing the life story of Judy Garland."

Pennebaker suspected, before he began shooting, that Stritch might provide some of the fireworks. "I'm always surprised by what I get," he says. "But I kind of knew that Elaine was gonna be the hit. That's her nature."

Pennebaker's instincts have a long track record of dependability. Considered one of the originators of cinema verite, he was responsible for the now epic footage of Bob Dylan in "Don't Look Back" and Janis Joplin (among many others) in "Monterey Pop."

His approach to "Company" was typical of the way he works: Place three cameramen in an arena of action and try to capture anything that appears intriguing.

A good part of the appeal of "Original Cast Album: Company" lies in the fact that Pennebaker has incorporated so many riveting real-life scenes among the tense

mechanics of the recording process. Stritch's long, harrowing and eventually transcendent encounter with "The Ladies Who Lunch" is the high point of the video.

Almost as telling, if less overtly theatrical, is the Dean Jones reading of "Being Alive." A few weeks later, the tensions so apparent on his face in the video eventually drove him to leave the show.

"It was very difficult," Jones recalls. "There I was, going through a painful divorce, being on the phone with my two daughters every day trying to reassure them and going on stage at night to deal with the brittle, destructive relationships in the play. It finally got to the point where I just couldn't keep going over the same material at night that I was experiencing during the day. It was like enough already, and I guess you can see that in my eyes when I'm singing 'Being Alive.' "

Most of the cast members have held on to treasured versions dubbed from the syndication run or, in Jones' case, a scratchy, pirated release in a plain wrapper picked up somewhere in the South of France.

As Browning aptly puts it between takes of "You Could Drive a Person Crazy": "This is so definitive. It's the end-all and the be-all of this song. God! It could drive a person crazy!"

Newsday

A Legendary Documentary Of Yesterday's Broadway

By Jan Stuart. STAFF WRITER

January 1, 1993

NATHAN LANE got a rise out of the media circus at the "Guys and Dolls" recording session with a wisecrack directed at a camera crew filming the event for last month's Great Performances special. "I'm going to be the Elaine Stritch of this documentary," he quipped, and everybody in the large studio broke up.

This was one of those Broadway insider jokes that didn't need spelling out. Everyone present understood that Lane was making reference to the stunning climactic moment in D. A. Pennebaker's 1970 documentary of the original cast album recording session of Stephen Sondheim's "Company," the one in which Elaine Stritch goes over the edge after 14 exhausting hours in the recording studio. It was the stuff of a docu-director's dream - a no-holds-barred breakdown on camera! - and it crackled with as much high drama as the number Stritch was attempting to record, Stephen Sondheim's acid-tongued "The Ladies Who Lunch."

The unanimity of recognition for Lane's little throwaway was a tribute to the legendary status of a 53-minute film that few people, until recently, have actually seen. The Broadway babies fortunate enough to have caught a single local-TV airing back in 1970 would come to embroider the experience with a mythology usually reserved for memories of the WPA. For bootleg collectors, a pirated Pennebaker would gain as much cachet as a home-movie edition of Bette Midler at the Continental Baths.

Now that RCA Victor has seen fit to release "**Original Cast Album: Company**" on videocassette, the film doesn't quite reach the Olympian heights it scaled in the intervening years (what could?). It's still a bonanza for theater lovers and Sondheim mavens; indeed, now that the ho-hum "Guys and Dolls" documentary has come and gone, one could safely say that Pennebaker's 53 minutes is to a bygone epoch of musical comedy what Michael Wadleigh's three-hour epic "Woodstock" (released the same year) was to the flower-child generation of rock and roll.

Like the Wadleigh film, "**Original Cast Album: Company**" is as potent a time capsule of turn-of-the-decade style and attitude as it is an invaluable imprint of music in performance. The women go in for perky Peter Pan bobs or flowing Judy Collins tresses; pale makeup and long Liz Taylor eyelashes are de rigeur. The men sport bushy sideburns, wide neckties and turtleneck shirts - when they were first fashionable.

Most evocative, however, is how the hip-flip '70s urbanity of Sondheim's lyrics and George Furth's libretto is reflected in the offstage poses of everyone in attendance: The

pursed ennui of a boyish Stephen Sondheim as he describes his frustration at only being allowed to write just the lyrics to two of the greatest Broadway musicals of all time ("West Side Story" and "Gypsy"); Or the Top-Cat slick of producer/ director Harold Prince, looking like the ultimate mogul wannabe in sunglasses and sculpted beard. The studied animation of Elaine Stritch as she winks and mugs like crazy for the camera. There are a lot of cigarettes, and they dangle from between fingers at just the right angle of cancer-shmancer indifference and sophistication.

With its real-life sampler of the wry "Company" spirit, this selective cast-recording document is probably more bracing a souvenir of the original production than any Great Performances taping of the show itself could ever be. As is the case with all too many great musical scores, the book that keeps company with Sondheim's tunes dates badly. Sure, you can reproduce the tale of a 35-year-old Manhattan man who can't settle down as a period piece; you'd almost have to, what with all of its pre-AIDS promiscuity, casual dope smoking and dinner party promises about "going on the wagon." Does anyone still drink a vodka stinger?

In this instance, the tensions inherent in putting together an album are far more exotic than any of "Companys' " groovy-trendy marital vaudevilles about martial arts, divorce or (sigh) hangovers. Instead of, Will Bobby-baby ever find the right girl? we want to know if Pamela Meyers will ever learn how to pronounce "bubi" correctly. Will desperate bride-to-be Beth Howland have enough breath to sing " . . . Hudson with the other garbage"? Will tired-and-wired Elaine Stritch get through the definitive version of "The Ladies Who Lunch" before committing mass murder on everyone in the sound booth?

Then there are the tantalizing mysteries that linger after the orchestra calls it quits. As we peer deep into Dean Jones' mouth during a vocal obstacle course called "Being Alive," we wonder what really prompted the star to leave so soon into the run that the Tony Award nomination went to his successor, Larry Kert? What became of the riveting Pamela Meyers, whose trumpet-throated rendition of "Another Hundred People" blew away the rear mezzanine crowd? Beyond other achievements, Pennabaker's film is a haunting reminder of the sadly ephemeral nature of musical-comedy careers.

The real star of "**Original Cast Album: Company**" is the album's producer, Thomas K. Shepard, a fussy acrobat-cum-diplomat whose chief talent would seem to be walking on eggshells. Whether mollifying a volatile Stritch or suggesting dynamics changes to an anal-retentive Sondheim, Shepard demonstrates that the formula for a successful record producer requires two parts diplomacy for every one part caffeine. A successful music documentarian, as D. A. Pennabaker so vividly demonstrates, can occasionally stir up a television show as electrifying as great theater.

Stephen Sondheim, who'd written the words and music, was clearly nervous. The record producer, Thomas Z. Shepard, was downright rude. And as the cast of the landmark 1970 Broadway musical Company soldiered through a grueling, 18 1/2-hour recording session to get the show's tongue-twister songs down on tape for posterity, one performer--Elaine

Stritch--came apart at the seams.

In a mixed blessing for Stritch, documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker was there to capture the torturous marathon as a TV special. His warts-and-all feat of voyeurism, **Original Cast Album: Company!**, has been reissued by Docurama on DVD (\$ 29.95) and VHS (\$ 24.95)--and three decades after first airing it's still one of the most intimate portraits of theatrical creation ever caught on film.

For her part, Stritch still marvels at how Pennebaker snuck in under everybody's radar. "They told us it was for a college or something," says the 75-year-old stage veteran. "It was underplayed to such a great extent, and Pennebaker did that for a reason. He didn't want the subjects trying to look like Elizabeth Taylor."

Of course, Stritch invokes Taylor as a synonym for glamour and poise. But as the belter strains in *Cast Album* to nail the song "The Ladies Who Lunch," a blistering takedown of wealthy Manhattan wives, she comes off more like Taylor fumbling at the Golden Globes podium. She botches take after take, screaming her way through the lyrics, until she yells at her own playback, "Oh, shut up!" Then, in a follow-up session two days later, she nails it perfectly. It's an astonishing portrait of a performer triumphing over her own exhaustion and insecurity.

"I cost them an awful lot of trouble and money," Stritch says. "But through no fault of mine. My heart was in the right place. I wasn't misbehaving, I was trying to get it." Watching her finally do so makes for a deeply satisfying showstopper.

--Steve Daly