

Here We Are

Stephen Sondheim music, lyrics **David Ives** book

The Shed, New York 28 September 2023 – 21 January 2024

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Here they are, world: Sondheim's surreal swan song boasts a cast including David Hyde Pierce's bishop (far left) and Rachel Bay Jones's Marianne (far right, in blue)

There has always been an undercurrent of social justice and class warfare in the work of the late, great Stephen Sondheim, from *Sweeney Todd* to the anarchic antiheroes of *Assassins*. But his final musical, *Here We Are*, is a more explicit social satire based on the brutal surrealist takedown of Spanish director Luis Buñuel's classic films *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* and *The Exterminating Angel*.

A familiarity with the source material is helpful for theatregoers, as well as an appreciation for the irony of skewering the one per cent in a star-studded, lavishly produced show at the \$500 million Off Broadway venue The Shed. Act One roughly follows the fortunes of six members of the urban elite, led by a business titan (Bobby Cannavale, wonderfully crass in a velour sweatsuit) and his status-conscious wife, Marianne (Rachel Bay Jones); a plastic surgeon (Jeremy Shamos) and his Hollywood agent wife (Amber Gray); the lascivious ambassador to the fictional Moranda (ultra-smooth Steven Pasquale); and Marianne's sister, a would-be revolutionary with a trust fund (the golden-voiced Micaela Diamond) whose progressive convictions evaporate the moment she meets a man with a real sense of purpose.

The discreetly charming six-pack's quest is a modern one: brunch. But they are repeatedly thwarted from that goal in a succession of locales (strikingly designed by David Zinn, who also performs wonders with the costumes). Who would say no to these oligarchs? The chameleonic Denis O'Hare and Tracie Bennett magnificently embody a series of varying apologetic servants and gatekeepers. 'We do expect a little latte later, but

we haven't got a lot of latte now,' O'Hare sings to his disappointed patrons in a characteristically Sondheim turn of phrase.

It's a pleasure to hear the vamps, the syncopated rhythms of Sondheim's final new songs, with topical lyric shout-outs to 'infinity pools and Damien Hirsts' and the familiar juxtaposition of surface wit with the suggestion of deeper truths. The cast, which swells to include two military types (Francois Battiste

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and Jin Ha) as well as a discontented bishop (David Hyde Pierce), is faultless, fleshing out characters which might otherwise be dismissed as archetypes. The standout is Jones, who retains a sense of naivety and wonder even as she embraces worldly pleasures ('What's wrong with superficial?').

By Act Two, Zinn's spare white cube of a set has been taken over by an elaborate drawing room that would be at home in an Agatha Christie locked-room mystery. That's apt since the gang have finally gotten a meal, but are now trapped in this ornate room, bickering with each other and forced to turn a Ming vase into a toilet.

It's a clever notion to transfer the cast of *Discreet Charm* to the can't-escape room of *Exterminating Angel*, but it also makes it more difficult to follow through on that 1962 grisly proto-horror movie's plot. Can Sondheim and book writer David Ives

really kill off these monsters they've sketched so melodiously and endearingly? You can understand how Sondheim got stuck – and why he signed off on stripping much of Act Two of music altogether. The characters, too, are stuck – frustrated by circumstances and only fitfully able to communicate with each other. (Naturally, it is Marianne who sees a path forward, in a heartfelt philosophical conversation with Pierce's wistfully wry priest.)

A sense of abandonment hangs over *Here We Are*. There is no way to know what shape this show might have taken had Sondheim not died in 2021, but director Joe Mantello's first-rate production, with his incomparable cast, makes a strong case for the virtues of what remains. After all, Buñuel's surrealism resists any effort to be explained away. 'What does anything *mattreur*?' Bennett's French waitress asks at one point. 'It is what it is. Things are what they are.' In the end, we can be grateful for what Sondheim has left us.

Thom Geier

Production credits

Cast Francois Battiste, Tracie Bennett, Bobby Cannavale, Micaela Diamond, Amber Gray, Jin Ha, Rachel Bay Jones, Denis O'Hare, Steven Pasquale, David Hyde Pierce, Jeremy Shamos et al

Direction Joe Mantello

Choreography Sam Pinkleton

Music supervision Alexander Gemignani

Orchestrations Jonathan Tunick

Set, costumes David Zinn

Lighting Natasha Katz

Sound Tom Gibbons

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