Stephen Colbert: A 'Company' Man On Broadway

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This week on Fresh Air, we're marking the year's end by revisiting some of the most memorable conversations we've had in 2011. This interview was originally broadcast on June 14, 2011.

Stephen Colbert has run for president. He's testified before Congress, created a political action committee and assisted the U.S. Olympic speedskating team in the role of assistant sports psychologist. He has a spider named after him (the *Aptostichus stephencolberti*) as well as a Ben & Jerry's ice cream flavor (the Stephen Colbert's Americone Dream) and a NASA treadmill (the Combined Operational Load Bearing External Resistance Treadmill, or COLBERT).

And now, the political satirist and award-winning host of *The Colbert Report* can add a new line to his resume: Broadway star.

The comedian and television host recently grabbed a straw hat and cane and performed as Harry in the 2011 New York Philharmonic production of Stephen Sondheim's *Company*. The revival, which also starred Neil Patrick Harris, Patti LuPone, Christina Hendricks and Martha Plimpton, has been made into a film that plays this week in limited showings.

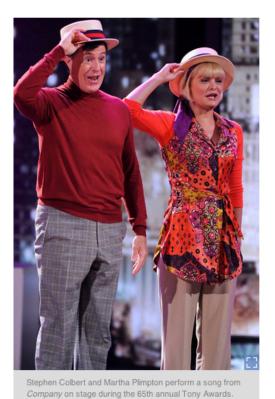
Colbert tells Fresh Air's Terry Gross that he didn't fake "a single smile" during the show's entire run. "It's what I imagined I would be doing when I went to theater school," he says. "It was such a bungee into an old dream to go do something like that."

Colbert, who attended the theater program at Northwestern University, says he's a huge musical theater fan and that it was always his intention to spend his life acting on the stage.

"I imagined myself living in New York in some sort of open, large but sparse studio apartment with a lot of blond wood and a futon on the floor and a bubbling samovar of tea in the background and a big beard — living alone but with my beard — and doing theater," he says. "That's what I thought my life would be. It has not been — and I love what I do — but to be asked to do this and then to accept the challenge of it. ... I can la-di-da my way through things ... but to sing Sondheim is a completely different beast."

Let Me Entertain You

It was Sondheim, in fact, who wanted Colbert to perform in *Company*. After appearing on Colbert's show, Sondheim invited Colbert to appear in the production. But Colbert's agent turned the role down, saying that there was absolutely no way Colbert could fit the limited engagement into his busy taping schedule. That's when Sondheim wrote Colbert a personal note.



Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images

Web Extra: Colbert's Training For His Hat And Cane Number

Stephen Colbert explains how he prepared for his tricky hat and cane dance number.



"[He said that] against his instincts, he had a good time on my show and would I consider playing Harry in *Company?*" he says. "And he ended the letter with the sentence 'You have a perfect voice for musical theater.' And I read it to my wife and she said, 'Boy, you have to do this. No one, let alone Stephen Sondheim is going to ask you to do Sondheim.' And I said, 'You're right, I have to do it.' "

Once he was cast, Colbert started taking voice lessons and gained a new respect, he says, for professional singers. "What I rediscovered was the therapeutic nature of singing lessons," he says. "They're like doing yoga but for [the] inside of your body. You open up and use muscles that you don't think of as malleable. ... You can turn your head into a bell. ... That's what we kept working on: resonance and projection and relaxation and just remembering or relearning how to breathe through a phrase. The technical aspects of it are fascinating to go through in the lessons. And then you have to forget all of it, and sing."

Because of the cast members' busy schedules, most of the rehearsals were conducted via the Internet. Colbert was given recordings of his harmonies and told to practice them alone. The cast got together infrequently to rehearse lines and choreography — and then performed live at Lincoln Center with the New York Philharmonic.

"On one level, it was impossible," he says, of the limited-run engagement. "In another way, it was the only way it could have gotten done — because you couldn't have gotten all of these people to commit to doing *Company*. ... I literally left rehearsal for *Company* [one night] and went and did "Friday" on Jimmy Fallon and then went back to *Company*. It was just a tremendous experience."

In The Company Of The Colbert Report

Colbert says he specifically chose not to mention his role in *Company* on his show *The Colbert Report* for two reasons. The first, he says, was to protect the production from any kind of "fake" endorsements.

"People could ascribe an insincerity to the things that I tout on the show," he explains. "And I didn't want to ascribe any insincerity to trying to go do this [musical] at Lincoln Center. Because I knew that I was dealing with somebody else's delicate product and I didn't want to invest it with my character's ego."

The second reason he chose not to mention *Company* on his TV show, says Colbert, is that he was worried that his performance wouldn't live up to his expectations.

"I had no idea if I wanted anyone to know I was doing it, because I knew how hard it was going to be," he says. "I was afraid I would suck. I don't mind failing so much, but I am a perfectionist. ... If you're a perfectionist and you know you're about to do something at which you cannot be perfect ... then that is daunting because you know what your heart is like and the way you approach your work. ... It was difficult to say 'Hold onto your socks America, I'm singing Sondheim.' "

After the production's run, Colbert sent a note to Sondheim, thanking him for getting him into "the most joyous trouble" he's ever been in.

"I tell a lot of young performers, 'Go get in trouble. Go commit yourself to something you're not sure you can do,' " he says. "And I followed my own advice. It was something I desperately wanted to do — not as a career — but an invitation I knew I couldn't refuse and yet had no sense of whether or not I could do it. And that is trouble — but it was all so joyful. I'm very grateful to Mr. Sondheim that he got me in such trouble."



The cast of *Company* includes Christina Hendricks, Martha Plimpton, Patti LuPone, Neil Patrick Harris, Jon Cryer, Craig Bierko and Stephen Colhert

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