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Ram's Head's 'Company' comes on strong

[Jen Beichman](#)

 April 15th, 2005 by Jen Beichman

The Ram's Head Spring Musical is no small thing on Stanford Campus. As a genre, musical theater faces the unenviable task of finding a stable balance between occasionally too-campy musical numbers and dialogue that inevitably seems like filler. Nothing can remove the tropes of musical theater — as a director, you can only embrace them and try to make them work. And “Company” does just that. It's well done musical theater through and through — the sopranos hit all the high notes (with no squeaks), the dance numbers and the movement are choreographed in such a way that they don't make it difficult to understand the lyrics and the pit orchestra is perfect.

The performances are all good, excellent voices and excellent acting, but Lisa Rowland really steals the show. First off, she has a great character to work with — the cynical serial wife Joanne. I found myself waiting for her to appear because she nailed her character every time she stepped onstage. All the other actors / characters are excellent as well, but mostly in pairs or as a group. The musical number with Bobby's three girlfriends, Cathy, April, and Marta, is better than any individual girlfriend by herself. In a musical all about relationships (a bit redundant, I know), the dynamics of the groups of characters often matters more than individual performances — and “Company” does well to draw its strength from those groupings.

The set design is excellent and the show is visually arresting. Perhaps more impressively, “Company” actually fills Memorial Auditorium, and the huge stage never looks bare. The set takes advantage of the stage's height with three more levels above the stage floor as well as a very real flight of stairs (everyone's favorite set piece). There's a frame in the back with a perspective skyline of New York City, and the frame acts as both box for tableaux and as the stage's backdrop. The clouds change from scene to scene and, through an excellent use of lighting, simulate shifts in time, mood and the season. The only slight weakness in the overall production design lies in its costume design. By trying to combine the 1970s setting of the play and the present, the designer ends up with women who look like they're pulled straight out of the '70s and men who look like they just walked in from the business school.

I have only one caveat for the prospective audience: “Company” is highly distilled musical theater. At times, it feels more like a revue of several sketches than a coherent show. It has a non-linear plot line that requires a lot of attention to put into a logical order. Really, it breaks down into scenes in full musical theater style (dialogue that mysteriously segues into song and dance), rather than a linear story.

If you're the type of person who occasionally puts up with the all the song and dance in order to enjoy the straightforward and farcical plots, “Company” is probably not for you. If you can enjoy a musical for its own sake, well, you've probably already seen the show. And if not, I bet I know where you're headed tonight. Either way, you'll be hard-pressed to find a better example of musical theater on campus.

Company, directed by Merritt Forrest Baer, is the Ram's Head Spring Musical. You can see it tonight, April

15, and tomorrow, April 16, at 8 p.m. in Memorial Auditorium. Tickets are available in White Plaza, at the door, and online at www.CompanyTheMusical.com



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In good 'Company'

[Emma Vaughn](#)

 April 8th, 2005 by Emma Vaughn

As the curtain closes at the end of Act I in this year's Ram's Head Theatrical Society's production of "Company," Director Merritt Baer tells the actors to take a five-minute break during their long rehearsal before they have to reassemble for Act II. There are only 14 performers in the production, an unusually small number for a spring musical, but their stage presence, combined with a uniquely majestic set, more than compensates for the lack of bodies.

"Things are going well tonight," said Baer, a sophomore and first-time musical director. "We've been in full dress rehearsal for almost two weeks so I think the show should be really strong by the first performance."

"Company," which opens tonight in Memorial Auditorium, marks a departure from many of the standard Ram's Head musicals. Unlike past productions such as "Kiss Me Kate" or "West Side Story," "Company" epitomizes the Broadway transition from the standard happily-ever-after plot line to the non-linear, concept piece.

"Theoretically, the concept we're developing is that the entire show is taking place in my head as I'm making a wish at my birthday party," said senior Chris Babson, who plays the lead character Bobby. "There are repeated birthday parties throughout, in order to tie this conceptual line of the metaphysical 'birthday' throughout the story. Everything that happens has happened at one point, but it's all going on in my head."

Originally written as a collection of one-act plays, the story was molded into a musical by director Harold Prince and Stephen Sondheim. When the show first appeared on Broadway in 1970, it stunned audiences and was awarded a record number of Tony Awards, including "Best Musical," "Best Music" and "Best Lyrics." The production closed in 1972 after 706 performances.

The story follows the life of 35-year-old bachelor, Bobby, as he grapples with the significance of intimacy and relationships through experiences he has had with 10 friends, who are all in relationships.

"He has five couples of married or soon-to-be married friends," said freshman Clea Alsip, who plays one of Bobby's past girlfriends. "They comment on his life throughout the play and serve as a kind of Greek chorus because they're always on stage."

While the story centers around Bobby's personal experience, it is also a commentary on the complexities of love and marriage and the sacrifices that are part of each.

"'Company' is probably the closest thing that you can get to 'Sex and the City, the musical'" said Baer. "It's very Manhattan, very edgy, very trendy and very chic. We play around a lot with the story, trying to

blend the atmospheres of both 2005 and 1970 so that people will relate to it more.”

The music in the show is famous for its distinctively non-stereotypical numbers. Unlike mainstream musicals with bright melodic ballads, Sondheim’s pieces are far more complex and intricate, Baer said.

“They are complex out of necessity,” he said. “It may be initially harder to work through for both the performers and audience, but it is much more fulfilling in the end.”

The emotional intensity present in Sondheim’s songs also adds a unique level to his work.

“What makes his songs the best is that you begin every single one of them with a complete sense of security in who you are and what your ideals are,” said Babson. “But by the end you’re completely lost and you don’t know where to go.”

The cast and crew have been in daily rehearsals since the beginning of winter quarter, including eight-hour-days during spring break.

“We started in January, rehearsing five nights a week for four hours,” said Babson. “Now we’re up to about six hours a day. But a lot of people, besides me, have more than two days a week when they don’t have to be there.”

For Babson, who hopes to pursue acting and music after he graduates this spring, it’s been a particularly rigorous process. With six songs and hundreds of lines, he leaves the stage for a total of only 10 minutes during the entire two-hour production.

Learning the songs and dances, however, was only one of the many tasks that the “Company” ensemble took on in the last few months. During spring break, the group spent the majority of time building the intricate set.

“We were going for minimalism on a grand scale,” said Baer. “It is intended to reflect the embodiment of New York City on a stage while keeping the distinction between reality and fantasy intact.”

One would assume that spending more than 30 hours a week with the same group of people might get slightly exhausting. The crew of this show, however, said they are already sad about their separation — even before the curtains have risen for opening night.

“It’s really awesome because everyone is so close to one another,” Alsip said. “The small cast makes people even closer. Initially we did a lot of cast bonding exercises like improv. and various activities that really brought us together, and it’s been really nice since.”

Some of the cast members attribute this amiability to the specific rehearsal methods that have been used.

“I’ve really enjoyed the way that Merritt has set it up,” said sophomore Kanyi Maqubela, who plays one of the husbands in the play. “He’s had each couple work together on their own for a lot of the time, and then he’s moved us into the whole group. It makes me feel like I’m first a part of my couple and then part of the whole ensemble.”

Baer contributed much of this cohesiveness and smoothness to the fact that there are so few characters in the production, which allows everyone to have a distinct place.

“Everyone has a role and everyone is important,” said Baer. “There’s no chorus, and everyone has their own song or at least their own verse in a song. It really makes it so that a lot of people can shine.”

Baer said he hopes that students will come away from the show with an understanding that not all musicals need a happy ending.

“In this musical it’s about losing something,” said Baer. “It’s about losing your way and realizing that you can feel the notion of ‘being Alive’ without having a happy ending.”



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