Robert Sondheim’s Company
Still a pacesetting musical

Company, at the Loeb Drama Center, 65 Brattle Street, Cambridge, March 6-11, tickets $5.50 and $4.50, call 864-2630 for information.

By Kathy Harris

Stephen Sondheim’s Company was an award-winning musical on Broadway, and rightly so. It has been described as a “landmark musical,” one of the few shows that enter the permanent lore of the theatre by “altering the scope of conventional dramatic possibilities.”

Harvard College, at the Loeb Drama Center, is now presenting a rare Boston-area production of Company which is quite good. Sondheim afficionado should make a point of seeing this much praised musical, and everyone else should try to see it simply because it is a well-performed, funny show.

Company’s plot concerns Robert, a 35-year old bachelor currently living in Manhattan who is constantly evaluating the risks of loving and commitment. Five married couples and three single girls provide him with a means by which to assess these risks.

All the married couples play a sort of show-and-tell in front of their favorite bachelor friend. Several of their problems are common, exposing the trivialities and boredom associated with marriage. Other problems are unusual and perhaps even symbolic: one wife wants to divorce the flail out of her husband while a Catholic girl (in a wedding dress with guests already at church) nervously chickens out about marrying the "handsome Jew" she’s been living with for four years.

The husbands half envy Robert and his freedom. Their wives picture him pining away in unrequited loneliness, but Robert does manage to seduce a beautiful, loquacious airline stewardess of vacant mind and easy virtue. The show’s ending is not a cop-out, but rather an often overlooked issue: Robert discovers that these footloose and fancy-free, casual liaisons are empty, leaving him feeling “less than alive.” He will abandon the company of friends to find a more fulfilling relationship with commitment. Attention is also paid to the plight of the young single girls who are also unable to be truly happy with a man who wants only freedom.

Company tells all of this with understating honesty and dooms of one-word and one-line laughs. When the stewardess sits to leave the bed after a discreet blackout, Robert tells her where she’s going, "Barcelona," she replies.

The structure of Company is not that of a conventional musical. It contains no chorus, and all roles — with the possible exception of Robert — carry equal weight: the singing and dancing mesh into one integrated composite of action.

Singing out one member of the cast would risk slighthing the others who were all very good and highly stylized in their individual roles. However, Jean Benedict nearly brought the house down with her solo, the neuritic patter song, "I’m Not Getting Married Today!"

The choreography was appropriate and the original number "Sidet by Side by Side," besides being well-executed, really showed Robert to be the only guy without a partner.

The only criticism concerning the show was that it was hard to hear the words in some of the songs, most notably "Another Hundred People," which contains lyrics as poignant and sensitive as some Paul Simon works. It describes New York as a "city of strangers," a lonely place for a single person.

All things considered, however, Company is definitely worth seeing. It’s a great show punctuated with wit and wisdom, and the Loeb production certainly does justice to this musical which should play on Broadway more often.

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