

# Theater

## Shakespeare/SC gambles with glitzy 'Company'

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GIVING Shakespeare some company has to rank as one of the biggest risks Shakespeare/Santa Cruz has taken in its short but exciting life.

After mounting several of the Bard's works in bold modern settings which emphasize how vital and contemporary they can be, the local festival has taken the next step this season by presenting Stephen Sondheim's "Company." Aside from some thematic points in common with the festival's "Much Ado About Nothing," it has nothing to do with Shakespeare. That's the novelty, and the risk.

The production arrives on the stage of the UCSC Performing Arts Theater glitzy and glossy in its chrome and glass-bricked set. The cast is solid, in some cases wonderful, and Mark Rucker's direction ingeniously transforms George Furth's book into a compendium of modern musical theater set pieces. Philip Collins' musical direction turns out to be the biggest delight of all, texturing Sondheim's score into a jagged but beautiful aural environment, setting the mood while carrying the play's theme in the nouveau urban neurotic lyrics.

The only problem is the play itself.

It is ironic that after making so many of Shakespeare's 400-year-old works seem so current, this one — which premiered on Broadway in 1970 — feels dated.

The subject under consideration is marriage, in all its ambivalent glory and confusion. Obviously, no one has come up with the key to unlock its troubling mysteries in the almost 20 years since this project was conceived. But between Woody Allen — who has covered lots of the same material and the same New York milieu — in a sharper, funnier way; and Phil Donahue, who has covered lots of the same material in a pseudo-psychological and seemingly never-ending way, the play doesn't come up with much we haven't seen too many times before.

Insights that might have once gotten gasps

of recognition between the laughs are fairly ho-hum, no matter what Rucker and his cast can do to jazz them up. One of "Company's" funniest scenes revolves around smoking marijuana; another hinges on a series of Woody Allenesque "Jew jokes." Who knows? "Company" might have been its origin — but still, the material doesn't exactly crackle with surprise.

The story revolves around Robert (Tim Bowman), the proverbial bachelor in a sea of couples. It's Robert's 35th birthday. His friends have gathered in his apartment for a surprise party.

Robert — or Bobby as he is called by everyone — has a problem. Or he thinks he does. He wants to get married. Or he thinks he does. His friends want him to get married, too — or at least they say they do. But it's a lot more complicated than that.

While supposedly searching for the right women for him, the wives in the group actually guard him possessively, passing the bitchiest of judgments whenever someone, like the airheaded stewardess April (Nancy Carlin) makes a serious bid for a ring. The men, in the meantime, may try to fix him up, but actually eat their hearts out over his freedom.

Of course for all their upscale Manhattan trappings, the members of the ensemble can't mount a single very convincing argument in favor of marriage, no matter how they spend the play trying. Sarah (Meg Savlov) and Harry (Brad Myers) are wound-up tight on diets and alcohol denial; they wind up locked in karate combat which goes from playful to death-defying, at least psychologically, as we watch.

Susan (Kathy Nitz) and Peter (Tom Graves) seem to be so perfect, you can see the divorce announcement coming a mile away. Jenny (Bridget Connors) is hilarious when she gets stoned, showing all those sides of herself she represses the rest of the time; hubby David (John Zerbe) has to resort to serious psychological tyranny to guarantee that she doesn't show them again.

Paul (Michael Wright) is a perfectly ador-



Tim Bowman and Nancy Carlin in "Company."

ing husband-to-be on his wedding morning. Unfortunately, his sweet have-a-good-day spirit is the problem for fiancée Amy (Lynne Rose), who decides, hilariously, that she just can't go through with it. And Joanne (Damara Reilly) delivers the cynical, and well-alcóhedoed play-by-play commentary on the whole marriage scene as her husband Larry (Peter Troxell) does the decadent dance of desire with a younger woman. And the band plays on.

April's competition for Bobby's tentative affections include Kathy (Jo Anne Bailey), who gives him his chance, but doesn't wait around; and Marta (Mara Fiinerty), a free-spirited philosopher who colorfully sees everything illustrating her basic view of New York as one big kooky circus.

The casting is excellent, and the characters bring engaging energy to their shades-of-gray portrayals. Strangely though, while Bowman does good work carrying the show, his character as written isn't all that easy to love. His

ambivalence about marriage hides a fairly unsympathetic passivity. Bobby doesn't seem strong enough, or even interested enough, to really make a go at what's required in a relationship.

Musically "Company" is exciting throughout. The songs are sophisticated, as opposed to humm-able, and aside from a few instances where the vocals have to compete with the orchestrations, they provide more insight than George Furth's book can.

"Company" does offer its share of fine moments, illustrating the "sorry-grateful" knot of marriage as well as the "Chorus Line"-inspired power inherent in the modern musical format. The production deserves its long spirited ovation — even if the cheers are more for the talents and efforts of those involved than for the impact of the experience in emotional terms.

"Company" continues in repertory at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays through Aug. 29. For tickets or further information call 429-4168.