

THEATER REVIEW

Outdated 'Company' brought to life by music, actors

By Joanne Engelhardt

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It's hard to imagine anyone but the multi-talented Andrew Ceglio having the chutzpa and ability to bring a musical as complex, demanding, outdated and somewhat tedious as "Company" to a stage as small as the one that Actors' Theatre uses at Center Stage in downtown Santa Cruz.

That's because "Company" is now almost 50 years old and its meager premise sounds a bit archaic in 2019. That's primarily due to George Furth's book because most of the music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim is first-rate — save for the tootie "BoBoBoBoBobby" chant that seems to be reprised several times during the show. It doesn't hold a candle to the rest of Sondheim's score.

And the storyline? So last century!

Bobby, a nice-looking 35-year-old man lives in New York City, has a good job and a friendship circle that consists of five married couples in various stages of marital bliss. They frequently have him over for dinner and give him a "surprise" birthday party. Then the guys join forces to sing him the song "Have I Got a Girl for You."

Besides Ceglio's sure direction, what elevates this production is the fine cast of actors who each have one or more of their 15 minutes of fame. Choreography is another highlight. It's simply incredible what excellent choreography can do to otherwise ineffectual scenes. Ceglio is credited with basic movement, while Ashley Rae Little choreographed all the dance numbers.



CONTRIBUTED — JANA MARCUS

From left, Bobby Marchessault, Michael Stark and Lori Rivera in the Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre presentation of Stephen Sondheim's "Company."

IF YOU GO

Produced by: Actors' Theatre

Where: Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Directed by: Andrew Ceglio
Closing when: Oct. 13

Tickets: Adults: \$32 general; \$29 seniors/students

Details: www.sccat.org

As Robert/BoBoBo/Bobby, Bobby Marchessault is a bit of an enigma. At times he seems surprisingly bland, then other times Marchessault has solid, strong reactions, especially when he's the center of attention of his married friends. His vocal range is impressive,

with his best numbers being "Someone is Waiting," "Marry Me a Little" and the company finale, "Being Alive."

Several of his lady friends are also stellar: Brittney Mignano as Marta, the lover of all things New York; Sarah Kauffman Michael as flighty, dimwitted (but sexy) flight attendant April; and Melissa Harrison as the commitment-phobic bride Amy whose rendition of (Not) "Getting Married Today" is a showstopper.

As the older wife Joanne who drinks a lot — as in, a LOT! — Lori Rivera comes so close to nailing that acidic cocktail of a song "The Ladies Who Lunch." Granted, it's not easy to

even attempt that number when everyone gets measured against the incomparable Elaine Stritch. Rivera has the throaty voice. She has the world-weary look of a woman who has seen it all. She just needs to dig a little deeper into the depths of that song because she's nearly there.

Several other actors deserve mention here, not least of whom are David Jackson as Harry and Anya Ismail as his wife, Sarah. It's fascinating to observe their sharp repertoire back-and-forth about Harry's drinking (or not drinking), her caustic little digs at him, all the while they both try to help Robert decide whether or not he'd be happier if he got married.

And that's before they decide to show Robert their karate moves and begin swinging and throwing blocks at each other!

There's literally no set for this production other than a series of plain wooden blocks which fill in as tables, chairs, and, in one scene, Robert's double bed. Actually, scenery really isn't necessary here because the audience can then focus on the acting, the dialogue, the music and songs.

Musical director Daniel Goldsmith plays piano and directs three other musicians (Cole Berry, David McGillicuddy and Travis Cruse) on drums, guitar and bass behind a gauzy black screen. Occasionally

the piano and drums are a bit too loud for a singer's voice, but most of the time the orchestra does a fine job with Sondheim's music.

Because the show is recast in present-day New York, Joyce Michaelson's costumes look as if some probably came from the actors' own wardrobes, although certainly a few (like Harrison's wedding gown and veil) likely are the costumer's choice.

Davis Banta's sound and Carina Swanberg's lighting are good additions to the show, as are Cheryl Wong's props.

Judging by the audience's reaction, one of the best numbers of the show is performed by three of the single ladies Robert dates: Marta, April and Kathy (a somewhat too-glum Lori Schulman). The trio practically back Robert into a corner as they surround him with the lighthearted "You Could Drive a Person Crazy."

A comic highlight is when Robert finally corrals April into his bed for some under-the-covers action. Shortly afterward, April jumps out of bed and immediately puts on her flight attendant outfit. "Where are you going?" he sings to her, and she responds musically "Barcelona."

Mignano gets her moment to shine with the song "Another Hundred People," and ends with the declaration that "...the pulse of the city is ME!"

The overall result is a production that combines some fine Sondheim songs, excellent pacing and movement, several knockout performances but with dialogue that is uneven at best. "Company" may be a tad slow-paced, but it can still be good "company" for an evening of theater.