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Company

Couples Therapy: MPC's Company momentarily has its moments.

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By Walter Ryce



"Isn't she a little bit, well, you know..." Bobby's friends sing about the rotating girlfriends he considers marrying, like Marta (above).

Dropped into a genre dominated by book musicals with traditional narratives and character development like *Hello, Dolly!* and *Cabaret* Stephen Sondheim/George Furth's *Company* pushed the Broadway musical along its evolutionary path when it debuted in 1970. With *Company*, the concept was the thing – not the story.

The jazzy, slightly dissonant opening song, "Company," sounds like voices calling through a dreamy slumber. And the main character, Bobby (Jared Hussey), is kind of in a dream. On the eve of his 35th birthday, as his friends – cosmopolitan New York couples all – stream in for his not-so-surprise birthday party, he reminisces on life, friends, relationships and women. The subsequent action takes place in the "theater" of his mind, in kaleidoscopic flashback vignettes.

His first visit – kind of a ghost of dinner parties past – is to the dieting and needling Sarah (Jennifer L. Newman) and the sober and irritated Harry (James Brady, with gusto). The couple nip at each other until it turns into a physical (and symbolic) wrestling match.

The next couple is David (Sean Boulware) and Jenny (Michelle Boulware – hey!), with whom Bobby shares a joint. It's a funny scene, with Michelle acting Jenny giddy and charming and Sean's David genuinely likable.

It jumps like that, from couple to couple, with inventive interludes wherein stage-hands reconfigure the big, agile set. The flashbacks also visit Bobby's three girlfriends: April (Tara Marie Lucido), a naïf-y flight attendant who thought Radio City was an actual city; Marta (Zenaida Nieves-Lee), a lusty Puerto Rican high on life in the Big Apple; and Kathy (Natalie Hall, crystalline voice), who belts an impressive "Another Hundred People."

Jared Hussey's starring role as Bobby is convivial enough, but a little flat, his face unexpressive, like a spectator bemused at all the commotion instead of at the center of it. Lucky for him, he's almost always surrounded by folks who have dived right into their characters.

Like Kristin Brownstone (Amy), a crisp, confident performer who radiated every time she stepped onstage. And Phyllis Davis (Joanne), who may have the best musical lines ("Neighbors you annoy together/ children you destroy together") and sings "Ladies Who Lunch" with boozy brashness.

There are moments of grown-up wit, as when Harry goads his dieting wife Sarah into an orgasm of food lust by saying "chili," "manicotti" and "sweet and sour shrimp." And there's lots of ambivalence, like the song "Sorry-Grateful," which teeters over the question of whether any of the men regret getting married.

But *Company* is chockful of hammy parts, too, as when the cast do a song-and-dance number that borrows Charlie Chaplin's wobble-walk, Groucho Marx's cigar wiggle, and *A Chorus Line* high kicks – they even break out shiny, gold top-hats. And the

songs about friendship and cocktail parties – not to mention all the doting on Bobby – gets a bit thick.

But with its innovative approach to “story,” mature analysis of the institution of marriage, complex union of overlapping sung and spoken parts (Brownstone merrily nails the tongue-twisting “Not Getting Married Today”), it opened a new frontier for Broadway’s “post-Golden Age.”

As a whole, *Company* is pretty civilized stuff next to the sexual daring of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, the references to AIDS and drug addiction in *Rent*, or even the cynicism of *Evita*. Its lasting legacy, though, is that the subsequent three were all pulled along in its wake.

COMPANY plays 7pm Thursday, 8pm Friday-Saturday, and 2pm Sunday on the Morgan Stock Stage at Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont St., Monterey. \$10-\$25. 646-4213, www.ticketguys.com.

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