

Company in college

Playing thirtysomethings at twentysomething

My first experience with *Company* was nine years ago in 1996, as a bright-eyed 11-year-old at Queens College. I was on a field trip with my performing arts camp in the Catskills, and honestly, I was bored. While the lavishly melodramatic Joanne was highly entertaining, for some strange reason I couldn't connect to the rest of the piece. Needless to say, *Company*'s complex and highly sophisticated dialogue and music probably goes a bit over the

head of even the brightest 11-year olds.

Nine years later, I found myself at the helm of Stanford University's production of the same brilliant Sondheim musical. Ram's Head Theatrical Society, Stanford's oldest and largest student theatre group, produces a full-scale Broadway musical each spring. After attempting *West Side Story*, *A*

Chorus Line, *Cabaret* and *Sweeney Todd* in previous years, Ram's Head chose *Company* for 2005. Even before being hired as director, I had seen four more productions of the show (a few on film at the Lincoln Center Performing Arts Library) and fallen captive to the sharp and crafty genius that is the *Company* score. When the script and score arrived, I quickly remembered George Furth's hilarious dialogue (which somehow hadn't faded with age) and was once again entranced by lyrics and music that have rarely been matched since their Broadway debut.

However, I was immediately struck by a serious obstacle — performing a musical in honor of its 35th anniversary with actors born more than a decade after its first Broadway bow. For a show that seemed exclusively about thirtysomethings coming to terms with middle age, I assumed *Company* would be a difficult sell to college students. But there is far more to this musical than one might glean from its surface. Drugs, alcohol, sex, homosexuality and relationships are themes to which almost any college student can relate. Looking at these issues more directly, I realized *Company* could be an ideal musical for a college.

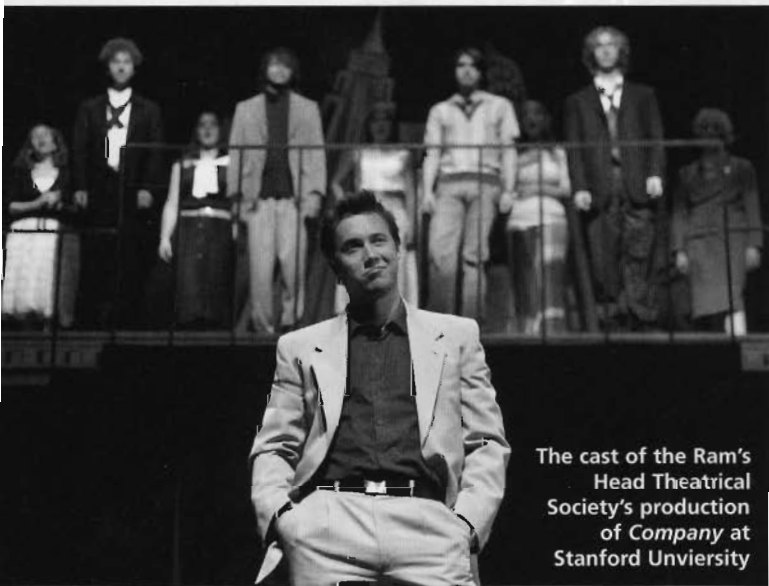
At its very heart, *Company* speaks to the

uncertainty of the future, a subject that fits squarely into the daily routine of most college students. Sondheim commented that *Company* was a break from the common musical that an audience attends, seeking escape. Since those seeing *Company* were mostly middle-upper-class New Yorkers, instead of helping them escape, it confronted them with a deeper look at themselves. Inherently, our production played a similar role for a very different generation. We would provide a mirror through which the audience would examine their own lives and relationships. While the original Broadway production played for audiences of my grandparents and their friends, our production would be aimed more specifically at my peers. I hoped they too would see the gem that once fascinated New York and changed the face of musical theatre forever.

As a landmark "concept musical," *Company* can be a challenging puzzle for even the most experienced director with the ideal cast. That said, this production marked my directorial debut. For our production, we decided to delve deeply into the premise of reality vs. fantasy, what is real for Bobby and what are simply thoughts floating in his head. After careful script analysis and a multitude of design meetings, we aimed to delineate, as clearly as possible, the difference between those two worlds.

We were then able to blur those lines when necessary for dramatic effect. We created two parallel playing spaces: the main stage, where all of the "real" scenes would take place, and a giant floating picture frame 10 feet above the stage, where Bobby's thoughts came to life. For instance, all of the birthday party scenes and apartment scenes took place on the mainstage, whereas all of the "Company" reprises as well as a few aesthetic tableaux were performed in the frame. Using serims and lighting effects, we were able to make characters appear and disappear within the frame. Our production explored the confrontation and friction between these two seemingly opposing worlds. To bring a New York metropolitan energy to our laid-back California campus, our set designer employed striking angles, monochromatic colors and structural railings to create a heightened level of urban chic rarely seen against the serene backdrop of Palo Alto.

To accurately portray the characters in *Company*, the cast and staff went through an intensive two-month rehearsal process, during which students with full course loads were asked to commit multiple nights to learning Sondheim's intricate music and creating relationships with one another that would color in the lives of five married couples. Given the academic rigors of Stanford, there were times when



The cast of the Ram's Head Theatrical Society's production of *Company* at Stanford University

PHOTO BY GREG KUHNEN

the production had to take a back seat to coursework. The all-student cast and staff also collaborated on building and rigging the set, constructing costumes and taking part in every aspect of the production. While none of us had ever been married, we were still able to investigate these roles with detail and intensity, often working extensively with scene partners to create sincere characters rather than simple caricatures.

The result? *Company*, little known to college students, was a huge success. With large crowds and standing ovations, students were able to connect enthusiastically to the musical that was written in and for another era. *The Stanford Daily* gave the production a glowing review, and some students claimed it was the best student production they had ever seen. Compliments aside, many students and community members found the production edgy and sophisticated; not preachy, but rather genuine and contemplative.

At the end of the day, *Company* is and will forever be a musical from 1970, and thus many had questioned whether our production would feel more like a museum piece and less like a modern-day musical. To those who wonder whether *Company* still has a place among today's musicals, I would answer with a defini-

tive "yes." Although certain references are a bit dated, and a physical fight between spouses might now be considered assault and battery, in the overall scheme of things life hasn't changed drastically since the show's Broadway debut. We face the same issues of uncertainty today, amplified by our society's pressure to succeed. Bobby's colorful married friends and varied girlfriends might be a page out of history, but I'm pretty sure I've seen a few Martas in the West Village, and I know a few neurotics who would give Amy a run for her money. In today's Broadway landscape, dominated by larger-than-life characters and ever-inflating production values, *Company* comes as a welcome relief — an intriguing production that makes the audience participate by thinking and questioning rather than being submissively entertained. While Broadway seems to be awash in jukebox musicals, many people long for shows that can touch and inspire audiences as *Company* did in 1970.

College campuses might be the perfect place to do just that. [TSR]

MERRITT FORREST BAER, a junior at Stanford University, is a double major in drama and economics. He hopes to explore both fields in the future.