

Company • January 2004 • Parkshot

REVIEW

"Two's company and three's a crowd" could be the byword of Bobby, the central character in Stephen Sondheim's 1971 musical Company. It is not an easy show to carry off, but the BROS Theatre Company's production matched the sleek sophistication of its set, updated to present day Manhattan, with designer stubble revival and plasma television.

Company is essentially an essay on marriage. We see a portrait of Bobby through the eyes of his married friends. The men envy his freedom, but the women want him to find a wife ... or do they ? The plot, if there is one, takes Bobby through a series of sanitised ménages-à-trois ... and so we meet five couples, played by a versatile and accomplished cast.

Here's a sample : Clare Henderson Roe's Sarah tried out her karate skills with bone-crunching athleticism on her husband, yet still had the energy to sing beautifully. Susan's Deep South accent was sung as smooth as soft-shelled gumbo by Alison Birtle, as she discovered the best part of her marriage : the divorce. Chris Storer's powerful voice conveyed all the mellowness of Paul, jilted at his wedding. Angela Sturgeon managed the difficult task of portraying sympathetically the razor-tongued Joanne : her "Ladies who Lunch" had verve and energy.

With friends like these, Bobby had difficulty making a lasting commitment, but it wasn't an easy choice. Karen Swift's Marta was kooky and kool, a real gem, and April, the airhead air-stewardess, bedded but not wedded, was attractively played by Lucy Clement.

Andy Clarke was convincing in the role of bewildered Bobby, believing that "a person's not complete until he's married". Andy is clearly a good actor and singer, but coping with the New York accent added a slight harshness to an otherwise good voice. Many of the actors found the accents difficult to sustain, but this did not distract from their adept and balanced performance.

Sondheim's distorted harmonies and vamped style make interesting listening, but difficult singing, but the balanced cast tackled even the most difficult numbers with apparent ease. Musical director, Oliver Jackson, brought the richness of an orchestral score to his talented quartet of musicians.

The small space at Parkshot was effectively used, suiting the intimacy of the piece, without losing the big-show feel. The smart symmetrical set spoke modern minimalism. Caroline Smith's choreography within the tight stage was a delight, achieved by an equilibrium and economy of movement.

The lighting was ambitious and included chases and projection sequences. Lighting designer, Ed Pagett, and his crew worked very hard to obtain a pleasing result, slightly marred by shadowing. I was uncertain about the use of the plasma screen, which somewhat distracted the main action, but it generally worked well, setting the scene but also providing a series of witty comments.

Director, Paul Kirkbright, has drawn together an enjoyable show, with crafted characterisation and a well-directed cast who brought out the comedy and wit inherent in the story.

Mark Aspen
Richmond & Twickenham Times

REVIEW

This is one of the more accessible Sondheim pieces depicting the interaction between a New York bachelor and his various married friends. The show is extremely well written with an interesting structure and good songs. The company performed to a very high standard and delivered a show to be proud of. It was one of the best evenings entertainment that I have had.

The challenges of this piece are to convey the variety of characters and to deliver the complex songs. The story revolves around 'Bobby' the quintessential NY bachelor who enjoys the company of various girlfriends and married couples; none of who give him clear endorsement or encouragement to choose marriage.

The acting space was laid out as upscale minimalist living room with a single large sofa. The space was additionally dressed with a classy looking flat screen TV and some black and white photos mounted on one of the walls. The space felt very clean and gave the performers and uncluttered area that with some well considered lighting gave a great deal of versatility.

Paul Kirkbright director brought out the humour of the show, developed the characterisations with nice expressions and gestures. The pace of the show was excellent and the cast maintained characterisation complete with accents throughout. The use of the acting space was very good with the action being varied throughout the area. Caroline Smith the choreographer delivered some tight work that was appropriate, watchable and clearly well drilled Oliver Jackson as MD oversaw a 4-piece band, which was very musical and unobtrusive. The singing was to a very high standard.

The principals were all well cast and all performed to a high standard in the telling of the story. I do not think that there was a weak performance from anyone. 'Bobby' the main part, was played to the full by Andy Clarke who was handsome, funny and sang well. The three girlfriends who all turn out to be unsuitable for one reason or another were all interesting and very different: 'April' was the dull air hostess played superbly by Lucy Clement. Her timing and facial expressions were excellent. 'Marta' was the kind of crazy New York 'broad' that is both engaging and infuriating. Karen Swift gave a great portrayal of her quirky character. 'Kathy' was the girl that 'Bobby' could easily have married if either he or 'Kathy' had got their timing right but they didn't, typical of Sondheim's realism, so 'Kathy' goes off to marry someone else. This role was ably played by Rachel Moorhead. The couples all seem to conspire to show 'Bobby' that marriage is a bad thing. 'Joanne' played by Angela Sturgeon and 'Larry' played by Jim Simpson were the older more sophisticated couple with Joanne being the type of rich lady who lunches yet looks razor sharp and seeks to corrupt 'Bobby' in a number of ways. 'Sarah' played by Clare Henderson Roe and 'Harry' played by Martin Wilcox were a combative pair each with their own fad and each correcting the other over matters of fact. They were excellent; their fighting was very amusing. 'Jenny' played by Sarah Perkins and 'David' David Brown were the couple that wanted to be trendy except that 'Jenny'

was not as committed to the trendlines as she pretended. 'Susan' played by Alison Birtle and 'Peter' played by Anthony Chalmers were a complex couple who on the surface were genuinely happy to be both divorced and living together which was compounded by 'Peter's' homosexuality. 'Amy' played by Aimee Barnett and 'Paul' played by Chris Storer were a Catholic / Jewish couple about to get married seemingly against 'Amy's' better judgement.

The technical aspects of the show were excellent. The props were entirely in keeping with the piece and supported the story. The costumes were entirely convincing and appropriately varied. The lighting was subtle and added to the piece. Stage Management was unobtrusive and the various transitions were seamless. The Front of House team were most welcoming. This was an excellent show that was well presented reflecting the hard work of the whole company and the production team.

I am sorry to say that this is the first show that I have seen of the company (I was asked to stand in for Stephen Macvicar who was otherwise engaged as Lazar Wolf in Fiddler on the Roof) and I look forward to seeing one of your shows again.

John Huckle
NODA
