

THEATER

Stagecrafters offers evening of good 'Company'

Stagecrafters presents "Company," a musical comedy by Stephen Sondheim, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, Feb. 13 and 14, Feb. 20 and 21, and 2 p.m. Sundays, Feb. 15 and Feb. 22 at the Baldwin Theatre, 415 S. Lafayette in Royal Oak. Tickets are \$12-\$14 and are available by calling (248) 541-6430.

BY JON KATZ
SPECIAL WRITER

"Company," the very mention of its name sends shivers through the Stephen Sondheim lover and shudders through the Sondheim hater. The version currently running at Stagecrafters' Baldwin Theatre gave us the "shudders" ... mixed emotions.

"Company," with music and lyrics by Sondheim and book by George Furth, was a breakthrough in 1970 for both Sondheim and American musical theater.

A show with no plot and characters you wouldn't want to be seen in a stadium with, much less at a birthday party, it ushered in Sondheim's "sophisticated period." He followed it with "Follies," "A Little Night Music" and "Sweeney Todd."

Bobby (Dean Gaboury) is a 35-year-old New Yorker whose dysfunctional friends — five married

couples — want him to get married so he can be as "sorry-grateful" as they are. "A person's not complete until they're married," says one. "It's not like I'm avoiding marriage; it's avoiding me," protests Bobby, trying to convince himself as much as his hosts.

Each couple is seen with Bobby in a vignette that could be in the present or the past. Harry and Sarah (Kevin Edwards/Laurie Freedman) stage a funny karate demonstration. Peter and Susan (John M. Miller/Jennifer Combs) reveal their unorthodox state of matrimony. David and Jenny (Doug Clark/Judy Clubb) get stoned. Paul and Amy (Michael P. Falson/Megan Meade-Higgins) have pre-wedding jitters. And Larry and Joanne (Rick Bodick/Dianne Sievers), the older couple, provide an unsteady foundation for these "good and crazy people."

Bobby also has three girlfriends, and he's welcome to them. April, the ditzy stewardess (Dana Lynn Applebaum) needs three tries to button her blouse evenly. Kathy (Megan McNally) escapes to married life in New England. And then there's Marta (Anne Conlon), whose explanation of how living in New York

can affect one's anatomy you won't find in the tour guide-books.

"Company" is an adult musical comedy, and the opening-night audience was hip to both the subtle humor from author George Furth and the touches deftly added by director David McIntosh. The two ensemble numbers — "Company" and "Side By Side By Side" — were outstanding, with great flair and energy as choreographed by Jerry Haines with vocal direction by Kim Marlinga.

In contrast, the girlfriends' "You Could Drive a Person Crazy" was danced well, but a poor vocal blend by the trio and the sound mixer undid the effect. Low volume was a problem throughout the show. The actors relied too much on their body mics, substituting amplification for projection. Singers were often drowned out at the end by the orchestra. The fortunate exception was Amy's showstopper, "Getting Married Today." The song is vocalist's nightmare that works only when every breath is taken right and every syllable is heard clearly, but Megan Meade-Higgins nailed it perfectly.

Notable, too, was Dianne Sievers as Manhattanite Joanne, for

whom Chicago is "over there somewhere." Her "stupidified" delivery of "The Ladies Who Lunch," though lost at what should be a big finish (see previous paragraph), showed a great grasp of both her character and how to play her.

That's more than can be said for Gaboury, who confuses compassion with commitment. Bobby is afraid of the latter. Gaboury is afraid to show us the former. He portrays Bobby as an unemotional observer; Bobby is neither. Bobby cares deeply for his friends; they are his "ports in a storm, comfy and cozy." In the climactic "Being Alive," Bobby is supposed to tear open his chest to us ("Somebody hold me too close; somebody hurt me too deep..."). Spreading his arms at the end of the song isn't the same thing.

Purists will note that Stagecrafters is presenting the 1995 revival version. The "Tick Tock" dance has been cut; "Marry Me A Little" has been resurrected (with a much better presentation by Gaboury); and a scene with apparently bisexual Peter has been extended, which caused some people to appreciate his political correctness while others seemed plainly uncomfortable.



On stage: Robert, played by Dean Gaboury of Bloomfield Hills, is surrounded by the women in his life (clockwise from left): Dana Lynn Applebaum of West Bloomfield as April, Anne Conlon as Marta and Megan McNally as Kathy in the Stagecrafters presentation of "Company."

Farmington Players presents fine version of 'The Heiress'

Farmington Players presents "The Heiress," a drama by Ruth and Augustus Goetz, 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, Feb. 13 and 14, 20 and 21, Feb. 27 and 28, 8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 26, and 2 p.m. Sundays, Feb. 15, and 22 at the Farmington Players, 32332 W. 12 Mile in Farmington Hills. Tickets are \$8 and are available from the box office, (248) 553-2555.

BY BOB WEISZEL
SPECIAL WRITER

The Farmington Players' splendid production of "The Heiress" illustrates how much we need to be loved and respect-

ed for who we are — not for fame, position or money — or even what others may expect of us.

The setting is the elegant parlor of Dr. Sloper's home on Washington Square, New York in the 1850s. A rich, but somehow sterile environment is achieved with pleated muslin walls — most unusual and very effective.

The beautiful costumes and fine furnishings provided decorous accents of a moneyed family.

Suzanne Rogers gives a luminous performance as a young lady, Catherine Sloper, who seemingly has it all — except

what she needs most: unconditional love from the two most important men in her life, her father and her husband. Her transformation from a shy, naive young lady into a revengeful woman is extraordinary.

The people around her use and abuse her in cruel, manipulative ways. Hank Benet gives a commanding performance as her dominating father (Dr. Sloper). He constantly reminds Catherine that she has none of the beauty, wit and charm of her deceased mother. Totally intimidated by her father, Catherine lacks social graces, especially in

the presence of men.

She is easy prey for one Morris Townsend, when he comes courting one day, invading her with compliments. Craig Forhan, as Townsend, is a bit one dimensional in creating the formal upper class style and language of the 1850s. However, he perfectly creates doubt as to whether he is a mercenary out to get her money, or is the unlucky victim of circumstance.

Her father suspects the former. So, Morris and Catherine plan to elope. At the appointed hour Morris fails to show up (after learning Catherine will not

receive her full inheritance until the father dies.)

Devastated, Catherine somehow survives — as a hardened woman. As her father faces death, he asks Catherine how she can be so cruel. Her answer: "I learned from a master." And at long last, when Morris comes courting again, Catherine leads him into a trap and extracts a most appropriate act of vengeance.

Marge Wetzel is delightful as Lavinia Penniman, a jolly aunt who accepts Catherine as she is. Kathleen Monticello is effective as the fixer-upper (Eliza-

both Townsend), who arranges the meeting between the young couple.

Ellen Atkins is terrific as Morris' sister, Mrs. Montgomery, who stands up to the conniving bombasts of Dr. Sloper. Kathleen, Teres, Toby Booker and Janet Giniis give solid performances in supporting roles.

Director Emily McSweeney has effectively staged, in style and substance, Ruth and Augustus Goetz's classic drama, which was first performed on Broadway in 1947. Olivia deHavilland won her second Oscar in the movie version of 1949.

JET's 'Taking Sides' weighs conflict of art and politics

Jewish Ensemble Theatre presents "Taking Sides" by Ronald Harwood, through Sunday, March 8. Opening night is 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 15. Performances 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays; 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. One additional show 2 p.m. Wednesday, March 4. Tickets range from \$13-\$23, student, senior and group discounts available. There will be a talk back for "Taking Sides" after the 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 18 performance led by Dr. Charles Calmer, the new artistic administrator of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Call (248) 788-2900.

BY KEELY WYGINIK
STAFF WRITER

Can you separate politics from art? Do you believe "music especially transcends language and national barriers and speaks directly to the human spirit?"

These are the questions playwright Ronald Harwood explores in "Taking Sides," a docudrama about Wilhelm Furtwangler, chief conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic during the Third Reich.

After the war, Furtwangler is accused by an American tribunal of serving the Nazi regime.

Among the issues "Taking Sides," explores are: Did the great conductor give aid and comfort to Hitler by continuing to work there during the war?

Or, did he, as he claims, stay to "defend the intellectual life of my people against an evil ideology?" The play is fictional, but based on historical facts. John Michael Manfredi portrays Major Steven Arnold, who has already decided that Furtwangler is guilty before questioning him. Arnold just has to prove it.

"As an artist, I agree that art can raise you above politics, but as Arnold I don't," said Manfredi. "It's up to the audience to make a choice where they stand. What would you have done in those circumstances?"

As the drama unfolds, the audience learns that Furtwangler, who is German, helped Jews

escape, but they were talented musicians.

In his defense, he argues, "They came to power in January '33. In April, I wrote an open letter to the newspapers condemning what they were doing to music, making these distinctions between Jews and non-Jews. For my part, the only divide in art is between good and bad. Great artists are rare, I said, and no country can do without them unless it wishes to damage its cultural life irrevocably ... I have a definition: Whoever held the view that art and politics should have nothing to do with each other."

Although he tried to separate himself from what was going on, Furtwangler continued enjoying benefits.

Arnold says, "Art and politics, yeah, art and politics. Are you saying that touring abroad, conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in foreign lands from 1933 on wasn't a commercial for Adolf and all he stood for?"

"It is a very entertaining piece of theater," said Manfredi. "The juxtaposition between the two men is witty, but a lot of the humor is at someone else's expense."

The other characters in "Taking Sides," Manfredi said, are interesting as well. "I think people will identify with them," he said.

Robert Grossman portrays Furtwangler. Betsy Brandt is Emmi Straub, who works in the office. Charles W. McGraw is Helmut Rode, a German musician who is questioned. Rode wasn't skilled enough to be in the orchestra on his own merits, he got in only because of the Jews who were forced to leave.

David Wolber is Lieutenant Wills, a Jew who fled to America, and lost his family in the Holocaust. He appreciates Furtwangler's talent, and respects him as an artist. Joanna Hastings Woodcock is Tamara Sachs, a woman who defends Furtwangler because he helped her husband, Walter Sachs, a promising young Jewish pianist, escape.

"What would you do if you

were given a chance to become a great player in a world-class orchestra even if it was at someone else's expense," asks Manfredi. "What if you knew the only reason you got there was because the people that were there are dead?"

Fearing an arrest by the Gestapo, Furtwangler fled Germany shortly before the war ended.

"This is much more a world issue," said Evelyn Orbach, director and artistic director of the Jewish Ensemble Theatre. "What is your responsibility in your society?"

In the play, Furtwangler argues that the only real legacy we leave is our culture, but "what is the true culture if it is isolated from society," said Orbach.

The major says, "so you saved a few lives, but what about the millions that were killed? Furtwangler was the star of stars, he was among the very tiny elite of conductors."

As a director, Orbach said her task is to try to create an atmosphere where the audience can hear both Major Arnold and Furtwangler.

"The man was sincere," she said. "He did help people, and honestly felt that he was protecting the German culture that he valued from the Nazis. But when they were ready to arrest him, which probably meant death, he fled."

For Orbach, "Art is about asking questions. Let's hear all the arguments," she said. "He loved his music, but Major Arnold who witnessed the liberation of the camps doesn't know anything about his music. It's a complicated but fascinating story."

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