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Desel finally takes Sondheim musical to Chemeketa

Staff

The concept show 'Company' focuses on relationships

'Company'

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and May 19-21, with a 2 p.m. May 21 matinee

Where: Building 6 Auditorium, Chemeketa Community College, 4000 Lancaster Drive, Salem

Cost: \$14 and \$10

Call: (503) 399-5131

BY RON COWAN

Statesman Journal

Something has been stewing in Ted Desel's mind for the last year, and this spring, on the eve of his retirement, he is making it come true.

Chemeketa Community College's Theater Department will present the musical "Company," with book by George Furth and music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, opening Thursday in the Building 6 Auditorium on the Salem campus.

"We've all wanted to do it," Desel said. "We've looked at it carefully for three years.

"I've been listening to this score for four years," said Terry Rohse, who will not only be behind the scenes as set designer and technical director but also part of the cast, playing the character David.

In spite of some recent setbacks, including illness and injury in the cast, Desel is still up on the challenges of the ambitious show.

"I am still pretty enthusiastic about the cast and the piece itself," he said.

Set in New York, "Company" follows five married, once-married or soon-to-be-married couples and their mutual friend, Robert (Doug Moxley), a 35-year-old bachelor, who has been unable to connect in a long-term relationship.

"They created this thing called a concept musical," Desel said.

"It's not a linear story at all."

There is a birthday party for Robert, but most of what we see takes place in Robert's mind, as he looks at the relationships of his friends.

The relationships are presented in a series of vignettes, so that we see the less than ideal aspects of commitment.

The men generally envy Robert, seeing him as free of encumbrances and able to date several women, and the women just enjoy being around him as a friend.

The question at the end is whether Robert decides to continue as he is, or will he take the step to commitment?

Desel compares the show to another hit, "A Chorus Line," which is more about characters than events.

"Company" won six Tony Awards and was considered ground-breaking, even revolutionary, when it opened in 1970.

It was considered a bold, unconventional exploration of love and commitment in a complex modern world. "Company" is as well a show about a place, New York, with its people, neuroses and particular lifestyles.

The songs include "You Could Drive a Girl Crazy," "Getting Married Today," "The Ladies Who Lunch" and "Being Alive."

Sondheim's musicals, such as "Into the Woods" and "Sweeney Todd," are known for their acerbic edge.

"We're trying to find the warmer side of the show," Desel said.

Attitudes have changed since the show premiered in 1970.

"We think differently about some issues," he said.

Sondheim is considered one of the most important figures in American musical theater.

Growing up, one of his closest friends was Jamie Hammerstein, son of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein, who would become a surrogate father and mentor to the young Sondheim.

He worked as a co-lyricist with Leonard Bernstein on the musical "West Side Story" and was only 27 when the show debuted on Broadway.

Sondheim finally would get his chance to compose a musical four years later when he penned the hit "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" in 1962.

His next hit was "Company," which ran on Broadway for 690 performances, was produced by Hal Prince and began Sondheim's reign on Broadway.

Other musicals by Sondheim include "Follies," "Assassins" and "Sunday in the Park with George."

Sondheim is the recipient of seven Tony Awards, an Oscar and a Pulitzer Prize.

Chemeketa's production of "Company" will be set in period.

Rohse's platform-style set will feature two moving platforms for different settings, as well as a bed that rolls out.

The background will be a conceptual view of a New York skyline.

Although he is better known for his backstage role, Rohse has acted and feels comfortable singing and dancing.

"I'm part of the ensemble," he said. "I get stoned in my part.

"It's kind of a scary part."

The ensemble includes Sarah Sharp as April, Joe Dustin as Peter, Mike Balyo as Larry, Emily Eikleberry as Amy, Jacob Mainord as Paul, Grace Swanson as Sarah, Shannon Paris as Susan, Haley Shell as Jenny, Monique Skorniak as Kathy, Terri Swanson as Joanne, Todd Swanson as Harry and Ara Andrea as Marta.

The choreography is Dee Montgomery-Smith, costumes are by Mary Kate Lindbeck and Ray Elliott is music director, accompanied by John Radosta.

rcowan@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6728

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