



The Wicked Stage

By Rob Kendt

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The first graduating class of UCLA's Ray Bolger Music Theater Program is currently knocking Sondheim's *Company* out of the park, in a fabulous, all-stops-out production directed by alumni John Rubinstein. In the years since Bolger's family endowed this conservatory-style program within UCLA's ecumenical School of Theater, Film, and Television, the program has attracted such talents as Nancy Dussault, Nick Gunn, and Karen Morrow, as well as Gary Gardner, who teaches the history of musical theatre. "We are training students in the showmanship of singing, the acting of the lyric," said Gardner. "Bolger believed that the actor comes first. This is not a song-and-dance program; we want to send out a working actor who is able to do anything."

On the evidence of *Company*, they're doing the job: The lead, Grant Tyler, is among the most convincingly uncertain Bobbys I've seen, and the show's Joanne—the wizened boozehound who belts out "The Ladies Who Lunch"—is played and sung to a fare-thee-well by Leah Sprecher, a real find. At last week's opening, which offered a short tribute to Bolger and speeches from acting program head Mel Shapiro and UCLA Chancellor Albert Carnesale, it was disconcerting at first to see barely-twentysomethings performing Sondheim's songs of urbane, jaded marital regret, and enacting George Furth's witty but very 1970s take on relationships; ultimately I found the young performers' imaginative leap into material beyond their years quite moving. *Company* runs through June 8 at UCLA's MacGowan Hall Little Theater.