

Filichia Features: That Ol' Reliable WEST SIDE STORY

By Peter Filichia

The New Jersey Youth Theatre proved last month, there's still quite a bit of life in the 56-year-old war horse known as WEST SIDE STORY. When the lines and lyrics unfold in performance, as when Arthur Laurents, Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim first opened the show in 1957, the story remains as timeless as ROMEO AND JULIET. New Jersey Youth Theatre's accomplished production was dynamic right from the start.

First and foremost, WEST SIDE STORY is judged by its dancing. NJYT choreographer Sherry Alban wisely took a page out of fellow choreographer Jerome Robbins' book – or, perhaps to be more accurate, took a clip of film from the 1961 Oscar-winning movie. Having the young men walk first, then walk a little faster, feel the rhythm of the music, then gracefully put out arms and then legs and e-a-s-e their way from walking into dancing, that is exactly what the New Jersey Youth Theatre dancers did – and the musical was off and running – and dancing.

As for the founders of the Jets, Tony and Riff, although we put the former in the emeritus category, Tony has simply lost interest in gang warfare, is intent on making an honest living and, as it turns out, is open to falling in love. Here, New Jersey Youth Theatre's Alex Corson had the requisite toughness, and yet there was genuine tenderness and excitement in the look on his face when he first spotted Maria. And while Corson has a g-l-o-r-i-o-u-s voice, his joy made his holding the long note in the middle of "Maria" even more right for the character. If Corson had been around to do the 1961 film, they wouldn't have had to bring in a singer to dub him.

As Maria, Angelica Staikos was marvelous in the scene in the dress shop where she and Tony get as close to a wedding as they'll ever get. She made her "Only death can part us now" have an extra resonance.

"The Dance at the Gym" is one of the show's biggest challenges, but director Cynthia Meryl knew that choreography alone does not a scene make. Her direction made each of her performers effectively display attitude. Especially effective were Julia Silva as Anita and Taylor Feldman as Graziella – because these are respectively Bernardo and Riff's women – and they feel as if they're royalty to have been chosen by the most important members of the Jets and Sharks. Yes, we know that these "kingdoms" that these gangs have are meaningless and that whatever illusions they have will soon come tumbling down. But we see this youthful cockiness and presumed invulnerability from these girls as well as everyone else.

Isn't it interesting that the Jets hate the Sharks, yet they love to do the mambo, a decidedly Latin-American dance? But who doesn't feel like dancing to Bernstein's music? His score, even after five-plus decades, still feels fresh and not the least bit dated.

Lawrence Dandridge, who played Bernardo, perfectly expressed surprise, shock and fear after accidentally killing Riff; and Tony killing him out of hot-headed love for his friend simply drove the perfect dramatic irony. As the second act begins, the audience knows that Bernardo is dead, but Maria does not; her singing the score's most joyous song -- "I Feel Pretty" -- only makes us feel worse for her; and we know that her life is now on a trajectory towards complete tragedy. To be sure, after Tony's murder, we sympathize with Maria, but we suspect that one day she will put this behind her and love again.

New Jersey Youth Theatre's WEST SIDE STORY points out to all its participants, and to all parents and others attending the show, that going with gangs resulted in three murders and one wasted life. Parents should be reminded that they're lucky to have kids whose "gang" is the cast of a musical.

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