

DAILY REPUBLIC

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"West Side Story' a fitting tale for any age

By Michael T. Moseley
Daily Republic CORRESPONDENT

FAIRFIELD - New York has spawned some great rivalries - the Jets and the Giants, the Mets and the Yankees, Hillary and Guiliani - but of all the great rivalries in New York history, the one that stands out in the minds of theatergoers everywhere is the Sharks and the Jets. It's a story as old as time, a boy-meets-girl tale of love and loss. That's "West Side Story." The Solano College Theatre production of the Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim creation is one of the most action-packed shows you will see all year.

Directed by the sharp-witted Ken Sonkin, SCT's "West Side Story" is nonstop singing, dancing and acting, leaving the audience, as well as the actors, gasping for breath. It's heavy stuff. It was a depiction of reality in the 1950s and it is still a picture of reality today. Ask anyone to explain the musical and you will most likely hear that is an updated version of "Romeo and Juliet," but that's only part of it. The other part is a mixture of street violence, peer pressure, first love, disregard for authority, prejudice and finally finding out what life is really all about. The same things we all grew up with. It's something we can all relate to, something we can all grasp as a part of our lives.

From lights up to lights out, Sonkin's production uses every inch of stage space that can possibly be accessed. The maze of ladders, stairs, platforms, entrances and exits astounds the senses. Actors and actresses criss-cross and cross again, displaying a dizzying array of dance styles - from ballet to tap. The talent of the dancers is a definite plus in the telling of this classic tale. Standing out among the dancers is David Tarap as Snowboy and Mindi Dornaus as Anita. The fine lines and definition of their movements simply draw your attention as they spin and kick their way through the dance routines.

Though the Jets vastly outnumbered the Sharks, it is fitting to spotlight the standouts on each side. First, the principals. Nick Dothee as Tony is a singing talent, though one questions the ease of his transformation from tough guy to gentleman. At times, he was just a bit too "sensitive" to have been a hood of high ranking only a short time before. Michel Patrician as Maria proved to be a triple threat - singing, dancing and acting her way into the hearts of the audience. No Maria was ever so lovely while singing "One Hand, One Heart" or so playful when singing "I Feel Pretty." One who is familiar with SCT's productions, would immediately recognize the subtle directions of Sonkin in the small gestures and voice inflections that make this musical such a joy to watch.

Dan Brake was tough as nails as Riff, leader of the Jets. Though his vocals were his weak point, his ability to act and carry a wide variety of scenes was admirable.

His counterpart, Sharks leader Bernardo, was played by Joey Costello. Costello pulled off a perfect depiction of the Puerto Rican gang leader. The accent, the movements, the attitude were all there. A tip of the hat also goes to Costello as the standout male dancer among the Sharks. For acting ability, the nod goes to Steven Brown, Action of the Jets, and Stephanie Lindsay, Rosalia of the Sharks. Brown is a staple in Solano County theater and always a good act to watch. As the tough-talking Action, Brown more than lived up to the billing. He's a talent to watch in the future. Lindsay's facial expressions and vocal quality were right on time, especially showcased in the bedroom scene during "I Feel Pretty." Most fun to watch: Nick Musleh as the ever-moving, always entertaining Jet, Baby John, and the gum-chewing, always sassy Amanda Duran as the Sharks' Consuelo. It's hard to imagine that Musleh has stopped moving since his appearance in Shakespeare in the Park's "A Comedy of Errors." He is a bundle of energy, guaranteed to draw laughter from the audience. Duran, under heavy make-up, was both playful and alluring.

Other standouts include Will Schick as the large-and-in-charge Diesel, Leslie Waggoner as the wanna-be-gang-member Anybodys and Jerry Jacob as the not-quite-Columbo detective Shrank. In the scene battle, it's hard to pick a winner between the Sharks' "America" and the Jets' "Gee, Officer Krupke." Both were delightful and entertaining.

Besides a few slow musical pickups, a couple of wiggly spotlights and an inadvertent lowering of the curtain fly, the production on opening weekend went off without a hitch. The only downside to the entire production is Sonkin's decision not to include a curtain call at the end of the performance. The audience, in stunned amazement, sat for a moment before finally beginning a second round of applause - obviously in an attempt to lure the actors back on stage. According to the actors, it was Sonkin's idea not to have them come out for a final bow. But more than one theatergoer was a little unsettled by the decision. "There's no closure," said a student who was on hand to review the musical for their theater class. Closure or not, though, it's a fine play and well worth the admission.

Suisun City resident Michael T. Moseley is a freelance writer. He can be reached at michael.moseley@travis.af.mil.

"West Side Story"

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and April 20, 21, 27 and 28; 2 p.m. April 22 and 29; 7:30 p.m. April 18, 19 and 26

On-campus Theatre, 4000 Suisun Valley Road

Recommended for audiences 13 years and older

3 1/2 stars