



WEST SIDE STORY

Based on a conception of Jerome Robbins
Book by Arthur Laurents, Music by Leonard Bernstein
Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Reviewed Performance 6/12/2015

Reviewed by [Daniel Solon](#), Associate Critic for John Garcia's THE COLUMN

Garland Summer Musicals and Eastfield College present the American musical classic West Side Story. Developed by visionary choreographer Jerome Robbins with book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by a very young Stephen Sondheim, West Side Story is the once-fresh retelling of William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet transposed to 1950's Manhattan.

West Side Story is also easily one of the most loved musicals of high schools, colleges and community groups. Every year, hundreds of productions will hit America's stages and all of them will abide, near slavishly, to Jerome Robbins' angular hop-and-snap choreography. They'll

all feature racially inaccurate casting. And the audience will be treated to inconsistent attempts at New York and Puerto Rican accents.

And while this clearly a talented group of young performers, this production doesn't go far enough to break through these trappings.

As romantic lead Tony, Equity performer Max Swarner's voice is clear and robust. He emanates youthful innocence, but I was less convinced of his credentials as the leader of a hardened street gang. Perhaps this is the point - that these are children entering into a world much rougher than any had experienced.

Maranda Harrison delivers a musically sound Maria with her strong, legitimate tones. Maria is a deceptively tough role. Harrison does well transitioning from wide-eyed ingénue to rage-fueled woman. From "I Have a Love" to the heartbreaking finale, Harrison delivers confident dramatic force.

There is a good amount of humor, passion, and beauty to be found on this stage. And this production is to be commended for the quality of its talent. Jerome Robbins' choreography looks super sharp and this show is at its best during company dance numbers. Dancers exude enthusiasm and land their marks with precision. Crowd favorite, "Dance at the Gym" was especially invigorating. The house crackled with kinetic energy as dancers twirled about the stage singing, "Mambo!".

But with directing heavyweight Buff Shurr at the helm, I was hoping for new moments of revelation. No one could predict that the small Texas town of McKinney, just miles from the Granville Arts Center, would become the international focus of America's contemporary struggles with authority and race. But this production seems so very far from the real-life drama unfolding on the streets outside the auditorium that I wondered for whom this show existed.

Is it good enough to produce good-enough carbon copies of stage classics? Or, are we missing opportunities to reinvigorate the popular stage with interpretations that are savvy to contemporary audiences?

This potential seemed to materialize briefly in Act 2 as the "Dream Ballet" and "Somewhere" merged into an extended contemporary dance sequence that was stylistically so disconnected from the rest of the show, that I felt robbed of a key emotional moment. As Rodney Dobbs' serviceable set disappeared, the stage was reduced to an overly-bright recital featuring the entire cast (including two blood-soaked characters who had previously died). The "fantasy" here is that everyone dresses in earth tones and smiles a lot... like, a lot.

In a different production, one rich with investigation and interpretation, this sequence may have proved very successful. But that wasn't the context in which it existed. The result was jarring, rendering aspects of the surrounding show dated and inauthentic.

Still, some of the old-time charm did shine through. The Jets nailed "Gee, Officer Krupke". This second act comedic number playfully explores the failings of the child welfare system. As

characters get passed from cops, to parents, to doctors, to social workers, it becomes more clear why they're in a fix. Stephen Raikes offers a standout performance as Action, playing the most maligned of the Jets.

This production evokes much of the relevance and electricity one might have felt when West Side Story first opened in 1957. But some opportunities were lost in sticking to convention. Jets and Sharks still live on our cities' street corners and their faces and struggles have changed. The theatre needs to change with them.

WEST SIDE STORY

Granville Arts Center

300 N 5th St, Garland, TX 75040

June 19, 20 at 8:00pm, June 21 at 2:30pm. Tickets: \$30 Adult; \$26 Seniors; \$24 Student/Youth
Box office location: 300 North Fifth Street, Garland, TX 75040. Hours: 10am-4pm Monday
through Friday and two hours before each performance

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