

## **West Side Story @ The Muny**

Music by Leonard Bernstein

Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Book by Arthur Laurents

Conceived by Jerome Robbins

Ran July 15 - 21, 2023 @ The Muny

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I shouldn't even have to say anything. Everybody knows that *West Side Story* is a classic. So go see it. Period. It's been adapted for the screen twice, sixty years apart, and both films are just as good as the other. I've seen both the Muny's 2013 production of the show and their current one, ten years apart, and both are just as good as the other. This is a musical that, quite honestly, speaks for itself. But I'm still going to talk about it.

*West Side Story* is a retelling of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead of centering the story around a rivalry between two powerful families, it is now between two teenage street gangs: the Jets, first-generation White Americans born from European immigrants, and the Sharks, recently arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. Instead of setting the story in 1597 in Verona, it is now set in 1957 in Manhattan's Upper West Side. The "star-crossed lovers" are Tony, the former leader of the Jets and the best friend of current leader Riff, and Maria, the sister of the Sharks' leader Bernardo. The excitement of their young love is still present here, as well as the rising tensions between the gangs that ultimately end in tragedy. It's a timeless story that everybody knows, but we keep telling it.

I think the reason why both *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story* have lasted as long as they have is because they are, as once described by theatre critic Harley Granville-Barker, "a story about youth as youth sees it." This is a story about teenagers constantly trying to justify themselves to systems and figures of authority that were not made for their generation; so, we get to see what happens when those authorities completely give up on them. However, instead of framing the story as one of class warfare, as it is in *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* is framed as a story of racial tensions – all during a time when the treatment of immigrants and people of color in America was being called into question in a big way. And they still are, if we're being honest. As long as we are still seeing systems of oppression holding down teenagers, immigrants, and people of color, *West Side Story* will always be relevant, even after almost 70 years.

The show's urgency and tumultuousness are crafted compellingly in the Muny's production by director Rob Ruggiero, musical director James Moore, and choreographer Parker Esse, who recreated Jerome Robbins's iconic choreography to seamless effect. Christian Douglas and Kanisha Feliciano are fantastic as Tony and Maria – they are a duo that will both warm your heart and then break it, their performances are that good. Feliciano also shares such moments with Jerusha Cavazos as Anita, Bernardo's girlfriend who has become a sort of mother figure for

Maria, a portrayal solidly conveyed by both actors. Yurel Echezarrata and Kyle Coffman are both excellent as the gang leaders Bernardo and Riff; in fact, both of them were cast members in the 2021 film adaptation and have been in multiple stage productions of the show (*talk about bringing the heat!*). All of the adult roles are played beautifully: Ken Page is Doc, the kindly owner of the local drugstore who finds himself frustrated with the teens; Michael James Reed is the hostile Lieutenant Schrank, James A. Butz is the ineffectual Officer Krupke, and Drew Battles is the milquetoast social worker Mr. Gladhand. Standouts from the wonderful ensemble include Caylie Rose Newcom as Anybodys, Ethan David Steph as Action, Ethan Van Slyke as Baby John, and Daniel Assetta as A-Rab.

The dinginess of the Upper West Side is made strikingly clear by Ann Beyersdorfer's versatile scenic design featuring a rotating unit set of a decaying urban jungle ripe with neon lights, stairwells, and steel beams; the sets are punctuated by John Lasiter's lights and Shawn Duan's video design. Gail Baldoni's costumes and Ashley Rae Callahan's hair and makeup capture the late 1950s in stunning detail.

*West Side Story* is a true masterpiece of American theatre that will continue to stand the test of time. I will never forget the moments when the audience was so enraptured by what we were seeing that there was absolute silence. The endings of both acts even ended without applause, they were that powerful. This is the ninth time the Muny has staged *West Side Story* and I look forward to seeing their tenth.