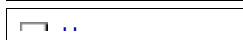
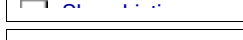
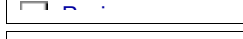
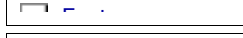
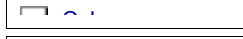
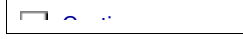
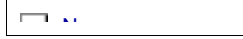
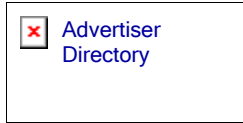
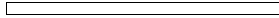


WEST SIDE STORY

at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts
Reviewed by Les Spindle



Musical Theatre West's recent production of Fiddler on the Roof was a rather passionless rendering of one of the musical theatre's most deeply affecting works, so who could have predicted that the group's new revival of West Side Story would be a bona fide four-handkerchief weepie? Director/choreographer Dennis Courtney has fashioned such a heartfelt, electrifying, and resonant interpretation of the masterpiece by Arthur Laurents (book), Leonard Bernstein (music), and Stephen Sondheim (lyrics) that it's hard to believe this show has reached the menopausal age of 41.

This vibrant tale of youthful street gangs and doomed romance on New York's mean streets calls for triple-threat performers, and foremost among this production's triumphs is a shattering performance by Kristin Peterson as the Puerto Rican heroine Maria. Her angelic-voiced delivery of the gorgeous Bernstein/Sondheim songs is matched by her deeply moving characterization in this classic romantic role. Likewise, the sympathetic role of the tragically doomed hero Tony is in the accomplished hands of Greg Kohout, who invests the part with all of the singing and acting panache it calls for. Together, these charismatic lead performers make the spirit soar and the heart break.

Other sterling performances abound: Cyndee Z. Esparza's ballsy spitfire Anita, Tim Talman's feisty Anglo gang member Riff, Victor Alonzo's volatile Puerto Rican gang member Chino, Chuck Saculla's courageous yet bitter Bernardo, and Mark Fredo's empathetic and fatherly Jewish storekeeper Doc.

And the list of splendid accomplishments goes on. Stephen Gothold's impeccable musical direction does full justice to the soaring beauty of the songs and the edgy excitement of the musical bridges. Courtney's razor-sharp choreography is a loving tribute to Jerome Robbins' brilliant original work. Jacqueline Jones Watson's versatile lighting effects range from wistfully ethereal to intensely dramatic. Sharell Martin's colorful

costumes are always on-target, and the highly functional rented sets are appropriately stark.

Turf warfare and blind bigotry were much in evidence when this show's illustrious antecedent (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*) first appeared. These social blights were still around when this musical premiered in 1957, and they continue to be major problems today. In an era in which irrational hatred causes an innocent 21-year old man to be senselessly tortured and strung out on a fence to die like an animal, the show's timeless message of tolerance seems more profoundly touching than ever.

"West Side Story," presented by Musical Theatre West at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, 14900 La Mirada Blvd., La Mirada. Oct 9-25. (714) 521-4849. Also at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton St., California State University, Long Beach. Nov 5-8. (562) 985-7000.

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