

Theater Review: Classic ‘West Side Story’ at Chicago's Lyric Opera

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on May 14, 2019 - 7:56pm

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CHICAGO – “When you’re a Jet, you’re a Jet all the way ... “ And there is no more appropriate way to lyrically pay tribute to a classic staging of the Leonard Bernstein/Stephen Sondheim musical, “West Side Story.” There is a new staging currently at Lyric Opera of Chicago, which runs through June 2nd, 2019. [Click here](#) [18] for more details and tickets.



Play Rating: **4.5/5.0**

The musical first opened in 1957, and its message of fearing the “other” – by adapting the universality of Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet” – will resonate as long as people suffer through their bigotry. Two rival gangs, girl-from-one-side-guy-from-another then meet/fall in love, tragedy ensues, and along the way are one of the greatest collections of songs/lyrics in one musical, so standard that they are practically in everyone’s DNA. It’s “West Side Story,” babies, and this latest adaptation at the Lyric Opera of Chicago is spot on entertaining.

Instead of the two families in “RomJul,” it is the teen street gangs – the white boy Jets and Puerto Rican Sharks – that are rivals, and Jet Tony (Corey Cott) meets Shark girl Maria (Mikaela Bennett) at a school dance. They immediately fall in love, much to the consternation of rival gang leaders Shark Bernardo (Manuel Stark Santos) and Jet Riff (Brett Thiele). On Maria’s side there is her best friend Anita (Amanda Castro), and they all have to test their loyalties when a street fight between the two gangs occurs. Nothing is ever to be the same.



Place For Us: Maria (Mikaela Bennett) and Tony (Corey Cott) in ‘West Side Story’

Photo credit: Todd Rosenberg for Lyric Opera of Chicago

Enhancing that narrative are the amazing and timeless songs. including "Jet Song," "Something's Coming," "Maria," "America," "Cool" "I Feel Pretty," "Somewhere" and the show stopping "Gee Officer Krupke." They are all standards from the overall American song cycle, as written by the legendary team of Leonard Bernstein (music) and Stephen Sondheim (lyrics). The young Lyric Opera cast had a few difficulties with the complexity of some of the numbers, especially the reprise of the song "Tonight," when the characters and chorus belt out their status before the street fight.

The main cast is strong, with Mikaela Bennett's Maria and Amanda Castro's Anita leading as standouts. Bennett's soprano voice provides a longing to the ballads and a whimsy in "I Feel Pretty." Castro is a feisty and strong Anita, and delivers "(I Want to Be in) America" with a verve that creates yet another show stopper, in a musical full of them. In the contest of singing acuity, the women in the lead/chorus bests the men, but the vocal range of Corey Cott's Tony shows off some impressive pipes.

What is strongest was the choreography (interpreted by Julio Monge) that relied on the original 1957 dance design of Jerome Robbins (which was also used in the 1961 film version). The "Robbins pose" in the prologue is sheer perfection, both present and nostalgic. There had to be discussion on which "West Side" the Lyric version would use – a Broadway revival a few years back added Spanish to the lyrics and modified the dance to update it – but the Lyric chose to present the original Robbins-directed/choreographed rendering, which was more in line with the august Chicago opera house.



I Like to Be: Amanda Castro as Anita (center) in 'West Side Story'

Photo credit: Todd Rosenberg for Lyric Opera of Chicago

There was an impression within the drama that the younger cast also had a bit of difficulty understanding the motivations of the rivalry, probably because they are used to a more diverse world. And there is something odd about seeing an opera-ish crowd, primarily white and economically advantaged, watching a musical about New York City street gangs. It made me want to ironically sing "I like to be in America, okay by me in America ... "

The Lyric Opera of Chicago presents "West Side Story" in both matinees and evening performances on various days through June 2nd, 2019, at the Lyric Opera house, 20 North Upper Wacker Drive, Chicago. Featuring Corey Cott, Mikaela Bennett, Manuel Stark Santos, Brett Thiele and Amanda Castro. Composed by Leonard Bernstein. Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Directed by Francesca Zambello. For more information about the Lyric Opera of Chicago, [click here](#). [19]



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