

NEW FAIRFIELD THIS WEEK

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On Stage

Community
Theater Reviews

By Mary Hembree



West Side Story - Musicals at Richter Danbury
Book by Arthur Laurents, Music by Leonard Bernstein;
Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim; Directed by Michael Limone

Review By Mary Hembree

In the words of Stephen Sondheim, "All the best performers bring to their role something more, something different than what the author put on paper. That's what makes theatre live. That's why it persists." This was never more evident than opening night of *West Side Story* at Musicals at Richter. Under a full moon, with fireflies aglow, in the most idyllic of settings, this high-energy, talented ensemble cast delivered a knock-out performance of this iconic play!

West Side Story is a musical with a book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and choreography by Jerome Robbins. Inspired by William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* opened on Broadway in 1957 and was nominated for six Tony Awards. Most people are more familiar with the 1961 film version starring Natalie Wood. Set in an Upper West Side neighborhood in New York City in the early 1950's, the play explores the rivalry between two teenage gangs. The Sharks, from Puerto Rico, are taunted by the Jets, a white gang. Tony, a former member of the Jets, falls in love with Maria, sister of Bernardo, leader of the Sharks. The dark theme, sophisticated music, extended dance scenes and focus on social problems marked a turning point in American theatre.

From the moment the twenty-five piece orchestra began the sliding, sensual prologue my heart panged and I knew this would be an evening of stellar entertainment. Like cats effortlessly gliding over a fence, the Jets take the stage. The intensity of youth in the flawless dance numbers is inspiring. Even the fight scenes are choreographed with such graceful athleticism it's a joy to behold.

This is a large ensemble cast each putting their heart and soul into their part so perfectly that if you pulled one out the play would falter. Whether they are members of the Jets or Sharks, or their girls, each performance here contributes to the vibrant success of the play.

As with any show, however, there are roles and performances

thereof that lend themselves to more time in the spotlight.

Brian Bremer as Riff, leader of the Jets, commands the stage with movement and voice. He's gritty, like a gang leader should be, and Mr. Bremer delivers this role with a just right intensity.

"The air is humming and something great is coming." So predictive of what's ahead the words almost hang in the air. Stephen Moores has a glorious voice and plays Tony with definitive passion and charm. He's exceptional.

Lithe, elegant, yet powerful in voice and dance, Sergio Mandujano portrays Bernardo as the frustrated leader of the Sharks. At odds with his new country, protective of his family, and willing to risk everything, Mr. Mandujano is perfection in this role.

Lauren Nicole Sherwood is at home on the stage and her portrayal of Anita is vibrant, sassy, and sexy in a way only an accomplished actor can deliver. She shines in this delicious part like a Broadway star!

Maria is such a key role in *West Side Story*. Fortunately it's in the gifted hands of Juliet Dale whose voice alone is a marvel. Ms. Dale's Maria is naïve, charming and determined. A memorable performance and her duets with Mr. Moores (Tony) are heaven.

I would be remiss not to mention three other performances that definitely deserve attention. Pam DeHuff is a lilting soprano and delivers a moving rendition of the song "Somewhere". Nathan Clift as Action, deftly provides a highlight of the show in his outra-



Photo Credit: David Henningsen Photography

geously good number, "Gee, Officer Krupke" along with the rest of the Jets. And a tip of my cap to Kevin McCarthy as Doc, a subtle performance giving expression to Doc's weariness with the tragedies unfolding around him.

The golden triangle of an exquisite production team – Director Michael Limone, Choreographer Jimmy Locust, and Musical Director Zachary Kampler – have combined their significant talents to produce a show that far exceeded my expectations.

Directing a large ensemble cast through song and dance requires a skilled director at the helm and Mr. Limone is certainly up to that task. Mr. Locust's choreography is imaginative, sophisticated and tight. The orchestra under the direction of Mr. Kampler is uniquely capable of delivering everything from a fight scene to a melody. These three gentlemen have seamlessly woven their crafts together resulting in a stand-out production of *West Side Story*.

Jake McGuire's set design sparks the imagination and coupled with the inventive lighting designed by Director Michael Limone and Mike Campbell it was magical.

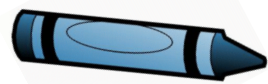
Musicals at Richter is Connecticut's longest-running outdoor theatre providing exceptional musical entertainment "under the stars" since 1985. This was my first time at Richter but it certainly will not be my last. *West Side Story* is a classic touching on social issues that remain with us today. Musicals at Richter's production of *West Side Story* features talented, young actors from the area (some are still in high school!) whose performances in this play will leave you stunned and applauding for more.

West Side Story at Musicals at Richter (100 Aunt Hack Road, Danbury) runs Friday, July 14th, Saturday, July 15th, Friday July 21st, and Saturday, July 22nd. For tickets and further information, visit the website at www.musicalsatrichter.org or call 203-748-6873.

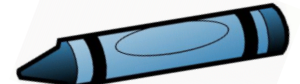


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