

## OVERALL PRODUCTION

Classified as one of the greatest musical scores of all time – jazzy, sparky, lyrical, aggressive, beautiful, memorable – the list is endless, when describing ‘West Side Story’ as I’m sure you’ll agree.

It also has the reputation of being very difficult and this has led to it being rarely performed. I directed it several years ago, successfully as it turned out but I had a very difficult start due to doubting Thomas’s and a M.D. whom although agreeing to do the show, then changed his mind! I persuaded him to at least see the auditions through and fortunately he was so moved at hearing the songs sung by the potential cast, that he was totally committed by the end of the evening!

Of course it is an enormous challenge, but ‘doable’ as you found out too and enormously rewarding for all. I could see that you were an exceptionally dedicated company and had worked very hard especially in the ensemble numbers, to do justice to Bernstein and Sondheim’s masterpiece.

The choreography was really superb as your audience reaction must have told you. The simple set design was ideal for the available space symbolising the street environment of the gangs. There were one or two reservations regarding the inset scenes. The costumes were another asset as we were transported to 50’s New York. Above all a strong principal line up brought the story to life with focused sincerity. A fast pace was maintained as the exciting structure of the story developed under firm direction.

However in spite of all the above positive comments I have to give my personal view for a fair adjudication. At time of writing there has been a lot of media coverage regarding teenage knife crime, involving a fifteen year old’s murder at Victoria station. The chief of police being interviewed mentioned teenage knife crime as being an ongoing problem. Ganzyl’s book of the musical theatre gives a synopsis of the show beginning with “In a New York street two rival gangs of teenagers are playing an elaborate cat and mouse game”. Your cast in general gave the impression of being at least in their early twenties and early thirties. Theatre is all about taking risks we know and I hope I have given you lots of encouragement. But ‘West Side Story’ ideally should be performed by a younger cast. For example teenagers do not have the maturity to realise the enormity of what happened in the rumble and can almost go straight into officer Krupke. The frequent mood swings and changes of direction both physically and verbally is typical of any gangs of teenagers due to their inability to foresee the consequences of their actions. The love scenes between Tony and Maria are very poignant because of their youthful inexperience and vulnerability in an adult world. Another key is the direction in the script of naming ‘adults’ in the persons of officer Krupke, Schrank, Doc and Gladhand.

For a full realisation of the show only a teenage cast will ring true. Having said that you undoubtedly had a successful production and I suspect the vast majority of your audience did not even think of my criteria. Having spoken to one or two whom saw the show it was apparent that they were unaware of age concerns and just enjoyed the familiar music, songs and dance.

## MUSICAL DIRECTION AND SINGING

Now and again the conductor failed to bring the orchestra through difficult shifts of time signatures which lost the seamless symphonic thread of dramatic music that this score is so famous for. For instance the overture sounded ragged at first and seemed to be struggling with the complex score, however this settled down as the show progressed and all the instrumentalists blended well with each other. The haunting themes were a joy to hear again and all those wonderful box office hits.

The chorus had been well rehearsed and sang out with confidence, there were many momentous highlights, 'America' was outstanding and from then on I felt everyone involved gave 100% building the sound for 'Tonight' and the tragic finale. Some of the principal singing could have done with more projection at times.

The dialogue for the beginning of Act II was lost, but 'I Feel Pretty' was a highlight. 'A Boy Like That', always my personal favourite reached it's dramatic potential, with terrific brass accompaniment.

I felt the scene changes all needed cover music to keep up the momentum, the drugstore especially.

Tony's 'come and get me' to Chino also needed a sound effect or musical contribution to hold the audience and increase the suspense. This is a difficult one perhaps a drum beat or hint of tolling bells in the background would have worked.

The percussionist deserves congratulations.

## SET DESIGN

I have been unable to find a credit for scenery so assume you hired the basic set which was atmospheric and ideal for the production. The scene in the bridal shop seemed rather spread out, Tony and Maria, looking lost in the space. Maria's bedroom was acceptable but the door being right next to the window gave rise to a giggle factor I'm afraid for Tony's hasty exit. Doe's drugstore and cellar were convincing. The stage management were very efficient, but as aforesaid cover music was lacking now and again for the stage crew. The gym with the red glitter curtain worked well, followed by the evocative raised Romeo and Juliet balcony set.

## LIGHTING AND SOUND

This was very interesting and a dramatic support to the action. The shafts of light across the stage were unusual and gave the railings surrounding Maria's home a symbolic image of Maria's lack of freedom within the family. I enjoyed the effect again used in the bedroom with Maria and Anita. The lighting complimented the set in its somewhat drab urban mood. The haze for 'I like America' was effective likewise the gun shots and police sirens.

## CHOREOGRAPHY

This was outstanding both for the dance numbers and placing and grouping for the fight episodes, which were excellent. The ballet was imaginatively ethereal as we saw the lovers dream of what might have been and its collapse into the nightmare sequence. I could see how dedicated the cast were in all the impressive dance numbers and felt this was the core of the casts enjoyment and success of the production. 'America' was particularly memorable, which is usually the case!

The dance patterns were varied and contrasting and held the audience with impressive acrobatics and lifts. 'Cool' and 'Gee officer Krupke' were a triumph. I did make a note that at the end of Act I the gangs could have increased the tension by running on before the fight scene, some of the entries were casual.

## COSTUMES

The girls fared better in their 50's dresses, make-up and hairstyles. The boys in the main looked fine, but the jeans with belts and T shirts had an ageing effect on the older members of the cast, I felt more thought was needed to capture a younger appearance, perhaps loose shirts, and a special make-up.

The PR's looked suitably exotic for the dance at the gym with their bright shirts etc. although their makeup seemed too dark.

Officer Krupke's elaborate uniform was very authentic, but I wondered if it was absolutely correct for the Period.

## INDIVIDUAL PERFORMANCES

### *Maria*

The lovely clear singing voice was in character but lacked power and stability at times against the orchestra. 'I Feel Pretty' was more confident because the mood is lighter of course and less demanding but the voice was still unsupported in the top register. Maria's wide eyed vulnerability and sweet nature was captured, her girlish dreams coming true all too briefly in her relationship with Tony. The interaction with him was tenderly intense, when with Anita was saw a more spirited girl of the future, determined to break away from childish restraints. The final scenes with Tony were convincing in their raw realism and there was more support vocally. Movement and body language were expressive. Her final exit was sensitively handled for the tragic curtain.

### *Anita*

I always look forward to seeing this talented performer. The vitality, fire and energy needed for the role of Anita was ideally cast. 'America' was a highlight of the show and had all the essential ingredients. The interaction with Maria was on the whole

convincing but I did find 'A Boy Like That' was a little on one level with the repetitive gesture of wagging a finger at Maria distracting. Underneath she is warm and sympathetic to Maria's situation but is in great pain from losing Bernardo, a difficult subtext to find because the audience needs to see her tragedy too, there was a little too much harshness in the interpretation to achieve this I felt. In other words in these very dramatic emotional scenes one has to guard against a subtle loss of control.

Dramatic tension in the harrowing 'message scene' at the drugstore was sustained with appropriate cliff hanger elements. A fine singing voice and excellent dancing ability was enjoyed.

### *Bernardo*

A convincing appearance, accent and very able dancing ability carried the role. The interaction within his gang and passionate relationship with Anita brought the story to life with a strong stage presence. The body language amongst the P.R.'s carried through the Latin temperament.

### *Tony*

I understand the original cast of this pivotal role was different and I fully appreciate it is difficult in the amateur theatre to fulfil perfect casting. I must congratulate this performer on taking on and giving his all to this iconic part, in spite of being a mature adult. Tony's detached and more settled outlook on life away from the jets was immediately established and his reluctance to regress back to them. His overpowering attraction to Maria was sensitively conveyed as he was irrevocably drawn back into the street warfare. The interaction with Maria and all those wonderful songs revealed a more than competent singing ability as the drama developed. This voice has great potential, but lacked the style needed for the strong legato line in this Bernstein classic.

A heartfelt understanding of Tony's plans for his future with Maria was poignantly conveyed. Body language and movement were thoughtfully expressed.

### *Riff*

I enjoyed this performance very much. The portrayal carried a 'less is more' quality, giving a clean cut impact. 'Cool' was another highlight and carried through his confident place amongst the Jets. Vocally very sound with great dancing skill.

### *Chino*

A challenging role because he is the catalyst for the doomed lovers and eventual killer of Tony. He is the quiet shy observer of Maria's attraction to Tony and builds up his own dangerous emotions. Although a small part he has to have a vital stage presence. His bewilderment felt at his actions captured a youthful persona very well. Dancing ability and movement contributed energetically to the ensemble numbers.

### *Action*

Impressive youthful zest came through a 100% and was absolutely right for the relentless energy needed for this show. Entrances and exits were most convincing as he seemed to stop at breakneck speed before hurtling off somewhere else! The intense focus on his absorption in the Jets was convincing.

### *Diesel*

All the above applies to this performance too capturing the dramatic tension with breathtaking reactions and so on.

### *Anybody's*

An interesting cameo, projecting the desire to be accepted and hitting home the importance to the gangs of their life on the streets away from their homes and families. Here again, dancing and singing ability helped to propel everything along at a fast pace. The scene when helping Tony escape had touching sincerity.

### *The Adults*

As I have had to comment, a younger cast would have put more emphasis on the gulf between the gangs and the despairing adults, who were in authoritative positions. Their exasperation on a lost cause came through effectively.

I especially enjoyed 'Doc'. The scene with Tony when trying to bring him down to earth was searingly realistic.

Officer Krupke was suitably amusing with comic reactions and movement.

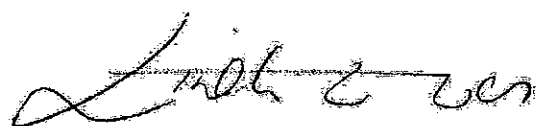
Lieutenant Sehrank and Gladhand projected their involvement with the street gangs with conviction.

*Thank you for an enjoyable evening*

*And*

*Kind Hospitality*

*Best Wishes for Future Productions*



*Linda Evans*