

NATIONAL OPERATIC AND DRAMATIC ASSOCIATION LONDON REGION

Society : Reading Operatic Society
Production : "WEST SIDE STORY"
Date : Friday 28th September 2012
Venue : Hexagon Theatre, Reading
Report by : Henry Hawes - NODA Representative - Area 13

Both *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music* were great and instant successes in the theatre's of Broadway and London's West End but the third mega-hit of the late 1950's took decidedly longer to take off. Nowadays, there doesn't seem too much that's outlandish about Arthur Laurent's New Yorkish update of the Romeo and Juliet story, nor about his show's large and youthful dance content, but, back in the 1950's, the urgent, contemporary *West Side Story* was a bit harder for audiences to take than Eliza Doolittle's amusing old English antics or the sweet story of the singing nun of *Saltzburg*. So paying public reaction was a bit slower and it took altogether longer, until the boost of a particularly fine film version which turned the show into the classic it is now.

On Friday and Saturday 28th, 29th September 2012, I had the pleasure of attending two performances of Reading Operatic Society's latest presentation "*West Side Story*", and what a presentation. This was one of the finest shows that Reading Op's have presented over recent years. It had a fine line-up of principals, a great chorus and choreographic routines which ensured a superb evenings entertainment which left the large audiences wanting more.

Damian Sollesse - (TONY)

Jenni Simmonds - (MARIA) - This show needs two strong leads in the roles of 'Tony' and 'Maria' and this we had in plenty from Damian and Jenni. Their feelings for each other was beautifully portrayed and 'Maria's' loss of 'Tony' was heart-rending and certainly produced a few handkerchiefs amongst the audience. Their acting ability, diction and movement could not be faulted and vocally they were both superb. This is a demanding show for both of them and they need good quality voices for the wide range and demands of the music, both rose magnificently to the challenge with voices which were melodic, had power and control and did full justice to the music. They made as good a pair as you are likely to see on any stage - Many congratulations to both of you.

James Gwynne - (RIFF - Leader of the Jets)

Michael Manley - (BERNARDO - Leader of the Sharks) - I have also combined these two characters as there was nothing to choose between them. As the leaders of the two opposing gangs, both gave the right characterisations with James being typically American and Michael having all the mannerisms of a Puerto Rican, both presented well sustained accents throughout. Acting ability, diction and particularly movement was outstanding - Brilliant.

Caroline Garragher - (ANITA) - As the girlfriend of 'Bernardo' she finds herself at odds in regard to 'Maria's' feelings for 'Tony' but eventually comes round to accepting their love for each other. Caroline was excellent and I was most impressed with her characterisation and her singing which had great quality and was a joy to listen to. Her number "America", together with 'Rosalia' and the 'Shark Girls' was a 'Showstopper' - Well done to all of you.

THE JET BOYS

Stuart Brookfield - (DIESEL)
Oliver Kyte - (ACTION)
Ben leach - (A-RAB)
Sam Chapman - (BABY JOHN)
Tom Bassett - (SNOWBOY)
Liam Caswell - (BIG DEAL)

THE SHARK BOYS

Adrian Tang - (CHINO)
James Mitchell - (PEPE)
Michael Cox - (INDIO)
Jerome Ifill - ((ROCCO)
Tom Crossley - (TORO) - It is impossible for me to report on each individual, so I have combined the cast of the 'Sharks' and 'Jets' together, because in all fairness, there was nothing to choose between them. They all entered fully into the spirit of the production. Each and everyone of you portrayed the right characters with well sustained American and Puerto Rican accents. The fight scenes between the 'Jets' and the 'Sharks' was most realistic and the dance routines were breathtaking, full of athleticism and coordination. The number 'Gee Officer **Krupke**' sung by members of the 'Jets' was well presented, containing all the humour and danced with precision - Congratulations to all of you.

THE JET GIRLS

Bethany Bianga - (GRAZIELLA)
Joanna Perkins - (VELMA)
Shannon Allen - (MINNIE)
Shanie Lynch - (CLARICE)
Kath Harman - (PAULINE)
Charlotte Gilliam - (ANYBODY'S)
Annelies Howard - (JENNY)
Deanna Hockaday - (SANDY)

THE SHARK GIRLS

Louise Woods - ((ROSALIA) -
Charlotte Partlow - (CONSUELA)
Naomi Winter - (TERESITA)
Marie Beazley - (FRANCISCA)
Jemma Moore - (ESTELLA) - Again I have combined this group of 'Jet' and

'Shark' girls together as there was nothing to choose between them either. Everyone gave a superb performance, developing excellent characters and all with well sustained accents. The dance routines were energetic and precise and were the equivalent of the men, I was particularly impressed with the 'America' number led by 'Anita' and 'Rosalia', the dancing was both energetic and precise and this was without doubt another of the 'showstoppers' in the performance. I was fortunate that I attended both the Friday and Saturday performances so I had the advantage of hearing both girls, **Deanna Hockaday** and **Jemma Moore** sing that beautiful, haunting number 'Somewhere', superbly sung by both of them - Once again - Congratulations to you all.

Phil Elliott - (DOC) - As the proprietor of the hang-out for the 'Gangs', Phil gave a good characterisation of their elderly owner. His feelings for the young people and his disgust at some of their activities was well displayed - Well done.

Tony Slevin - (Lt. SCRANK) - Tony really got under the skin of this character and made him most believable. His movement and accent was well maintained throughout, looking the world weary cop who has seen it all and feels he is banging his head against a brick wall with the young generation. - A good portrayal.

Stuart Neal - (OFFICER KRUPKE) - As the baton wielding New York cop who has no time, or patience for the West Side young hoodlums, Stuart was great. His characterisation was spot-on, I couldn't fault it - Well done.

David Anthony - (GLADHAND) - This little cameo role was well presented by David, a lovely characterisation. One can always rely on David to give a good performance, irrespective of the role.

Simon Woodbridge - (DIRECTOR) - This show is a challenge to any society and there are not many that attempt it, due mainly to the numerous, energetic dance routines which obviously require a fit, young cast, an aspect that seems to be missing these days in a lot of society's. So you have my heartfelt congratulations Simon in taking up this challenge, but the end result must have been worth all the hard work. Casting could not be faulted and all the right characterisations had been brought out. Stage positioning was first-class and the whole show had obviously been well rehearsed which made the performance slick with not a pregnant pause to be seen or heard. The cast also seemed to emanate a joy of performing which certainly came across to the audience. This was a great show and one which you must be proud of - Congratulations.

Scott Jenkins - (CHOREOGRAPHER) - I have nothing but the highest praise for the choreographer Scott who had devised some superb choreographic routines, of which there were many, bringing out all the athleticism and feeling required, filling the Hexagon stage with precise movement. It was obvious that a lot of hard work had been put into this aspect, and it showed. I assume that you were also responsible for choreographing the fight scenes between the 'Sharks' and 'Jets' as it was not mentioned in the programme and which I found most realistic - Congratulations.

Marc Pizer - (MUSICAL DIRECTOR) - I remember Marc being musical director for Henley Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society's *West Side Story* at the Kenton in April 2008. At the time I complimented him on the excellence of his orchestra which was no mean feat within the small confines of the Kenton pit, but on this occasion, with a much bigger pit, Marc went one even better with an orchestra of 14 excellent musicians who played the music of which Leonard Bernstein would have been proud, in fact this was one of the finest pit orchestras I have heard for a long time and was a truly integral part of the performance. Marc had obviously worked hard with the performers as all the singing was of a very high standard and I would imagine a lot of hard work had also been put in by the rehearsal pianist **Judith Creighton** - Congratulations to both of you.

Stage Manager and Crew - An excellent stage crew under stage manager **Carol Hodgkinson** who ensured scene changes were swift and silent with no pregnant pauses - Well done.

Lighting Design and Operation - A superb lighting design by **Kim Hollamby**. It certainly generated the right atmosphere on stage in the various scenes and, which coupled with the misting in certain scenes, had quite a dramatic effect. The operation was slick with no missed cues - Well done.

Spots - This aspect was certainly well controlled, they were accurate and well focused.

Sound - For many years I have criticised the sound control in the Hexagon, being poorly cued, unbalanced and over-amplified, but on this occasion I found a vast improvement in the sound control. It had been well balanced with an acceptable amplification and on the two nights of my visit I only noticed one late sound cue. I think congratulations are due to the sound technician and hope that it continues in the same vein.

Scenery - By **Proscencium Ltd** was most effective, giving a good impression of urban New York. It was well made so that the maximum of space was available for the many dance routines and at the same time it appeared ethereal in certain scenes with the use of mist, making quite a dramatic impact.

Wardrobe - The Wardrobe Department had certainly pulled out all the stops ensuring that the cast appeared correctly dressed for the period. I understand that some of the costumes were sourced from **'Stamaker Costume Hire'**,

Props - All props used looked authentic and fitted the action, even the pistol shot sounded authentic as so often it is a pale imitation due to the restrictive firearms laws.

Make-up - Nobody was credited in the programme as being responsible for the make-up, was this an **oversite** or did the cast do their own make-up? Whoever was responsible ensured that the correct make-up was used with it all standing up well under the strong stage lights

Programme - A neat programme of the right size containing all the relevant information, well laid out and printed on good quality paper. It had an eye-catching cover with good cast photographs and interesting biographies. It was good to see a programme not inundated with adverts

Front of House - This society always maintains an excellent standard for Front of House staff, smartly dressed, easily identifiable and welcoming to their audience - Well done and keep up the standard which is so nice to see in this day and age.

Thank you for inviting me to review your latest show and your hospitality which was much appreciated and my congratulations to all concerned in this excellent show. May I take this opportunity to wish you all success with your next production *"Footloose"* at the Kenton Theatre.

Henry

Henry **Hawes** - NODA Representative - Area 13 - London Region.