

West Side Story is a timeless tale of love and hate

BY ALICE RHEIN
CORRESPONDENT

When *West Side Story* opened, it was heralded for its grittiness and unflinching portrayal of gang life in New York in the 1950s. But since that time, America has lived through Vietnam, the Kennedy assassinations, Columbine, Sept. 11 and countless other senseless and brutal tragedies.

But for Drew Niles, who plays Tony in the Theater of the Stars production of *West Side Story* which will be at the Fox Theatre Sept. 3-8, the musical is no less relevant today than it was in 1957, when it first premiered in Washington, D.C. on August 20.

"I don't see it ever becoming dated. Gang life is very different now, but the emotions are not," says Niles, a Colorado native who earned his BFA degree in musical theatre at the University of Michigan. "Everyone has some sort of innocence and optimism when they are young, but (in *West Side Story*) the gravity of choices leads to loss until they are so filled with hate by the end."

Indeed, Leonard Bernstein composed the score to *West Side Story*. Arthur Laurents was the librettist. Stephen Sondheim was the lyricist, and Jerome Robbins choreographed the original production.

But Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet was the original inspiration for the musical which sets the Jets, a native New Yorker gang, against the Puerto Rican Sharks.

In the musical, Tony, a Jet who has been distancing himself from the gang, meets Maria, a Puerto Rican beauty whose brother, Bernardo, is the leader of the Sharks. Tony and Maria are instantly drawn to one another, and profess their love in one of Niles' favorite scenes, where he and Maria sing *One Hand, One Heart* in the bridal shop.



Niles

with the feud being over Easter versus Passover celebrations.

But as the project evolved, the warring gangs took form. Today, the musical contains some of theater's most beloved songs including *Maria*, *Tonight*, *Something's Coming* (*There's a Place for Us*), *I Feel Pretty* and (*I Want to Live in*) *America*.

Niles was first introduced to the movie version of the musical, which starred Natalie Wood as Maria, by his mother, who was also his first voice teacher. Even at an early age, Niles knew that Tony was the part he wanted to play.

"For a tenor, this is the dream role. For me, it seems to be the music that best fits my voice," says the 24-year-old, whose credits also include roles in *Grease*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Miss Saigon*.

After graduating from the University of Michigan in 2000, Niles headed to New York. "Just like just about everybody else in the graduating class."

He was performing in Maryland when he saw auditions for *West Side Story*. He sawed sawdust from Maryland to New York a few days on call-backs, and then landed the part for the 14-city tour which will take Niles away from his new apartment near 105th and Columbia for nearly two months.

Directed and choreographed by Alan Johnson, who won the American Choreography Award for the Gap *West Side Story* commercials, this stage production of the musical remains true to the original.

In addition to Niles, the musical also stars Natasha Harper as Maria, Lynn Sterling as Anita, Bernardo's girl, and Andy Blankenbuehler as Riff, the leader of the Jets.

"It's a very special show, and I'm excited to be back in Michigan," says Niles, who will be staying with friends in Livonia during the Fox Theatre run.

"It's amazing to get paid for what you love to do."

WEST SIDE STORY

Where: Fox Theatre, Detroit
When: Tuesday, Sept. 3 to Sunday, Sept. 8

Tickets: \$28-\$66 available at the Fox Theatre and Joe Louis Arena box offices and Hockeytown Authentics (without service charges) and all Ticketmaster locations, including Marshall Field's. To charge by phone, call (248) 433-5115. To purchase group tickets (15 or more), call (313) 471-3099. For information, call (313) 471-6611.



A scene from *West Side Story* with Drew Niles (center, left) as Tony and Natasha Harper (center, right) as Maria.

Readers celebrate performing arts

BY KEELY KALESKI
STAFF WRITER

why they enjoyed going to the theater and why it's important to support the arts. Here are the winning entries:

Doris Hawery of Livonia wrote: "My family and I enjoy going to live theater because it gives an opportunity to participate in the arts. We live in Michigan. By our reactions, oohs, and aahs, clapping and laughing, we sense that we are actually 'playing a part' in the creation that is building on stage. We feel 'alive' on the inside as do the live actors in front of us. One does not get this feeling from watching a movie. There is no give and take from watching a 'canned movie.' The movie does not care if we are present, but live actors certainly do! We like this feeling of being appreciated by the actors in front of us. Nothing replaces the excitement of live theater. There is an electricity that flows when a play on stage

is going well. It is hard to explain, but it is like an euphoric 'high' when all the actors have played their parts to perfection in a play that's well written and produced. It is a creation that oftentimes allows you to feel a oneness with the community. You can almost feel that connection with the actors on stage for just a brief moment, when it all seems to come together just right."

The fact that no two stage productions can ever be the same, also makes them very special. A movie can be watched over and over, and it will always be the same. A live stage production offers so much variety with the give and take of the players and the audience. There is nothing like it. Movies and CDs cannot replace the intensity of being at a live performance."

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