

'West Side Story' an exciting show

Performances of "West Side Story" continue through Sunday, Nov. 5, at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. For reservations call 661-1000, or call 334-0545 for ticket information or reservations.

By Barbara Michals
special writer

Sparked by wonderful choreography and an abundance of talent, a young and spirited cast makes the Nancy Gurwin production of "West Side Story" a thrill to watch.

Many of the talented teens in the Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim musical are played by youngsters of about the right age, young stars who also sing and dance with impressive skill.

Director-choreographer Kathi Bush's interpretation seems faithful to the spirit of the original Jerome Robbins dance numbers. By doing these dances successfully within the confines of the small stage at the Jewish Community Center, Bush achieves a special magic.

An undated version of the Romeo and Juliet story, "West Side Story,"

deals with the tensions and pre-

judices between two rival New York City street gangs. The ill-fated lovers are Tony (Danny Gurwin), a Puerto Rican member of the Jets, and Maria (Dawn Hamblin), a Puerto Rican whose brother Bernardo is the lead-

er of the Sharks.

When Tony and Maria show in-

terest in each other they trigger the

violence that has been percolating

for some time. When the gangs

clash, their rumbles are choreo-

graphed with as much care as their

other energetic dance numbers. The

violence is reasonably convincing,

even from the front row.

Both Gurwin and Hamblin have outstanding voices and strong stage presence that make their performances polished and moving. Tony (Dawn Hamblin) and "Somewhere" (Dawn Hamblin) have a fine vocal power, as do Gurwin's renditions of "Maria" and Hamblin's "I Feel Pretty."

Michael Dillon's Bernardo seethes with anger and resentment, periodically erupting with staccato bursts of frenetic energy as he leads gang members Mike Deming, Daryl Ziegelman, Kenny Peurreasari and Brett Ward through their paces.

Jesse Heindel's boyish good looks belie his bent for violence as Riff, the leader of the Jets. Jason Scott as Action, another Jet, excels in the "Officer Krupke" number, which takes a humorous look at the causes of delinquency. Other talented Jets are Howard Freeman, Tony Casas, Don Strohmer and young Marc Bleyer as Baby John.

Laura Rodgers does a fine job as Anita, Bernardo's girlfriend. Her Puerto Rican accent is convincing, and she sings "A Boy Like That" and "America" with fiery intensity.

AMONG THE ADULTS, Gary Lee Temple does his usual good work as Doc, the drugstore owner who tries to befriend the Jets but is helpless to prevent their tragedy. Dolores Edmonson, as Mrs. Rizzo, and Michael Kowalski's Detective Schrank is so overjoyed he cannot be taken seriously.

Music director Lee George and the four-member orchestra keep the sound level just right for the small auditorium. The simple set functions perfectly.

Overall, this "West Side Story" is a remarkable achievement combining talent, energy and expert direction.

Humor is accented in 'Mr. Roberts'

Performances of "Mr. Roberts" continue through Saturday, Nov. 18, at the Farmington Players Barn in Farmington Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 338-0570.

By Mark S. Carley
special writer

The Farmington Players' production of "Mr. Roberts" contains several fine individual performances and captures most of the humor of the play nicely. Unfortunately, it lacks the freshness and spirit needed to create a truly memorable experience.

Thomas Hegen and Joshua Logan's World War II Navy comedy continues to stand as a truly great piece of American theater. The story of Lt. Doug Roberts' quest to get off a cargo ship and into combat during the waning days of the war, it remains one of the warmest, funniest and best written accounts of men in uniform ever staged.

THE TROUBLE with the Farmington Players production is that director Sandra Sutherland's cast has focused more on "acting" (making sure their lines have the proper inflection and that their facial expressions are appropriate) than they have on "interacting" (establishing comfortable relationships with the other characters on stage). This inability to gel as a unit leaves the production with all the warmth and human feeling it needs.

Action focuses on the conflict between the title character and a tyrannical ship's captain, Asst. Executive Officer of Navy cargo ship AK601. Mr. Roberts spends his time trying to get transferred into a combat unit and trying to make life bearable for a crew, which has not had shore

leave in more than a year. The captain, one of life's truly embittered losers, has made this ship his own, with little time for anyone but an ingot but iron hand. He hates Mr. Roberts for the respect and loyalty the lieutenant enjoys from the crew.

CRAG FORHAN as Doug Roberts is a likeable leader, but his portrayal lacks the strength and charisma needed to make the love and devotion of the ship's crew convincing. Jack Grulke rants convincingly as the evil captain, but fails to give the character the depth needed to make him truly menacing.

Bob Locks turns in a nice performance as Ensign Pulver, the cocky but totally insecure officer who finds his courage at the show's climax. Locks' self-deprecating humor makes Pulver the most endearing member of the crew. Chuck Fisher is understated and reliable as Doc, Mr. Roberts' low-key sidekick.

Several of the minor characters also come from minor characters: the sailors who make up the crew. The graft-talking Jim Shinde, fresh-faced Phil Hadley and energetic Frank Marcus especially stand out.

The set, unfortunately, is cramped and awkward. Its restrictions contribute heavily to the show's stumbling pace. Costumes seem simple but authentic.

"Mr. Roberts" is a wonderful play, and despite its flaws, this production does manage to draw a lot of laughs and generate more than a few moist eyes in the audience at the end of the show.

Mark S. Curley is active in local community theater, both on stage and behind the scenes. He is a member of Ridgedale Players in Troy.

Musical 'Baby' gets lively presentation

Performances of "Baby" continue through Saturday, Nov. 11, at St. Dunstan's Guild of Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills. For ticket information, call the box office at 644-0527.

By Barbara Michals
special writer

"Baby" is a bouncy musical that celebrates the joys and anxieties of impending parenthood, is presented with spirit and style by St. Dunstan's Guild of Cranbrook.

The story follows the lives of three expectant parents: a baby and one trying to conceive. As luck would have it, it is only the latter couple that really desires a child at this point in their lives.

Danny and Lizzle (Jim Andres and Pat Ward) are a young, unmarried college couple who must adjust their goals and expectations when an accidental pregnancy comes along. Both Andres and Ward are solid, bothistic performers who are terrific voices and generate real chemistry together.

When Danny, a student of serious music, decides to join a rock band to support his prospective family, Andres hilariously transforms into a punk rocker with leather jacket, chains and an outlandish spiked wig.

ALAN AND ARLENE (Tom Spriggs and Barbara Solversen) are a mature couple whose first three children are already grown and out of the nest. An unexpected pregnancy also transforms their lives, forcing compromises and changes.

Spriggs and Solversen are appropriately more sedate in their reactions to impending parenthood. Solversen's fine voice is delightful, and Spriggs is likable and convincing as a thoughtful, loving husband and father.

The third couple, Pam and Nick (Marsha Coosa and Mike Smith), first suffer false expectations and then a humiliating struggle to conceive that puts a real strain on the marriage. The vivacious Coosa and affable Smith convey warmth and love and build real sympathy for their characters.

In a small role, Valjean Myers is very funny as a doctor struggling to adjust to new contact lenses while advising Pam and Nick. Other supporting players are fine individually but never quite mesh vocally as a chorus.

The show's musical numbers are all pleasant, but there are not really memorable songs. "I Want It All" takes the age-old experience of expectant motherhood and anchors it firmly in the '80s. "Fatherhood Blues" offers an amusing male viewpoint.

Director Isabel Himmelhoch and musical director Marlene Loucks keep the pacing smooth and lively. However, conductor Loucks allows the five-member orchestra to sometimes overpower the singers, and clever lyrics get lost in the process.

Barbara Michals teaches high school English in Southfield. A theater critic for the last 15 years, she is an inveterate playgoer who regularly catches up on all the New York productions.

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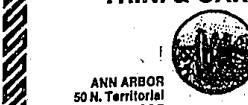
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