

'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 354-0545 for ticket information or reservations.

By Barbara Michaels
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" truly with vitality.

Many of the troubled teens in the Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim musical are played by youngsters of about the right age, youngsters 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 near-miracle.

An updated version of the Romeo and Juliet story, "West Side Story" deals with the tensions and prejudices between two rival New York City street gangs. The ill-fated lovers are Tony (Danny Gurwin), a Polish member of the Jets, and Maria (Dawn Hamblin), a Puerto Rican whose brother Bernardo is the leader of the Sharks.

When Tony and Maria show interest in each other they trigger the gang war that has been percolating for some time. When the gangs clash, their rumbles are choreographed 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. Their duets "Tonight," "One Hand, One Heart" and "Somewhere" radiate vocal power, as do Gurwin's rendition of "Maria" and Hamblin's "I Feel Pretty."

Michael Pilon'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 Pourasari and Brett Ward through their paces.

Jesse Heindl's boyish good looks nicely 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 Casarta, Don Shepherd, 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 teens but is helpless to prevent the tragedy. Dolores Schieff is amusing as Glad Hand, but Michael Kowal's Detective Schrank is so overly intense he cannot be taken seriously.

Musical 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 538-1870.

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 cohesiveness and spirit needed to create a truly memorable experience.

Thomas Heggan 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 get as a unit leaves the production without the warmth and human feeling it needs.

Action focuses on the conflict between the title character and a tyrannical ship's captain. As 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 despotism kingdom, which he rules with an iron fist and iron hand. He hates Mr. Roberts for the respect and loyalty the lieutenant enjoys from the crew.

CHAIK FORHAN as Doug Roberts is a likable 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 Lock turns in a nice performance as Ensign Pulver, the cocky but totally insecure officer who finds his courage at the show's climax. Lock's self-deprecating humor makes Pulver the most endearing member of the crew. Chuck Fisher is understated and authentic in the somewhat thankless role of Doc, Mr. Roberts' low-key sidekick.

Some of the finest moments in the show also come from minor characters, the sailors who make up the crew. The gruff-talking Jim Stedman, fresh-faced Phil Hadley, and energetic Frank Marcus especially stand out.

The set, unfortunately, is cramped and awkward. Its restrictive, cluttered 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 misty eyes in the audience at the end of the show.

Mark S. Carley is active in local community theater, both on stage and behind the scenes. He is a member of Ridgeland 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 Michaels
special writer

"Baby," 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 couples, two of them expecting 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 Lizzie (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 gifted, energetic performers who are terrific vocally and generate real chemistry together.

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

ALAN AND ARLENE (Tom Spriggs and Barbara Solverson) 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 Solverson are appropriately more sedate in their reactions to impending parenthood. Solverson'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 Coasala and Mike Smith), suffer fuller expectations and then a humiliating struggle to the marriage. The vivacious Coasala and affable Smith convey warmth and love and build real sympathy for their characters.

In a small role, Val Joan 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 Himelhoch 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 Michaels 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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