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Certain theatrical works are so inherently satisfying that they're pretty great even when their productions are only pretty good, and some are so firmly entrenched as classics that nothing less than spectacular will do. *West Side Story* is the rare piece that's actually both - a thrilling entertainment that many of us have seen *way* too many times - and the Timber Lake Playhouse's *West Side Story* is both, as well; it starts out as pretty good passing for pretty great, and ends up spectacular. By its finale, director James Beaudry's offering had morphed into one of the smartest, most impassioned versions of this legendary Bernstein/Sondheim/Laurents collaboration I've yet seen. It just took a while to get there.

Beyond its employment of a live (first-rate) orchestra, Timber Lake's season-opener has something big going for it right off the bat: Joseph C. Heitman's intricately designed, suggestively spare rotating set. Composed of a series of metallic beams and walkways reminiscent of last summer's *Dracula*, it's a marvelous playing area; when the set spins, the Jets' and Sharks' on-stage movement achieves an almost cinematic fluidity. And beginning with the show's dance prologue, *West Side Story*'s ensemble, looking fantastic under Brian Hoehne's dramatic lighting effects - and in Kaitlyn Kearn's vibrant costumes - go at Beaudry's and Zachary Gray's Jerome Robbins-inspired choreography with energetic, athletic gusto.

Yet I still found something rather ... *routine* about it all. Part of this feeling, I'm sure, stemmed from my personal (over-)acquaintance with the material; there was a lot of enthusiasm on display but little sense of discovery - not much to separate this *West Side Story* from the others I'd seen. From the start, though, it felt as though Beaudry and his cast

also
knew the material all too well; the actors, presenting the exact archetypes we expected, were almost too archetypal for the production's good. On Friday, Shannon Boland's Anita accidentally lost one of her shoes during the "Dance at the Gym" number, but instead of putting it back on, the grinning actress took the other shoe
off
, dancing the rest barefoot - and it was the one time the show's first half-hour felt truly spontaneous.

There was another, more sizable hindrance, though: Danny Henning's Tony. His first scene is something of a shock, because when the slender, baby-faced actor speaks, he does so in a low-key, vaguely flippant, barely audible mumble; as Jets go, Henning seems less Tony than Baby John (a role played exceptionally well by co-choreographer Gray). There's nothing wrong - and quite a bit right - with untraditional casting, and in a few of Henning's numbers, his pitch and timbre were beautiful. But he appeared so disconnected from Tony's romantic longing that none of his early scenes, not even his love-at-first-sight encounter with Maria (Colleen Johnson), carried much weight, and like all strong singers, when Henning hits a bad note, he hits it so fervently that it becomes *really* bad - too many of his vocals were almost painfully flat.

Despite these hiccups, though, *West Side Story* hit a rather stunning (and wholly unexpected) high in Act I, and afterwards, never looked back. In a move I've been waiting literal
decades
for a director to make, Beaudry positions Act II's "Gee, Officer Krupke" number in Act I where (I've always thought) it properly belongs, and the song - led with splendid comic hysteria by Jake Thomas' Riff - was so exuberantly, imaginatively staged and executed that it not only liberated the audience from its appreciative politeness, but the cast from its dutiful professionalism.

Suddenly, it seemed, terrifically committed and inventive performances started popping up everywhere: Michael J. Yarnell's Bernardo; Elliott Cunningham's A-rab; Brandon Ford's Diesel. (This actor is superbly charismatic in his "Cool" number, which Beaudry positions, again properly, in Act II.) Johnson and Boland, both excellent from the outset, became figures of heartbreaking directness and candor, and provided gorgeous vocals to match. Even Henning began to find an ache that eluded him previously; Tony's forceful directive to Anybodys (the feisty Eli Pauley) to "Be ... a *girl*!" was one of the night's absolute finest readings. (There are also plenty of intimidating talents in the production's ensemble, and I'm looking forward to writing more on Jeremy Day, Samantha Dubina, and Heather Herkelman as the summer progresses.)

And Beaudry himself had more than a few other miraculous tricks up his sleeve, from his brilliant, singular staging of "Somewhere" (which, in its glorious ensemble rendition here, becomes a mournful hymn to the dead and prayer for the living), to the Jets' brutal, stylized attack on Anita, to the casually cruel throwaway when Justin Banta's Snowboy inches up to Bernardo's corpse and steals his watch. In the end, Timber Lake's presentation became everything I hoped it'd be and, early on, feared it wouldn't be, and I'm officially stoked for the venue's next offering, *You Can't Take It with You* - another theatre piece that's both continually engaging and almost criminally over-produced. Any company that can turn *West Side Story* into such a sensational *surprise*, I'm thinking, can do just about anything.

For tickets, call (815) 244-2035.