

CHS presents West Side Story



COVENTRY — During the course of his 41 years overseeing the Coventry High School Drama Club, Program Director Mychael Wilkinson has turned the high school stage and auditorium into just about everything you can possibly imagine for the school's annual fall and spring shows. With this year's production, *West Side Story*, Wilkinson and parent volunteers have transformed the CHS stage into the Upper West Side of New York City in the mid 1950s.

Wilkinson is known for selecting particularly poignant productions, musicals and plays that hit on modern themes in American culture and very much make a statement about the state of society.

Last year the cast took on the dark comedy *Heathers*, which centered around teen suicide and bullying. The production in December of 2017 was the first time the show was performed by high school students in Rhode Island. In March of 2017 the CHS Drama Club premiered "The Insanity of Mary Girard," a piece set in 1790 involving the true story of a woman, Mary Girard, whose husband places her in a mental asylum. All of Wilkinson's shows send a message, and *West Side Story* is no exception.

West Side Story, Wilkinson said, is a play that effectively changed the history of theatre. The industry, he said, would never be quite the same again after *West Side Story* swept in. It bravely addresses dark social issues, sharing a familiar story of love and loss, and highlighting differences between cultures and generations, and the effects of social division, ethnic and generational tensions as well as gang violence.

The show is a musical based on the book by Arthur Laurents, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. It was inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and centers around two gangs living in the Upper West Side neighborhood of New York City during the mid 1950s. The two

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neighborhood gangs, the Jets, who are white, and the Sharks, who are immigrants from Puerto Rico, are in the midst of a severe turf battle.

Main characters include Tony, played by Marcus Evans, and Maria, played by Brianna D'Ambra. Tony is a former member of the Jets who is best friends with the gang's leader. Tony falls in love with Maria, who is the sister of the leader of the Sharks, Bernardo.

West Side Story is full of dark themes, music and plenty of high energy dance numbers. And just like Romeo and Juliet, there are balcony scenes, star-crossed lovers and a serious divide between two different sides.

In all of his years teaching acting, Wilkinson said, he's never had the pleasure of putting on a formal production of West Side Story. He needed just the right cast with the right set of talents to pull it off and finally, this year, he decided to go for it.

"Ever since I started teaching acting I would use this play as an example," he said. "So I've been wanting to do this for 20 years, waiting for the right group of people, the right time. I finally had all the right people so I thought, let's do this. It's been such a challenge."

Wilkinson would ask students to listen to West Side Story and read through the lines.

"It was the first sort of dark musical following the Romeo and Juliet theme," he said. "I had done Grease here and this is certainly the flip side of Grease. That's like the small town rock version of this."

The music from West Side Story is classical and symphonic, and the dances Latin in nature. The 27 students included in the cast had to learn to learn styles like the Mambo and the Cha-Cha, assisted by Choreographer Stephanie Rodger.

It was challenging to transform the space of the school auditorium into an inner city, but they managed to pull it off, erecting two large balconies, fire escapes really, on either side of the stage, which is lined with metal chain link fences, brick buildings and other bits of city debris.

"You have to leave a lot of room on the stage for this show," said Wilkinson. "It's supposed to be a ghetto of New York in 1957, but I had to leave a lot of room for dance. There are a lot of balcony scenes in Romeo and Juliet and this takes place on fire escapes, so I thought we'd build two towers on each side. It gives the effect that they're trapped inside this inner city cage fighting over turf, so there's a lot of fencing all over, and trash all around."

The show is particularly timely right now, he said, because of the country's current state of divisiveness.

"Because of the immigration and the rejection of some, that tension between the two seems very timely to me," said Wilkinson. "Acceptance and bitterness that's caused this battleground just like in Romeo and Juliet. There's this animosity for immigrants coming to the country. I think it hits on themes that are current in our news."

The cast have been preparing and rehearsing since early September, he said, practicing six days a week. Lead Actor Brianna D'Ambra, who will take on the role of Maria, said she started practicing enhancing her vocal range even before that.

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“Our characters are the Romeo and Juliet of the show,” said D’Ambra, a Senior at CHS. “I was so happy to find out it was West Side Story. I’d heard of it and knew the soundtrack but I’d never actually seen it, so as I soon as I found out I watched the movie and fell in love with it.”

Prior to West Side Story, D’Ambra had never participated in musical theater before, and she wasn’t very confident with her soprano singing voice, a key attribute of Maria’s character.

“I mostly stuck to pop songs, so when I found out it was West Side Story I knew I wanted Maria and I was like I need to work on my soprano voice,” she said. “So over the summer I was singing opera songs. I’m still not perfect with singing soprano, but I’ve definitely progressed. The breathing is so different.”

“We worked together before the auditions as well to kind of get ourselves ready for the amount of stamina we need and operatics and everything,” said Evans.

Evans, a Junior, plays Tony, who as a character is also known for his impressive vocal range.

“I personally am a huge fan of Leonard Bernstein, and West Side Story has been one of the shows I’ve always wanted to do, ever since my first show six years back,” he said. “Mr. Wilkinson’s been trying to do this for about 20 years, so it’s a great honor to be part of it.”

“Mr. Wilkinson is very well known for making political statements with his shows,” Evans continued. “For instance, last year when we did Heathers we wanted to promote a message to help the mentally ill and to prevent school shootings by coming together and being a part of something greater than yourself.”

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As a high school student, Evans sees the relevance of the musical today, even though it takes place in the 1950s.

"It's relevant because of the divides within our social groups," he said. "Not just at school but in the country. There's a lot of divide between race and over the Trump election. West Side Story is a wakeup call that this divide is only meant to destroy, not to build."

"Something bad happens at the end of the show and it really unifies everybody," D'Ambra added.

Ultimately, love transcends language, time and place in the musical.

Evans said the members of the cast are "incredible," and even credited his co-star on how well she's done with her first foray in musical theater.

"Maria is very famous for her soprano range," he said. "Being the first time that she's been thrown into a musical, it's like being thrown to the bulls when you're just learning how to walk. It's incredibly inspiring."

Some of the production's Grammy-winning scores include "Something's Coming," "Maria," "America," "Somewhere," "Tonight," "I Feel Pretty," "Jet Song," and "Cool."

To this day West Side Story is considered one of the most powerful and celebrated American theatre musicals in history.

The show will be presented on December 6, 7 and 8 at 7:30 p.m. in the Coventry High School Auditorium. Tickets are \$15 each and will be available at the door.

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