



The Friday Edition

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The sell-out story behind 'West Side' Music, dance and theater collaborate

University Theatre simply can't sell any more tickets to the upcoming production of "West Side Story" — it just can't.

All six shows are sold out. They have been for months.

So the pressure to sell enough tickets to cover costs is off. The pressure to coordinate and polish the behemoth production, however, is on.

"West Side Story" is a collective effort of the School of Music and the departments of dance and drama. It is, by any standards, a huge production. The dancing, vocal and acting sequences are complex, and could only be done with the cooperation of the three departments.

Director John Rindo is a doctoral student in the drama department; Caroline Shell, who choreographed the musical, is head of the Dance Department; Exine Bailey, Richard Clark and Marsha Mabrey, in charge of coaching the soloists, directing group vocal work and conducting the orchestra, respectively, are professors in the School of Music.

Story by Dave Stone
Photo by Mark Pynes

Clark and Bailey have spent several hours each week since auditions helping the cast perfect their vocal roles. Bailey coached the 10 cast members who had solo parts, while Clark worked with the 35 members of the cast (out of 37) who sing in group numbers.

Rindo started preparing for the musical in January 1983, nearly a year before choosing the cast last December.

He says "West Side Story" has always been his favorite musical, and he was one of the early supporters of the production. Other musicals, such as "Kiss Me, Kate," were suggested, since "West Side Story" had been done by several other local companies in the past.

But "West Side" was agreed upon, and it sold out in the second week of February — "We were really shocked" when the show sold out so quickly, Mabrey says.

"John Rindo has been just a super source of energy and spontaneity in bringing everybody together," she adds. "It's been very, very pleasurable" working on the musical.

"It's also been a nice experience for those of us who are in the music department to get outside of our department and meet with our colleagues in the arts," she says. "It's been a nice stimulus."

The obstacles in putting together "West Side Story" were "monumental," Rindo says, because of the geographical separation of the departments. The School of Music and the theater department, for example, are at opposite ends of the campus.

Because of the separation, Rindo says that "in the past people have been reticent to do this kind of project."

Shell says that "West Side Story" would have been physically impossible to do without cooperation of the three departments. For instance, several rehearsal studios in different departments were needed to rehearse the different dance units separately.

Artistic decisions also needed to be resolved between the departments.

"We had to get our heads together with the music people and make some compromises in terms of all the elements — in terms of acting and the singing and the dancing with all the cast," Shell says.

Rindo says problems have surfaced which needed "creative solutions." Some problems were easily solved, such as the use of studios in different departments to rehearse the musical's different dance units.

Other problems, however, weren't solved so easily. The orchestra pit at Robinson Theater comfortably seats 25 or 30 musicians, Mabrey says, hardly enough for "West Side Story"'s 55-member orchestra.

The solution? The ensemble's rhythm section was put in a trap room under the stage. But the sound of the drummers in the tiny room would have been deafening, so padding was added to the room's walls.

But sound wouldn't carry out of the room, so they added microphones to boost the sound.

And TV monitors had to be installed so the isolated



University Theatre's spring sell-out production of "Westside Story" is a campus collaboration by the School of Music and the departments of theater and dance. The ever-popular musical is directed by John Rindo (pictured here behind the fence), a doctoral student in the drama department. David Gustafson stars as Tony, and Lynnette Schenkel as Maria.

group could see the conductor.

The weekend before the show's opening last Wednesday, Rindo said the show was close to being ready, and the cast was responding with energy to the challenges he presents as a director.

"I have very high expectations. I'm not like a slavedriver or anything, but I think people rise up to the expectations," Rindo says. "I wouldn't be your Woody Hayes-type director (because) it works against my personality — I'm not a mean person."

"All the directors involved in the production team have been very cooperative, and have been very hard working."

Shell said Rindo chose her to choreograph "West Side Story" after he saw her work on Dance '83, and for her reputation as a demanding teacher.

"In talking with some of the students, he had heard that I'm a real taskmaster," Shell says. "He said that that's what he wanted — someone who was as much a taskmaster as he was."

Lynnette Schenkel, who plays the lead part of Maria in the production (David Gustafson plays the other lead part, Tony) agrees that the co-directors have been demanding, but fair.

"None of them are trying to work for just themselves or their department," Schenkel says. "They all seem to be working for the better of the show."

Shell has been working on original choreography for the show since last summer, and has made constant adjustments in the dance sequences since then.

Creating the "totally fresh, contemporary movement feelings and images" for "West Side Story" has been a time-consuming project, she says.

"It's just like pottery. You just have to scratch the whole thing and start all over until something works. Students want to be pushed beyond (where) they will push themselves," Shell continues. "People want to be challenged, but they don't know how to challenge themselves."

Schenkel says the cast and crew have been working hard to perfect the production, putting in about 22 hours a week until recently, when they began to work up to eight or more hours a day in preparation for opening night.

"If the push from the directors isn't enough, peer pressure is really starting to come into play," Schenkel says. "One way or the other... we're all going to be ready for the show."