

West Side Story

"West Side Story" is currently being presented by The Musical Company at the East-side Performance Center, through May 12. Call 235-4551 for reservations and ticket information.

"West Side" has book by Arthur Laurents music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. The story is a '50s version of Romeo and Juliet. And since it's the '50s, they made the families gangs (Jets and Sharks) and since families didn't really create much conflict in the '50s, the writers opted for racism as the conflict.

So the story is, the Jets (all white) control the neighborhood (including their pony-tailed girlfriends) until the Puerto Ricans (PRs, they're called) move in and create their own gang, the Sharks. The Sharks are led by Bernardo (Michael Welsh), whose beautiful, virgin sister (Theresa Koon), has just arrived in New York two weeks ago, and is betrothed to Chino (Gene Hughes). Meanwhile, the Jets leader, Riff (Paul Buschman) decides to declare war on the Sharks at the big dance and needs his lieutenant, Tony (John Jaqua) for the job. Now Tony has dropped out of the Jets because he feels something is about to happen in his life and he doesn't want to miss it, but he agrees to show up just this once (apparently the story of his life!).

At the dance Tony and Maria meet, fall in love, and he doesn't want to miss it, but he agrees to show up just this once (apparently the story of his life!).

At the dance Tony and Maria meet, fall in love, and create havoc. (Maria "belongs" to the Sharks, Tony "belongs" to the Jets, and never the twain shall meet.)

Well, the gangs rumble, Bernardo kills Riff, Tony kills Bernardo, Tony escapes to Maria's bedroom, they make love, Anita (Diana LoVerso) finds out, and things get really confusing.

Tony hides out at the drugstore waiting for Maria. Maria and Anita have a very moving scene together where they recognize their bond as the pain of love and Anita agrees to deliver a message to Tony, even though he's the chump who killed her lover. But when she gets to the drugstore, the Jets are hanging out and think she's come to get revenge and have Tony killed by Chino (who by now has a gun and is hunting). Well, these louts rape Anita, so she tells Tony that Chino found out about him and Maria and killed Maria.

So Tony, of course, calls Chino out, begging him to kill him too. Just seconds before Chino shows up, Maria appears just in time for Tony to see she's alive before Chino shoots him down.

Maria threatens to shoot herself, but instead brings the two gangs together and ends the senseless violence that had prevailed.

That's the story, now here's the scoop. This is one hot production. Maria & Tony are incredible singers. Incredible. Their voices complement each other so beautifully that it's worth twice the price just to hear them sing. Riff and Anita are the dancers of the group. Anita is also a very good actor. So is Maria. Their scenes together are very real. Both know how to use space and take their time onstage. In the scene where Tony dies (and he dies so good) Maria takes control of the stage, the cast and the audience. People were crying openly, and you don't see that a lot at musicals.

The unison dancing was not always in unison, but the choreography (by Michael Falotico) was lively, entertaining, and used people to the best of their abilities. The "Gee, officer Krupke" number was very clever, in-

deed, and very well done.

The set design (Scott MacGregor) makes the EPC stage seem several times larger than it is which is necessary, and really works. Hearing Tony & Maria sing from the balcony is a rare treat.

Costumes (Kristin D. Jager) are appropriate, authentic, colorful and visually appealing.

Music (D. Walter Carr, Stefan Minde), was very well done, if somewhat loud at times (hard to control given the physical environment).

This show is a must see. There's a tremendous amount of local talent you wouldn't want to miss.

Torch Song actress gay activist

Thelma Lee is the 68 year old heterosexual grandmother of five who played the homophobic mother of Arnold Beckoff in "Torch Song Trilogy" in the road show production which played Portland in late March.

In addition to performing virtually every night of the week for the past nine months, Thelma Lee (along with P.J. Benjamin, the show's star) gives interviews all day long.

Why would a woman of Ms. Lee's age and status subject herself to such an arduous schedule? Why, after 47 years of marriage, 55 years in show business (16 of them playing Golde in "Fiddler on the Roof," 20 as a stand-up comic in the Catskills). After playing on Broadway with the likes of Zero Mostel, Debbie Reynolds, Lucie Arnaz, Theodore Bikel, Imogen Coca, after doing TV and movies (with DeNiro and Pacino), why do nine months in "Torch Song"?



Thelma Lee

Because Thelma Lee feels it is important. Because gays continue to be oppressed and she, Thelma Lee, believes people do not have the right to sit in judgement upon other people because of their lifestyle. Because gays come from all walks of life and need

Torch Song Trilogy

by Sandra de Helen

"Torch Song Trilogy" by Harvey Fierstein (the road show — the original is still running on Broadway) came to Portland recently and played to a very interesting audience. There was probably the same number of men and women as usually show up at Civic Auditorium, but this time the pairs looked a little different. And that was nice. There were some heterosexual couples too, and that was good, because "Torch Song" does some educating about how gay relationships are a lot like

recognition. Because no one should be forced to stay in a closet. Because gay people are only asking for the right to be — and it's important that other people stand up for them. Especially heterosexuals. Especially women. Especially older women. And most especially people who have access to the media.

So, Thelma Lee plays the mother of drag queen Arnold Beckoff. She plays a mother who loves her son, the universal mother whose words may as well be engraved in

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stone, so familiar are they to all of us. Mrs. Beckoff loves Arnold, is willing to accept him, tolerate his bunny wallpaper, his bunny cushions, his bunny slippers, his "friends," his "roommates," maybe even his homosexuality — if he just won't talk about it! (Isn't that the universal plea of liberal heterosexuals — "Whatever you do is fine with me, but please, don't talk about it" or "Why do they have to talk about it all the time?")

But Arnold is grieving for his murdered lover, and Mrs. Beckoff is grieving for her late husband. And this grief is what finally pulls them together, finally allows them to see their sameness as clearly as their differences. And Thelma Lee brings this mother to life. She plays her so real, so strong, because she believes the stronger she plays the mother, the more clearly the audience can hear Arnold's answers, the more the audience can identify with both characters.

Ms. Lee has two grown children of her own (and the previously mentioned five grandchildren) none of whom are gay (at least not yet identified as such) but she identifies herself as a gay activist, and spreads the word wherever she goes. When people ask her, "What about AIDS?" she asks them, "What about herpes? What about VD?" Nobody condemns the entire group labeled heterosexual because of herpes. And people do stop Ms. Lee on the street to ask her her views on such topics because she very proudly wears a jacket with the "Torch Song" logo on the back.

When asked what's next in her career, Ms. Lee says she just wants to work. She is as committed and cooperative as she knows how to be, and she likes working in theater because it's not a place to settle into oneself, it's a place to work *with* people, a place to listen. And, we might add, a place to be heard.

straight relationships.

This is a play about people, and life, and love. It is specifically about Arnold Beckoff (P.J. Benjamin). In the first play (this trilogy has been trimmed down so all three plays make up an evening's entertainment) we meet Arnold the drag queen and are treated to his views on love affairs and meeting the right man. He gets picked up by Ed (Malcolm Stewart) in the front room of the Back Room bar. Arnold falls in love and gets hurt. Ed is seeing a woman and doesn't want to get involved with Arnold. They break up. Arnold goes to the Back Room and has sex with a man he never sees (and, of course, we don't as he isn't really onstage). This scene is the most controversial of the play. It's cleverly done and funny too, but it is also embarrassing for some people, and a few people walked out at this point. Which is too bad because the play has so very much to say.

Arnold goes through all the pain of a breakup, Ed shows up giving mixed messages and they go home together.

In the second play, Ed has married the woman, Laurel (Louisa Flanigan) and Arnold has a young stud of a lover, Alan (Bruce Toms) and the four of them do this play in a huge bed. This is the "civilized" version of how people deal with ex-lovers. It's as complicated and painful and funny as life.

In the final play, Alan has been gay-bashed to death, Ed and Laurel have broken up, Arnold has adopted a gay teenage boy, David (Karl Wiedergott) and Arnold's mother, Mrs. Beckoff (Thelma Lee) comes for a visit.

Here we see the pain of having come out to parents who love you but can't accept your sexuality. And we see the pain of loss, the grieving for lost partners. And the trials of being a gay parent, and the difficulty of re-establishing relationships with people you were hurt by in the past.

All this pain does resolve to a truce with Mom, a solid parent-child relationship and a together-at-last for Arnold and Ed. The grieving process is what brings them all together in the end. The mother-son dialogue is particularly moving because it is particularly real, and incredibly well done by P.J. and Thelma.

The acting throughout is very, very good and P.J. and Thelma are excellent. They work together beautifully.

The play itself is brilliantly written (and it won the Tony for best play of 1983). In a play so good, one wishes for perfection, and it's not, quite. There are a couple of racist remarks, a sexist, ageist bit about an 80 year old woman with a fifteen year old male lover, and some deaf jokes that are definitely oppressive. I wish that Mr. Fierstein would remove these few blemishes and show the world a flawless example of gay writing. It comes close.

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