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ACROSS FROM PIONEER SQUARE

Just entertainment

Mousketeer murderers

Even though West Side Story is a condemnation of prejudice, the white Jets come off better than the Puerto Rican Sharks. Shocking Greek extends run.

BY DOUG E MARTIN

Portland Civic Theatre has come very close to giving us an excellent version of *West Side Story*; the masterpiece of modern musical theatre by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. While the production does not match the excellence of the score, this is still quite an

Theatre

enjoyable piece of work.

What really makes this production worthwhile is the chorus. They are alive and active, they are in character and they play off one another, they perform the very good (and very Fosse-esque) choreography with enthusiasm — and of course, it helps that the gang members are cute. It would be good if the leads had the same enthusiasm. They are competent, generally in tune, but they just lack the spark that the choruses have. Diano LoVerso as Anita and Shawn Rogers as Riff are lively and charming in their interaction with the choruses, but they do not seem to have anything to play off of when dealing with Maria, Tony, and Bernardo.

It is interesting that the Jets (the white gang) come off better than the Puerto Rican Sharks. Even though this show is a condemnation of prejudice, it is still a product of the late '50s, and the whites are shown as more sympathetic; they get more to do in the show, and their characters are better defined. All the white gang members have identities and lines, we remember their names, but I can only remember two of the Puerto Ricans ever speaking; the rest were sort of stage dressing.

The sets and lighting are excellent, as usual for the Civic. David Kelly's orchestra is good (except the strings are out-of-tune). The direction by Greg Tamblyn is generally very good; the play moves along at a good rate and the relationships are clear. I could only hope that it felt a bit more dangerous, a bit dirtier. These are street gangs who end up committing murder. While it is somewhat accidental and is all very stylized, these kids seem more like Mousketeers than murderers.

This production would be quite good if it were almost any other show, but just good is not quite good enough for *West Side Story*. In some ways it is too bad that the music, lyrics and story are so good, because if the performance is not also fantastic we feel let down. While this production is still enjoyable, it has the same problems that Civic had last year with another show by Bernstein, *Candide*. In both shows the big things that are lacking are control and tightness, they come close but are just not as precise as they need to be. This is very complex music and it requires complex dancing, the performers have to concentrate on vocal production and rhythmic precision while they are

moving, and they have to act, and it all needs to be simultaneously under tight control, look effortless, and be spontaneous. These things might seem incompatible (and there are many who cannot achieve them who say that they are incompatible), but that is what makes musical theatre the most difficult art form we have.

Greek, by Steven Berkoff, is being given its Northwest premiere by Storefront Theatre, and it is one of the finest pieces of theatre I have seen in Portland in a long time. The script is fresh and adventurous (and somewhat caustic), and the cast and technical aspects of this production are first-rate and professional.

The story of *Greek* is a reworking of the Oedipus legend in modern-day working class London. The script is quite violent, especially in the first act. Berkoff is trying to shock the audience into recognizing the uncaring and cruelty that people have for each other in our present society. He is trying to get us to take a good hard look at the world around us, see what is wrong and what is right about it, and see what we can do to make it a better place to be in. It is a forceful point he is trying to make, and he does it in a forceful manner, some might say too forceful.

This is a play that brings out some strong emotions in the audience, some emotions that not everyone will like; that is one thing that makes this play worthwhile, it makes you react.

Director Rosalie Brandon has put together an excellent cast of some of Portland's most seasoned actors: Vana O'Brien, Ted Roisum, Keith Scales, and Dee Dee Van Zyl. Though Scales as Eddie (or Oedipus) has the most lines, this is very much an ensemble show, and the actors work with one another very well, none of them come off as being more important than any other. The women are deserving of particular praise. O'Brien does an amazing job of making an overlong monologue by the Sphinx constantly interested and enjoyable, and her portrayal of Eddie's soggy old mother is perfection. Van Zyl standing over the body of her dead husband and lamenting that now her life has lost its meaning is an incredibly touching moment — I think the high point of the play.

Greek has been a great success for Storefront, and is now occupying the loft space at the old Sumus Theatre on NW 13th. When I saw it for the second time on the closing weekend of the first run, the actors were getting a little over-indulgent after their great success of the previous weeks. They were playing for laughs too much, rather than just letting them come, and they were getting laughs in some places that cheapened what the play was trying to do. Maybe the few weeks off and re-rehearsal will clean these few spots up. Still, this is a remarkable show, and I highly recommend that it be seen.