



Photos by Kirby Neumann-Rea

**RIVAL GANGS:** Sharks, led by Bernardo (Nik Portela, center left) and Jets, led by Riff (William Thayer-Daugherty, in hat at right) prepare to rumble in "West Side Story," performed in Odell.

## ON STAGE: 'WEST SIDE STORY'



**MEETING AT the dance:** Maria (Lily Galvez) and Tony (Orville Grout) share a first kiss, moments after first setting eyes on each other. In a moment, Maria's brother intercedes. Talk-back sessions with selected cast members are planned after matinee performers, to give audiences an opportunity to discuss racism and other prevailing themes of the musical.

### Amidst hate, Maria sings, 'I have a love and that's all I have'

By **KIRBY NEUMANN-REA**  
News editor

"West Side Story" is like a time capsule never closed or buried.

Its lyrics and rhythms move and entertain just as they did when it debuted more than 60 years ago, and its contents also disturb.

"It is fundamentally troubling that some of the more explicit themes, dialogue and language of the script sound as relevant now as they did in 1957," Director Mark Steighner said.

Racial and class disparity and gender identity are timeless concerns that are dealt with outright or hover just below the surface.

"West Side Story" appeared on Broadway in 1957, the product of a creative team that included such luminaries as Leonard Bernstein, Jerome Robbins and the newly arrived Stephen Sondheim.

The Columbia Gorge Orchestra Association version of the tale debuted March 6 at Wy'east Performing Arts Center, and continues the next two weekends. (See Tickets and Times, at right, for details.)

"The show was innovative, challenging, shocking and not a big success," Steighner said.

"It wasn't until the film version arrived in 1961 that 'West

Side Story' became a staple of American culture.

"It's about people co-existing in the world and trying to live in the same space, which is a theme now," said Gorge theater veteran William Thayer-Daugherty, who plays the central role of Riff, leader of the Caucasian street gang, the Jets.

Thayer was in the 2016 local production of "Romeo and Juliet," the Shakespeare play "West Side Story" is based on, in the parallel role of Benvolio.

As the Jets and rival Latino gang Sharks, led by Bernardo (Nik Portela) vie for inner city turf, a secret love develops between Tony (Orville Grout) and Maria (Lily Galvez). The racial divide is what fuels the hatred that makes the love ill-fated — "star-crossed" as Shakespeare put it.

"Stick to your own kind," her friend Anita (Amalia Vasquez) tells her in a key scene.

But love, tragically, prevails. "This is something we're dealing with still today," Petrela said. "These kinds of issues, and it's going to be interesting to see what the community has to say about us like embodying these stereotypes and is it harmful we're doing something like this or does it shed light on the reality of where we're living right now? It's a really intense play for something

so campy."

Steighner said, "Over 60 years later, West Side Story still retains its capacity to challenge audiences to think about American attitudes around race, culture and our treatment

of immigrants — in short, and sadly — issues that are still headline news and the topics of political rallies."

"West Side Story" is, like the Shakespeare play from which it

draws inspiration, a love story first, but its context is an America that continues to struggle when asked to accept and embrace immigrants or those that are 'different,'" Steighner said.

"Of course, at its fundamen-

tal level, 'West Side Story' is simply about conflict and misunderstanding, suspicion and tribalism and innocent lovers out of step or uncaring about the violence around them (as it was in Shakespeare's original play, 'Romeo and Juliet')."

In his playbill notes, Steighner wrote, "As lyricist and composer Stephen Sondheim recently remarked, theater is an art form in which there is constant re-invention."

Susan Sorensen based her choreography on Robbins' original, but modified it for a less experienced cast; and dance captains Claire Rawson and Maza Brady (who are Jets members on stage) have helped to shape some of the dances and fight scenes.

Steighner said the musical "will always have a fundamental dissonance between the violence of the characters and story and the fact that they are — unrealistically — expressing their rage through stylized dance. It is simultaneously one of the most brilliant and least convincing aspects of the show.

"Our production of 'West Side Story' follows both the leads of the 2009 Broadway revival and the current Broadway production in setting the story not in the 1950s but in some-



**IN EARLY REHEARSAL,** Jets gang members Diesel (Christian Conway), Big Deal (Claire Rawson) and Baby John (Amy Courtney) express their anger and wish for respect and recognition.

#### TICKETS AND TIMES

"West Side Story" runs March 13-14, 20-21 at 7 p.m. and March 8, 15, and 22 at 2 p.m.

Tickets are available at the door.

Prices are \$20 (\$15 for CGOA members), and \$5 youth ages 10-17 and free for kids under 10.

Tickets and more information at gorgeorchestra.org.

Wy'east Performing Arts Center is located on Wy'east Road on the Wy'east Middle School Campus in Odell.