

THEATER

I've Found How Wonderful a Sound Can Be

By TERRY TEACHOUT
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Portland, Ore.

Of all the classic musicals of the '40s and '50s, "**West Side Story**," which Portland Center Stage picked to inaugurate its brand-new theater, is by far the hardest to revive. Not only is Leonard Bernstein's jazz-flavored score more demanding than that of any other show of the period, but Jerome Robbins's vaultingly vital street-kid choreography, which was central to the effect of the original 1957 production, remains familiar to audiences who know it from the Oscar-winning 1961 film version. If you don't use Robbins's dances, you have to come up with a plausible substitute for them -- and either way they've got to be executed by a cast of first-rate dancers who can also sing and act excitingly enough to bring the show to life.



Owen Carey

Carey Brown and Anderson Davis in Portland Center Stage's 'West Side Story'

None of this is impossible, but it's no cakewalk, and I'll admit to having felt a shiver of doubt as the lights went down last Friday. Even for a solidly established regional company like Portland Center Stage, "**West Side Story**" is a stretch, and I expected to see an ambitious but not wholly successful production about which I'd have felt honor-bound to write a tactful, encouraging review. Well, guess what? This "**West Side Story**" needs no apologies of any kind. Among other things, it's the best-sung revival of a musical that I've ever seen, whether on or off Broadway.

Compelling Personalities

Strong words, I know, but all the leads have splendid voices and compelling personalities, especially Carey Brown, who sings well enough to remind me of Kristin Chenoweth. Ms. Brown and Anderson Davis, who played Maria and Tony, were convincing in every way -- vocally, physically, dramatically. As for Ivette Sosa, who had the misfortune to make her Broadway debut last season in the dreadful "**Latinologues**," she redeems herself by giving a performance as Anita for which "sizzling" is the palest of understatements.

Chris Coleman, the company's artistic director, has staged "**West Side Story**" in a no-nonsense manner meant to evoke the Broadway production without being slavishly faithful to it. Joel Ferrell's Robbins-like choreography is imaginative enough to recall the master's touch -- I especially liked what he did with a pair of shopping carts -- and G.W. Mercier has set the show in a stark world of rusty fire escapes and chain-link fences. The onstage band, led by Rick Lewis, tears through Bernstein's score with swinging flair (though the amplification is spotty and unpleasing).

Portland Center Stage's new home, carved out of the city's old armory building, is a wonder -- a two-theater complex whose festive lobby, three stories high and decorated in the manner of a postmodern planetarium, is warm and inviting. Even the best-wrapped of packages, of course, is wasted unless there's something good inside -- but this "**West Side Story**" is fully worthy of the appealingly designed space in which it's being performed.