

# Paramount's 'West Side Story' nails today's gang violence in darker, emotional dance



By **Chris Jones** - Contact Reporter

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**F**or all the grant money expended on theater that is designed to combat youth violence, there's a case to be made for just buying those at-risk kids a ticket to "West Side Story" instead. Or, more specifically, to the unstintingly expressionistic, empathetic and dark-hued Jim Corti production of "West Side Story" — rendered as more Twyla Tharp than Jerome Robbins — that you currently can experience at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora.

This is, of course, testament to the abiding power of the 1956 masterpiece from Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, especially when staged in a theater with the resources to employ 19 musicians to play its visceral, beautiful score and the determination to place a relentless focus on veracity and the vulnerability of the young.

Laurents hardly was known for a cuddly personality, but he somehow found a way in his book-of-all-musical-books to depict the potential fatal perils of gang violence, nascent gang violence at that, while making clear that these rumbling kids from New York's Upper West Side didn't so much make the world lousy as react to the way they found their unequal and brutal city of adults.

Nothing much has changed on that score. Not in Chicago. And yet Laurents and his collaborators also injected a counterintuitive note of hope in the forbidden Romeo and Juliet relationship that acts both as the inciting incident of the story and the moral conscience of the tale. As a force for change, Maria and Tony still work, in the Brechtian sense. What else have we found in the years since 1956 to make the case for urban peace than the milk of human tenderness?

In Corti's West suburban "West Side," there is none of the traditional solace in the show's climax, wherein the bereaved Maria typically takes up the status and moral authority of a surrogate widow, leaving us with the sense that the Jets and the Sharks will finally now understand the human cost of their enmity. Instead, Corti kills off the usual "Somewhere" play-off and its swell of optimism, preferring instead to show us a vista of a world where death quiets nothing. I found these last few moments chilling, frankly, since death does indeed change nothing about today's gun-fueled insanity, where innocents lying on the pavement seemingly can be stepped over with ease. You can't watch the end of this show without your mind going right there.

This certainly is the darkest end to this show you likely will have seen, and it's a fitting coda to the breathtaking work of the young Chicago choreographer William Carlos Angulo, who powers his ensemble with the overwhelming angst of adolescent energy — of both the sensual and the deeply destructive kind. Throughout this production, which honors the show's groundbreaking role in the history of narrative dance while also feeling completely fresh, you feel like you're mostly watching kids unable to control their bodies. At times it's like they are attacking themselves.

What Angulo is doing — in the rumble, at the dance, in the aspirational sequence where these kids hope for a kinder place in the world — works as a metaphor for adolescence, but it's also a way of greatly raising the emotional stakes to a level you rarely see (certainly not in the most recent Broadway revival) when the choreography is stylized and distancing. The movement in this unusual production has a rage to it, and it plays in tandem with a typically expansive set from Kevin Depinet that felt, to me, not so much like a literal depiction of the Upper West Side but more a picture of the inside of the adolescent brain, with the odd shaft of light occasionally piercing through the darkness of resentment and abandonment.

There's nothing pretty at all about this take. As played by Tom McElroy, Old Doc the drugstore owner comes with a hint of Father Michael Pfleger, just as Joe Dempsey's Schrank calls up a certain recent

video, shot from a dashboard. Even "Gee, Officer Krupke" (Joe Foust plays the nasty old beat cop) is pretty scary. It's hardly comedic but rather a big howl of pain — a time-warped insistence that Young Lives Matter — black, white or Latino.

I do not, however, want to scare you off from taking your family to downtown Aurora or suggest that this is some counterintuitive deconstruction. On the contrary, this is the full "West Side Story," replete with the patina of a big night out in the company of those incomparable Bernstein melodies and bodies hurtling across the stage, often quite gorgeously. The emotional landscape of the show was full in 1956, and it is just as brimming with passion here.

Tony, beautifully sung by Will Skrip, is clearly more a lover than a fighter, and you feel deeply for Alexander Aguilar's wiry Bernardo and Jeff Smith's hapless Riff. Mary Antonini, who plays Anita, dominates the proceedings far more than this character usually manages — Anitas vary in where their loyalties lie and how much they seem willing to lay down for positive change, and Antonini's Anita seems willing to give up a lot, for she signals to us all that she already knows a lot about how these stories usually end.

Zoe Nadal, the young actress playing Maria, has some vocal challenges yet to overcome — especially in Act 2 on Sunday, when too many notes went awry, especially when she was singing with the accomplished Antonini. Maria is a tough part to sing. But if Nadal's vocals need work, her moral authority in the piece is more grounded. She floats through her own era and into ours, a woman of indeterminate race and time, crying over a body that is shot and lying on the ground, the body of one she truly loves.

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### **3.5 STARS**

**When:** Through April 24

**Where:** Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora

**Running time:** 2 hours, 30 minutes

**Tickets:** \$41-\$56 at 630-896-6666 or [www.paramountaurora.com](http://www.paramountaurora.com)