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Stage

Wanna fight?

By Arnold Wayne Jones

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Gangs rumble in a dancetastic ‘West Side Story;’ soldiers get into trouble with ‘Defiance’

Upon first glance, the set for Lyric Stage’s production of “West Side Story” is a non-set — some Home Depot ladders and a few tin cans, then some free-standing wooden doors. Then the strains of Leonard Bernstein’s instantly-recognizable score waft out, and in dance the Sharks and the Jets to Jerome Robbins’ original choreography. Suddenly, the set doesn’t seem like such a big deal... and they move it around so efficiently, it kind of works anyway.



“West Side,” an iconic musical adapted from “Romeo & Juliet” and set in 50s New York, is one of the hardest shows to do right. It’s a ballet in blue jeans, and singing to Stephen Sondheim’s lyrics and Bernstein’s jazzy music. There are many opportunities to go wrong and only a few to get it right.

BALLET IN BLUE JEANS: The Sharks prepare to rumble with the Jets.

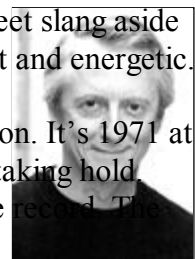
Fortunately for Lyric, director Grover Dale knows the right ways. Dale was just out of his teens when he was cast in the original Broadway production, and he brings that learned canniness to this staging. Let the set take a back seat. He’s more concerned with a different kind of beauty.

Mostly, it is beautiful. You can’t help but react viscerally upon seeing those stylized dance moves the first time, performed by street toughs obsessed with getting into rumbles and listening to the rock and/or roll ... but only after six years of jazz-tap and well-practiced plies. The cast dances like mad, especially Anita (Christie Peruso) and Riff (Philip Groft), leader of the Jets (you can easily spot the gang leaders: they’re the ones with the biggest hair).

But the singing crown goes to Kimberly Whalen as Maria. She’s a songbird with such a lilting coloratura, you feel like you’re in an opera. At least you do until her boyfriend, Tony (Micah Shepard), has his solos. Shepard’s a bland, milquetoast presence, one you have difficulty believing Maria would fall in love with on first sight. His voice is chirpy and thin, and he tends to writhe and bounce around a lot.

Try to overlook that and concentrate on the positive qualities of a show, changes in street slang aside (who says “daddio” anymore, except Jon Favreau?), that feels remarkably still-relevant and energetic.

There’s much less dancing in Theatre Three’s “Defiance,” but just as much racial tension. It’s 1971 at Camp Lejeune, as the Vietnam War is petering out and the Black Power movement is taking hold. Onto the base arrives Capt. King (Bryan Pitts), a black JAG officer with an impeccable record. The



camp's well-intentioned commandant, Col. Littlefield (Steven Pounders), hopes King can help soothe the black troops, but King doesn't want to be a symbol for racial pride — or to take on the unwelcome responsibilities that come with Littlefield's misplaced confidence.

“Defiance” unfolds like primer to Shanley's Pulitzer-winning “Doubt,” where a nun's suspicions about the sexual behavior of a priest creates a moral dilemma. The dialectic is almost identical: a rigid institution built on unquestioned obedience (the church, the Marines), a human failing, a desire to do the right thing, even if there is a high cost. But Shanley's writing feels lazier, especially when King, usually taciturn, engages in the rat-a-tat banter of esoteric debate. Pitts is no good at it, and the preachy dialogue doesn't help him much.

Yet the production, tightly directed by T.J. Walsh, is easy to recommend. Pounders delivers an incisive performance, witty and unsentimental yet deeply sympathetic. He and Diane Worman, playing his devoted military wife, create genuine chemistry, a realistic portrayal of a complex marriage. Drew Wall, in a single scene as a disturbed enlisted man, projects a fierce intensity, and David Fluitt is spot-on as an unctuous chaplain.

Missteps aside, “Defiance,” like “Doubt,” puts abstract issues in a relatable context. Presenting two valid points to several thorny issues — anger vs. idealism, ends vs. means — it prompts conversation, whether you agree or disagree. As the country prepare to elect its first African-American, or first woman, to the level of presidential authority, the talk in the play about “change” and responsibility resonates in unexpected ways.

“West Side Story,” Irving Arts Center, 3333 N. MacArthur Blvd. Final weekend. Friday–Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 2:30 p.m. \$20–\$50. 972-252-2787. “Defiance,” Theatre Three, 2900 Routh St. Through Oct. 5. Thursdays and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays-Saturdays at 8 p.m., weekend matinees at 2:30 p.m. \$10–\$40. 214-871-3300.

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