

West Side was storied production

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Every year when Professor Garrod tells me what play he has decided to perform, I say to myself, Just how is he going to do this? Indeed, when he told me three months ago that he was going to do West Side Story this year I honestly thought he was nuts: All that singing and dancing and intense racial drama on a stage... Here? And every year when I go to the dress rehearsal, as I did this year, I inevitably wind up thinking: No way, this is going to be such a mess, my friend Andrew may finally have to deal with a bit of failure. And every year I walk away after the last performance with my jaw scraping the ground in awe of how he manages to show us all just how deep the artistic talent runs within our own community. The four days of performances last week at the ICC were an overwhelming success and such a tremendous joy for our island.

Perhaps the reason West Side Story connected so well with the community here is that the actors on the stage were playing characters that were so close to their own age. When they sang the refrain from the song "Somewhere," I couldn't help but wonder how many of those young people on stage haven't had that same set of feelings about finding their place in the world.

The main characters of Maria and Tony, played by Lulani Ritok and John Riklon, were outstanding. I must admit a bias here for Lulani because she has sung in each of our four films. Her voice has always had a way of taking me places. I am beyond thrilled that so many people were able to experience her singing live as I have for the past five years, and I know I was not alone as I sat in awe of her performance.

John Riklon was equally astounding. To be able to sing solo, not once but twice, in front of those huge crowds makes him one of the bravest people in the Marshall Islands. His rendition of Maria was superb and captivating and was one of the show's best moments. The manikin scene with just John and Lulani was also one of my favorites; indeed, their interaction



Marshall Islands High School senior Ann Abija (center, above) delivered a spirited performance as "Anybods," a member of the Jets gang in West Side Story. The play centered around the love-at-first-sight story featuring "Maria" (played by Lulani Ritok) and "Tony" (John Riklon) at left.

Photos: Hilary Hosia.

was intriguingly passionate and dynamic throughout the play.

The supporting roles of Anita, Riff and Bernardo, played by Jennifer Andrike, Niten Anni and Vahid Pedro, made the play what it was. Any production is only as good as your supporting cast, and these three were quite powerful. Jennifer has a stage voice and presence that is as good as I have seen in any of these plays. She has an incredible ability to show her emotion by throwing her voice and contorting her body; she mesmerized the audience with the immense amount of personality she brought to her character.

Niten has always been one of my favorites and is a veteran actor: I expect him to be brilliant, and he did not disappoint. His graceful dancing movements, his bodylines reminiscent of a talented figure skater, were downright eye candy. Niten

has learned to use the stage as an effective tool in communicating what his character is all about. Vahid Pedro gave the role of Bernardo a biting-though-entertaining nasty edge. It was nice to see Vahid get a chance to take center stage in a production like this because I have known him for a quite a while, i.e., he is a character.

The gang members were wonderful and well cast. Chino, played by Yoda Mewa, and Action, played by Rickson Katwon, were fun to watch as they interacted with the rest of their gang. I particularly liked the performance — the dialog, singing and dancing — of the song "America," and the scene where Brittany Johnson sings the song "Somewhere" as the cast surrounds Maria and Tony sitting on the stage. Brittany has a nice deep tone and range to her singing voice. Ann Abija as Anybods created an instant buzz and then a

laugh each time she darted onto the stage. Putting her in that role was a stroke of genius as it seemed to be made just for her.

One reason I enjoy these plays is that we always get to see some "outsiders" on the stage mixing it up with the local cast. This allows everyone in the audience to connect with the play, which is an important goal of any production. This time, however, it was intriguing to see how the outsiders were solely cast to play the "adult" roles in the play. The reason I say this is that universally, to a teenager, any adult IS an outsider (I have raised six of them, I know). Joe Naeem as Doc was perfect, and when Joe wasn't masterfully playing his role on stage, he was over at the side working the music. I am not sure how he did this, but he did. Bryan Armbruster as Shrank and Jovilisi Fotofili as Krupke livened the production with their gravity (and at times, their comedy) as officers of the law. Andrew Shanahan's role as the nerdy-looking-Buddy-Holly-lookalike Gladhand was well played as he looked so profoundly out of place on stage — just like any adult would at a teen dance.

Largest crowds ever at the ICC?

As word spread after opening night of West Side Story, people crowded the ICC for the final three showings. By Saturday night, more than 900 people packed the hall, with several hundred standing up for the two-and-half-hour show.

Play organizers said they were forced to turn away about 50 people Saturday because the ICC could not accommodate any more.

Indicating the enthusiasm of local audiences for the show, PII CEO Jerry Kramer after watching the play arranged for a special performance Monday for PII workers and families.

The two most important people that we never saw on the stage were Mona Levy-Strauss, who each year has been tasked with assembling some enormously complicated wardrobes, and Alson Kelen, who has translated most of the plays from English to Marshallese: Imagine the powerful mind of a person who has the capability to translate Shakespeare dialogues and West Side Story from English to Marshallese. Sigh.

Choreographer Marisa Clementi, Producer Max Mucenic, and Assistant Choreographer and Music Director Kristan Thatcher, and the other people from Dartmouth all have our sincere thanks for helping make this play such a marvelous experience for all of us. Bonny and Ken Taggart, who helped build the props and sets, and Scott Stege, who helped with the

audio, were also essential in helping get this production off the ground and up and running.

When you think of what was accomplished with this herculean amount of effort by our small community in just two months, it makes you wonder what we could do if we actually had a permanent facility to encourage and accommodate the seemingly unquenchable desire for the performing arts that we have here in the Marshall Islands: Imagine having various forms of live entertainment in a professional venue every weekend instead of one or two weeks a year.

Of course, we would have to find a way of keeping Professor Garrod here on island, but that is what we have immigration control for: I mean, he is only a Canadian, so how hard could this be? Somehow. Some day.

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