

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Rehearsals heating up for Vancouver Opera's

## WEST SIDE STORY

VO's full-on Broadway-style production features original Jerome Robbins high-energy choreography, a 30-piece live orchestra and a stellar cast of the country's best triple-threats

**Vancouver, BC** ~ Vancouver Opera's 30-piece powerhouse orchestra combines forces with more than 40 of the country's best triple-threats to present Bernstein's masterpiece the way it was meant to be done. VO's high-octane *West Side Story*, performed in full-on Broadway style with **Jerome Robbins's** original choreography is onstage for eight thrilling performances only, **October 22 - 29, 2011** at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

Directed by **Ken Cazan**, who worked with Leonard Bernstein, and choreographed by **Tracey Flye**, one of the few in the world officially certified to coach the original Robbins choreography, VO's *West Side Story* will be a rare treat for Vancouver audiences, retaining both the grittiness of the script and story and the exuberance and charm of the music and dance.

This season, VO will be offering some matinees in addition to evening performances. Matinees will begin at 1:30pm and evening performances will begin at the usual time of 7:30pm.

Opening night of *West Side Story* is **Saturday, October 22, 2011**. There will be a matinee performance on **Sunday, October 23**; evening performances on **Tuesday, October 25; Wednesday, October 26; Thursday, October 27; Friday, October 28** and both a matinee and evening performance on **Saturday, October 29**.

All performances take place at the **Queen Elizabeth Theatre**, Georgia and Hamilton Streets, Vancouver, BC. Tickets are available exclusively at the Vancouver Opera Ticket Centre, online at [www.vancouveropera.ca](http://www.vancouveropera.ca) or by telephone at 604-683-0222. See complete ticket information below.

Please note that *West Side Story* contains suggestive language and physical violence, including depictions of killings and an attempted sexual assault. Parents may consider this production unsuitable for children under the age of 12.

## The Cast and Creative Team

Performing the star-crossed lovers Tony and Maria will be **Colin Ainsworth** and **Lucia Cesaroni**. Already established as highly-regarded opera singers, both are equally comfortable and magnetic in music theatre and bring a unique power and intensity to these beloved roles.

Mr. Ainsworth was last seen on the VO stage as the young love-struck Kristian in the world premiere of the VO-commissioned opera, *Lillian Alling*. "The most immediate impression was Ainsworth's striking physical appearance – with his long blond hair and broad smile – though as the music began, it was all about his wonderfully engaging vocal talent," wrote *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record* of his performance of Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin*. "The wildly expansive piece tested the full range of vocal expression, from the most tender, achingly-wistful sigh, to the full-throttle gesticulation of giddy glee; Ainsworth conquered all with confident technique, tone and temperament."

Ms. Cesaroni makes her VO début in the role of Maria. The young soprano has been praised widely for her performances of "a stunning Cleopatra. Her voice has just enough wildness to lift the impulsive nature of the youthful character to that intangible level that separates good from great" (Norules-nolights.com) - a vocal quality that brings new dimension to Maria.

**Dani Jazzar** will perform Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks, one of his signature roles. Early in his dance career, Mr. Jazzar assisted with choreography at the Europe MTV Video Music Awards and has since appeared as a dancer and actor in such films as *The Love Guru* with Mike Myers and *Repo! The Genetic Opera* with Paris Hilton. He is also recognizable as "the Koodo guy", sporting a thick mustache and comb-over on billboards, buses and newspapers all over the country. "As the Sharks' fiery, possessive captain Bernardo, hostile recipient of a thousand sneers, [Mr. Jazzar] is excellent, effortlessly stylish." (*The Edmonton Journal*)

**Cleopatra Williams** will perform Anita. With her strong voice, sultry looks and spectacular dancing, Ms. Williams has captivated audiences with performances in *We Will Rock You*, *Jersey Boys* and *Happy Days*. She has also danced with the Toronto Raptors Dance Pack and toured the Middle East with Toronto pop singer Massari.

The production is directed by **Ken Cazan**, one of America's most sought after stage directors. Mr. Cazan has directed more than 100 productions for opera and theatre, including a collaboration of *La bohème* with Leonard Bernstein which was recorded and released on Deutsche Grammophon.

Choreographer **Tracey Flye** is one of only a few people in the world who have the credentials to coach *West Side Story*'s original Jerome Robbins choreography. She has choreographed and directed a variety of projects for TV, theatre, fashion and opera.

### The story, in brief

Drawing on the classic tale of Romeo and Juliet, *West Side Story* transplants the action to 1950s New York City. The Sharks and the Jets, rival gangs, are gearing up for a rumble to end all rumbles, when reluctant Jet Tony falls in love with Maria, sister of the leader of the Sharks. Can love end the turf war, or will it all end in tragedy?

Read a full synopsis at [www.vancouveropera.ca](http://www.vancouveropera.ca).

### Background

*West Side Story* was created by the team of writer Arthur Laurents, composer Leonard Bernstein, lyricist Stephen Sondheim and choreographer Jerome Robbins. Based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it remains one of the most memorable love stories of all time. Its dark theme, sophisticated orchestral music, extended dance scenes and focus on social problems were unusual for this kind of piece, which changed musical theatre forever.

Jerome Robbins first approached Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents in 1949 with the idea for a contemporary version of *Romeo and Juliet*. He proposed they centre the plot around the conflict between an Irish Roman Catholic family and a Jewish family living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. After some initial sketches of musical themes which yielded nothing worth pursuing, Bernstein opted to drop out and the project was shelved for several years.

Six years later, Laurents was invited to work on a stage adaptation of James M. Cain's novel *Serenade*. He asked Bernstein and Robbins to join the creative team. Bernstein and Robbins declined, preferring that the threesome return to what they were calling *East Side Story* rather than begin a new project. Stephen Sondheim was brought on instead, but *Serenade* was ultimately shelved.

Soon after, while in Hollywood to work on a screenplay, Laurents connected with Bernstein, who was in town conducting at the Hollywood Bowl. Their conversation turned to the fairly recent rise in juvenile delinquent gangs. Bernstein suggested they revisit *East Side Story* along those lines, setting it in Los Angeles. Laurents felt he was more familiar with Puerto Ricans and Harlem, and so the setting was changed to New York and the script retitled *West Side Story*. The two contacted Robbins, who was excited about injecting a Latin beat into the project. Soon arriving in Hollywood himself, at work on *The King and I*, he and Laurents began work on the piece, keeping in touch with Bernstein who

had returned to New York. Sondheim was then invited to join the team and accepted, after some initial resistance and convincing by Oscar Hammerstein.

Language in the original script was tricky, as four-letter curse words were not accepted in the theatre at the time. There was also some fear that the slang expressions would be dated by the time the production opened. Thus, Laurents invented a new street talk: "Cheese it" (as in *Hide!*), "Drop you!" (with "drop" in place of a certain expletive), and "cut the frabba-jabba!"

Bernstein worked on *West Side Story* and *Candide* at the same time, which led to some swapping of music between the two pieces. Tony and Maria's duet "One Hand, One Heart" was originally written for Cunegonde, and the music from "Gee, Officer Krupke" was taken from *Candide's* Venice scene.

*West Side Story* premiered on Broadway in 1957. This was also Stephen Sondheim's Broadway debut. The show was extremely successful for the time, running for 732 performances and then going on tour to an even longer run in London and a number of revivals and international productions. It was nominated for two Tony® Awards, losing for Best Musical (to *The Music Man*) but winning for Best Choreography.

In 1961, the musical film *West Side Story* was released, starring Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Rita Moreno and Russ Tamblyn. It won nine Academy Awards out of the ten for which it was nominated.

### **Full Ticket Information**

Single tickets are available exclusively from the Vancouver Opera Ticket Centre, online at [www.vancouveropera.ca](http://www.vancouveropera.ca), or by phone at 604-683-0222. Visa, MasterCard and American Express are accepted. Specially priced ticket packages for families are available for matinee performances of *West Side Story*; contact the VO Ticket Centre at 604-683-0222 for details.

**Groups:** For special pricing for groups of ten or more, call 604-683-0222.

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VO's 2011-2012 Season is generously sponsored by Goldcorp