

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Sharks and the Jets get ready to rumble in Vancouver Opera's

WEST SIDE STORY

VO's 2011-2012 season opens with a sizzling
production of Bernstein's masterpiece

Vancouver, BC ~ Vancouver Opera opens its season with one of the greatest theatrical and musical works of the 20th century: Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. This high-energy, knock-your-socks-off production will be on stage for eight thrilling performances only, October 22 – 29 at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre.

VO's spectacular production will feature Jerome Robbins's original choreography, also seen in the classic 1961 film. Accompanied by the powerhouse 30-piece VO Orchestra, the sensational cast will include more than 40 of the country's best triple threats who will sing, dance and act Bernstein's masterpiece the way it was meant to be seen.

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 or by telephone at 604-683-0222. See complete ticket information below.

With a youthfully exuberant cast of Sharks and Jets and a larger-than-life set, *West Side Story* will be a finger-snapping rarely-seen treat for Vancouver audiences!

Colin Ainsworth will perform Tony, the Jet trapped by loyalty and love. Last seen on the VO stage in the tenor role of Kristian in the world premiere production of *Lillian Alling*, Mr. Ainsworth is equally comfortable and magnetic in both opera and music theatre performance.

Lucia Cesaroni will perform Maria. The soprano is renowned for her performances as Pamina in *The Magic Flute*, Anne Trulove in *The Rake's Progress*, Lucia in *The Rape of Lucretia* and several other operas. This will be her role debut.

Scott Augustine will perform Riff, leader of the Jets. **Dani Jazzar** will perform Bernardo, leader of the Sharks (and Maria's brother). **Cleopatra Williams** will perform Anita. Doc will be performed by **David Adams**.

The director is **Ken Cazan**, who has helmed more than 100 theatre and opera productions. The choreographer is **Tracey Flye**, who handled the original Jerome Robbins choreography for an acclaimed production of *West Side Story* at the Stratford Festival in 2009. VO's Chorus Director and Associate Conductor **Leslie Dala** will lead the VO Orchestra.

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.

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 from the Vancouver Opera Ticket Centre, online at 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.

Learn More – Community Events

West Side Story Film Screening **Thursday, September 22, 2011**

Vancity Theatre, Vancouver International Film Centre
1181 Seymour Street (at Davie)
Doors: 6:30pm • Introduction and Screening: 7:00pm

Regular admission: \$11/\$9 senior or student (includes \$2 Vancity Film Centre membership).

One of the most dynamic and exhilarating musicals ever put on film, *West Side Story* relocates Romeo & Juliet to the streets of New York, where youth gangs the Jets (the white kids) clash with the Sharks (Puerto Ricans) over turf.

The movie includes the breathtaking choreography by Jerome Robbins, shot on real locations, as well as the sensational Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim songs: "I Like to Be in America"; "I Feel Pretty"; "When You're a Jet"; "Tonight"; "Gee Officer Krupke"; "Maria"; "Stay Cool Boy", "There's a Place for Us".

This special screening will feature an introduction by stage director **Ken Cazan**.

Ken Cazan is the resident stage director for the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California and is one of America's most popular, controversial, and sought after opera-theatre stage directors. He has directed more than 140 productions of operas, musical theatre, and theatre in the United States, Canada, Italy, and Mexico. In addition to VO's *West Side Story*, Mr. Cazan's upcoming directing projects include Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers* in Central City and a new play by Paul Sand titled *Possible Dangerous Side Effects*.

Seating is limited. This special event continues a series of co-presentations between Vancouver Opera and Vancity Theatre.

Opera Speaks @ VPL: All About Bernstein: The Life and Influence of Leonard Bernstein **Wednesday, October 5, 2011**

Vancouver Public Library Central Branch, Alice MacKay Room
7:00pm – 9:00pm

Free admission • Limited seating

Explore the life, music, and wide-reaching legacy of one of the 20th century's great composers and communicators. Speakers include conductor **Leslie Dala**, educator and Vancouver Sun music critic **David Gordon Duke**, and *West Side Story* stage director **Ken Cazan**.

Opera Speaks at Britannia: Gangs in Our Communities

Thursday, October 13, 2011

Britannia Secondary School Auditorium

1001 Cotton Drive, Vancouver (Commercial Drive at Venables)

7:00pm – 9:00pm

Free admission • Limited seating

Join a panel of community-connected experts as they explore with wisdom and experience the nature, influence and impact of gangs in our communities. VO is delighted to partner with our new neighbours, the Britannia Community Services Centre, and Britannia Secondary School. Many thanks to them!

With a special performance of an excerpt of the hip-hop-based theatre piece "**Kutz and Dawgs**" - a work in progress based loosely on *West Side Story*, created by at-risk youth, which will have its world premiere next spring at the Vancouver International Children's Festival. This "open rehearsal" segment is a project of [Miscellaneous Productions](#) (Elaine Carol, Artistic Director).

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