

**Ilkley Amateur Operatic Society's
production of
West Side Story
at the King's Hall Ilkley**

It would have been impossible not so many years ago, for a non-professional company to assemble a cast close enough to the age of the characters portrayed in Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's classic musical set against a backdrop of 1950s gangland tension in New York.

Perhaps it is just as much of a commentary on today's society that so many young people consider it cool to develop their talents as singers and dancers, as *West Side Story* was itself a commentary on the intolerance of society over half a century ago.

The spotlight is very much on youth in Jonathan Tate's vibrant, fast moving production for Ilkley Amateurs. Listening to the sweet and ardent young voices of Ilkley's Fraser Wilkinson and Kayleigh Stephenson as Tony and Maria, I was reminded of Bernstein's own controversial recording of *West Side Story*. Bernstein chose Jose Carreras and Kiri te Kanawa as the star-crossed young lovers with Tatiana Troyanos as Anita - all wonderful voices of course, but simply too plush and operatic for the musical theatre.

Fraser and Kayleigh give very convincing and moving performances. The pair are ably supported by a strong cast: Dale Chadwick puts in a smouldering performance as Maria's volatile brother Bernado and Pip Barton is a sultry and seductively smoky-voiced Anita. Matt Dalingwater is a formidable Riff, leader of the Jets. Mark Brown presents a sympathetic figure as Doc - the voice of reason and tolerance. Jamie Rogers shines as young Chino and so does Melanie Beck as "Anybody's" girl.

Above all, *West Side Story* is an ensemble show and every member of this large company gels together, thanks to Jonathan Tate's insightful direction and Andrew Walton's streetwise choreography. Pam Clarke's striking costumes and Andrew Walbank's scenic backdrop of New York skyscrapers combined with authentic sound effects and subtle lighting all help to evoke the atmosphere of 1950s New York.

Bernstein's tuneful but hugely challenging score is wonderfully realised by musical director Jim Lunt and his orchestra. He infuses the big song and dance numbers with vitality and achieves a good balance between between orchestra pit and stage.

The downbeat ending of *West Side Story* broke one of the cardinal rules of

the musical theatre, but as Jonathan Tate writes in the programme, there is an enormous amount of love in the story. Continues until Saturday evening and there is a matinee performance on Saturday at 2.15pm.

Geoffrey Mogridge