



The Jets hangin' tough.



MUSICALS need a cut-through, ear pricking opening number and they don't get much better than the finger-snapping start to *West Side Story*. It's hard to resist The Jets and The Sharks as the rival gangs strut their dance moves in tight 'T's and tighter jeans.

The story of star-crossed lovers is, of course, an adaptation of *Romeo And Juliet* and, as such, *West Side Story* is a generational timepiece with its themes of riotous youth, first love and cross-cultural awkwardness. *West Side Story* created musical theatre tropes that have been replicated in *Hair*, *Grease*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Rent*, *American Idiot* and, yes, Michael Jackson's *Bad* video!

The retelling of Shakespeare's drama replaces the two great houses, the Montagues and the Capulets, with two rival street gangs, The Sharks (Puerto Rican) and The Jets (Anglo American). Tony, from the latter, falls for Maria, sister to the Shark's leader, Bernardo. The subsequent story sees a battle between the gangs and an expectedly tragic Shakespearean conclusion, all set in a blue-collar neighbourhood of 1950's New York.

For Tony Award-nominated director and choreographer Joey McKneely, the themes of *West Side Story* are as relevant today as when it premiered back in 1957.

"The parallels are all around us in society," says McKneely. "It's sad that we are still dealing with racism but... there's a fear of others who are different. But what I love about *West Side Story* is that it gets this particular story right with out being preachy. That is, hate destroys love. There is a choice. We can choose not to

hate, but we have to be strong and make the choice. Children are not born with hate, they learn it."

Todd Jacobsson (*Book Of Mormon*) and Sophie Salvesani (*La Boheme*) play the lead roles of Tony and Maria, while Lyndon Watts (*Aladdin*) is Bernardo and Noah Mullins (*Cats*) is the Jets' gang leader, Riff.

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"It's about reaching deep into the emotions of each of these characters, and pulling out the highest stake one can get to, in order to tell the story," says McKneely, who is overseeing the Australian production.

"Since the show is about racism, which explodes into violence and the death of three characters, it needs to have an emotional truth behind it. On the flip side, there is the creation



Director and choreographer, Joey McKneely.

of all those feelings of first love. Falling in love sounds easy but putting it up on the stage takes a lot of tender moments to create that truth, and to do it as dance is the icing on the cake!"

Created by playwright Arthur Laurents, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the story was originally intended to be *East Side Story*, with the conflict between an Irish Catholic and Jewish family. Either way, its Shakespearean core is one that continues to find parallels in modern society.

"It's such a timeless story because first love speaks to the human condition and Shakespeare got it so right. The authors of *West Side Story* brought it into the modern area by using immigration and race as the conflict. I hope audiences will be reminded of the power of theatre and come and fall in love with *West Side Story*, just as they did many years ago!"

MORE: *West Side Story* plays at the Arts Centre Melbourne 6-28 April, and the Sydney Opera House 16 August to 6 October. Go to westsidestory.com.au