

WEST SIDE STORY

HISTORY

Memories of the Broadway hit musical... and the movie

by BABY A. GIL / Philstar.com

ALTHOUGH it won 10 Academy Awards including Best Picture, *West Side Story* (WSS) is not among the Top 10 or even the Top 20 all-time great Hollywood films. I did read some critics say it could have been better. But to this day, I still feel like I couldn't care less. What I recall as a kid is sitting in the theater totally stunned by what I just saw. The thought that WSS could be like that made me breathless. Strong was the description I remember most. It was not Elvis or a Gene Kelly rerun. There was definitely nothing namby-pamby about the movie version of the musical from 1961.



Natalie Wood and Richard Beymer as Maria and Tony in movie version of *West Side Story* (1961)

I could not get over how Arthur Laurents transported Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet* into the midst of a gang war on the streets of New York. Leonard Bernstein's music was a heady mix of modern and classical. It was opera with pop songs, some Latin, some jazz and so romantic ballads. *Tonight, Somewhere, Maria*. I thought the cast, Natalie Wood as Maria, Richard Beymer as Tony, Rita Moreno as Anita and George Chakiris as Bernardo was just perfect. And the dancing choreographed by Jerome Robbins was so spirited and beautifully photographed. It was the most amazing I had ever seen.

It was the School of Music of Santa Isabel College that mounted the first local production in 1968. An open casting call brought in an explosion of talented young players most of whom went on to bigger fame. They all sang and danced to the original Bernstein score played by the Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Eliseo Pajaro. That WSS was so successful that the show was taken on tour and performed to sold-out theaters in the provinces.

Petite soprano Gloria Coronel was Maria. Tommy Abuel who went on to success as a stage, TV and movie actor was Bernardo. Norma Balagtas who later became a recording artist was Anita. Singer Eugene Villaluz before he was a New Minstrel, was considered for Tony but because he lacked the high tenor notes landed Riff. Tony was Ricky Carrasco, who I suppose later decided against showbusiness because we have not heard anything about him since.

An even more ambitious version was produced in 1972. That was *West Side Story in Rock* wherein the orchestra performed with a rock band. Take note, this was over a decade before somebody came up with a punk WSS in the US. Once again it was a powerhouse cast. Abuel reprised his Bernardo while Gus Aldeguer played Riff. Marilen Martinez made a fiery Anita. Ronnie Henares made a handsome Tony while June Keithley was Maria. There among the cast were newcomers Bernardo Bernardo before he won his Urian and a pre-New Minstrel and Hong Kong stardom Ding Mercado.

Those were only two of the early attempts by Filipino artists to do *West Side Story*. There have been more since. Alongside watching WSS on TV reruns, on beta, vhs, laser discs and in the DVD copy I now keep, I have other memories of those over the years. Ralison Alonso refusing to be Tony because all he wanted to do was dance as Bernardo. There was Geneva Cruz showing up and then not as Maria. More reliable and surer of voice was Menchu Lauchengco in the same role. And only two or three years ago, there was a promising Jimmy Marquez playing Riff in a Cebu production.

West Side Story opened on Broadway on Sept. 26, 1957. That means that it is now 51 years old. Remarkably, it is not showing any sign of wear or tear. In fact, it remains hip, edgy and as unique as ever. Come September a revival will open in New York. Interestingly, there in news that there will be another version off-Broadway wherein the Puerto Rican characters will talk and sing in Spanish just like they would in real life.

Hereabouts, the situation is no different. It has also been announced that *West Side Story* will be staged anew. It will star Christian Bautista as Tony while Zsa Zsa Padilla's daughter Karylle and West End star Joanna Ampil alternate as Maria. This production is but the latest proof of the *Pinoy's* enduring fascination with the musical. Christian and the rest of the cast follow in the footsteps of many great Filipino actors and I must say, they have taken on mighty big shoes to fill. ■

Karylle and Christian Bautista as Maria and Tony in the Stages Manila production version of *West Side Story*



cast follow in the footsteps of many great Filipino actors and I must say, they have taken on mighty big shoes to fill. ■



The ensemble of "Xanadu," the new musical based on the 1980 Universal Pictures film of the same name on stage at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Can Pat Boone's "April Love" be far behind? Photo by Paul Kolton

NEW Yorkers look forward to summer with such fervor and abandon. At first, one may wonder why, but after going through sub-zero temperatures during the winter, the scorching sun and the green grass are sights to behold.

This is why New York is abuzz with summer activities, not only for tourists but for locals as well.

There are outdoor concerts at the park, with Bon Jovi headlining one at the vast grand lawn of Central Park to celebrate the All-Star game a couple of weeks ago.

Bryant Park hosts Broadway in Bryant Park during lunch hour every Thursday during the entire summer. Caught the first two weeks and if you intend to watch a Broadway show, this is the best way to select from whatever is on because four to five shows perform their highlights in Bryant Park for free.

Two Thursdays ago, we were able to see *Dancing with the Stars'* Drew Lachey and *7th Heaven's* Stephen Collins who are now part of the cast of Monty Python's *Spamalot*. Last week Lin-Manuel Miranda, Broadway's "it" boy because of his Tony-award winning *In the Heights*, mingled with theater aficionados. It can't get better than that.

Guilty pleasure

After having brunch with a Virginia-based friend one lazy Sunday, we passed by the TKTs booth on Times Square and—surprise, surprise—there were no queues. We asked if there were tickets for *Legally Blonde* and there were. He gave us good seats, and the best part, they were 50 percent off so instead of paying \$121.50 for an orchestra seat, we only paid \$60 each plus a few charges.

It was a packed audience, composed mostly of families and some younger people. I've been watching MTV less and less for the past few years so I did not even know that there was a reality show to look for the new Elle Woods, who is the lead character in *Legally Blonde*. The musical is based on the Reese Witherspoon film.

Apparently, this was the first week of the winner's performance so every single Playbill distributed didn't have her name yet. In fact, it was listed as MTV Reality Show Winner.

Her name is Bailey Hanks and she is fabulous.

An 'Elle' of a performance

Considering this was her Broadway debut, Hanks delivered an inspired and infectious performance. While she can no longer be considered an ingenue, Hanks has already performed in college productions and community theater.

The audience loved her to bits, and I am quite amazed. It was like watching a local stage show where every single one in the audience knows one or two performers in the cast, or vice-versa. I didn't get to see the show, but knowing it was aired on MTV I figured that it had a strong following. Think Jabba-wockeez.

The audience lapped it up and applauded every single song. I've never seen that happen before. Even the orchestra's crescendo music was drowned by the thunderous applause, especially when Hanks made her first appearance onstage. Note to self: this was the sound of a roaring audience, almost too literally.

It was as if the role was tailor-made for her. Maybe the all-too-stringent and rigorous audition process (and on television at that) prepared her for this role of a lifetime.

"I grew up in South Carolina and have always loved Broadway show but didn't know how I was going to get here," Hanks said in her statement inserted in every Playbill. Broadway by way of MTV, that's how.

I did not bother to see *Legally Blonde* before because I dismissed it as an ultra-light show, with no essence and depth, and boy was I happy to be proven wrong. After the show, I was asking myself why I didn't see it sooner. This was not the first time that a Broadway show partnered with a network to search for its stars. A couple of years ago, NBC aired its search for the new lead stars of *Grease, the Musical*. Two virtual unknowns—Max Crumm as Danny and Laura Osnes as Sandy—were propelled to Broadway stardom when they opened the show to sold-out audiences.

Summer I ♥ vin' in N.Y.

Legally Blonde, Xanadu and Grease: From Hollywood to Broadway

by MOMAR G. VIASYA / AJPress

Now, *Grease* is still packing them in, and for the past several weeks *American Idol Season 5* winner Taylor Hicks has been performing as Teen Angel (and he gets to play harmonica as well!).

Grease is based on the 1978 film that starred John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John, which was also based on a musical that conquered Broadway back in 1972. It is another light show that is worth watching.

Yes, sometimes it also pays to watch what some Broadway snobs would call mindless and lightweight shows, those that don't particularly discuss issues and heavy topics such as abortion, suicide, AIDS, teen sex, race, discrimination, among other things. Mindless because they discuss trivial stuff such as hair color, summer love or God forbid, fashion.

Think of songs entitled *Omigod You Guys* and *Bend and Snap* from *Legally Blonde* or *He's Not Dead Yet* and *The Song That Goes Like This* from *Spamalot* and you get the point. **Campy fun**

Among the other shows in my list of mindless yet fun shows is *Xanadu* and it ranks way up there. Watching it recently had me smiling for hours after the show ended because it was such a fun show.

It was gaudy, kitschy and campy and the songs were corny and cheesy but I was laughing my heart out the entire time. Kerry

Butler and Cheyenne Jackson are both amazing performers and are blessed with incredibly strong voices. Let's just say that watching it dragged my stress level to an all-time low.

I remember *Xanadu* as a dance contest on the noontime show *Eat Bulaga*, where contestants in their most colorful garb dancing and splitting like crazy. I had no idea that there was a movie of the same title that also starred Olivia Newton-John and that some critics call it as one of the worst films of the '80s.

Unlike *Grease* and *Legally Blonde* both of which I saw as movies, I didn't get to see the *Xanadu* film so I can't really say if the musical remained loyal to the film like the two. Based on clips I've seen online, there were ingredients that were present in both versions. Rollerblades? Check.

Legwarmers? Check. Disco balls and music by the Electric Light Orchestra? Double check.

And yes, even *Monty Python's Spamalot* is based on, well as they



Max Crumm as Danny and Laura Osnes as Sandy in *Grease, the Musical*

say it, "lovingly ripped off" from the 1975 movie *Monty Python* and the *Holy Grail*. Yes, it is also light viewing and in these day and age of stressful living, one needs to see an irreverent show once in a while.

Try to get tickets to any of these shows and have fun on Broadway. Better yet, make a beeline to the TKTs booth to get discounted tickets. Then, if you get star-struck, stalk your favorite performers by the stage doors. ■

'Tonight, tonight, I'll see my love...' again on Broadway in 2009!

THE classic New York musical about the Sharks, the Jets and the ill-fated love affair involving a young man and woman caught between the gangs opens in March, producers Kevin McCollum, James L. Nederlander and Jeffrey Seller announced Wednesday. Preview performances begin Feb. 23 with an exact opening date, cast and theater to be announced.

Get ready to rumble. *West Side Story* returns to Broadway in 2009.

The classic New York musical about the Sharks, the Jets and the ill-fated love affair involving a young man and woman caught between the gangs opens in March, producers Kevin McCollum, James L. Nederlander and Jeffrey Seller announced on July 16.

Preview performances begin Feb. 23 with an exact opening date, cast and theater to be announced.

The show, which has music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and a book by Arthur Laurents, will play an out-of-town engagement Dec. 16-Jan. 17 at Washington's National Theatre, which is where the original had its world premiere in 1957. Laurents will direct and Joey McKneely will restage Jerome Robbins' original choreography.

"This show will be radically different from any other production of *West Side Story* ever done," Laurents said in a statement. "The musical theater and cultural conventions of 1957 made it next to impossible for the characters

to have authenticity. Every member of both gangs was always a potential killer even then. Now they actually will be."

One of the changes will be the selective use of Spanish throughout the book and songs in the show, which will have an onstage cast of 37 as well as 30 musicians in the orchestra pit.

West Side Story, loosely based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, chronicles the love affair between Tony and Maria, lovers caught in a violent world not of their making. Larry Kert, Carol Lawrence and Chita Rivera starred in the original 1957 New York production. The Academy Award-winning movie starred Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer and Rita Moreno. The last Broadway revival was in 1980. (AP)

Carol Lawrence, shown here in an undated file photo, was the original Maria in "West Side Story," soon to be revived on Broadway. (CBS)

