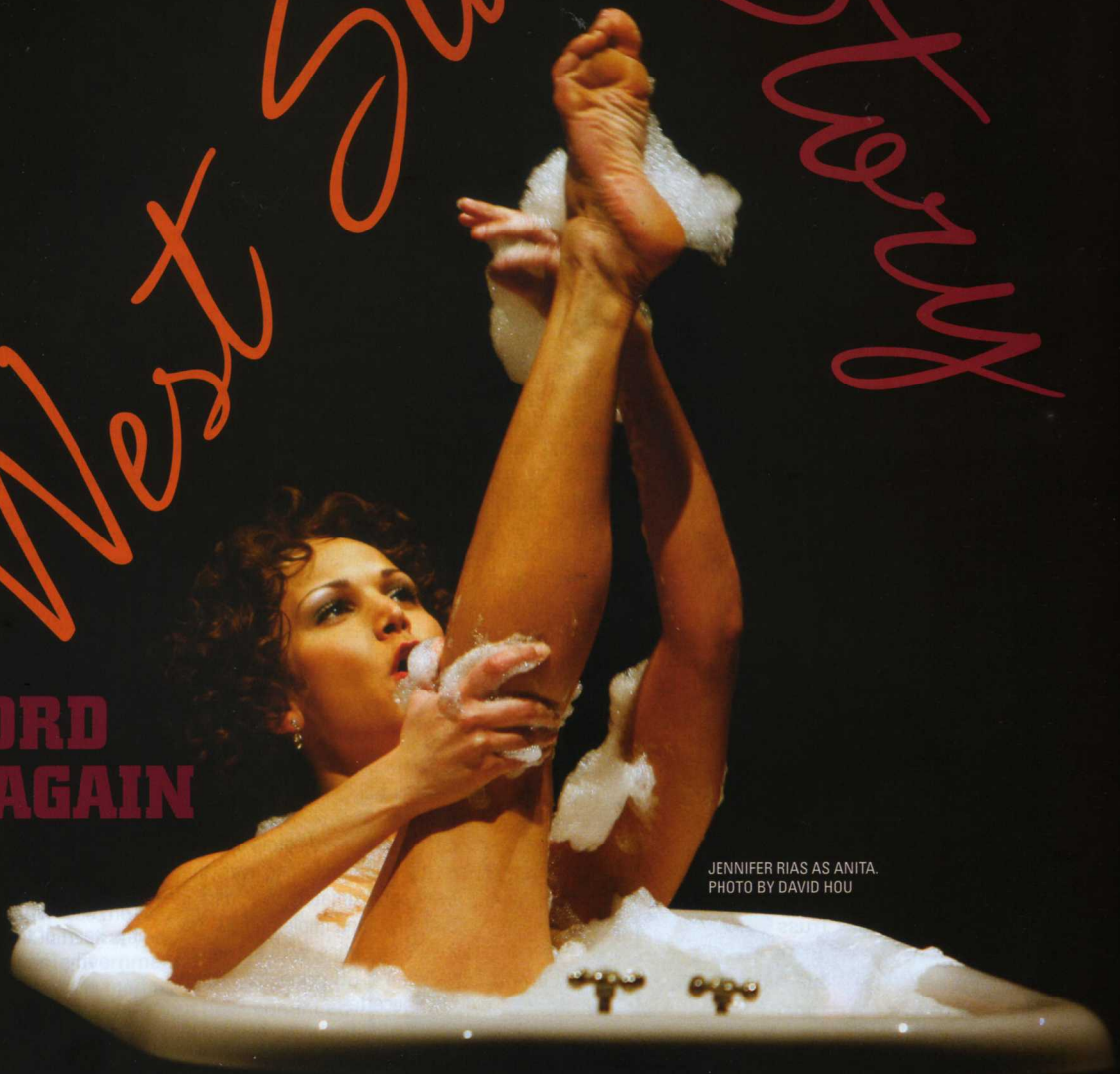


West Side Stratford

STRATFORD SHINES AGAIN

BY BRAD TRENAMAN



JENNIFER RIAS AS ANITA.
PHOTO BY DAVID HOU

For a show that's been around more than 50 years, *West Side Story* has aged very gracefully and continues to attract and entertain audiences both young and old. Considered by many to be composer Leonard Bernstein's masterpiece, even those who profess to not care for musicals will often admit to liking *West Side Story*, and really, what's not to like? The story, a modern (or at least it was in 1957) retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, combines with a diverse range of dance and musical styles and the result is a dynamic and engaging show which can be fun and exciting one minute and emotionally draining the next.

Conceived by the late, great Jerome Robbins, who also directed and choreographed the original Broadway production, *West Side Story* also marked the Broadway debut of Stephen Sondheim (lyrics). Arthur

Laurents, who wrote the book for the show, just recently directed a new Broadway production, marking the fourth time *West Side Story* has been revived on the Great White Way.

Much closer to home, The Stratford Shakespeare Festival has put its own unique spin on this timeless tale by mounting it in the Festival Theatre (a thrust stage) rather than the usual Avon Theatre (a proscenium). While this might seem like a huge gamble for a company of Stratford's size and reputation, especially in the midst of a recession, Stratford's Artistic Director, Des McAnuff, has hedged his bets by assembling a crack team of Stratford and Broadway veterans to breathe new life into this cherished classic.

Led by Director Gary Griffin, the design team of Douglas Paraschuk (sets), Jess Goldstein (costumes), Kevin Fraser (lights), and Peter McBoyle (sound) has crafted

a *West Side Story* that has proven to be a hit with both critics and audiences. In fact, several performances originally cancelled near the beginning of the season due to poor ticket sales were reinstated, and now most are either sold out or have only a select few tickets available. By late August 2009, five more shows had been tacked onto the end of the season to keep up with the demand for tickets.

Placing *West Side Story* on a thrust stage has certainly given audiences a fresh perspective on the musical, but it has also posed a myriad of challenges for the creative team, especially LD Kevin Fraser. Undaunted by the task put to him, Fraser has skillfully lit this dance-heavy production in such a way that the absence of low side light, which a traditional proscenium stage could provide, goes barely noticed.

Of course, having 23 years of experi-

