

Oberlin Opera Theatre: “A Salute to Leonard Bernstein” (Nov. 7)

by Daniel Hathaway



On November 7 in Hall Auditorium, Jonathon Field’s Oberlin Opera Theatre celebrated Leonard Bernstein’s centennial year with a professional-quality performance of his one-act opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*, and a revisiting of some of his Broadway triumphs in excerpts both brilliantly sung and crisply danced.

Tahiti was almost a self-parody when it hit the boards at Brandeis University in 1952 — a sendup of American suburban values and neuroses that may seem quaint but are still curiously relevant in 2018.

Five visible characters — Dinah, Sam, and a jazz vocal trio — follow a plotline that takes place in a single day as a married couple argue, dissemble, miscommunicate, unmask their prejudices, and pretend to be fulfilled by the good life that suburbia promises but never delivers. The trio, which Bernstein describes in the score as “a Greek chorus born of the radio commercial,” croons in and out of the scene, and “never stops smiling.”

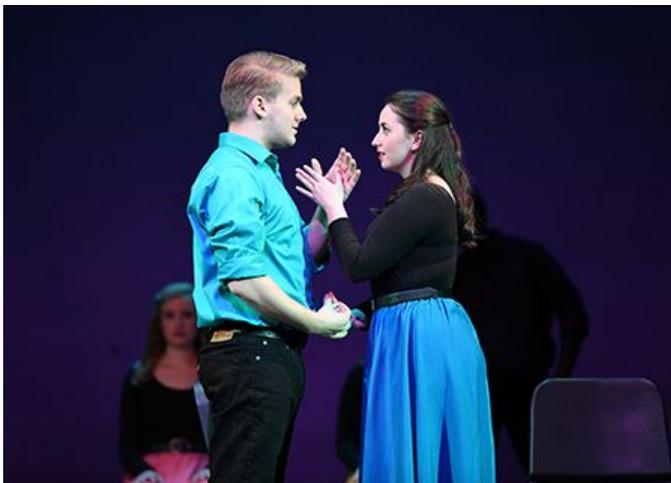
Gabriela Linares and Shawn Roth brought strong vocal and acting chops to the cardboard characters of Dinah and Sam. Caitlin Aloia, Jedidiah Rellihan, and Thomas Valle-Hoag made a superb jazz trio, tuning tricky chords to a razor’s edge while executing suave ‘50s dance moves. The era was nicely evoked by Laura Carlson-Tarantowski’s TV ad-inspired set and Chris Flaharty’s vintage costumery.





The large orchestra in the pit, led by Raphael Jiménez, brought Bernstein's jazzy rhythms and melodies vividly to life. Most of the time, Linares and Roth ably carried over the instruments, though you wished every now and again for supertitles to confirm what you thought you were hearing.

After intermission, Bernstein's alter ego as a Broadway composer was fêted in selections from *West Side Story*, *Wonderful Town*, *On the Town*, and *Candide* (the latter a beloved hybrid that vacillates between opera and musical theater).



After the Oberlin Orchestra's jaunty and incisive performance of the Overture to *Candide*, the curtain rose on a bare stage with singers seated in a big semicircle and dressed in bright solid colors. They popped up smartly in various configurations to sing and dance to vibrant choreography designed by Holly Handman-Lopez.

"I Feel Pretty," featuring Michelle Ravitsky, Catherine Robinson, Helena Colindres, and Abagael Chang, was full of energy that would have been even peppier at a faster tempo.



The guys turned in a terrific version of “Gee, Officer Krupke,” with characterful solos by Matthew Payne (Action), Thomas Valle-Hoag (Diesel), Thomas Litchev (Arab), and Michael Locke (Baby John), but without the overdone New York accents many will remember from the film.



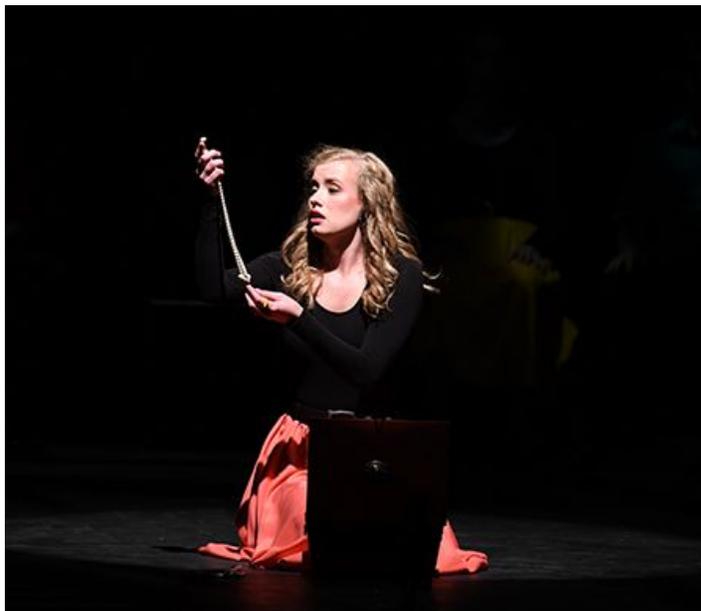
An affecting, *a cappella* version of “Somewhere” starred Aviana Burkepile, then the whole company came together for a near-operatic performance of the “Tonight” Quintet featuring Michelle Ravitsky (Maria), Aviana Burkepile (Anita), Max Cook (Tony), Matthew Payne (Riff), and Michael Locke (Bernardo).

“Why, Oh, Why, Oh, Why, O” from *Wonderful Town* got laughs for its references to Ohio (“Can’t sleep? Just make your mind a blank”) but was beautifully crooned by

Abagael Cheng and Rachel E. Ross. The not-so-wrong “Wrong Note Rag” from the same show dazzled in a duet by Katherine Krebs and Aviana Burkepile.



Max Cook, Seyquan Mack, and Kyle Miller, as the three sailors in *On the Town*, made a terrific ensemble both as singers and dancers for “New York, New York.”



But the show-stopper in the review was Greta Groothuis’ stratospheric and faultless coloratura in “Glitter and be Gay” from *Candide*. That led directly into the moving,

full-cast finale of Bernstein's version of Voltaire's philosophical tale. Greta Groothuis and Max Cook took the solo lines of Cunegonde and Candide in this best of all possible endings, which also brought the cast of *Trouble in Tahiti* back to the stage. "Any questions?" asked Cook during a pregnant pause before the final orchestral tag. Apparently none. The curtain came down to rapturous applause.

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