

## **West Side Story Project at John Jay College of Criminal Justice**

John Jay College of Criminal Justice is hosting and presenting a special 50th anniversary celebration of the culturally groundbreaking musical, *West Side Story*. This very special event, known around campus as the West Side Story Project, is a one of its kind collaborative initiative involving the students at John Jay College in educational partnership with over a dozen other colleges and universities throughout the country.

In the spirit of the original musical, the "West Side Story Project" offers a practicum and a potent learning experience for urban John Jay College students and Midwestern students from the consortium of colleges of the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) in artistic, social, and cultural collaboration.

Spearheading the Project is Dana Tarantino, who will direct the production, with book by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein, and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Dr. Tarantino, Associate Professor of Theatre at John Jay College, is a professional stage director, and has a special affinity for *West Side Story*. The musical's adaptation process from *Romeo and Juliet* into the contemporary musical format was the subject of her doctoral dissertation at NYU. Additionally, and coincidentally, her agent was Shirley Bernstein, the sister of the musical's composer, Leonard Bernstein.

According to Tarantino, "The decision to present *West Side Story* was based on many, many factors. First and foremost, in keeping with the mission of the College, our Department of Speech, Theatre, and Media Studies tries to present plays that deal with themes of justice and societal problems." She said the decision to use such a diverse student cast from colleges all over the country was borne from the idea of affording students the opportunity to work in a non-homogenous group, truly incorporating the experience of artistic and cultural collaboration.

"Cultural conflict and issues of identity are important to our students. In order to make this theme clear, and more importantly relevant to today, I was not particularly interested in preserving the original milieu of the 50's- early 60's. I wanted the production to focus on the larger issues of violence and cultural diversity. Part of this directorial concept was to place each member of the Jets and the Sharks in a different generation spanning 50 years, thus affording the opportunity to present the themes of the play in a contemporary and relevant manner, as well as truly celebrating the musical's 50th anniversary," said Dr. Tarantino.

Another factor we all considered was our location. John Jay College at 58th Street and Tenth Avenue is strategically located where the action of the play occurs, making the Gerald Lynch Theatre the perfect venue for this project. (*West Side Story* is set in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. Even parts of the 1961 film version of the musical were shot on 61st Street and 10th Avenue, where Lincoln Center now stands.) Historically, Hell's Kitchen was known as a notorious backdrop for urban youth gang activity. The area was and still is known as Hell's Kitchen where generations of immigrants lived and where thousands of New Yorkers still make their home. John Jay College has the one of the highest Latino student populations of any college in the East, making it an even more appropriate population for this production.

One of the satellite events of the "West Side Story Project" will be a symposium on the sociology of street organizations, "Street Organizations and *West Side Story* from the Latino Perspective." Tarantino organized the symposium, which will be moderated by Ellen Scrivner, Director of John Jay's Leadership Academy. Participants in the symposium include; Professors Luis Barrios, Luis Alvarez, David Brotherton, Wanda Arriaga, and Greg Donaldson, all faculty members at John Jay College and experts in their respective fields of juvenile justice and Latino studies. The symposium will be presented on November 27th at 2PM in the College's North Hall.

The Project is as much academic as it is artistic, with many of the students receiving credit toward their degrees. John Jay students earned their credits through the Department of Speech, Theatre and Media Studies play production courses. The students from the other

colleges earned their credits through the Great Lakes Colleges Association and Ohio Wesleyan University's New York Arts Program. All participating students have to keep journals, do research, write papers, and attend the Project's symposium. Dr. Lorraine Moller, also a faculty member in the Department of Speech, Theatre, and Media Studies, is serving as the production's dramaturg, and is a resource for students seeking background information in creating their roles. Dr. Moller has extensive experience in prison education. She is also a facilitator for the Anti-Violence Project, an alternative to violence program at Sing Sing and Taconic Correctional Facility.

Producing *West Side Story* involving all of these participating colleges was no easy feat. Students came to this production with many different backgrounds and varying levels of experience and talent. Professors from the participating colleges sent their very best students to NYC for the semester's project. Tarantino said the logistics of casting and staffing were somewhat challenging, and Professors Elane Denny from Ohio Wesleyan University and Kim Tritt from Wooster College's Dance Department, assisted in the remote casting process.

Although the production was to be financed by the Department's Fall production budget, additional funding needed to be raised for a project of this magnitude. Jacob Marini, Director of John Jay's Sponsored Programs Office, and Dean James Levine, Director of Graduate Studies and the Centre for the Advancement of Research assisted Tarantino in the grant writing process. According to Tarantino, "Funding was not easy to come by, especially in light of the fact that John Jay is not known as a performing arts college. That factor alone was very limiting in terms of governmental grants." Nevertheless, the participating colleges helped and with grants from Ohio Wesleyan University, Barnes and Noble Bookstores, and the Great Lakes Colleges Association, the production was underway. "The biggest shot in the arm, however, came in the eleventh hour from Paul Newman. He was so supportive of this Project, he awarded us a generous challenge grant. That lifted the spirits of all involved in a huge way." The College has extended a special invitation for Mr. Newman to attend the musical in December.

John Jay College's Department of Speech, Theatre, and Media Studies is thrilled to present this Project with its educational partners. Dr. Martin Wallenstein, chairman of the Department is impressed with the number of participating institutions and is especially proud that the John Jay community of students, faculty, and staff has taken the lead in making this happen. The "West Side Story Project" is an extraordinary educational and performance experience for all participants and will advance the arts-in education collaborations between institutions of higher education.

The *West Side Story* cast and crew consists of more than 150 students, faculty, and staff. Dr. Dana Tarantino will provide direction and musical staging; and Dr. Nicholas G.M. Ross, former director of the Hunter College Symphony, will serve as the conductor and musical director.

*West Side Story* runs December 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th at 8:00 PM at John Jay College's Gerald W. Lynch Theater. The theater is located at 899 Tenth Avenue. Tickets are \$20 for general admission, and \$10 for students. Tickets are available at the door, but reservations are recommended, and may be made by calling 212-695-6908.