

# DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Many shows come and go, but a few stand the test of time. As a Puerto Rican adolescent growing up in Pennsylvania, *West Side Story* had a prime existence in my world. The 1961 film was my entrée to the mid-century musical retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* because of its inclusion of showing a slice of life from a culture that I know so well. It's also possibly the first mainstream work to romanticize New York fire escapes. The primary power of the story, however, rests in the dominance of Leonard Bernstein's music, both gritty and beautiful, as well as the delicate balance of the depiction of 1950s gangs against operatic-Shakespearean high drama.

The setting is in a New York (and America) that no longer exists, yet somehow continues to resonate as current American society struggles with race, representation, and cultural shifts. Many scenes, whose words were etched in my memory from a young age, now have meaning that seems to reach a new level of poignancy: one of the first stage directions of the printed script describes the Jets as "an anthology of what is called 'American.'" Interestingly enough, there is also such a thing as "an anthology" of what is called Puerto Rican. This concept is reflected directly by the talented actors chosen for these roles—and highlights that what is "American" is precisely diverse. Today this debate seems to rattle in our consciousness as we experience modern day "turf" wars over freedom, borders, and supremacy.

The bullish nature of the gangs' behavior is juxtaposed by the role of women. Anita seems to be the strongest female figure, demonstrating her ability to combat *machista* culture by declaring to her boyfriend Bernardo that she's "an American girl now." The rules of home don't apply here on the mainland. Maria, while young, is not to be underestimated. We see flashes of sparks in her when she speaks with her clumsy would-be-boyfriend Chino, or when she is telling Anita that she hates her dress for the dance. Like Tony, Maria sees beyond her immediate sphere. His entrance into her life then ignites the sparks within her into a full-on fire: she begins to make choices for herself despite the dangers that surround her. The women on the Jets' side show that they support their men despite being obviously uninterested in what a turf war even means. Because it is, in the end, juvenile.

The environment we've created for this production is one of a New York that is in constant motion. Sometimes it supports our *Romeo and Juliet's* simple yet very real fantasies, while at other times it oppresses them. The period, while rooted in 1950's hairstyles and behaviors, remains timeless so as to illuminate the universality of what is transpiring between lovers, enemies, and culture.

Opera San José has given me the opportunity to tackle the show that I have been waiting to direct for almost 30 years. I grew up living on the mainland while simultaneously experiencing life on the island and, in adulthood, lived in New York for over a decade before making my permanent home in Puerto Rico. I have had nothing but a thrilling existence synthesizing cultures and heritage in this arduous yet rewarding process. I welcome you to immerse yourself in this story and feel why it will never lose its impact on the world.

## CRYSTAL MANICH



The company debut of Crystal Manich was partially supported by OPERA America's Opera Grants for Women Stage Directors and Conductors, generously funded by the Marineau Family Foundation.