

"West Side Story"

NWAAT breaks the mold of an American classic

"West Side Story" by Leonard Bernstein
 Directed by Chil Kong
 The Nippon Kan Theater
 628 S. Washington St.
 Thurs. - Sat. at 8 p.m.
 \$20 gen. admission, \$18 students & seniors
 (206) 340-1049

By DEIDRE A. SILVA

Many consider "West Side Story" the quintessential American musical. The original story revolves around the racial strife between a gang of street-wise American punks and a gang of street-wise Puerto Rican punks. There is romance, ambition and murder, and the story is set in classic urban America.

However, Chil Kong, Artistic Director of the Northwest Asian American Theatre (NWAAT), has adopted an even larger definition of "American" for the theater's upcoming run of "West

Side Story." Directed by Kong, the show opens Jan. 28 at the Nippon Kan theater in Seattle's International District.

"The characters make up an intense group of people from different backgrounds who break themselves up along racial lines," Kong said on break from a recent rehearsal.

Kong's multicultural production transforms the "Jets," a gang of American troublemakers in the original production, into a mix of second-

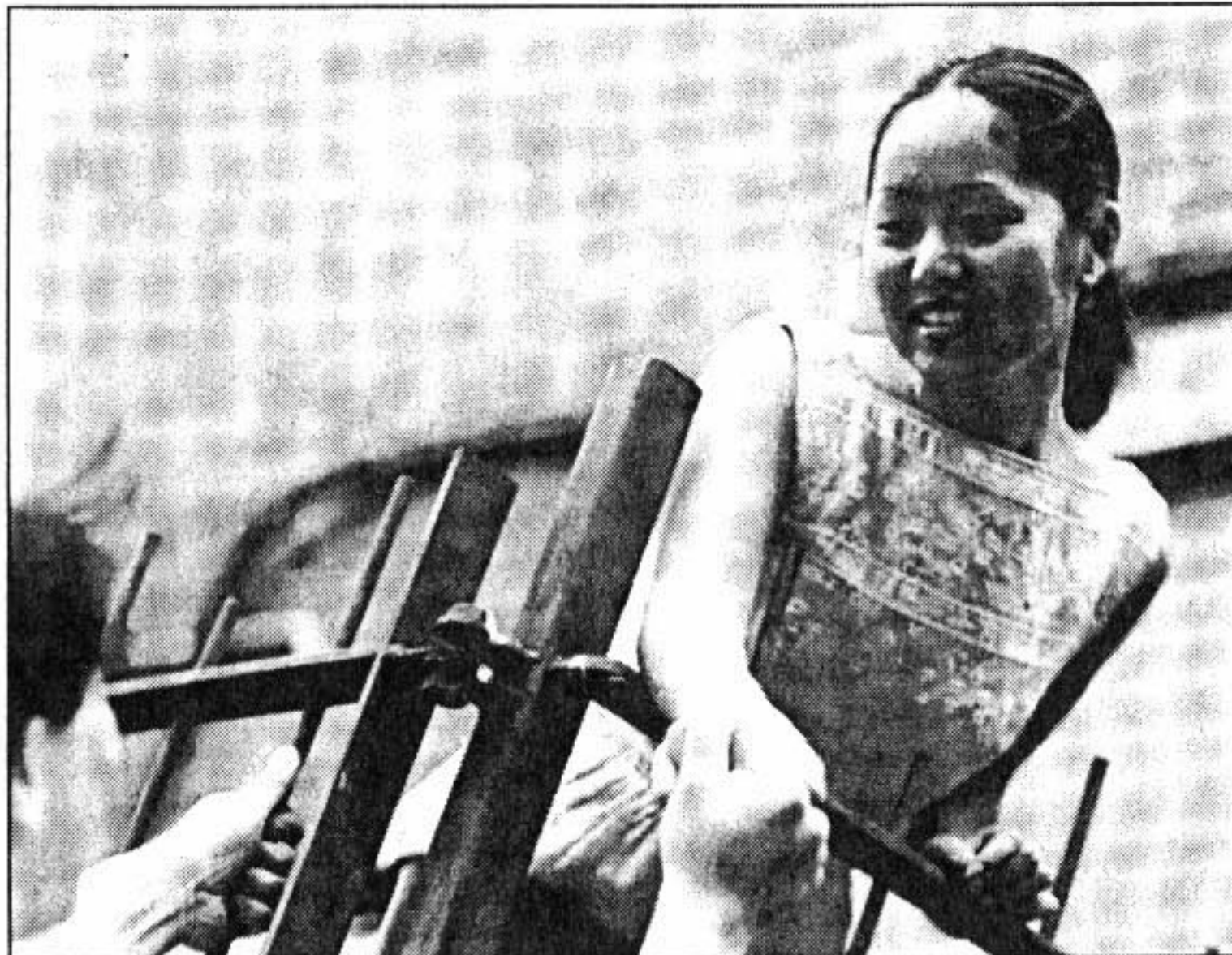


Photo: Katie Tupper plays "Maria" in NWAAT's version of "West Side Story," opening Jan. 28 at the Nippon Kan Theatre

and third-generation Japanese, Chinese and Filipino Americans. In turn, the members of the "Sharks" are newly arrived Filipino toughs desperate to assimilate into American culture.

This interpretation, Kong said, addresses the unique relationship between Asian American ethnic groups in this country.

"Asian Americans are forced together by mainstream America," the director said. Each Asian nationality carries its own stereotypes and biases, he said.

"How can we find where we belong in this greater American community if we can't even figure out where we fit in the Asian American community?" he asked.

As a condition of securing rights to the play, NWAAT was restricted from changing the music, the characters or the script.

"We were given the script and the music — the rest was up to our interpretation," Kong said.

Staying true to the original, NWAAT's production boasts a convincing New York-accent laden rendition of "Officer Krumpkie," masterful melodies in the "Tonight" finale and demanding dance sequences.

The show's choreographer, Bengie Santos,

played a significant role in creating the show's new identity. Applying her training in modern dance, jazz and ballet, Santos crafted a mood by drawing on her Filipino heritage.

"I like to blend my ethnicity into my forms of dance," she said, adding that she experimented with different styles of movements for this production.

With more than eight musical numbers, Santos had her hands full. In addition to directing the show's choreography, Santos took on the role of teaching dance fundamentals to many of the performers.

"Teaching takes a lot of determination and passion," she said. "It was enjoyable because the cast is a lot of fun and I have a passion for teaching."

Santos noted that she wanted to have distinct characteristics portrayed by the different gangs. The "Jets," she said, are more "cool jazz" dance and the "Sharks" have a Puerto Rican flair with some elements of classical Filipino and Asian dance mixed in.

Tim Yamamura, playing "Tony," said that although the production has an Asian American concept, the quality of the production is still the most important thing.

"The Asian American bent shouldn't detract from how well we perform the play," the Seattle University student said. "This production shows a very diverse perspective that can only be told if we do it well."

In her debut performance, Katie Tupper, a classically-trained vocalist, is in the lead role of "Maria."

She recalled with horror the experience of having to learn steps, on the spot, at the callback auditions.

"I was so out of sync with everyone that I got socked in the face and almost walked out of the audition," she said, adding that she was thrilled to get the part and, with the help of Santos, the dancing parts fell into place.

Gary Fukushima, who was initially hired to provide piano accompaniment, stepped into the role of music composer when local composer Byron Au Yong was unexpectedly called away. He started to arrange the score for an 8-piece band.

"We incorporated some Asian themes into the production," he said. Specifically, taiko drums are used during the rumble scene in lieu of Leonard Bernstein's full orchestra.

It takes money to produce a large-scale Broadway play for a 20-performance run. The theater relied on a \$10,000 grant from State Farm to get the show on the road.

"This is NWAAT's biggest production in scale, scope and size," Kong said, adding that the investment is starting to pay off now that four shows in the 250 seat theater have already sold out.

The idea for producing "West Side Story" was born several years ago when Kong and fellow thespians were sitting around singing songs from different musicals.

"We would think that we couldn't do many musicals because of the lack of Asian roles," he said. As he and his friends worked their way through Broadway scores, they would talk about what musicals they would want perform in, if presented with the opportunity. "West Side Story" was always at the top of their lists.

Kong has been emotionally tied to "West Side Story" for more than 20 years. As a child, "West Side Story" was the first play he saw. Having just arrived from Korea with his family, he barely knew English.

"Even though I couldn't understand the words, the music just stayed with me," Kong said.

Thank goodness it did. ■

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