

# West Side Story

by Chris Morash

When I came out of Neptune Theatre's production of *West Side Story*, all I could say was "Oh Yes!" However, when I suggested to my editor that I write "Oh Yes!" five or six hundred times as a review, he merely frowned, and asked me to be just a bit more explicit.

OK. Picture this: The stage lights come up on a simple, powerful set; all of a sudden, the whole room—stage, auditorium, everywhere—is filled with the whirling bodies of street kids, moving like Nureyev and Bruce Lee all rolled into one, singing, chanting in cross-currents over shifting rhythms, moving, whirling, always moving.

And that's only the first few minutes.

Before I go any further, let me make one thing perfectly clear: this is a native review. What else could it be? Neptune's *West Side Story* is an inspired treatment of a masterpiece of musical theatre. To describe all of the nice little details that make this show so magical would take an entire *Gazette*; so be content with the highlights.

Jesse Collins plays Tony, the idealistic member of a white street gang, The Jets, who falls in love with an innocent, charming Puerto Rican girl played by Susan Cuthbert, at a time when The Jets are locked in mortal combat with a Puerto Rican gang, The Sharks.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, on whose story the musical is based, the relationship is short and tragic. While Collins' singing is more effective than his acting, Susan Cuthbert turns in a superb all-round performance, singing with a beautifully soaring voice that seems impossibly big coming from her petite body.

However, *West Side Story's* strength lies not so much in its principals, as in the life and detail we find in the treasure trove of secondary characters who people this tragedy. Kim Stebner's so, so cool Riff, Maurice Godin's maniac A-Rab, Max Reimer's strutting Bernardo, John Duns-worth's hilarious Gladhand, and Robert Walsh's Doc—any one of these and many other fine performances would have stood out in a lesser production. In fact, if this show has a single, dominant

ing strong point, it is the sheer depth of the talent that director Tom Kerr has assembled.

The one actor who does surge forth from the pack is Kim Coates, playing Action, a dangerously violent street punk. Action is the reality of life on the street, the dark psychopathic underbelly of these romanticized gangs. Coates plays the role with a seething fury, an infernal intensity; you can almost reach out and touch the explosive threat that this man radiates.

Explosive is also a good word to describe Grace MacDonald's choreography; from subtle, swaying rhythms to Latin flavoured swirling frenzies, these dancers give a physical life to Leonard Bernstein's wonderful score. Max Reimer and Susan Gattoni stand out particularly in these production numbers, which ingeniously make the woefully small Neptune stage seem simply cavernous.

Credit must also be given to musical director Lloyd Nicholson's tasteful restraint; mercifully absent from his arrangements are the overblown horn sections and sickly swelling strings that all too often invade musicals. Instead, he gives us a simple four piece band who concentrate on the music's fascinating rhythms, giving the dancers a myriad of textures to work with, yet never competing with the singers for air space.

Robert Doyle's set does justice to all of the other artists' inspired work. A brilliant study in contrasts, towering monolithically in Neptune's curiously high, narrow stage, it makes use of every valuable inch of space.

At first, you can almost smell decay in the set's grey, graffiti-sprayed walls; and then, splash, it is invaded by the dazzling tropical colours of the the girls' costumes. It is gritty, realistic and romantic all at the same time.

Every one of these elements are crafted into a cohesive, moving whole by director Tom Kerr. If any shadow of doubt existed before this show as to whether Kerr could fill former Artistic Director John Neville's place, those doubts by now have drifted away like a street gang at the sound of a police siren. If *West Side Story* is any indication of Neptune's "next phase of development," Halifax audiences have an exciting future to look forward to.



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# The Aberhart hoax

*The Aberhart Summer*  
by Bruce Allen Powe  
Lester and Orpen Denys  
International Fiction List 618  
1983, 215 pages

Review by Geoff Martin

*The Aberhart Summer* is a newly-released Canadian novel ostensibly about the election sweep of William "Bible Bill" Aberhart in Alberta in the hot Depression summer of 1935.

I say ostensibly because the novel is not quite as simple as that, despite the publisher's hype. The book is really only superficially about Aberhart, the intriguing preacher who formed the first Social Credit government in the world.

This book can be best described as a mediocre novel set in

an interesting period in Canadian and Albertan politics. One gets the feeling that the author is trying to ride on the coattails of Canadian culture and history, though he has written a fundamentally uninteresting story.

Doug Sayers, the main character and 'I narrator,' was fifteen at the time of the August 26 election. Only a minor portion of the book actually deals with Aberhart or the campaign. Most of the book relates Doug's story, his father and his friends, like Albert Roothe, who is a big Aberhart supporter.

Anyone who goes to this book to try to get a real idea of Aberhart will be disappointed. The characterization is very superficial, especially of Aberhart, and not even Doug's father is charac-

terized in any depth.

In fact, only in the last 25 pages do we see the narrator as anything more than a cardboard cut-out, and even here it all seems rather feeble on the part of the author. The last few chapters of the book contain Doug Sayers' wartime experiences including his friends who were killed, the woman he slept with, *et cetera*, *et cetera*.

The ending is also astonishingly hokey. The last line reads, "That was a long time ago, though, and I'm all right now." The book really does not contribute anything to our understanding of the Aberhart election, or to life in the 1930's, or to anything else, and in that sense is not worth reading.

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