

How JCompany actors prepare for West Side Story roles

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By Eva Trieger

LA JOLLA, California — You don't need to be a theater buff or even a minor stage devotee to know that the "Green Room," replete with lighted vanity behind the starred door, is where actors await their cues. While that way station may be adequate for Hollywood or Broadway, it cannot begin to compare with the backstage rehearsal space for the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center, where JCompany is in the process of staging my favorite musical, *West Side Story*, under the insuperable direction of Joey Landwehr.

In this case, a long hallway serves as the backstage elongated Green Room. The air is hormone charged, and cupcake and potato chip laced. The 78 rpm chatter between actors is the soundtrack to rehearsing lines, dance moves, reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, solving quadratic equations, and scribbling Econ analysis questions for the 53 students who are leading a double life for the next few intense weeks. I was allowed to spend a few minutes with some Sharks and Jets while they were between scenes.



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Madison Leone, assistant Stage Manager to Landwehr, was in charge of locating my interviewees. This is her third show as Stage Manager and she enjoys it even more than acting because she gets to see "the whole process." In addition to participating in JCompany, Leone was able to assist with the Ben Vereen awards this past weekend and meet some "very cool people" in the business. As a La Jolla High freshman, Leone is juggling school, but looking forward to returning for next season's *Mary Poppins* where she and three other former stage managers will reunite to give us their finest.

A newcomer to the JCompany stage, Gabriel Krasovic (Bernardo), filled me in on his passion for the craft and his excitement in making his character demonstrate the greater depth of his persona. Gabriel relayed his interpretation of Bernardo, a Puerto Rican who wants so much to enjoy the sense of entitlement inborn to the Jets, his American rivals. Krasovic, a Mexican-American, is intent on making his character far bigger than the angry stereotyped one dimensional fellow. This role has encouraged him to appreciate the beauty of the culture. He averred that the Sharks are more passionate and desirous of establishing themselves in their New York home, than the Jets, who take their turf for granted. The actor enjoys the dance scenes, especially the Mambo. An English Honors student at CCA, Krasovic told me that he would love to work in the entertainment field, but his focus is, as yet, undecided.

Returning for her 12th or 13th JCompany show, high school junior, Noga Tour (Anita), revealed that she'd have been elated with any Shark girl role, but to be cast as Anita was *muy bueno!* Tour shared that her family and friends have all been super supportive, and they will not be disappointed from what I observed in rehearsal! As for most of my interviewees, time management is a bear, but I liked Tour's attitude. She told me that while she used to make herself crazy she regained her balance "when I realized **this** is what I'll remember, not one test or one night's homework assignment." Bravo!

Another "lifer" at JCompany, Cameron Chang is playing 'Nardo's nemesis, Tony. In what he thinks is his

20th show, Cameron wants to convince the audience how deeply he loves Maria. Chang told me that if this is not driven home, the audience will not find his character, nor the plot, viable. He's delighted with the role and would also have enjoyed being cast as Riff, his best friend, "womb to tomb." Chang takes voice lessons, while his twin sister is leaning towards dance. The actor shared that he has learned so much from Landwehr, in particular, to "be instead of act." This has allowed him to develop a greater sense of character analysis, and thanks to the director's acceptance and encouragement, Chang always feels safe doing what he can, knowing he'll receive feedback to make it better. It should not come as a surprise to anyone, that while Chang told me he loves every song, he finds "Maria" not only a melody well done, but "freeing to sing." Sounds like true love to me...

Rebecca Penner, a sophomore at The Bishop's School, is playing the romantic and tragic role of Maria. Penner reported that this may be her 25th show with JCompany and that she has been eyeing this part for some time. Playing Maria has taught Penner that she does have the ability to juggle a very demanding school work load and the lead role in a fabulous musical. This lesson has encouraged her and helped her to strive to maintain a high quality of performance in both arenas. She told me that her teachers have been quite supportive throughout the process. Her favorite number is "One Hand, One Heart." I asked Penner if there could have been an alternate ending, and while she ventured that perhaps Maria could kill herself, she likes the play as is. "It's a classic."

The play runs May 9-17 at the David and Dorothea Garfield Theatre, Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center. Tickets are available at www.jcompanysd.org or at 858.362.1348

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