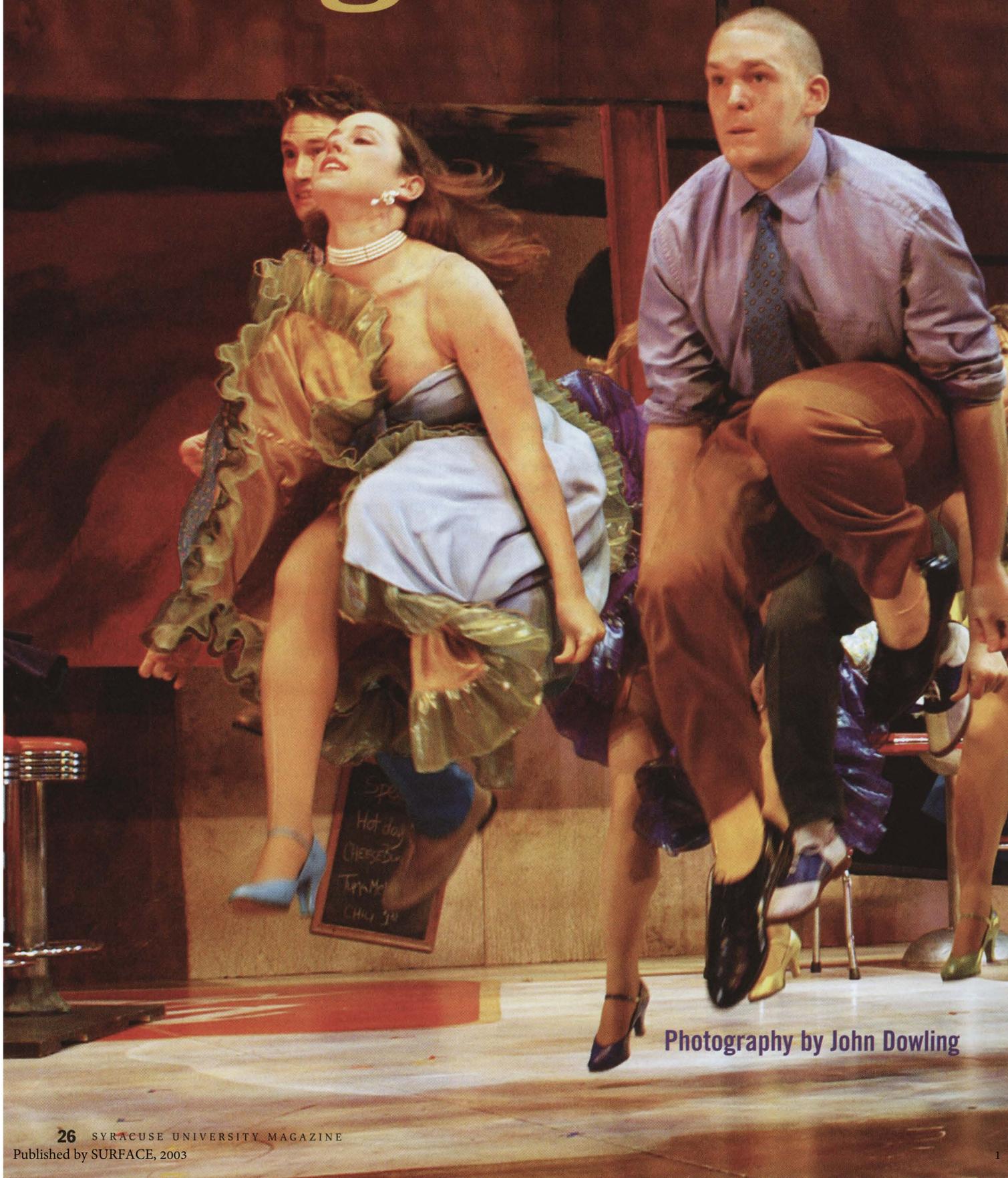
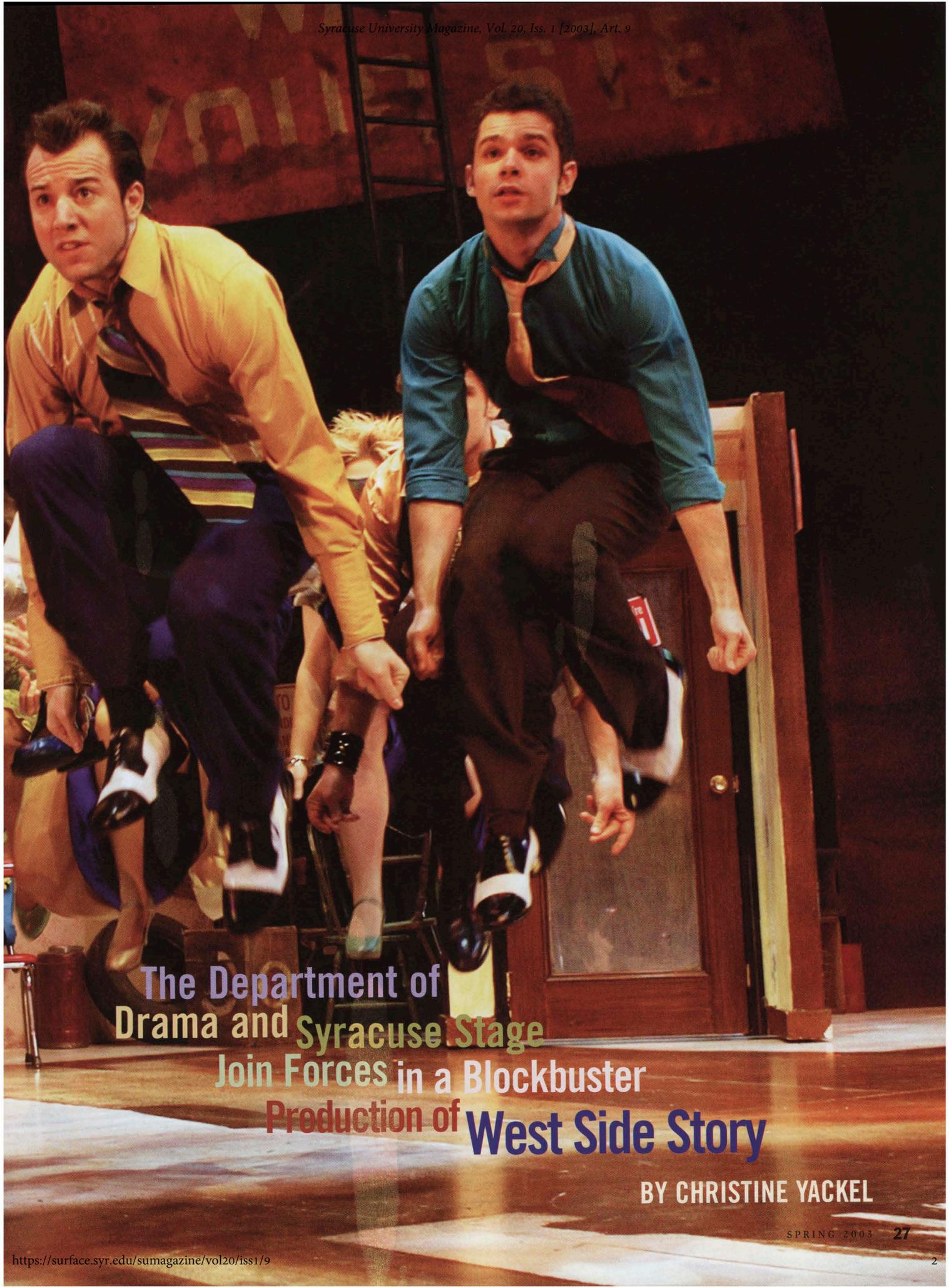


Yackel: Stage Struck

# Stage Struck

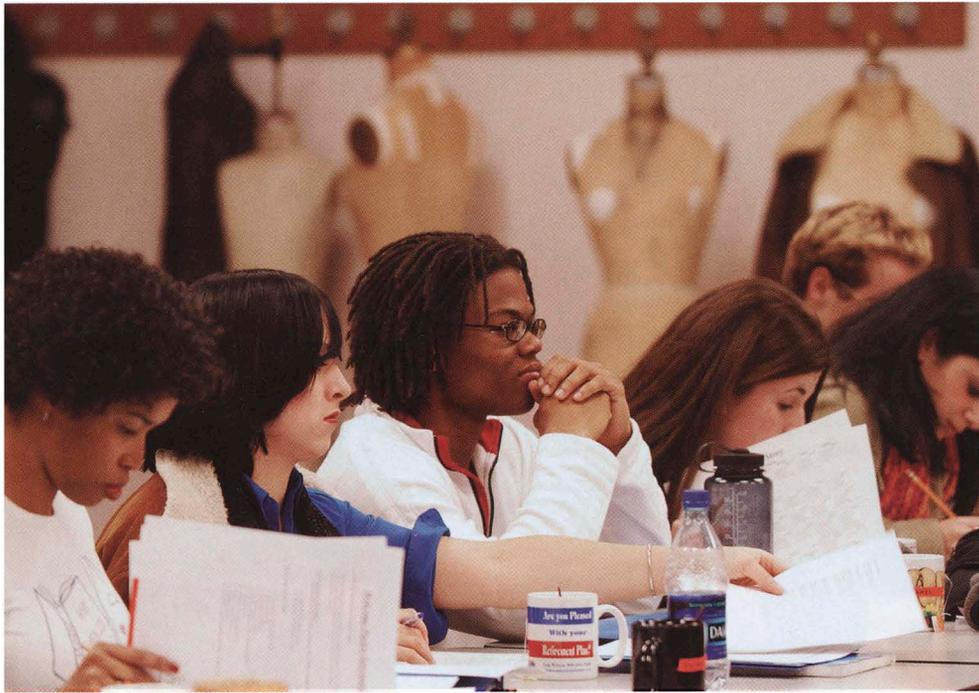


Photography by John Dowling

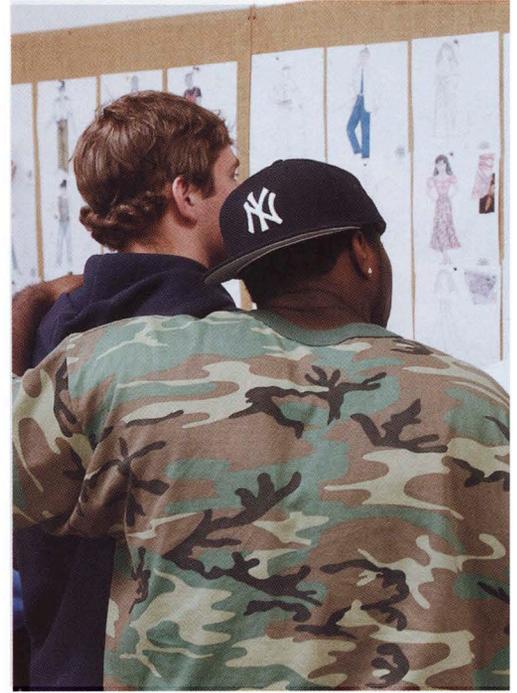


The Department of  
Drama and Syracuse Stage  
Join Forces in a Blockbuster  
Production of **West Side Story**

BY CHRISTINE YACKEL



Paul James '03 (Chino), center, listens intently during the first read-through of the script.



Tony Salatino discusses costume designs with the students.



Tony Salatino choreographs a dance number during a *West Side Story* dance class last fall.



Kristin Hoesl '03, center, and the other Jets girls rehearse "Cool" under the guidance of music director Dianne Adams McDowell, who is seated at the piano.

Musical theater major Kristin Hoesl '03 found out she had been cast in *West Side Story* on the last day of school. Upon arriving home for the summer, she pulled out a movie version of the musical she had been given as a child and memorized the entire show to prepare for rehearsals in the fall. "*West Side Story* is close to my heart because it's the first musical I ever loved," says Hoesl, who created the role of Velma, a Jets girl of Polish American descent. "Growing up I dreamed of playing Anita, the Puerto Rican girlfriend of the Sharks' gang leader. It was a sad day when I realized I wasn't Spanish."

Hoesl, a Remembrance Scholar, was one of 29 talented drama students chosen to work alongside professional actors in a production of *West Side Story* that was part of a unique collaboration between the Department of Drama and Syracuse Stage, a regional theater company associated with the University. Hoesl says working with the professional members of the cast was a phenomenal experience. "The best part was getting to watch how they rehearsed, since they all had different approaches to the material," she says. "And they took time to get to know us—there were no attitudes in the room."

*West Side Story* is the third such alliance between the Department of Drama and Syracuse Stage, following successful runs of *Peter Pan* in 2000 and *Oliver!* in 2001. Syracuse Stage is the only member of the League of Regional Theatres (LORT) to produce shows in partnership with a major undergraduate academic program. "This is an extraordinary event for a LORT member," says Robert Moss, artistic director of Syracuse Stage since 1996. "Originally we thought about collaborating on a main-stage holiday production every other year, but *Peter Pan* was so successful, we've joined creative forces to present full-blown Broadway musicals three years in a row."

Moss claims other regional theaters are envious of what Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama have accomplished. Undergraduates have an opportunity to put classroom theory into practice—a key part of the University's Academic Plan—and can jump-start their acting careers by making pro-

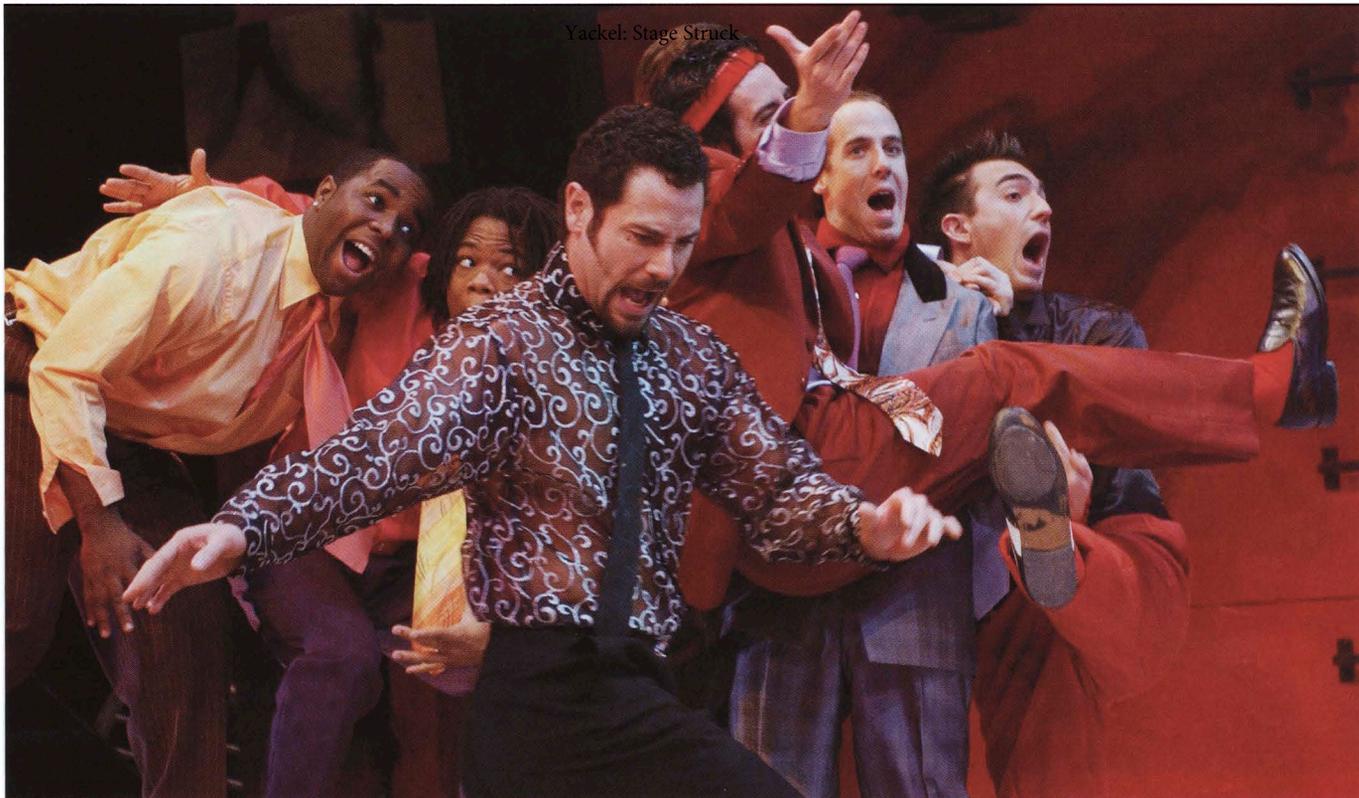
fessional contacts and earning points toward membership in the Actors' Equity Association (AEA), a performing arts labor union. And Syracuse Stage brings in new audience members by treating the Central New York community to a first-rate musical theater experience for substantially less than it would cost in New York City. "We don't argue with success," Moss says. "Working together has been, and will continue to be, a joyous experience."

### Vision to Reality

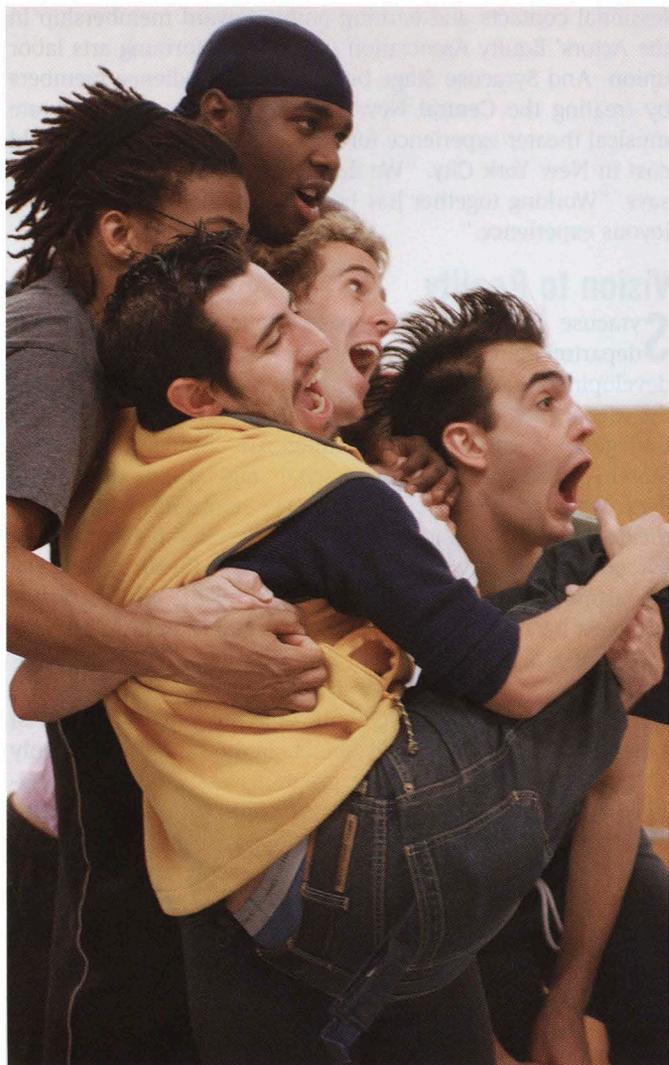
Syracuse University has boasted one of the top drama departments in the country since Sawyer Falk, a leader in developing theater programs at academic institutions, created the department in the early 1930s. Forty years later, the College of Visual and Performing Arts brought in Arthur Storch to serve as department chair and artistic director of Syracuse Stage, the University's new nonprofit professional theater company founded in 1973. Under Storch's leadership, Syracuse Stage grew into a major regional theater, while the Department of Drama developed one of the country's strongest bachelor of fine arts professional training programs.

One of Storch's goals was to nurture a symbiotic relationship between the academic and professional sides of the theater complex, thereby heightening the students' educational experience. "Of the 65 LORT theaters in the United States, only 22 have professional training programs associated with colleges and universities," says James Clark, producing director of Syracuse Stage and chair of the Department of Drama. "Syracuse Stage has, by far, the largest program of the four theaters that focus on professional actor training for undergraduate students."

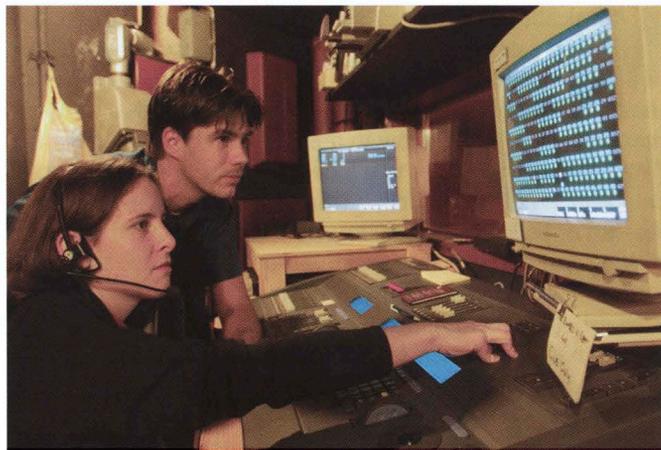
For many years, Syracuse Stage and the Department of Drama have worked together to present the Young People's Series—children's theater productions that tour local schools. Faculty direct, students perform, and Syracuse Stage technicians build the sets and make the costumes for the shows.



Equity actor David Villella (Bernardo) leads the Sharks in a rousing rendition of "America."



SU drama students rehearse "America."



Kelly D. Lane '03 practices lighting cues with A. Nelson Ruger IV G'96, who holds an M.F.A. degree in lighting and scenic design.

However, productions that go on the road have inherent technical limitations, and Clark wanted children in the community to have an opportunity to experience the magic of a fully staged performance. His vision became reality in 1996, when Syracuse Stage partnered with drama department faculty and students to present a production of *Dragonslayers*. That was followed by an original musical adaptation of the beloved children's story *Wind in the Willows* in 1997. The next spring, Syracuse Stage was invited to remount *Wind in the Willows* at the New Victory Theatre in New York City, where it had an impressive four-week run.

Energized by the remarkable success of *Wind in the Willows*, Clark and Moss had fun envisioning how the professional and academic wings of the theater could collaborate in the future. Both had always wanted to do a Broadway musical, but Syracuse Stage's 500-seat house can't generate enough revenue to cover the cost of the large casts, royalties, costumes, and pit orchestra required to mount such a production. "I kept looking at the budget, but I just couldn't make it

work on a LORT/Actors' Equity union contract," Clark says. "The drama department had similar frustrations—unlimited manpower but inadequate physical space. So we decided to switch hats and reduce overhead by hiring fewer paid professional actors and casting more students in key roles."

A small number of students have appeared in minor supporting roles in Syracuse Stage productions over the years, but LORT contracts restrict the number of non-union actors allowed to work with Equity union members. By using a University Resident Theater Association/AEA contract, Clark and Moss are allowed to hire a reduced number of Equity actors to appear on the same stage with an increased number of students. The only restriction is that the shows can't be part of Syracuse Stage's regular subscription series.

Their first venture, *Peter Pan*, was an enormous undertaking that brought all of the resources in the building to bear on the project. Faculty members directed and choreographed the show and appeared in two of the leading roles; the costumes and sets were designed by professional artists (including a recent graduate of SU's M.F.A. design program) and produced by Syracuse Stage technicians; and 20 students joined 5 Equity

actors on stage. "At first we were concerned that the professional actors and students would have difficulty meshing, but the quality of the students was such that they presented a seamless production that played to sold-out houses," Clark says. "*Oliver!* enjoyed even greater success the following year, and advanced ticket sales for *West Side Story* tracked better than any show in Syracuse Stage or Department of Drama history and played to standing-room-only audiences throughout its run."

## Page to Stage

Auditions for *West Side Story*—an updated retelling of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*—were held last spring. With music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the show has a difficult score—almost operatic, with a jazz idiom. Director and choreographer Anthony Salatino and music director Dianne Adams McDowell knew just what they were looking for in voice range, vocal stability, and pitch for this classic American musical about two rival teenage gangs, the Sharks and the Jets. "We looked for students with pure young voices who could handle intricate rhythms, sweeping sonorities, and uneven phrases,"



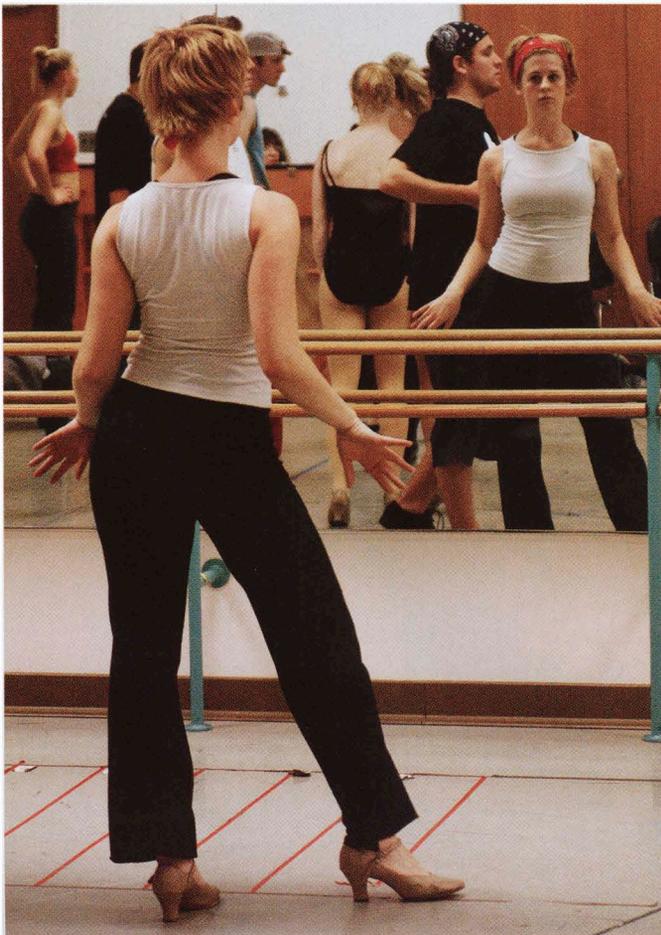
Equity actress Izetta Fang (Anita), center, and the other Sharks girls, played by SU students, taunt their boyfriends in a performance of "America."



Tony Salatino and Emily Mattheson '03 (*Anybody's*) share a laugh during a break in rehearsal.



Paul James '03 (*Chino*) rehearses a dance with Erin Kukla '04 (*Rosalia*).



Kristin Hoehl '03 (*Velma*) practices her dance steps.

says Salatino, a longtime member of the drama faculty who also directed and choreographed *Peter Pan*. “We also looked for students who could express raw emotion through dance.”

When the students chosen to be Sharks and Jets returned to SU in the fall, they enrolled in a two-credit course devoted to creating the show’s dance numbers. “It was a good idea for us to take a dance class because it kept us from becoming overloaded, and we had time to play with ideas,” says Paul James ’03, who played Chino and understudied the role of Bernardo. “Tony [Salatino] was always open to our suggestions and didn’t force movements on us, so we developed our characters through an organic process. It was rewarding to work at such a professional level—every day I achieved something new.”

Salatino asked his students to imagine a “back story” for their characters—a personal journey that would help direct their motivations and movements on stage. To deepen their understanding of his concept for the show—a contemporary interpretation of 1950s gang warfare upon which the musical is based—Salatino brought in a representative from the Onondaga County district attorney’s office to talk about the current gang culture in Syracuse. “I wanted my students to realize that the subject matter of *West Side Story* is timeless—that we still live in a world of fear and bigotry,” Salatino says. “I wanted them to feel how each movement on stage is profoundly rooted in this universal story of hatred, love, and the power of forgiveness—that the plot is carried forward through music and dance.”

It didn’t take long for the students to get into character. Most of them had known each other since freshman year and were good friends, but as soon as warm-ups began before dance class, the Sharks and the Jets instinctively clustered on opposite sides of the rehearsal hall. “It wasn’t intentional,” says Lauren Creel ’03, who played Francisca, a Shark girl. “It just happened naturally. I never thought I would bond so completely with the Sharks, but the only time I saw the Jets was when we were going at each other. It was really tense.”

Each dance class began with a half-hour warm-up session of stretching and Tai Chi movements that started slowly and swelled to a feverish pitch. Since the show is so vocally and physically demanding, Salatino cautioned his students to save their voices during rehearsals and to check their shoelaces before each dance number. “In this show the cast went up and down on the floor and engaged in stage combat every night,” he says. “The fight scenes were choreographed with precision, but sometimes the students were too enthusiastic, and I had to keep all that energy under control. I always put safety first and tried to make sure they ate right and worked out at the gym. It was like being a surrogate parent.”

After months of preparation and anticipation by the students, the six Equity actors in the leading roles joined the rehearsals. Salatino had just four weeks to meld the student and professional performers into a synergetic ensemble. “It was kind of chaotic at first,” he says. “But once the initial shock wore off, we became a family.”

To ease the tension, all members of the technical crew, design team, administrative staff, and cast—the largest ever to appear on the Archbold Theatre stage—gathered at a “Meet and Greet” in the theater lobby, where introductions were made in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. “I was really nervous and excited about meeting the Equity actors, so in the weeks before they arrived I worked twice as hard to polish my

dances,” James says. “I wanted them to think well of me.”

The actors from New York were equally enthusiastic about working with the students. Izetta Fang, who played Tiger Lily in *Peter Pan* and Anita in *West Side Story*, looked forward to returning to Syracuse. At first she didn’t know what to expect when she was cast in *Peter Pan*, but found the students to be fresh and eager to apply what they had learned in class. “Their optimistic attitudes sharpened my senses and helped me tune up and renew my own performance skills,” Fang says. “In return I gave them some help with vocal technique and showed them how a professional takes hold of a role and goes for it. I also think the students were relieved to realize the pros have problems too, and it was helpful for them to see how we worked those through.”

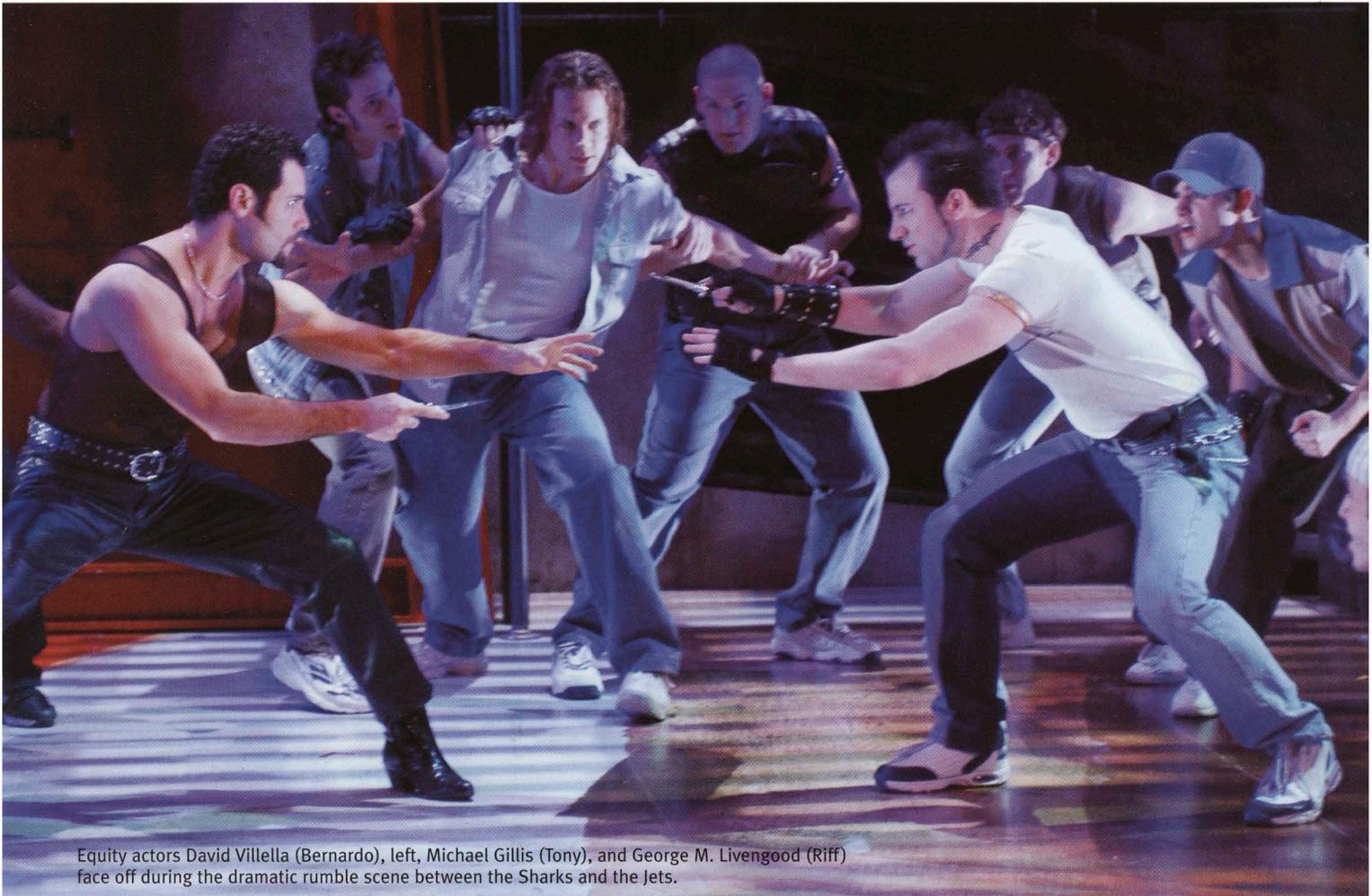
## Ready to Rumble

**A**t last the Sharks and Jets were ready to rumble on opening night—the first of 33 public performances and 15 school matinees that would take them through the holiday season. Despite the cold and blowing snow outside, the show opened to a full house, received a standing ovation, and garnered rave reviews. “*West Side Story* grabs audiences from the first jagged, restless notes of the overture and holds them through to the tragic finale,” wrote a reviewer for the *Syracuse Post-Standard*. “It’s a powerful show, witty, passionate and sheerly lovely at times, put together by one of the strongest creative teams ever at Syracuse Stage.”

The show was a hit, but the hard work of keeping it fresh and alive had just begun. Several of the students, known as swings, had to step in for other chorus members who were ill or injured, and six students understudied the lead roles to pinch-hit for the professionals at school matinees. “It takes skill to sustain a role, and the students are usually dragging after the 10th show of the week,” says musical theater professor Rodney Hudson, an Equity actor who played Fagin in *Oliver!* and Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*. “The audience has paid good money to see the show and no matter how tired the students are, they are required to give their best.”

For Creel, opening night was so exciting that she couldn’t wait to do the show again and again. “Every performance was just a little bit different than the last, and that kept it fresh and new,” she says. “However, the 10:30 a.m. school matinees were difficult because everyone was tired from performing the night before—although I do have to admit it was fun to get wild standing ovations from high school students who made us feel like ‘N Sync.”

Hoels agrees there was nothing quite like the thrill of opening night. The only drawback was trying to maintain that same intense energy throughout the run of the show. “The schedule was grueling,” she says. “We opened the final week of classes, and it was difficult trying to manage performances, final exams, and sleep, not to mention a social life. But being a part of *West Side Story* taught me that sometimes it’s necessary to make sacrifices to succeed. I was tired, but happy.”



Equity actors David Villella (Bernardo), left, Michael Gillis (Tony), and George M. Livengood (Riff) face off during the dramatic rumble scene between the Sharks and the Jets.