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Bryce Hallett
November 10, 2009

A REVIVAL of the classic American musical *West Side Story* will open at the Regent Theatre in August next year, produced by a consortium that includes international impresarios Michael Brenner, Howard Panter and David Atkins.

A professional staging of *West Side Story* hasn't been seen in Melbourne since Ian Judge's Victoria State Opera production in the 1990s, starring Marina Prior, Sean McDermott and Caroline O'Connor. Auditions will be held this month.

The producers have decided to open the show in Sydney in July, bucking the recent trend that has favoured openings in Melbourne, where there are more commercial theatres.

Australian Producer Cameron Mackintosh said recently that a new 1750-seat theatre "was desperately needed" in Sydney, or production and tourism opportunities would go elsewhere. His and Disney's lavishly detailed production of *Mary Poppins* has its Australian premiere at Her Majesty's in Melbourne next year. It transfers to Sydney's Capitol Theatre in 2011.

Panter, co-chief executive of the Ambassador Theatre Group, expressed an interest in acquiring theatres in Melbourne and Sydney on a recent visit to Australia. The company last week completed a £90 million (\$A162 million) purchase of Live Nation's British theatres to make it one of Britain's biggest theatre groups.

The *West Side Story* production coming to Australia has won acclaim in London, Tokyo, Paris and Beijing. It will be directed by Joey McKneely, who choreographed *The Boy from Oz* on Broadway and whose credits include US touring productions of *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Crazy For You* and the off-Broadway production of Jerry Herman's revue, *Showtune*.

McKneely was chosen by Jerome Robbins, co-director of the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*, to reproduce its choreography for the stage.

The production will be more faithful to the original version than the current Broadway revival, which Arthur Laurents, now 91 and author of the 1950s book of *West Side Story*, came out of retirement to direct earlier this year. While the Broadway show increases the violence and has the Puerto Rican characters singing and talking in Spanish, the touring show is all in English.

Based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, the ground-breaking *West Side Story* was composed by Leonard Bernstein with lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and directed and choreographed by Robbins. The film version won 10 Academy Awards, including best picture.

Tickets to the Melbourne season go on sale on November 30.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2009/11/09/1257614998364.html>

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