

The Cultural Perspectives of *West Side Story*

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Dedication

For my mother, who loved the arts, especially musical theatre.

Thank you for introducing me to this wonderful
musical at the tender age of seven. You are remembered.

Acknowledgments

Doing a project like this takes time. It also takes patience and diligence while working toward a common goal. I have collaborated with many people in my day, and I have never met someone so dedicated to a project like Kate Goodwin. Her love for the performing arts is immeasurable. With her unwavering support and dedication, I have been able to create a piece of theatre history that will hopefully find its way to those who love the arts, and those who want to learn about *West Side Story*. I could not have done it without her. To Kristi Shamburger, thank you for reading this thesis with love and an open mind. Your passion for musical theatre inspires me. I would also like to thank Dr. Martha Hixon for her encouragement and support. She was more than willing to me when I needed her expertise.

Abstract

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This thesis explores the cultural perspectives of *West Side Story* and whether the musical should be shelved as a piece of history. Culture is defined by traditions, clothing, language, music, the arts, the people, and achievements of a particular nation. This thesis discusses how the musical *West Side Story* portrays Puerto Ricans and their culture within the story. The extensive research from books on the creators of *West Side Story*, the history of American and Puerto Rican culture, and countless interviews, videos, periodicals, websites, and scholarly articles have shaped this thesis. With all this information, I was able to confirm that although *West Side Story* has not represented the Puerto Rican culture accurately, it is a living, breathing art that will be reimagined, revised, and produced for years to come.

Table of Contents

Dedication	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Abstract	v
1. <i>West Side Story</i> : A Cultural Conundrum	1
2. <i>West Side Story</i> : The Prologue	6
3. <i>West Side Story</i> : The Plot Summary	10
4. <i>West Side Story</i> : The Meeting of the Minds	12
5. Jerome Robbins: The Rumble with Perfection	19
6. Leonard Bernstein: Somewhere	24
7. Arthur Laurents: Cracko Jacko!	29
8. Stephen Sondheim: Something's Coming	34
9. Everyone Will Have Moved Here: Classism, Discrimination, and Racism	40
10. House Un-American Committee (HUAC) I Like to be in America?	48
11. <i>West Side Story</i> : The Revival, The Reviews, and the Criticism	51
12. <i>West Side Story</i> : The Finale	54

West Side Story: A Cultural Conundrum

How did a musical about racial unrest become the American classic it is today, and why do so many love it? *West Side Story* is loved by many because it has everything a Broadway musical needs: great music, exquisite dancing, and a brilliant libretto that centers around two young lovers. After its original run on Broadway from 1957 to 1959, *West Side Story* has been performed by professional and amateur theatres all over the world. Three revivals of *West Side Story* ran in 1960, 1980, and years later in 2009. A West End (London's equivalent to Broadway) production in 1961 featured Chita Rivera as Anita, who originated the role on Broadway. Arthur Laurents' revival of *West Side Story* in 2009 cast Latino actors to play the Puerto Rican characters. Laurents told Elizabeth Llorente, freelance writer and Senior Reporter for Fox news, that he was aiming "for a more realistic portrayal of 1950s New York." He elaborated by saying, "Both sides were villains. They're so poor, they fight over who's king of the hill of this particular block. It makes them vicious. That attitude is not restricted to any one nationality" (AARP VIVA). *West Side Story* is currently running on the Broadway stage once again, reimagined and directed by Ivo van Hove, with new choreography by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker.

A movie of the Broadway production was released in 1961 and won 10 Academy awards, including best director Jerome Robbins. A remake of the film *West Side Story* is being co-produced and directed by Stephen Spielberg, due to be released on December 18, 2020. According to the Library of Congress, "*West Side Story* continues to be mounted regularly in high schools, universities, community theatres, and regional theatres, and in first-class revivals around the world. There are more than 250 domestic productions every year, and the libretto has been translated in over 26 languages, including Chinese, Hebrew, Dutch, and six separate

Spanish translations based on countries and local dialects-making it a classic indeed” (Baber). *West Side Story* has proven to be a story worth telling over and over again, becoming a classic Broadway musical for the same reason *Romeo and Juliet* is considered a classic: a great love story is never dated, no matter how long ago it is written. Although, in an interview with Stephen Sondheim on February 16, 2020, his take on the hit show is that the movie version helped catapult *West Side Story* into the classic it is today. He says, the Broadway version “had a very limited run,” 732 performances compared to *The Music Man*’s 1375 performances, and “was not a smash hit by any means, so it endured, I think, because the movie made it popular” (CBS News). It is true that the musical did not run for years on end, but when it opened the critics were raving about it.

The original musical *West Side Story* opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957. The New York Times critic Danton Walker called it “a masterpiece of dancing, singing, lighting, costuming and stage techniques-timely, taut and expert in every department” (41). John Chapman, with the *Daily News*, touted, “The American theatre took a venturesome forward step when the firm of Griffith & Prince presented *West Side Story* at the Winter Garden last evening. This is a bold new kind of musical theatre...In it, the various fine skills of show business are put to new tests, and as a result, a different kind of musical has emerged” (51). Dick Kleiner, a writer for the *New York Times*, called it “a genuine, golden hit” on October 27, 1958 (Newspapers.com). Frances Lewine, a critic for the *Democrat and Chronicle*, touts “It was a splendid comingling of music, lighting, costumes...It’s a dancing story with every movement part of the main theme” (Newspapers.com). *West Side Story* was a bonified critical success. Almost every review from every newspaper in the city touted its excellence. However, it is not without its critics.

Throughout the years, *West Side Story* has come under scrutiny for both the inaccurate depiction of the Puerto Rican culture and the hiring of white actors who need to wear brownface to play the Puerto Rican roles. In 1957, critic Alexander Fried of the *San Francisco Examiner* wasn't sure if he should call it fiction or art saying, "there are obvious elements of fiction – or you may prefer to call it art-in the way *West Side Story* lays out its grim pattern of conflict (25)." It is not known if he meant that the story or the portrayal of the Puerto Ricans was fiction, but either way he wasn't sure he believed what was happening on the stage.

In the 1961 movie, Natalie Wood's skin was darkened to play the role of Maria. In the 1980 version of *West Side Story*, actress Jossie de Guzman, a Puerto Rican, said her hair had to be darkened to play the role of Maria. Her first reaction was, "Oh, my God, I *am* Puerto Rican- why do they have to darken my hair." They also darkened her skin (Sanchez 79). A U.S. Puerto Rican writer, Judith Ortiz said, described her experiences as a Puerto Rican woman. She said that she could not escape the stereotype of the character Maria from *West Side Story*. She came to the conclusion "The Myth of the Latin woman: I just met a girl named Maria." She was taunted by people singing 'Maria', "La Bamba" and "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina" (Sanchez 81). Ortiz' experiences suggest that she could not escape the stereotyping of Latina women as "the other" rather than culturally different.

In the 2009 revival, Laurents chose to revise the songs and script by making "I Feel Pretty," sung by Maria and the ladies, a Spanish language song as well as interspersing Spanish into the dialogue. He felt that because all the girls were Puerto Rican, they would speak to each other in Spanish. He procured the talents of Lin-Manuel Miranda, playwright and composer of *In the Heights* and *Hamilton*, to translate the lyrics, and part of the script into Spanish in an attempt to authenticate the Puerto Rican roles. However, according to Elizabeth Vaill, "For

Puerto Ricans who resent the original work for its stereotyping of their culture (an issue that has cropped up more frequently in recent years), it may not be enough” (Vaill 133).

More recently in 2017, Viviana Vargas, a Steering Committee Member of the Latinx Theatre Commons and teacher of Theatre Management at CUNY Baruch College, published an essay about the appropriation of *West Side Story*. She said “The Puerto Rican voice of the 1950s was stolen and rewritten for appropriated consumption. Meanwhile, the real issues the community faced, as people looking for another shot at life, as US citizens coming from a territory were ignored and essentially erased in the eyes of US American mass culture” (Howlround). Vargas believes that *West Side Story* is guilty of artistic and cultural appropriation of Puerto Rican communities by stealing their culture and “whitewashing” it for white audiences. However, when the movie came out, Latinos were seeing Puerto Rican characters on the screen for the first time. In fact, Jennifer Lopez is a big fan of the movie and saw it 37 times as a kid. She said, “I never wanted to play that wimpy Maria, who sits around pining for her guy. I wanted to be Anita, who danced her way to the top” (Broadway.com). It is clear that Jennifer Lopez sees the portrayal the character Anita as a strong independent woman.

While *West Side Story* de-emphasizes Puerto Rican culture, the subject matter of racial discrimination in *West Side Story* is clear: the white Jets do not like the Puerto Rican Sharks moving in on “their territory.” Still, as the American culture changes and grows, so has the insistence that the cultural accuracy of its citizens be represented properly.

West Side Story has changed how people viewed Puerto Ricans. Did racial discrimination play a vital role in the development of *West Side Story*? Was it a blatant omission on the part of the creators to gloss over the accurate depiction of Puerto Rican culture, or was it written in an era that was homogenized, and all people who were foreigners, specifically people

of color, were expected to conform? Why does *West Side Story* portray Puerto Ricans inaccurately? Should *West Side Story* be shelved and only viewed as a piece of history, or is it still relevant today? Has revising the show helped to portray Puerto Rican migrants in the 1950s more accurately? And who were the creators, and what were their intentions when developing the show?

To examine these questions, one must explore what it takes to make a successful musical for Broadway, the plot of *West Side Story*, the genesis of the project, learn about the men who created the musical, and the Puerto Rican history of discrimination in America. It is equally important to understand American society in the 1950s and how it has changed, and how the revivals have been re-interpreted over the last sixty-three years.

West Side Story: The Prologue

Great American musicals are being written and produced for Broadway every day. However, the process of creating a musical from start to finish is a painstaking task. First, it requires a great story because without one, no one will want to see it. Equally as important are the storytellers, which include a librettist, a composer, a lyricist, and a choreographer. While writing the story, the rest of the creative team are developing and preparing for the collaboration to discuss their input to the project, thereby working in tandem with the storytellers to create the finished product. Because producing a successful show for the Broadway theatre is a business, finding a producer that not only believes in the work, but is willing to sink millions of dollars into a new show is key to getting a show off the ground. The producers are in charge of finding investors who will risk their money, and perhaps wait months or years to reap the benefits of a successful run, not to mention, lose everything when it flops. Every detail must be addressed until the show is ready to open. And still, with all the preparation, diligence, and perseverance, some musicals fail miserably.

Every year, several musicals open on Broadway with the expectations that they will run for a respectable amount of time. According to an article in the *New York Times* by Michael Paulson dated May 29, 2019, “Broadway remains a flop-zone industry – about 70 percent of commercial shows fail financially.” This Means, when *West Side Story* opened, it had a 30 percent chance of becoming a successful show. However, all the risks of bringing a musical to the Broadway stage has not stopped people from trying their luck on the Great White Way.

Such is the Broadway musical *West Side Story* created by Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Arthur Laurents, and then new-comer Stephen Sondheim. Fortunately for them, their chances of coming away with a hit show in 1957 was right around 40 percent. According to

Broadwayworld.com, ten musicals, including *West Side Story*, opened on Broadway. Of the ten that opened, six new musicals failed within the first thirty days. Thankfully, the four men didn't worry about statistics, and forged ahead with the hope that their project would beat the odds. Their hard work and dedication to the project paid off. From the smash previews in Washington D.C., in 1957, to the Broadway stage and beyond, *West Side Story* has entertained audiences for sixty-three years and counting.

West Side Story is a re-telling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead of the Montagues and Capulets fighting over family honor, the white¹ Jets and Puerto Rican Sharks are trying to preserve their territory. In the 1950s, gang violence was an ongoing problem in this country, especially in New York City. According to an article dated June 15, 1954, New York City's *The Daily News* reported "41 active teenage gangs spread across the map of the city, and that these gangs can be as small as twenty members or as substantial as two hundred and fifty members." The article goes on to say that the most popular weapon for the teenage gangs is a gun "or 'a piece' as it's called in this strange language the new youth gangs use" (C10). *The Troy Record* dated July 9, 1956, reported that "Police arrested two youths on homicide charges yesterday in the street-gang slaying of a 16 year old boy" (14). *The Daily News* dated June 11, 1955, reported " 'A Quarrel Over Territory' between the rival gangs, The Balkans and The Villains." The story continued, "The rumble was to decide territorial rights to Riverside Park" (210). The article goes on to say, "The Balkans, 40 strong, recruited reinforcements from the Mighty Hoods and the Politicians, who operate in Central Harlem. The Villains sought aid from the Black Knights and the Scorpions of the Upper West Side" (210). The newspapers were filled with accounts of teenage gang violence throughout the 1950s, and the creators of *West Side Story*

¹ I will use the word white to include Irish, Polish, Jewish, Italian, and Dutch Americans that lived in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York, in the 1950s.

were inundated with material to bring to the project. Armed with the subject matter for their musical, it was clear that *West Side Story* was not going to be a musical comedy like *The Music Man* or *My Fair Lady*, which were popular at the time.

West Side Story is not your typical “boy meets girl” love story. It is a tragedy based on William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. However, *West Side Story* differs from *Romeo and Juliet* in that one young lover survives to deliver a moral awakening. In 1957, a show like *West Side Story* was not being done on the Broadway stage, especially in the “Best Musical” category. The show was not the “All-American” Broadway musical like *The Music Man*, which also opened in 1957. It is set in the town of River City, Iowa, in 1912 where a con man convinces a town to start a youth band, and buys uniforms and instruments for them. He falls in love with Marian, the librarian, and finds it difficult to escape with the cash the town had raised intended for the children. The show is lighthearted and very homogenized.

On the other hand, with its dark premise, racial prejudice, and violent subject matter, *West Side Story* was breaking the mold of a typical Broadway musical. The creators used a combination of many styles of dance to help tell the story, while not relying on the libretto or score alone to propel the story forward. Furthermore, the lovers in the story are interracial, crossing a boundary that was taboo in 1957. There is a clear sense of ‘otherness’ that is felt more deeply because the conflict is not only “family” rivalry, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, but racial and cultural conflict as well. Not only do Tony’s friends think he too good for Maria, but they think he is superior because he is a white man and she is a woman of color. *West Side Story* does not have an uplifting ending like *The Music Man* and makes no claims for a solution to gang violence or racial harmony. Instead, *West Side Story* is cautionary tale of how the consequences

of hatred become personal. This tragic tale had something different to offer the Broadway audience, and after all the preparation and hard work, *West Side Story* made its mark.

West Side Story: Plot Summary

The white Jets and the Puerto Rican Sharks are fighting for control of turf in the Upper West Side of New York City. Riff, the leader of the Jets, decides he wants to rumble and asks Tony, a former Jet, to meet at a high school dance to challenge Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks. Maria has just arrived from Puerto Rico for her pre-arranged marriage to Chino, a family friend. Maria is going to the dance with Chino, but confesses to Anita, Bernardo's girlfriend, that she is not in love with him. At the dance, Maria and Tony see each other, share a dance, and fall in love. Bernardo disapproves and pulls her away from Tony. At this point, Riff challenges Bernardo to rumble, and they agree to meet on neutral ground to discuss the time, place, and if weapons will be allowed at the rumble.

On the day of the rumble, Riff and Bernardo start to fight and Bernardo stabs Riff, killing him. In a fit of anger, Tony takes Riff's knife and stabs Bernardo, killing him. After the fight, Chino arrives and tells Maria that Tony has killed Bernardo. Soon after, Tony sees Maria again and explains what transpired. She forgives him, and they vow to run away together. Tony takes refuge in the cellar of Doc's drugstore and prepares to leave with Maria. Anita is devastated by the death of Bernardo and tries to convince Maria to forget about Tony. Still, Maria convinces Anita that she loves Tony and is running away with him. Anita agrees to go to Doc's drugstore to let Tony know that Maria will be late. While there, the Jets tease, cajole, and almost gang-rape her until Doc stops them. In her anger, Anita tells them that Chino has killed Maria in a jealous rage. When Doc gives the news to Tony, he runs in the streets, calling for Chino and begging Chino to kill him too. Just then, he sees Maria, and they run towards each other. As they do, Chino brandishes a gun and shoots Tony. When the Jets and Sharks gather around Tony, Maria and Tony are sharing their last moments affirming their love as Tony dies in her

arms. Maria picks up the gun and tells them that they are all responsible for the deaths of Tony, Riff, and Bernardo because of their hatred for each other. She says, "I can kill now because I hate now." When the police arrive, the Jets lift Tony as the Sharks join them. As in *Romeo and Juliet*, tragedy has brought the feuding to an end.

West Side Story: The Meeting of the Minds

The idea for a musical can happen at any moment. No formula works the same for everyone involved, but the idea and the concept are the foundation in which to build a hit musical. Of course, that is not all it takes to make a hit show, but it is the very beginning of a very long process. Ideas happen when least expected. An article in the newspaper, something someone says, a paragraph in a book, or a conversation can ignite an idea. And of course, that idea for a Broadway musical takes a little bit of luck as well. The idea for *West Side Story* started out as the brainchild of choreographer Jerome Robbins. He first thought of the idea around 1947 when his friend Montgomery Clift, an actor, was working on *Romeo and Juliet*. Clift was having difficulty mastering the role of Romeo. He told Robbins, “I don’t know how to play that character, he’s so passive.” Robbins explained how the conflict was tearing Romeo apart, and that he needs to imagine the play “among the gangs of New York” (Vaill 250). It took another two years to begin the project.

The genesis of *West Side Story* began in 1949 when Jerome Robbins called Leonard Bernstein on the phone with his concept of an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet*, where an Irish Catholic boy falls in love with a Jewish girl. He asked Bernstein if he would be interested in writing the score. Bernstein was intrigued, so he wrote a note on January 6, 1949, “Jerry R. called today with a noble idea...Jerry suggests Arthur Laurents for the book. I don’t know him, but I know *Home of the Brave*, at which I cried like a baby. He sounds just right” (Vaill 250). Within four days, they all met for the first time to write the outline. They came up with various names, including *Gangway!*, *East Side Story*, *Romeo*, and *Operation Capulet* (Bernstein 132). According to Leonard Bernstein in an interview at a Dramatist Guild Symposium in 1985, “It was conceived on the East Side of New York and was a kind of East Side version of *Romeo and*

Juliet” (NPR). Despite of the creators’ prompt start on the musical, it took almost six years of delays due to prior commitments before the creators re-visited the story.

By 1955, the original religious theme had been replaced by teenage street gangs and racial intolerance. The change came about when Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein were meeting to discuss “*Romeo*” by the pool at The Los Angeles Hotel in August of 1955. Laurents read a *Los Angeles Times* headline about the Chicano gang violence in the Los Angeles streets and suggested that the story could be set in the multiracial West Side of Manhattan, another site of racial conflict (Wells 32). In a letter included in the book *The Leonard Bernstein Letters*, Arthur Laurents writes to Leonard Bernstein in July of 1955, referring to the recent gang violence in New York, saying, “By accident, then, we have hit on an idea which is suddenly extremely topical, timely, and just plain hot” (Simeone 343). Also, the religious-themed idea had already been done on Broadway in the play *Abie’s Irish Rose*. Both Laurents and Bernstein thought that the new theme was more in keeping up with the current events and issues of 1955. Bernstein wrote in his journal, “We’re fired again by the *Romeo* notion; only now we have abandoned the whole Jewish–Catholic premise as not very fresh, and have come up with what I think is going to be it: two teenage gangs as the warring factions, one of the newly- arrived Puerto Ricans, the other self-styled ‘Americans.’ Suddenly it all springs to life. I hear rhythms and pulses, and – most of all – I can sort of feel the form” (Bernstein and Simeone 343).

Each creator was developing the show alone on different coasts for the most part, because they were all working on other projects simultaneously in different parts of the country. Today, many letters still exist, describing their thoughts and feelings about the show. Their correspondence also reveals some of their creative process. Their writings are an exciting insight into how committed they are to tell their story, albeit with very different innovative styles. With

the new theme in mind, Bernstein and Laurents were feeling a surge of creativity, and Laurents quickly re-wrote the outline of the plot. Laurents sent a copy of the draft to Bernstein and Robbins calling it *East Side Story* because he and Leonard Bernstein both agreed that they didn't want the story to be set in a specific city or place (Bernstein and Simeone 343). Jerome Robbins loved the idea, and as it developed, and he would send messages to Laurents critiquing the choices and adding different schemes, like ways to develop the story and the characters in the outline. In fact, Robbins jotted down a note to both Bernstein and Laurents. "It concerns the outline, but before I tell you my objections I want you to know that I think it's a hell of a good job and very much on the right track, and that these differences are incidental to the larger wonderful job you are both doing" (Simeone and Bernstein 346). The creators would exchange notes and letters throughout the development of *West Side Story*.

All three men were excited about the new concept, but as they got further into the project, Leonard Bernstein, who was writing the lyrics as well as the score, decided it was time to look for a co-lyricist. Betty Comden and Adolph Green were well-known writers for the Broadway stage, writing hits such as *On the Town* and *Peter Pan*. Bernstein suggested asking them if they were interested in collaborating on *West Side Story*. The outstanding writing team was busy with *Bells are Ringing* and didn't feel that it was the project for both of them, so they declined the offer. Although, according to Stephen Sondheim in an interview with Frank Rich of NPR in 2010, Comden and Green were also under contract in Hollywood at the time, which meant that they were not allowed to work on other projects. Either way, the creators kept looking for an additional lyricist.

Arthur Laurents met Stephen Sondheim, a young, up and coming composer and lyricist, at a party where Sondheim was playing his original songs on piano. Laurents mentioned the

meeting to Bernstein, and the next day Stephen Sondheim auditioned for the team and was immediately offered the job. Sondheim was hesitant to take the position. He wanted to establish himself as a composer as well as a lyricist. He was not sure he was the right man to write the lyrics for *West Side Story*, because in his own words, he claimed, “I’ve never been that poor, and I’ve never even *known* a Puerto Rican” (Wells 33). However, his mentor Oscar Hammerstein II encouraged him to “take the project on because it would be a great experience to work with such established artists” (Wells 33). Sondheim relented and agreed to collaborate with the group. He worked slowly with Bernstein to craft the lyrics so that they were less like poetry and more like a conversation. With Sondheim on board, the team didn’t hesitate to move headlong into finalizing the project. Incidentally, Leonard Bernstein relinquished his lyric writing credit to allow Stephen Sondheim’s name to be mentioned in reviews of the show.

After spending the better part of six years developing *West Side Story*, the next step was casting the show. Jerome Robbins insisted that the actors hired be unknowns. Robbins wanted to use dancers who could act rather than actors who could dance, but Leonard Bernstein wanted to cast opera singers for the lead roles. Robbins’s expectations for the lead roles is unknown, but when Carol Lawrence showed up to her call-back with heavy makeup and gaudy jewelry in an effort to look more ethnic, Robbins told her to “go home and take a shower and come back” (Vaill 276). After countless callbacks, the lead roles were given to Larry Kert and Carol Lawrence. Neither were opera singers per se, but their voices were lovely, and Leonard Bernstein was particularly fond of Carol Lawrence. Robbins got his way when it came to the secondary characters. He was able to cast dancers in the most prominently danced roles. The issue then was to make sure that the dancers could handle the score.

The show was cast just as the creators found themselves without financial backing. The original producer Cheryl Crawford agreed to produce *West Side Story* early in 1957, but pulled out of the show after a botched producer's audition on a muggy April afternoon produced no buyers (Vaill 275). Crawford was not happy with the libretto as well, and she didn't hesitate to write a letter to Arthur Laurents explaining her concerns. She said, "This is for your eyes alone. I think we are in trouble... The characters are much too slightly developed to engage an audience" (Google Arts and Culture). Laurents did almost none of what the letter asked him to do. A few days after the producer's auditions, she brought all the creators into her office and said that if they didn't change the premise of the musical, she would not back it. The men believed in their show, and as a result, walked out and went to a bar for a couple of drinks to discuss their next move (Hoffman). Crawford left the creators scrambling to find a producer six weeks before rehearsals were to begin. It just so happened that Stephen Sondheim knew the producer Hal Prince, who had turned the *West Side Story* project down months before.

That evening, Sondheim called Prince and as Sondheim was sharing his woes with the young producer, Prince, in turn, shared his sorrows about a show he was producing and asked Sondheim to send him another copy of the show. Prince and his partner, Robert E. Griffith agreed to produce the show within days of Sondheim's call, and according to the *Daily News* dated November 10, 1957, procured two hundred and sixty backers. While the producers were finding backers for the show, the team conducted business as usual. Also, after casting was finished and rehearsals were to begin, Jerome Robbins started to feel overwhelmed with both directing and choreographing. He told the producers that he was going to step down as choreographer. Hal Prince explained to Robbins that he was drawn to the show because Robbins

was the choreographer, and if he wasn't going to do that, then he may not want to produce it. They compromised by bringing in an assistant choreographer named Peter Gennaro.

Typically, in 1957, a Broadway show would go into rehearsals for four weeks and then preview. The creators asked for eight weeks of rehearsal so the cast could learn the songs as well as the challenging choreography. The producers allowed them the extra time, which was unheard of in 1957. When rehearsal started, the name of the musical was still up in the air, but that didn't stop them from heading into production full force. As the director, Jerome Robbins had his hand in every aspect of the show. He wanted to know everything about the set, costumes, and lights. He worked extensively with Irene Sharaff, the costume designer, to come up with the perfect designs. Sharaff had dressed *The King and I*, *Candide*, and the movie *An American in Paris*, and the producers thought she would be too expensive. The producers told Robbins he had a budget of \$65,000 to which Robbins replied, "She'll do it for that." Sharaff chose muted indigo blues, ochres, and yellows for the Jets, and purples, reds, blacks, and pinks for the Sharks. She had jeans made out of a unique material that was stonewashed and softened so the dancers wouldn't feel constricted while moving. At the time, the jeans cost \$75.00 each, which is about \$688.00 in today's economy (Vaill 277).

Robbins also made sure that the set was to his liking. Oliver Smith designed a set that allowed a fluid, cinematic kind of scene shifting, something that hadn't been done on the Broadway stage. Robbins was taken aback, but fascinated by this idea, and imagined that the dancers would move as the scenery moved to make the transitions almost seamless. At first, Arthur Laurents was not happy with the set design calling it "Polarized between stunning and scabby." However, when Oliver Smith brought the set to life, it was a first for Broadway. Robbins needed a lighting designer, a rarity for the Broadway stage, and chose Jean Rosenthal,

who “almost singlehandedly revolutionized theatrical lighting design” (Vaill 276). She had lights coming from all directions to produce a more natural effect and allowed for mood, changes in time, and location. Furthermore, the scenery and the actors were also more visible in a way that had not been done before. Jerome Robbins was sure that her lighting design would flow perfectly with Oliver Smith’s fluid set design (Vaill 276).

The script, music, and dancing were re-written, revised, cut, and re-choreographed right up until opening night. When asked about the success of *West Side Story*, Arthur Laurents said, “The idea was to do something good,” he adds. “I think we were all in love with musical theater. I don't think any of us thought of the commercial possibilities of the show. I thought it would last if we were lucky, three months” (Fishko). The Broadway debut ended up running from September 26, 1957 to June 27, 1959, quite a bit longer than three months.

Jerome Robbins: The Rumble with Perfection

Jerome Robbins was born Jerome Wilson Rabinowitz on October 11, 1918. His parents lived in a Jewish community on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The family moved to Weehawken, New Jersey, in the 1920s where his father opened a Comfort Corset Company with Robbin's uncle. The Russian government labeled his father a deserter when he left Russia in 1904 to avoid becoming a soldier in the Russian army. Robbin's father came to New York with nothing and worked hard to become a well-respected business owner. By the time little Jerome was six years old, he was playing the piano and composing music well beyond his tender age. He discovered dancing through his older sister, who would take lessons as he sat on the floor looking on. Robbins would participate in the dance classes at times and make up dances. He delighted in performance and would do so whenever possible. His mother, Lena, would encourage him and challenge his imagination with games to stimulate his creativity. However, it wasn't always easy for Robbins growing up. He recalls, "There were always 'scenes.' Fierce arguments, threats of death, suicide, abandonment, murder & the opposite: laughter, singing, dancing, being crazy, singing fake operas & dancing to records (Jowitt 8)." Robbins always felt as though he was not good enough to gain his mother's love.

If he was defiant in any way, his mother would pretend to call an orphanage to say that she didn't want her son anymore. Robbins would then beg his mother to allow him to stay by telling her that he would be a good boy (Jowitt 10). Robbins remembers these and other incidences vividly, thereby shaping the boy into the determined, emotional, sometimes manipulative, incredibly talented man he became. It is then no surprise that Jerome Robbins was persistent in bringing *West Side Story* to life. It was Robbins who initially created the concept of *West Side Story*; therefore, he was passionate about all aspects of the musical. Jerome Robbins

was not one to back down when he thought something was wrong with the script. He would openly make his argument. Robbins was dissatisfied with the character Anita. Robbins was clear about what he needed from the character Anita, to make her age-appropriate. He did not want to over sexualize the character because Anita must be a believable companion for Bernardo. Nowhere in letters did Robbins ever mention making Anita a caricature of a Puerto Rican woman.

In an effort to familiarize himself with the popular Puerto Rican dances for the show, Robbins decided to go to a high school dance in Spanish Harlem. He came back and told his assistant choreographer about his experience, saying, “They do dances I’ve never seen before” (Lesser 99). He writes to Bernstein and Laurents, “About the dancing. It will never be well incorporated into the show unless some of the principals are dancers” (Simeone and Bernstein 348). Ultimately, the creators cast the show without any Broadway stars, because Robbins insisted on it. He also cast dancers who could sing rather than singers who could dance. However, the only cast members that were of Latino descent were Chita Rivera as Anita, Carmen Gutierrez as Teresita, and Jaime Sánchez as Chino. The rest of the cast were white.

Robbins was notorious for having a harsh tongue and working his performers to exhaustion to get what he wanted out of them. His style of ballet dancing was not utilized on the Broadway stage at this time, except in the dream ballet in *Oklahoma*, choreographed by Agnes de Mille in 1943. Although he choreographed *Our Town* years earlier, he created a more stylized form for *West Side Story*. He used some of the moves he saw at the high school dance, however, his vision was to create a ballet where the dancer’s body told the story without words, so he came up with choreography that would tell the story he envisioned.

His choreography projected moods, and gestures using the dancer's body movements to portray the action on stage. He had the Jets jumping up at a precise moment to create their passion and anger toward the Sharks during the prologue, and when the Jets and Sharks fight during "The Rumble," the knife play purposefully mixes with ballet movement. The gangs snap their fingers in anticipation of a confrontation along with a turn or kick to accentuate the tension. His balletic style empowers the story and denotes the urgency and anger of the gang members. "He wanted the mesh between the imagined, music-inspired, dance-filled world and the actual, gritty, streetwise world to be seamless" (Lesser 93).

Jerome Robbins' "Puerto Rican" choreography is not authentic; however, it is quite different than the Sharks choreography. According to Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, author of *José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway*, he believes that the style of dance is not authentic and that it is disparaging to Puerto Ricans. Sandoval-Sanchez says, In the song "America," "This song, with Spanish rhythm and a 'typical Spanish' choreography, centers the audience in the exoticism and spontaneity of Latino otherness" (72). Sandoval-Sanchez goes on to say, not only is the dancing from another country, the lyrics divide the Puerto Ricans politically. It is true that "America" uses Spanish style dancing. Still, Robbins chose his choreography to help the audience distinguish the Puerto Rican gang from the white gang.

Robbins, along with the costume designer, made distinctions in dance styles and costumes. These distinctions helped the audience recognize who everyone is on stage. Although the above techniques have been in practice for centuries, Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez believes, "The two gangs are defined both by their dress code, which refers to cultural codes (especially the women) and by their styles of dancing" (70). In fact, Irene Sharaff, the costume designer, researched portraits from the Italian Renaissance and Shakespeare's Elizabethan England to

better understand the Shakespearean point of view of matching colors for each family. She then made sure that her designs for *West Side Story* were reminiscent of 1950s gang apparel, and choosing jackets that matched in color to distinguish each gang. In an online exhibit in Arts and Culture, “She also had to allude to the Sharks' Puerto Rican garment styles and facilitate the choreographed movement.” The choices that Robbins made with his costume designer were through their collaboration and his need for the gangs to be distinguishable.

Jerome Robbins was also concerned about how his dancer/actors approached their roles, telling Chita Rivera, who played Anita in the original Broadway production, “Chita. Don’t dance to the window. Walk to the window, run to the window, crawl-but just be a person” (Lesser 88). Jerome Robbins as both choreographer and director telling a story, through dance, about the angst of the Sharks and Jets and how they are fully aware of their enemy’s presence at all times and that they are prepared to fight, bully, and even kill if necessary. In Jerome Robbins’ eyes, the dance moves depict the reality of gang life and the conflict. To achieve his vision, Robbins did something very unconventional. According to Chita Rivera in an interview with *The Guardian*, “Jerry had a phenomenal idea – he said, the actors playing the Sharks and the Jets shouldn’t socialize, in order to make things tenser when they meet on stage for the dancehall competition” (*The Guardian*).

Furthermore, when he wanted “to exacerbate tensions between the two groups, he circulated scurrilous gossip about Jets among Sharks and about Sharks among Jets—he did so to ‘create the level of manifest hatred that he felt the show demanded” (Lesser). According to Carol Lawrence, who played Maria in 1957, Jerome Robbins’ tactics represent the reality that lies, gossip, and ignorance turn into discrimination, racism, and hate. Fiction becomes fact, and hatred emerges. His actions suggest that he was well aware of how groups of people can be

mistrustful. Interestingly, very few of the actors playing Sharks were Latino, so it can be said that the divide between the cast members was not about race. Jerome Robbins' tactics provided the effect he desired, and the critics and audience alike were drawn in by the realistic conflict performed through dance.

Leonard Bernstein: Somewhere

Leonard Bernstein was born on August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. He was a sickly infant with bouts of asthma attacks that kept his mother up many nights, but by the time he was 18 months old, he was speaking in full sentences. His mother would listen to music on the Victrola, and young Leonard would calm right down and listen intently. His father was a profoundly religious man and enrolled his son in a Hebrew school when he was eight years old. Leonard would hear live music for the first time in 1928 at ten years of age at the Jewish Temple. He was so amazed and overcome by the cantor's voice, along with the choir and organ music, that he wept. That same year he was given a piano by his Aunt. He regularly played the piano and was awestruck by the sounds he could produce and the feeling he felt when he played. Later in life, he recalled, "I suddenly felt at the center of a universe I could control, or at least be at the center of, in that, I felt it revolving stably around me, instead of [my] being tossed around in it, which I had felt up until then.... I was safe at the piano (Allen 22)." By the time he was eleven years old, Bernstein had played the piano non-stop.

He started taking lessons from a neighbor, and when he didn't know the names of the chords, Bernstein would devise imaginative harmonies. He had an excellent ear for music, and after only a year, he was playing Bach and Mendelssohn. His music filled a void that he lacked at home. His parents didn't get along well, and his father, in particular, was prone to temper tantrums and dark moods. Because his father complained about the cost of lessons and the fact that he did not want his son to become a professional musician, Bernstein begrudgingly taught others how to play the piano to fund his desire to excel on the piano.

Being that his parents were somewhat distant, he formed close relationships with his younger sister and brother that included their invented private language and a kinship where Leonard was the “father” of his two siblings. They remained close throughout their lives. He continued to grow as a musician, despite his father’s disapproval, and was accepted into Harvard. At eighteen years old, he was already accomplished in many styles of music, from boogie-woogie to Ernesto Lecuona’s *Malagueña*. He would draw from many forms of music and play anything, anytime a piano was available. He met his future wife, Felicia Montealegre, at a party given by pianist Claudio Arrau, with whom Montealegre studied in 1946. They were engaged three months later, but they broke it off due to Bernstein’s homosexual tendencies.

Over the next three years, Bernstein would have affairs with women and men. Still, he was concerned that his homosexuality would prevent him from getting a conducting appointment, so in 1951 and fully aware of Bernstein’s sexuality, Felicia Montealegre married Leonard Bernstein. She would allow Bernstein his homosexual affairs as long as he didn’t embarrass her publicly (Interlude.hk). Although his personal life was far from conventional, Leonard Bernstein had a passion for all types of music, and thus poured his heart and soul into his work. His vast knowledge of music gave him the tools he would need to write the score for *West Side Story*.

Although there is no record of Bernstein specifically studying authentic Puerto Rican music or culture, he had a vast amount of knowledge of different types of Latin and American music. Bernstein was inspired by Aaron Copland’s love of Latin music. Copland had studied the music of Stravinsky and Ravel, who both used Jazz in their music. Ravel also used Spanish style music in his compositions, which Copland passed down to Bernstein (Beriskin). Copland, however, learned the most about Latin beats and rhythms when he was invited to Mexico by

composer and writer, Carlos Chavez in 1928. Copland and is quoted as saying, “It took me three years in France to get as close a feeling to the country as I was able to get in these few months in Mexico” (Wells).

Both Bernstein and Copland studied with the famed teacher Nadia Boulanger in France. Boulanger was famous for encouraging her students to write music that reflected their own experiences. Copland described his “introduction to Nadia Boulanger and her acceptance of [him] as a pupil” as the “most important musical event of his life. (Fauser).

Her vast knowledge of many styles of music would influence a long list of her students from around the globe, including Quincy Jones, Igor Stravinsky, Brazilian guitarist Egberto Gismonti, Argentinian Tango Master Astor Piazzolla, and Charles Strouse (Fauser). According to an interview with Quincy Jones with broadcaster Clemency Burton-Hill, Quincy Jones said, “Boulanger had a singular way of encouraging and eliciting each student’s own voice – even if they were not yet aware of what that voice might be” (BBC). Boulanger had a way to bring out the best in her students. Annegret Fauser, a music historian and Cary C. Boshamer Distinguished Professor of Music at UNC-Chapel Hill, says

Boulanger shaped Copland as an “American” composer by incorporating jazz ‘in an almost abstract’ compositional manner...One of the consequences of this appropriation of jazz in the spirit of neoclassicism led both her and her pupils to separate the musical elements of jazz from its racial and historical origins to create an abstract component of national identity formation (526).

She gave Leonard Bernstein lessons whenever he could take the time to see her. He wanted to get Boulanger’s opinion on his new score, so Bernstein sent her the score to *West Side Story* and asked for her opinion. She responded with enthusiasm and a subtle critique: “I am

enchanted by its dazzling nature – perhaps facility is a danger, but it is enough to be aware of that and follow it” (Guerrieri). Bernstein was a seasoned musician and writer, and he was passionate about his score. He had a talent for creating music that was empathetic to engage an audience to the point of pathos, which sounds like the teachings of Nadia Boulanger.

With all the influences that Leonard Bernstein was exposed to, it is not surprising that his musical education from childhood, Harvard, and beyond, prepared him to write the score for *West Side Story*. Aaron Copland’s influence can be heard in songs like “The Cha Cha” and “Dance at the Gym.” By incorporating both American and Spanish styles of music, Bernstein’s score invokes tension, empathy, excitement, passion, and love, strategically placed to support the atmosphere on stage. Leonard Bernstein wrote the score to *West Side Story* with motifs in mind. He chose the Latin rhythms and cool jazz rhythms within the score to create a distinction between the two cultures. “The most overtly Spanish number is the (rather ironically titled) song “America” (Wells 123), which is sung by the Puerto Rican characters. He also uses recurrent themes throughout the score called leitmotifs, which help the audience follow the action. He didn’t, however, use authentically Puerto Rican rhythms. Instead he used a Mexican indigenous form called *huapango* and the Puerto Rican form *seis*. Basically, *huapango* is a form that uses a 2/4 rhythm for one instrument and then cross-rhythms in 3/4 and 6/8 time signature for the two other instruments. *Seis* is a vocal piece that uses six to eight syllables per stanza like in the song “America.” It appears that Bernstein put a lot of thought into his score, and nowhere in the research does any publication or person say that Leonard Bernstein was a racist or unsympathetic to the Puerto Rican people.

On the contrary, he was aware of the social impact of racism. In an interview with Bernstein’s daughter Jamie Bernstein, Tom Huizenga asks her, “What do you want to convey in

your book *Famous Father Girl: A Memoir of Growing Up Bernstein?*” She replies, “What I hope I conveyed is that everything my father did, in any aspect of his life, was always in the context of love. If he could have, he would have hugged every person on the planet — and he kind of did, through his music” (Huizenga).

Bernstein has created a score so brilliant that the many styles of music (jazz, opera, modern, Latin, etc.) meld together to create tension, longing, hope, and sorrow. This type of heartfelt, exciting, “new music” complements the dancing in a way that hadn’t been done on the Broadway stage before 1957. Not only did the music help to further the storyline, but the music gave voice to the dancing, and in turn, the dancing propelled the story forward.

In fact, at the soft opening in Washington D.C., the audience was weeping at the end and were silent when the curtain went down, and then suddenly burst in uproarious applause for the last curtain call. Chita Rivera recalls, “The first time we did it for the gypsy run-through, we didn’t know what we had” (Vaill 286-287). Leonard Bernstein wrote to his wife, “I tell you, this show may yet be worth all the agony” (Vaill 287). His hard work paid off.

Arthur Laurents: Cracko, Jacko!

Arthur Laurents was born Arthur Levine in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York, on July 14, 1917 to his mother Ada, a school teacher, and his father Irving a lawyer. They were of the Jewish faith. Not much is known about his early childhood. In Arthur Laurents' memoir *Original Story By*, he recounts that he and his little sister were taken care of mostly by the maid during their younger years because his mother decided to go back to work teaching part-time after his sister was old enough to be taken care of by the maid. Between his sister's many illnesses and his mother's love for mah-jongg and bridge, there wasn't much time left for Arthur (9). He turned to his father whom he loved dearly, and although his father was distant and removed, focusing on his work rather than his family, the love was reciprocal (98). He was first introduced to the theatre by his mother's best friend who took him to see his first theatre pieces, *No, No, Nanette* and *Rain*. He wrote, "The dazzle of the twirling parasols in *No, No, Nanette*, and the real rain in *Rain* epitomized theatre to me. I was only eight" (14). *Rain* ended up being the last time he would see a play for quite a while. The show had too much adult content, and his mother would no longer let him attend. At age ten he was off to the theatre again with his father's secretary. She took him to see operettas such as *Lucia* and *Paris*. This is where Laurents fell in love with musicals. His mother would sit at the piano and play tunes and sing. His mother was a strong willed person who didn't put up with bad behavior. Her mother-in-law was very demanding and opinionated, so when it was time for Arthur's Bar Mitzva, she scheduled it for a Saturday, knowing Laurents' grandmother would never show up.

By the time he was a young teenager, Laurents would buy discount tickets to musicals as well as plays and see the shows alone. He felt comfortable in the theatre and didn't mind that the adults around him were appalled that he wasn't accompanied by a parent (15). After Laurents

graduated high school he headed off to Cornell where he would study to be an attorney. Shortly after he arrived, he confessed to his father that he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps and become an attorney. His father asked him what he wanted to be. Laurents said, "A writer." His father responded, "Fine. Good." His father supported Laurents in all his endeavors.

When he was given permission to study writing, Laurents began to read a number of plays. In fact, because he had such good grades, he was given permission by the school to invent his own class. He created the class *Drama Since 1848*. He and his teacher would read plays and discuss them at length. He also took a playwrighting class from a teacher he says was an anti-Semite. The professor made a comment that no play should start with a phone ringing. In response to that, Laurents wrote a one-act play that started with a ringing phone. He said he wrote to declare war because the teacher had no problem starting a sentence with, "you Jews" (17).

After Laurents' graduation, he had to find a job fast that would keep him out of the draft. WWII was almost under way and he would most likely be drafted soon. He found a job writing for CBS radio. There he met Ned Williams who told Laurents he had talent. Williams went on to say that his writing was too facile. Williams suggested that instead of making transitions with words, Laurents need to make them with emotion because "Emotions precede thought, emotions determine thought; plays are emotion." To that Laurents recall that that was "The single best lesson I have ever been given" (17). However, his job did not keep Laurents from being drafted.

Arthur Laurents was drafted into the army in 1941, before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Being a homosexual, he was very nervous and anxious about being exposed when he first arrived at boot camp. However, he became more comfortable as time went by. His first assignment was to write training films. His first, *Resistance and Ohm's Law* gave him the opportunity to work

with George Cukor or “Private Cukor ”as he was known in the Army. He would work with Cukor again after the war. He made several training films when he was asked to start writing for a weekly series called, *Assignment Home* that was to help make it easier for soldiers returning home.

He wrote a play called *The Knife*. In Laurents’ own words, “It was about Negroes in the Army and it was honest about discrimination in the army” (Laurents 29). However, in 1945 the Army was not going to show this play and it was banned in Washington. Laurents commented, “The brass were under no illusion about the Negro’s place after the war: Back to the back of the bus, boy” (Laurents 27). His comments are typical of Laurents, he has never been tolerant of prejudice. He believed “most Americans were prejudiced against homosexuals, Negroes, and Jews” (Laurents 8). He decided to fight for *The Knife* and sent a copy to the secretary of war, Henry Stimson. Stimson officially ordered the play to be aired. He also gave Arthur Laurents a citation for his work (27).

After the war Arthur Laurents was accused of being a communist by the House un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He had been suspected of being a communist while in the Army, but nothing came of it. However, after the war the HUAC were investigating almost everyone in Hollywood. He refused to testify against his colleagues and as a result he lost his passport. When he regained his passport, he headed to France. By 1949 he was back in Hollywood when he was approached by Jerome Robbins to write the libretto for his new unnamed musical.

Arthur Laurents did not like the premise and turned it down after their initial meeting in 1949. He must have still been interested because he himself was still communicating with Robbins and Bernstein about the project (Laurents). By 1955, everything changed when the

premise became about gangs in New York. Although he had never written a musical for Broadway before, he was able to create the characters in *West Side Story* loosely based on *Romeo and Juliet* using his modern perspective.

It is well known that the *West Side Story* script is one of the shortest librettos in Broadway history because the songs and dances tell most of the story. That didn't stop Arthur Laurents from writing diverse and well-rounded characters and a succinct script. He invented slang that he incorporated into the script like "cracko-jacko" and "PR's", that at first, sounded somewhat forced. Laurents had to invent non-offensive language for both groups because he wasn't permitted to use four-letter words. The *West Side Story* libretto has very little Spanish either, which is the primary language of Puerto Ricans. In the original book, a sweet moment when Maria is talking to her father is the only Spanish spoken. He also included a twist to the story by allowing his "Juliet" to live, evoking hope within the tragedy.

Laurents was in a constant battle with Robbins about the characters, especially the characterization of Anita. Jerome Robbins wrote a letter to Laurents. In it, Robbins quipped, "You are way off the track with the whole character of Anita." He called Anita "a terrible cliché." He goes on to say,

If she's 'an-older-girl-kicked-by-love-before-experiencing-the- worst' (and I'm quoting you) she's much too experienced for the gang, or else is sick, sick, sick to be so attached emotionally and sexually to a younger boy of a teenage gang. I can't put the above strongly enough and at the risk of offending you, Arthur, forget Anita and start writing someone who is either older (like Tante) or younger with the same emotional timber of the rest of the gang (Simeone and Bernstein 347).

It would have been a huge mistake to “forget Anita” as she is a big part of *West Side Story*, and Laurents knew he would have to make Anita more to the liking of Robbins. When Robbins suggested that he pare down the characters, Laurents retorted if he “pared down the script to story points, then we will have a conventional musical with two-dimensional characters. Furthermore, the gangs will be unsympathetic because there will be no understanding of their characters or feeling” (Berson 43). Laurents knew that he was writing a show that was unconventional with characters that had never been seen before on Broadway. He wanted all the characters to be three-dimensional and wanted the audience to feel sympathy for them. His script is short, but it is full of life.

Stephen Sondheim: Something's Coming

Stephen Sondheim was born March 22, 1930, in New York, New York, to Jewish parents, Herbert Sondheim, a dress manufacturer, and Janet Fox, dress designer. He grew up primarily on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where, as an only child, was brought up in what Sondheim calls “an environment that supplies you with everything but no human contact” (*Sondheim, A Life*). His parents were of Jewish decent, but did not practice Judaism, so Stephen never had a bar Mitzvah or observed the Jewish holidays.

His residence as a small child was the newly built San Remo apartments on Central Park West. The family had a beautiful apartment and although it was not the best the San Remo offered, it was comfortable. The San Remo had an affluent address, no shortage of highly influential neighbors, and his mother would have it no other way.

Sondheim was mostly cared for by servants and didn't spend much time with his parents. His mother, known as Foxy, made sure that young Stephen was dressed well, as she kept up with all the clothing trends. When Sondheim was four years old, he attended pre-kindergarten at the Ethical Culture School, and promptly skipped a grade and started 1st grade at age five. On Saturdays, he would go to something called Group, where he spent time with friends, mostly Jewish, at Central Park or Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx.

Stephen fell in love with music when he discovered a phonograph that would flip records by itself called a Capehart that belonged to his father. He would sit for hours and listen to music and watch the Capehart flip each record with ease. When his parents divorced, he moved with his mother to Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

He then went to a military school from 6th grade and 8th grade, skipping 7th grade, making him two years younger than his peers. By this time, he had already met Oscar Hammerstein II

through his mothers' design business. Hammerstein took an interest in Stephen, and as they got to know each other, Sondheim came to refer to him as a surrogate father.

When Sondheim's mother Foxy got her divorce settlement, she bought a farm near the Hammerstein home. There, he was emotionally abused by his mother, who projected her anger at her failed marriage on him. Sondheim recalls that "she would come on to and berate, beat-up on, you see. What she did for five years was treat me like dirt, but come on to me at the same time" (Secret 31). Luckily, Sondheim would spend many days and nights at the Hammerstein home playing chess with Oscar and spending time with Oscar's son Jimmy, especially when he needed a break from his mother. Stephen respected Oscar Hammerstein as a person and an artist, so, it is no surprise that Stephen wanted to pursue a career in the theatre. Sondheim believes "if Oscar had pursued any other profession, he would have followed him blindly" (Secret 15).

Sondheim spent his high school years at the George School where he wrote his first musical entitled *By George* at the age of 14 years old. It was a show that poked fun at the George School, and it was a huge success with the students. Sondheim had asked Hammerstein's opinion on his show, hoping that maybe he would become the youngest person to write a musical on Broadway. Unfortunately, Hammerstein thought it was terrible, but he also said he showed great talent.

Oscar Hammerstein would go on to teach Sondheim the skills of songwriting. In Meryle Secret's book, *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, she says "Sondheim learned the importance of choosing every word with meticulous care, while at the same time finding the right balance between say too little and too much" (51-53). He learned a great deal from Oscar Hammerstein, and when Stephen Sondheim went off to college, he was ready to put Oscar's techniques into practice.

Sondheim chose a college that would allow him the opportunity to move in with his Dad in New York. He entered Williams College at age sixteen, where he pursued a degree in English and took music as an elective. His time at college was a positive one, and he enjoyed learning. He would work as an intern for Oscar Hammerstein during productions of *The King and I* and *South Pacific*. When he graduated, he won the Hutchinson prize which allowed him to study composition at Princeton University at age twenty. When he met Arthur Laurents, his career was just beginning.

Sondheim was the lesser-known of the four creators, and only twenty-five when he was hired in 1955. He joined the project later in the process to write lyrics because Leonard Bernstein was unable to take on the score and the lyrics because of time constraints. When Stephen Sondheim agreed to write the lyrics for *West Side Story*, he was no more familiar with the Puerto Rican Culture than any of the other creators. He was also faced with songs that had already been written by Bernstein. He dug right in and worked within the score's structure. He chose words that flowed much better than some of the lyrics Bernstein had written so far. For example, in an archived image of Leonard Bernstein's lyrics to the song "Somewhere," Bernstein wrote,

Somewhere there's a place for us
somewhere, someplace for us
peace and quiet and **sun and air**
wait for us somewhere
There's a time for us
we'll find the time for us

time to take what the world can give

time to love, time to live

Sondheim re-wrote the lyrics to say,

There's a place for us

somewhere a place for us

peace and quiet **and open air**

wait for us somewhere

There's a time for us

someday a time for us

time together with time to share

time to learn, time to care

The changes may not seem very significant, and yet Sondheim's lyrics feel dreamier allowing space between the words, letting the music compliment the lyrics. He uses a rhyming scheme like Bernstein, but he is also thinking of how the singer will be able to execute the song. Singing on the words give and live cause the note to abruptly end while singing share and care the singer will be able to let the "a" sound extend before singing on the "r" sound. The elongated vowel sound instills the dreamy quality of the song, allowing the singer to vocalize a sense of longing and a desire to be in a place where ethnicity and color are non-existent. Sondheim remembers the impending collaboration with Leonard Bernstein, "Not only was I, for the first time writing lyrics to someone else's music, the someone was a legend verging on myth" (*Finishing the Hat* 26).

Sondheim took a different approach to the lyrics than Leonard Bernstein in that he attempted to convey the language that wouldn't sound contrived or be sung as if a poet had

written it. Sondheim thought Maria, whose first language was Spanish, would sing lyrics that were more simplistic than Tony. He would refer to Arthur Laurents' libretto many times to see the rhythms of the speech and try to mimic it in his lyrics. Sondheim was thinking more in terms of pleasing his partners as a writer. He wanted to show them that he could "turn a phrase" just as well as Comden and Green. He tried to match his lyrics to the energy of the music, and he faced the lyrics that Leonard had already written, to which he would change and manipulate to sound less poetic. In an interview with Jeffrey Brown, Stephen Sondheim explains his process. "All, most the rhymes in *West Side Story* are you know, very simple rhymes you know, go and so, and may and day, and things like that. And it was my first Broadway show, and I wanted to show that I could rhyme skillfully." He goes on to say, 'the phrase It's alarming how charming I feel,' from "I Feel Pretty," is much too sophisticated a phrase for a Puerto Rican girl to say." It's not that he feels the character wouldn't understand the feeling. He questions whether a newly migrated Puerto Rican would have the language skills to think of that phrase. Most audience member would not notice the sophistication of the phrase. Still, he says that he would have loved it more if it had been truer to the character of Maria. Sondheim believes that it brings a false note to the character (MacNeil). He also believes he missed the mark with some lyric choices because he feels the characters were teenagers, and they shouldn't sound too insightful.

Sondheim, in an online interview with Jeffery Brown, said that Oscar Hammerstein, whom he adored, "taught me more in one day about songwriting than most songwriters learn in a lifetime." He explains that Hammerstein taught him to think of songs as "little one act plays in which you state an idea, and then you develop it a bit, and then you come to a conclusion" (Brown). Within a musical, Sondheim says, "The song has to be necessary to telling the story. If you can take the song out and it doesn't leave a hole, then it's not necessary" (Brown).

Sondheim demonstrates this in the songs, “Somewhere” and “Something’s Coming.” Each song can stand alone on its own as “little one act plays.” Incidentally, Bernstein was initially credited for co-writing the lyrics, but as time went on, he realized that Sondheim deserved the credit alone and relented, allowing Sondheim sole credit.

All four creators put considerable time and effort into developing *West Side Story*. They all had a common goal and they achieved it by staying true to their story and honing their craft with every stroke of a pen and in Jerome Robbins’ case, every movement of his body. It is made clear in their biographies that they grew up with privilege, but they also had to overcome some adversity as well. Their hearts were in the right place and the research suggests that they were following their dream of creating a new musical for the Broadway stage like no one had ever seen before.

Everyone There Will Have Moved Here: Classism, Discrimination, and Racism

Through the centuries, playwrights have written about the many forms of discrimination from Classism to Racism. Discrimination of any kind provides a story with conflict, and conflict is a necessary ingredient for great drama. Shakespeare was the master at creating conflict. Several of Shakespeare's plays centered around racial conflict. The tragic hero in *Othello* is a Moor which causes racial conflict when he doesn't promote Lago and marries Desdemona, and Shylock is persecuted by Antonio for being Jewish in *Merchant of Venice*.

Shakespeare set *Romeo and Juliet* in the city of Verona, known for its feuding families, murder, and mayhem. It was a small but flourishing city where cultural and artistic pursuits were plentiful. The Venice Republic ruled Verona at the time, so the city was not very well known. However, between 1594 and 1596, in a time when Verona was a bustling city of palaces, churches, and convents, two young people fell in love. The feud between the Montagues and Capulets is on-going, but neither Romeo nor Juliet care because they are in love. The plot and story are not new to Shakespeare. In fact, Dante first wrote of the family feud between the Montagues and Capulets two hundred and fifty years before Shakespeare was born. Also, Shakespeare based his lead characters in the play on a poem written by Arthur Brookes in 1592 called "The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet." According to the British Library, "Brooks' poem describes the 'deadly' feud between two wealthy, noble families—Capulet and Montague. Against this backdrop of 'blacke hate,' he tells the 'unhappy' tale of a beautiful youth, Romeus Montague, whose heart is entrapped by the wise and graceful Juliet Capulet." Shakespeare's, Dante's, Arthur Brookes', and much later the *West Side Story* creators, have many things in common, including feuds, power,

discrimination, and young love. All the creators write about the young lovers' perilous dangers they face because of their forbidden love. Whether the obstacles are feuding nobles or fighting gangs as in *West Side Story*, the lovers choose each other despite their feuding family's possible consequences.

These cautionary tales are still as relevant today as when Shakespeare created his epic play, *Romeo and Juliet*. The conflicts are what make *Romeo and Juliet* a great story, and looking forward in time, the very same components are used to create *West Side Story*. Shakespeare uses conflicts in the play that were relevant for that time period, the same way the creators of *West Side Story* use conflicts that were relevant in 1957. In fact, New York City was seeing many changes in their communities that were causing conflict.

In 1953, a massive influx of Puerto Ricans migrated to the United States, most of them to New York City. According to the Salem Press Encyclopedia, "More than 69,000 Puerto Ricans moved to the United States in 1953 alone" (4). New York City was also embroiled in teenage gang warfare at the time, and it was all over the newspapers. Headlines read, "20 Youths Held in New York Park Murder", and "A Quarrel Over Territory." John Martin, writer for the *Daily News* in New York City, reports, "Cops to Wrap Upper W. Side in 4th Blanket. Cops wil[l] be thrown into the area, a diverse section containing Columbia University, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, and block after block of festering tenements. Half of its 400,000 population, according to police estimates, are foreign-born" (Newspapers.com).

Puerto Ricans were moving because of the lack of opportunity in Puerto Rico at the time. Derek Green writes, "Unemployment was high on the island while opportunity was dwindling" (Countries and their Cultures). Ironically, most Americans forget that Puerto Rico is a territory

of The United States, and yet the opportunities on the island were not nearly as lucrative as on the mainland. Puerto Ricans were looking for a better life than could be offered on the island of Puerto Rico in the 1950s, but they did not have the same rights or opportunities of American-born citizens. They could not, “and still cannot” vote for the president of the United States, and they do not have full representation of Congress. According to a *New York Times* article written by Russell Porter on July 4, 1955, “A characteristic of West Side life is the mixture of races and nationalities in run-down neighborhoods with antiquated housing, in close proximity to modern houses and apartments with all the comforts and conveniences. These contrasts of squalor living next door to luxury have created frictions, resentments, and fears.” The article goes on to say there was a rise in juvenile delinquency, and people were afraid to walk on the streets because of muggings and molesting of women and children (Porter 13).

Because *West Side Story* was written at a time when Puerto Ricans were migrating to the mainland, there was plenty of material in the New York newspapers about gang violence and “foreigners” for the creators to cement their decision to proceed with the theme of teenage gangs and race relations. And because New York City in 1955 was still seeing a rise in its Puerto Rican population, it started causing tension within the neighboring white community.

New York City newspapers were running articles about the Puerto Rican migration and the rising gang activity. On June 23, 1955, a *New York Times* article reports that a Viceroy gang member was shot in the back of the head by a Dragon gang member in retaliation for the stabbing of a fellow gang member (22). In this case both gangs were Puerto Rican. At this time, all the newspapers were pumping articles out about gang violence and delinquency. There was no shortage of headlines in the newspapers about shootings, murders, and robberies caused by youth gangs.

As the citizens of New York City were inundated with reports of gang activity, they were on edge. Coupled with the fact that the racial demographic was rapidly changing due to the Puerto Rican influx into the “white” neighborhoods and African Americans integrating into all “white” schools, racial tensions were mounting. Furthermore, people of color and people who had foreign accents were considered less-than to the established white communities, making it difficult at best to find decent jobs. According to racial scholar Matthew Frye Jacobson, “ethnic revision of race stopped at the color line, universalizing whiteness by lessening the presumed difference separating ‘Hebrews,’ ‘Celts,’ and ‘Anglo- Saxons,’ but deepening the separation between any of these former white races and people of color, especially blacks” (85). In other words, religious differences and country of origin were less significant than skin color.

Although the name *West Side Story* came much later in the creative process, Laurents knew that gang violence was a crisis all over the United States and around the world, not just in L.A. or New York City, making the subject matter highly significant in the 1950s. Laurents knew that religious prejudice was not as prominent in society as racial discrimination in the 1950s. He made it clear in the first outlines that gang warfare was to be a prominent part of the story. In an interview with Sara Fishko, a writer for NPR, Laurents recalls, "That kind of bigotry and prejudice was very much in the air. It's really, 'How can love survive in a violent world of prejudice?' That's what it's about" (NPR).

The song “America” is staged with the women complaining about the poor conditions in Puerto Rico and the opportunities America has to offer. Yet, the song touches very little on the inequality of “white” versus Puerto Rican. Still, the movie takes the opportunity to change the lyrics in the song “America” and add the men to drive home the point to the women; unless they are “white” in America, they have little opportunity and no equality. The lyrics, such as:

Anita: I'll get a terrace apartment.

Bernardo: Better get rid of your accent

Anita: Life can be bright in America

Boys: If you can fight in America

Girls: Life is alright in America

Boys: If you're a white in America

The lyrics suggest, at the very least, that Stephen Sondheim had some awareness of the inequality of people of color. However, he may not have considered that not all Puerto Ricans were moving to the mainland because they disliked Puerto Rico. However, according to Alberto Sandoval-Sanchez, "Although Bernardo discredits and "demythifies" Anita's exaltation of the American dream, his comments are subordinated and silenced by the patriotic pro-U.S. propaganda" (73). Furthermore, it can be argued that "America" was not the only song to use language that regarded assimilation in American society the path that foreigners must adhere to. The song "I Feel Pretty" is also written with lyrics that have the audience believing that Maria wants to assimilate into white American life, specifically by becoming Miss America. To this day, The Miss America Pageant only allows the fifty states of the union and Washington, D.C. to compete for the title. It wasn't until 1984 that a person of color, Vanessa Williams, was crowned Miss America. For Maria then, the song suggests that it is only a fantasy brought on by her new found love.

Reviews can make or break a Broadway show; luckily *West Side Story* received excellent reviews for the most part. However, a man in Pittsburgh was especially harsh and completely forthcoming about his point of view. Karl Krug of the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph date October 9, 1957, wrote "It is not yet within me to applaud such an obvious musical stage dodge

that blames the Americans for Puerto Rican troubles in New York.” He also blamed the creators for “making bums out of the cops.” He goes on ranting about the character lieutenant Shrank who offers to help the Jets wipe out the Sharks. This review of the musical clearly shows that Krug believed that the Puerto Ricans were causing all the problems in New York, and that there couldn’t possibly be any corrupt cops. Karl Krug’s review suggest his beliefs about Puerto Ricans and his faith in the New York City police department were made out ignorance or blatant racism. Evidence from the research suggests that the creators did not go forward with the project with any malicious intent whatsoever.

America has been moving closer to racial equality since *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway. What have Americans accomplished in regard to equality and race relations, and where is America headed as a nation? In 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give her seat up on the bus to a white man catapulting the Civil Rights Movement. Lorraine Hansberry tackled racial discrimination and housing rights in her Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* where a black family is “urged” to reconsider buying a house in a white neighborhood. By the 1960s, attitudes toward people of color started to change, in part by Martin Luther King Jr.’s push for Civil Rights. Integration of schools, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ending segregation was a step further to provide legal protection for people of color. It banned segregation in public places, repealed the “Jim Crow” Laws, and minorities could no longer be denied service based simply on the color of their skin. Martin Luther King Jr. called the Civil Rights Act of 1964 “nothing less than the second emancipation” (History.com). Later, the Civil Rights Act was expanded to include the elderly, disabled Americans, and women in collegiate athletics. The Voting Rights of 1965 bans discriminatory acts like literacy tests and other practices that prevent minorities from voting. The new laws helped minorities, but there was still more to do. Lynden B. Johnson tried to pass

the Fair Housing Act, but it was consistently voted down by Congress. It wasn't until Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated that Johnson was able to convince Congress to pass the Fair Housing Act of 1968. With all the new laws in place to protect minorities, the laws were not being enforced, so people of color were still being treated unfairly and denied their civil rights. More recently, organizations such as #Black Lives Matter, the Dream Defenders, and Millennial Activists United, are cropping up all over the United States calling for action to stop discrimination against minorities. People of color are still being persecuted, discriminated against, and denied services, and housing. Clearly, there is still a lot of work to do in America to protect minorities from racial discrimination, inequality, police brutality, and injustice. Additionally, the theme of racial discrimination in *West Side Story* is still an ongoing problem in America.

House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC): I Like to be in America?

The U.S. House of Representatives established The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938. They were to investigate possible threats to national security that included communist and fascist regimes. By 1945, WWII ended, and the Cold War had begun. The U.S. decided to broaden their investigations into different types of “un-American” activities as well. They targeted Liberals, artists, labor leaders, immigrants, Jews, and African Americans. The committee would threaten to expose an individual’s sexuality if they did not testify against their friends. Furthermore, the HUAC’s actions would effectively silence the accused’s first amendment right of free speech. By 1950, the committee targeted Hollywood. The HUAC questioned actors, producers, musicians, directors, writers, choreographers, and anyone else associated with the entertainment industry. By the time they finished their interrogation, over three hundred artists were put on a “blacklist,” thereby losing their jobs. Famous names like Lucille Ball, Ronald Reagan, Walt Disney, Lillian Helman, and Jerome Robbins all testified during this time. The people called to testify for the HUAC were asked if they were members of the Communist party. They were also encouraged or coerced to name others who may be affiliated with the Communist party.

Jerome Robbins “sang like a canary” as Arthur Laurents put it, regarding Robbins’ testimony on May 5, 1953 to the HUAC where he named people he knew that might be communists. Nora Kaye, one of his best friends, said about Robbins, “He would inform on his mother” (Laurents p. 45). On March 29, 1950, Senator Kenneth Wherry (R-Nebraska) on the floor of the U.S. Congress claimed there were “thousands” of homosexuals employed by the federal government. Dwight D. Eisenhower then revised President Truman’s Federal Loyalty

Program to include “immoral conduct” and “sexual perversion” as posing a security risk which were grounds for being ineligible for federal employment (Todayinlh.com) It became known as the “Lavender Scare” and caused panic in the homosexual community. In an unpublished journal, Jerome confided “It was my homosexuality I was afraid would be exposed I thought. It was my once having been a Communist that I was afraid would be exposed.” He also said that he was afraid that his career would be taken away, and that it scared him to the point that he “crumbled & returned to that primitive state of terror” (Jowitt 231).

Arthur Laurents was blacklisted by the HUAC, and his passport was taken away. He had to hire an attorney, then write a letter to the state department explaining his political stance. It took two letters before he received his passport in the mail (Laurents 286). Laurents and so many others in Hollywood were harassed, lost jobs, their reputations, and never worked in Hollywood again because of the HUAC’s interrogations.

Leonard Bernstein had been monitored by J. Edgar Hoover since 1949. Hoover received an internal FBI memo citing the conductor’s involvement with several groups. “Among them: the American Committee for Yugoslav Relief, the Civil Rights Congress, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee” (WQXR, public Radio). By 1951 he was labeled a communist, and when he applied for renewal of his passport in 1953, he was denied. According to New Yorker Magazine, “In order to get the passport back, Bernstein had to submit an eleven-page affidavit stating that he had never been a Communist Party member and that he had never knowingly engaged in Communist activities.”

The HUAC was on a “witch-hunt” looking for any reason to blacklist someone. The creators, excluding Stephen Sondheim, were all blacklisted from working in Hollywood. However, it didn’t prevent them from working in the theatre. Arthur Laurents and Leonard

Bernstein refused to testify in front of the committee, causing them to lose their passports. Jerome Robbins was so afraid to *not* testify that he named his friends and colleagues, in an attempt to hide his homosexuality and his brief involvement in the Communist party. First hand, Laurents and Bernstein understood the power of the government to deny them their inalienable rights as American citizens. Likewise, Jerome Robbins felt the pressure of the government to testify, threatening his livelihood, and freedom. All three men were exposed to discrimination, although different from racial discrimination it suggests that it may have had an impact on them when creating *West Side Story*.

***West Side Story*: The Revival, Reviews, and the Criticism**

West Side Story has a history of successes, accolades, critics, and tremendous popularity. From its auspicious opening in 1957 to the newest Broadway production, it has continually proven that it's worth re-telling it over and over again. It is also a musical that brings up several issues of authenticity and the appropriation of the Puerto Rican Culture. Each Broadway revival of *West Side Story* revised some aspect of the musical to reflect a more accurate portrayal of the Puerto Rican people by addressing the shows' flaws.

The most recent production of *West Side Story* opened on Broadway on February 20, 2020, to mixed reviews. The critics either loved it or downright panned it. Most reviewers criticized the use of the movie screen behind the actors to depict the New York streets as well as provide close-ups of the actors' faces in real-time. The critics were also confused as to which person belonged to what gang. Ben Brantley, critic for the New York Times, says, "in this version, both gangs appear to be multiracial melting pots...you'll wish they were wearing team uniforms" (New York Times). Perhaps the costume designer was not aware that defining who belongs to which gang, although common, was essential to the story. Perhaps it was done on purpose to provoke. By the same token, Helen Shaw critic for *Vulture*, a magazine published in New York, feels as though Ivan van Hove, the director, blurs the racial lines by "sometimes deliberately making it difficult to tell the Jets and Sharks apart." It seems that Van Hove has created a revival that is thought-provoking and attempts to tell a story for present-day America.

The review headlines are as diverse as the revival. *Rolling Stone Magazine's* Headline claims, "*West Side Story*, Breaks All the Rules for All the Right Reasons." Terry Teachout with the *Wall Street Journal*, headlines her review with, "Worst Side Story." *The New York Post* reveals, "Radical Revival is a Triumph." The New Yorker calls the revival a "Grim Take on

West Side Story.” In other words, the re-imagining of *West Side Story* is being reviewed more harshly than the original version. Perhaps because in 2020 the critics are able to express their opinions more freely.

Carina del Valle Schorske wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times* on February 24, 2020, where she says, “The latest Broadway revival can’t fix the painful way it depicts Puerto Ricans.” She also addressed the limitations of Leonard Bernstein’s score, which other theatre critics did not mention, by saying “There’s only so much Latin rhythm they can bring to the musical while maintaining a working relationship with Leonard Bernstein’s score.” Because the score cannot be altered for any reason without permission, van Hove was obligated to stay within the score’s parameters. This may account for some of the challenges van Hove faced when revising *West Side Story*. There is research that Bernstein used many different Latin influences in his score, but there is nowhere in the score that is exclusively Puerto Rican. The theatre critics also talk about how the singers sang each song beautifully, and that the high school dance was brilliantly choreographed to the music. In effect, Leonard Bernstein’s score is resilient, and able to still hold up to criticism in the 21st century.

Schorske also criticized the multi-racial Jets, saying that Van Hove is “concocting a fantasy world in which bigoted whites form an alliance with African-Americans against Puerto Rican migrants — a bid, in Ms. De Keersmaecker’s words, ‘for inclusion’ of the American population today. But it’s unlikely black New Yorkers would seek (or find) security among white Americans rather than among their Caribbean, Middle Eastern, and Central American neighbors” (*New York Times*). She does not believe that gangs could be multi-cultural, but old newspaper articles with pictures of youth gangs prove that some gangs in New York City were multi-racial. *The New York Times* ran an article dated August 1, 1957, just 6 weeks before the

original production of West Side Story opened, describing the gangs as the Egyptian Kings and Jesters, saying, “According to the police, each of the rival gangs had white and Negro members. They said racial tensions had not been involved. The two gangs had been feuding for the last five weeks.” Therefore, assuming that van Hove intended the time period to be irrelevant, not all gangs were racially based, but rather neighborhood-based. Meaning, it could be possible that if families were living in multi-racial neighborhoods, the youth gangs could have also been multi-racial, and united in preserving their turf against intruding gangs.

West Side Story: The Finale

When Sondheim was asked in an interview by 60 Minutes Overtime, “Why do we need a new version of *West Side Story*? His reply solidifies why theatre pieces like *West Side Story*, are re-imagined and produced all over the world. He answers with great enthusiasm, “Oh, because what keeps the theatre alive is re-interpretation. What’s great about the theatre is it’s a living organism. A play or musical lives on by its re-interpretation” (NBC News). Stephen Sondheim has been involved in every Broadway revival of *West Side Story* in some capacity. Theatre is entertainment that can be thought-provoking, maddening, beautiful, funny, and sad. Theatre gives the audience a living piece of art that is ever-changing and subject to reinterpretation. Each audience member will come away with their own interpretation of any given show. Theatre is a living art where creative people join together to create an experience that changes with every performance. Each creator comes to a project with their point of view, and expresses their talent through this glorious medium.

Never will there be a theatre piece that everyone in the world loves, but *West Side Story* has endured and been loved by many. However, *West Side Story*’s creators failed to depict Puerto Rican migrants accurately in New York City. *West Side Story* does not portray the Puerto Rican culture as wholly authentic, yet, it doesn’t discount the themes of racial discrimination and hatred that Puerto Rican people feel in their daily lives. The above themes are a prominent part of the musical. What the collaborators lacked in knowledge about race relations and the Puerto Rican culture, they tried to make up for by drawing on their childhood experiences, especially Arthur Laurents who from a very early age said, “I was intolerant of anything I considered bigotry” (Laurents 8). They also drew on the understanding of, and their dealings with discrimination. It was the 1950s, and at that time, racial prejudices were an unfortunate a way of

life. The four creators were all privileged white Jewish men from upper-class families, but they were also gay or bisexual men who had to hide their true self-identities from the world. Being discriminated against because of religious belief or sexual orientation, although not the same as racial discrimination, perhaps made it easier to understand the plight of discrimination against Puerto Ricans for not being “all white” in America. Jim Crow laws were in full force in the southern states, interracial marriage was illegal in more than half the states, segregating schools was legal until 1954, and antisemitism still existed post-WWII.

Furthermore, Puerto Ricans in America faced blatant discrimination in the 1950s. According to Lolita Lebrón, a prominent figure of the Puerto Rican Nationalist party who was imprisoned for the attack on Congress in 1954, recalled, “There were signs in restaurants that read “No dogs or Puerto Ricans allowed. WHITES ONLY” (Vido 31). All the creators were advocates of integration and equal rights. When Bernstein and Robbins worked together on the Broadway show *On the Town*, both men were very conscious of the decisions they made regarding race. Robbins integrated the dance chorus and paired black men with white women, demanding “a chorus that mirrored the diversity he saw on the streets around Times Square” (Vaill 277), defying the racial taboos of the times. Bernstein addressed race by hiring black singers to perform his compositions. In fact, “The Library of Congress houses a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* owned by Leonard Bernstein in which he wrote, *West Side Story* is “an out and out plea for racial tolerance” (Oja). This says a lot about where Leonard Bernstein stood on racial discrimination. He was well aware of what direction he wanted to go; to send a message about race relations. Arthur Laurents confronted racial injustice in his movie *Home of the Brave* about a black soldier enduring racial prejudice while at war. He comes home from the war, unable to

walk until he learns he must never bow to prejudice again. He also wrote *The Knife* about racial injustice within the military.

With each revival of *West Side Story* there emerges a re-interpretation, a new way to tell the story with a more accurate portrayal of the Puerto Rican culture. The 1980 version directed by Jerome Robbins was starting the trend toward hiring actors that were of Puerto Rican or Afro-Puerto Rican decent, casting Debbie Allen, an African American, as Anita.

Laurents made a comment while he was directing the 2009 revival of *West Side Story* saying in an interview with Sara Fishko "That kind of bigotry and prejudice was very much in the air. It's really, 'How can love survive in a violent world of prejudice?' That's what it's about." Arthur Laurents wanted to make changes to the script to portray the Puerto Ricans more realistically. He chose to make the song "I Feel Pretty," sung by Maria and the ladies, a Spanish language song. He felt that because all the girls were Puerto Rican, they would speak to each other in Spanish. He also interspersed Spanish into the script. Lin-Manuel-Miranda translated the song and parts of the script for Laurents. However, according to Elizabeth Vaill, "For Puerto Ricans who resent the original work for its stereotyping of their culture (an issue that has cropped up more frequently in recent years), it may not be enough" (Vaill 133). Laurents believed the show was about the racial tension that existed in New York and around the country. His version won a Tony for best cast album in 2010 (Broadwayworld).

The newest version has tackled many aspects that critics have addressed in the past. The colors of the costumes are not color coded for either group, the cast is diverse, and the Puerto Rican characters are all Latinx, doing away with disparaging the Puerto Rican people by putting white people in brownface. Ivo Van Hove also incorporates the current state of the world by adding video during "Gee, Officer Krupke" that overlays #Black Lives Matter, and #Police

Brutality, to drive home the fact that there are still people in the country that are discriminated against and are considered the “other.” However, the score remains virtually unchanged, so there is nothing added to the musical portions of the show that depicts Puerto Rican or Afro-Puerto Rican influences in the music such as the traditional Puerto Rican rhythms of bomba. The director must work within the parameters of the score and the libretto, and that can limit one’s creativity and forward thinking. Notably, this revival of *West Side Story* is the most modified, exuberant, risky, version to date. The upcoming movie directed by Steven Spielberg will be released in December 2020.

There will always be more than one answer to the questions posed by *West Side Story* critics, and the many reincarnations of *West Side Story* to come will set out to produce an even better version than its predecessors. Some critics will love *West Side Story*, and critics will not, but it won’t stop high schools, colleges, regional, and community theatres from putting it together in cities around the world. Stephen Sondheim, the only surviving creator, has been involved in the new production on Broadway by watching rehearsals and giving his advice. He is still “Finishing the Hat.”

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