

BERNSTEIN

West Side Story

Leonard Bernstein was born August 25, 1918, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, and died October 14, 1990, in New York City. He composed the musical West Side Story principally from autumn 1955 through summer 1957, and it received its first performance (a pre-Broadway try-out) on August 19, 1957, at the National Theatre in Washington, DC. It opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957, at the Winter Garden Theater, with Max Goberman conducting. The book is by Arthur Laurents and lyrics are by Stephen Sondheim. The orchestrations were realized by Sid Ramin and Irving Kostal, in consultation with Bernstein.

As early as 1949, Leonard Bernstein and his friends Jerome Robbins (the choreographer) and Arthur Laurents (the writer) had batted around the idea of creating a musical retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* set amid the tensions of rival social groups in modern New York City. The project took a long time to find its eventual form. An early version tentatively titled *East Side Story* was going to focus on the doomed love affair between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy on New York's Lower East Side, their hopes dashed by differences of religion. The idea simmered on the back burner for several years. In 1955, Laurents and Bernstein encountered each other by chance at the Beverly Hills Hotel and started chewing through the idea yet again while basking beside the swimming pool. According to Laurents: "We realized the religious issue had become extraneous. Juvenile delinquency had become the problem. We thought in terms of the Mexicans in Los Angeles. Then it was just a step to the Puerto Ricans in New York." This change of concept mandated a new title. In an uncensored moment, Laurents floated *Gangway!* as a potential name. "To my horror," he recalled, "they took it so seriously, it was stenciled on the

back of the scenery and stayed there even after reason prevailed.” A better solution was practically staring everyone in the face, of course. The collaborators decided that the action would center logically on a ghetto on New York’s Upper West Side, where a Polish-American boy falls in love with a Puerto Rican girl, and the title *West Side Story* was born.

The piece itself would require rather more time. Everybody involved had very full calendars. In 1956, much of Bernstein’s energy went into the premiere of his operatic musical comedy *Candide*. It opened on Broadway on December 1, received passionately mixed reviews, and closed in a sea of red ink and frustration after 73 performances. It was also just then, in November 1956, that Bernstein was selected to be joint principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic. That appointment not only revived a relationship that had been dormant for the preceding five and a half years—he had not conducted the ensemble in a subscription concert since 1951—but also placed him in a position to succeed Dimitri Mitropoulos as the orchestra’s music director, an eventuality that would take place in September 1958. The joint appointment would not begin officially for another year, but Bernstein needed to be re-introduced to the orchestra’s audience right away. Suddenly New York Philharmonic subscription concerts packed his schedule, 21 of them in December 1956 and January 1957 alone. In April 1956, he signed an exclusive recording contract with Columbia, and five Bernstein-conducted LPs were scheduled for release that fall. His lectures on the *Omnibus* television show were growing ever more popular (the ABC network had just decided to pick up the series), and it was announced that he would also be taking over the Philharmonic’s Young People’s Concerts (on the heels of which CBS acquired broadcast rights). He was already committed to conduct concerts in South America and Israel later in 1956. Now a major, time-consuming new project had to be squeezed into the schedule.

Even compared to the typical turmoil that surrounded the birth of Broadway shows, the genesis of *West Side Story* was chaotic. Producers shunned it from the get-go, fearing that its tragic tale would guarantee commercial failure. Finally Cheryl Crawford and Roger Stevens signed on to produce the piece. Crawford ended up getting cold feet about what she termed “a show full of hatefulness and ugliness,” and after she withdrew her support, Stevens gave the project a fighting chance by providing a bridge loan before pulling out. The creative team hoped that Bernstein’s friends Betty Comden and Adolph Green would write the lyrics; but it turned out they were tied up with a movie project, so there was another key position to be filled. Bernstein made a stab at writing lyrics himself, but he was really not up to the task. Laurents had heard some songs by a fledgling composer-lyricist named Stephen Sondheim, and he had especially liked the lyrics. Sondheim was brought in for an audition at Bernstein’s apartment and left feeling lukewarm about getting involved. He discussed his misgivings with his mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, and, as Sondheim wrote in his book *Finishing the Hat*, “it was he who persuaded me that if I was offered the job, I should leap at it. The show has an interesting idea, he said, and here was a chance to work with three of the most gifted and experienced men in music and theater. . . . When Lenny phoned a week later and invited me to join the crew, I duly leapt.”

Apart from snagging the future pacesetter of American musical theater at the outset of his career, this personnel decision proved useful in another way: Sondheim secured the interest of his friend Harold Prince, who became involved as a producer (along with Prince’s producing partner Robert Griffith). Then, to everyone’s amazement, Robbins announced at the eleventh hour that he would rather spend his time directing the show than choreographing it, thereby jeopardizing Prince’s participation. In the end, he was persuaded to stay on as choreographer as well as assume the director’s spot, and he was granted an unusually long rehearsal period as an inducement.

Some of Bernstein's composition of *West Side Story* overlapped with his work on *Candide*. On the face of it, the two stage works would seem entirely dissimilar. Bernstein described *Candide* as a Valentine to European music, and he peppered its score with allusions to the waltz, the gavotte, bel canto warbling, Gilbert & Sullivan, and Gounod's *Faust*. *West Side Story*, with its highly spiced and syncopated Latin undercurrents, was a paean to urban grittiness. Notwithstanding the disparity, music flowed in both directions between the two scores: the duet "O Happy We" in *Candide* started life as a duet in *West Side Story*, while *West Side Story*'s "One Hand, One Heart" and "Gee, Officer Krupke" originated in *Candide* before finding their proper places.

Laurents recalled being struck by the distinctive quality of Bernstein's score from the very first run-through he heard:

The thing that distinguishes American music theater music is its vitality and its complex rhythms, the qualities to be found in Bernstein, and to me those qualities reach their peak in West Side Story. It was the best theater music that's ever been written. He didn't think. The music just poured out of him. He somehow knew how to take the vernacular and raise it up, make music instead of a pastiche. He had that rare quality of being able to feel each character; he was a musical dramatist.

Indeed, the dramatic choices in *West Side Story* are far from routine, even to a point where the creative team had trouble agreeing on how to describe this work in which singing, acting, and dancing all play integral, extended parts. Robbins viewed it as "an American musical"; Bernstein considered it "a tragic musical comedy." There's no question that dance scenes, often sinister and threatening, play a more dramatically vital role than was customary in American musicals, though of course precedents were to be found in such dance-infused pieces as the 1936 *On Your Toes*, by Rodgers and Hart, with its famous "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" ballet, and the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals *Oklahoma!* (1943; Bernstein cited it as a specific influence) and

Carousel (1945), which included potent dance scenes that were essential to the narrative.

From a strictly musical point of view, *West Side Story* displays greater integration of material than had previously characterized works destined for Broadway. It might be an exaggeration to claim that the whole score is predicated on the interval of the tritone—the augmented fourth (it can also be “spelled” as a diminished fifth)—but as overstatements go, it would not be severe. The two notes of this interval may overlap but they nonetheless define distinct harmonic realms—a musical reflection, one might say, of Tony and Maria. Its harmonic instability notwithstanding, the frequent recurrence of this interval helps unify this wide-ranging score. The first two notes of “Maria” have served decades of ear-training students as a mnemonic device for the tritone, but by the time that song is first heard, in Scene Four, the interval has already been established as the work’s foundational sound. We hear it practically at the outset, in the louche phrase that accompanies the entrance of the finger-snapping Jets, then again in the solo-trombone gesture at the moment when Bernardo (of the rival Sharks) crosses their path, in the first two notes of “Cool,” in the melodic contours of “Something’s Coming” . . . ears attuned to the tritone will hear it over and over in *West Side Story*.

Rhythmic syncopation and metric dissonance are also elemental to the score. “When You’re a Jet,” for example, is composed almost throughout in 6/8 meter, and the bass line dutifully emphasizes the first and fourth beats of each measure. Bernstein, however, writes a melody (sung by Riff) that stresses the first, third, and fifth beat of the measure, yielding a constant syncopation in which two-pulses-per-measure exists in nervous conflict with three-pulses-per-measure. “America,” sung by Anita and her friends, is also famous for its mixed meters, here worked out sequentially rather than simultaneously. It, too, maintains a meter marking of 6/8, but Bernstein alternates measures of two pulses with measures of three pulses, achieving a buoyant sense of energy and propulsion.

On August 19, 1957, *West Side Story* opened in a try-out run in Washington, D.C., and then it continued through a shorter booking in Philadelphia. Even as it went through inevitable pre-Broadway adjustments (though fewer than many a show has had), Bernstein sensed its claim to greatness. To his composer-friend David Diamond he wrote: “The three weeks in Washington were phenomenal sellouts, raving press and public. Now similar in Philly. It really does the heart good—because this show is my baby, my tragic musical-comedy, whatever it is, and if it goes in New York as well as it has on the road, we will have proved something very big indeed, and maybe changed the face of American musical theater.” Indeed it did go well in New York, its initial Broadway run totaling 772 performances—just short of two years. It then embarked on a national tour and made its way back to New York in 1960 for another 253 performances, after which it was released as a feature film in 1961.

Notwithstanding the show’s resounding success in the theater, it was really the film that made the work iconic in the American memory. Nevertheless, *West Side Story* did not even win the Tony award for best musical in 1957, that honor instead going to Meredith Willson’s *The Music Man*, a fine show that looked more to Broadway’s past than to its future. Of the six Tony categories for which *West Side Story* received nominations, it won only two: Robbins for Best Choreography and Oliver Smith for Best Scenic Design. The 1961 film, in contrast, won Oscars in ten of the eleven categories in which it was nominated.

Candide is famous as the Bernstein stage work that kept morphing through various versions, never reaching a form that everyone considers definitive. Though its basic text is more of a fixed quantity, *West Side Story* also holds a number of editorial challenges, principally involving its orchestration. Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal carried out the show’s original orchestration under the composer’s supervision, scoring it for about thirty players. Some of their decisions were specific to the available forces. For example, their original orchestration uses a string section that lacks violas.

The reason? Union rules governing the Winter Garden Theater, where the show played, required that the members of the house orchestra be used in the performances, and Bernstein found the theater's two viola players to be sub-par. "Let's just do without them," he told his orchestrators, "because I couldn't stand listening to my show every night and hearing what those guys would do to the viola parts." Ramin and Kostal re-orchestrated the work when it was turned into a movie, increasing the forces to a full symphony orchestra, and Bernstein worried that the result was overblown and unsubtle. In 1984, Bernstein retouched the score as he prepared to conduct *West Side Story* for a Deutsche Grammophon studio recording. For this concert production, however, taken from the San Francisco Symphony's live performances in June and July 2013, conductor Michael Tilson Thomas reverted to the musical text of the original Broadway score.

"The radioactive fallout from *West Side Story* must still be descending on Broadway this morning," wrote Walter Kerr, critic of the *Herald Tribune*, in the wake of the opening in New York, and one might say that his assumption remains true more than a half-century later. *West Side Story* stands as an essential, influential chapter in the history of not just American musical theater but, indeed, of American theater of any sort, and its engrossing tale of young love struggling against a background of spectacularly choreographed gang warfare has found a place at the core of Americans' common culture.

—James M. Keller

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