

# **WEST SIDE STORY**

**A Proposal for Staging**

By Gibson DelGiudice

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## I. ARTIST STATEMENT

### *The Show*

If you don't know the story of *West Side Story* by now, you need to broaden your musical theater horizons. But for the uninitiated, picture it: New York City, 1957. The Upper West Side, an ethnic, blue-collar neighborhood, before the urban renewal project that led to the development of Lincoln Center changed the neighborhood's character. On the harsh streets, two New York street gangs battle for control of turf, but the situation is complicated when one gang member falls in love with a rival's sister.

This modern-day *Romeo and Juliet* won two Tony Awards upon its Broadway debut, spawned a long-running London production and numerous revivals and international runs, and was made into a feature film in 1961 which received ten Oscars, including Best Picture. The struggle of young love to survive in a world of hate, violence, and prejudice went down so well with the public that it has come to be acclaimed as one of the most innovative, heart-wrenching, and relevant musical dramas of our time.

### *My Background with the Show*

From an early age, *West Side Story* has been one of my all-time favorite American musicals. My first exposure to the show came in second grade, when a friend's mother loaned me the film version. Back then, I had no idea who Arthur Laurents (book), Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), or Leonard Bernstein (music) were, let alone the great Jerome Robbins (director / choreographer), but the movie had a profound effect on me. I studied the show in and out almost from the time I discovered it, and became something of an aficionado, when I wasn't busy being obsessed with The Beatles, or other musical theater pieces like *Jesus Christ Superstar* and the like. Witty, controversial, complicated, romantic... *West Side Story* was all of these and more, and these are what mark my favorite kind of theater.

Over the years, there's been no dearth of productions, many essentially replicating the original. In the early years of the show's numerous revivals and national productions, Mr. Robbins himself reproduced his direction and choreography, and otherwise supervised any number of them. Dedicated assistants like Gerald Freedman (who helped direct book scenes in the original), and original cast members like Tom Abbott, Robert Arditti, Richard Caceres, Alan Johnson, Tony Mordente, Jay Norman, or Lee Becker Theodore, faithfully recreated the original staging and choreography after he was gone. Often, these productions also replicated Oliver Smith's original set design, Irene Sharaff's costumes, and Jean Rosenthal's lighting.

This devotion to the original can be attributed in part to entertainment attorney Floria Lasky, Jerry's longtime shark of a lawyer, who (until her death in September 2007) fiercely protected all of his staging and choreography, but particularly that of *West Side Story*, on the professional stage. Knowing this didn't stop me, however, from cultivating ideas for over a decade. I knew that at some point, the show had to reappear in a new way, because it had been performed so often in its original form. I'd be ready when that

day came, my goal being to retain the original's freshness, combined with 50+ years of hindsight.

As often happens in cases like these, that day came without me. In July 2007, Arthur Laurents teased a new Broadway revival of *West Side Story* via Playbill Online, in an interview with Andrew Gans. He said, "There was a revival in the 1970s that was no good. It was too white-bread. I've come up with a way of doing it that will make it absolutely contemporary without changing a word or a note. And what will annoy you is that I'm not going to tell you what it is." He wasn't wrong; I was assuredly annoyed. But at the same time, I rejoiced that *West Side Story* would be revived in a new form on Broadway in celebration of its fiftieth anniversary.

Ultimately, in 2009, Laurents staged a rote, almost stock *West Side Story*, noteworthy only for needlessly decimating Robbins' choreography and for a single useful innovation: incorporating Spanish in the Puerto Rican characters' lyrics and dialogue, courtesy of *In the Heights* (and, later, *Hamilton*) creator Lin-Manuel Miranda, a move which made a substantive difference in representing ethnicity respectfully – the show had long been criticized for stereotyping the Latin American community, as what appeared progressive within the context of racial politics in 1957 had not aged well. Unfortunately the production wasn't so well-received critically, but some deserving performers won Tony Awards, the show had a decent run on Broadway in spite of the lack of great critical and commercial notice, and it did equally respectably on the road.

Needless to say, for all its strengths and weaknesses, his production was not my *West Side Story*. Mine, of course, remained in my head. Until now.

## II. Play Analysis

Sometimes a concept is not necessarily sparked by love for a show, but by the thought of being able to do better than a particular production of the piece. As you might've guessed from the section about my background with the show, I feel that sometimes an author is too close to their work to be objective. There are a handful of writers that can direct their own work successfully, and when it goes badly, it usually goes very badly.

In the case of *West Side Story*, it seems to me that with his revival, Arthur Laurents was mostly responding to productions over the years that sanitized the characters, which can happen as the mold for a replica becomes more watered down with time, and as a popular film version that (not always effectively) combined stylized theatricality with realism supplanted the show's image in the public consciousness. The problem is he overthought, and tried too hard.

For example, in an interview with Bloomberg.com, he said of the Jets and the Sharks, "They're not adorable street kids. They're killers, each and every one of them. They're vicious and they have to be played that way." One wonders if he mistook Irving Shulman's darker novelization of the film for his own work, because Laurents' libretto sure doesn't portray budding criminals on the fast track to "fifteen to life." These gangs are composed of what amount to children. By today's standards, the Jets in particular read like detention kids in a wealthy white suburb playing 'gangsta.' He was right that they shouldn't be shown as naughty Boy Scouts; they are tough, knocked-around, street gang members, and Tony's portrayal especially usually suffers from not giving the impression he was ever like the rest of them. To that extent, yes, reinterpreting the gangs is key. But if they're murderous and violent from the onset, the whole point – and the finale's catharsis – is lost. The argument *West Side Story* makes, particularly in "Gee, Officer Krupke," is that these kids *aren't* inherently evil. They're misguided, and so they've slowly lost their innocence. They've become so wrapped up in meaningless violence that it takes the deaths of Riff, Bernardo, and ultimately Tony to return them to reality – a point Laurents seemed to forget. If they were nothing but thugs, Maria's sorrow would be for naught; they'd respond by amping up the bloodshed. Maybe they're more than "kids next door gone a bit wrong," but the solution isn't to strip the characters of the humanity in the piece that enables audiences to relate to them.

Flipping to the coin's other side, however, in the same interview Laurents spoke about how he would stage Tony and Maria's iconic fire escape duet, "Tonight," and he was on target, in my opinion, about imbuing the number with raw sexual passion. He first described how it's normally staged – "When they sing 'Tonight,' it's like Jeannette McDonald and Nelson Eddy" – and then elaborated on *his* thoughts: "It's hard for them to sing because they're so sexually involved. They're all over each other." This, I agree with. Because of several-times-removed replicas that reduce characters to stick figures, and in part because of Jerome Robbins' choreography, however brilliant it was/is, *West Side Story* is often (unfairly) stigmatized as a collection of tour jetés, pirouettes, extensions, and exaggerated balletic movement, albeit easier to handle on stage than in actual city streets, which somehow ended up in musical theater canon and keeps coming back like a bad rash. Giving the characters' portrayal more "life" and realism certainly helps dispel that negative image of the show that many people have.

On another negative note, Laurents could be stubborn as a mule when it came to his shows<sup>1</sup>, and would often stick to his guns to their detriment. It was well-documented, for example, that he hated the otherwise beloved film of *West Side Story*, and for valid reasons – his criticisms that it was too “clean,” too “stagey,” and too much of a caricature were fair, and shared by others. I don't begrudge him those opinions.

But his apparent vendetta against the movie made him unnecessarily protective of the original book. Screenwriter Ernest Lehman made many changes that strengthened the show (about which I'll expound in the dramaturgy section shortly), but because Laurents still found the film “appalling” almost half a century later, he was deaf to others' suggestions and refused to allow *any* alterations into the stage show, keeping the book frozen in 1957 and arguably making the many productions each year weaker than they could be. It's all a matter of opinion, and as the writer he absolutely had a right to his, but considering how many people agree with *my* opinion, it's a shame that he seemed to let personal feelings get in the way of his work so much.

The dance and the music are what make *West Side Story* great. The book, on the other hand, is merely serviceable without the changes made for the film, and over-fealty to the original production has, to a certain extent, straitjacketed individual creativity. A creator's intentions for their work should only be paramount while the creator is alive to express them. This, of course, is not to assume “death of the author” (literal or figurative) allows interpretive artists to run wild, but thoughts and feelings rooted in a different time, sociopolitical context, etc. shouldn't dictate shows from beyond the grave. Nevertheless, odd outliers in community level productions aside, here we are.

The protection of copyright in this case poses an interesting challenge for a director: knowing that many elements of one's production are already predetermined by the contract with the licensing agency, how could one put a contemporary spin on the rest?

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<sup>1</sup> His fortunate and unexpected change of heart about Patti LuPone playing Rose in *Gypsy* comes to mind, in part *because* it was so fortunate and unexpected.

### III. Vision

#### *Dramaturgy*

By the time this section is over, a few wigs will no doubt have flipped, so better to start in the safest possible territory available; I'll open with some less controversial ideas.

First, people can say what they will about the 1961 film's lack of realism, but Ernest Lehman's script managed to remain faithful to the play while incorporating new elements, most noticeably a "rising line of dramatic tension." In the late 1950s, there were several theatrical conventions that were held sacrosanct, including balancing out the most dramatic elements of the story-line with comic relief or musical numbers designed to break the tension (see "I Feel Pretty" and "Gee, Officer Krupke" as positioned in the second act), but on film, this was deemed unnecessary and discarded.

I've read in Craig Zadan's *Sondheim and Co.* of Laurents' famous "Shakespeare's clowns" argument, but, while valid, I feel strongly that the argument applied more to that time than now. Especially since the 1980s, when Broadway was largely populated by melodramatic "pop operas" (usually British in origin), audiences have become inured to what some deem an emotionally weighty evening. As the movie's runaway success proved, this minor tweak only enhances the story's emotional impact on an audience. Therefore, one of the first things I'd do is align the structure to Lehman's "rising line of dramatic tension" for today's more sophisticated audience. Not every change in structure is necessary, but many are invaluable in their effect. This would notably entail moving "I Feel Pretty" to the bridal shop scene prior to "One Hand, One Heart," and transposing the Act I and Act II positions of "Cool" and "Gee, Officer Krupke."

This re-shuffling of events necessitates a new alteration as well. To me, and to other commentators over the years, the "Tonight" quintet has always felt like the real first act closer, heightening anticipation for the coming events, with the rumble reading to discerning observers as anticlimactic. Further, my decision to move "I Feel Pretty" to Act I would slightly overstuff the turkey, and leaves dramatic "dead space" at the start of Act II. With this and the new structure's purpose in mind, I'd bring down the curtain on Act I with the quintet and move the rumble sequence to the start of Act II, leading directly into the continuance of the "rising tension" following intermission.

One other book problem needs to be discussed as well: the dialogue. People have often remarked on the gangs' unrealistic portrayal, and while the show's traditional casting practices are partially at fault, the script compounds the problem. The Jets' and Sharks' dialogue is definitely part of what's kept them from appearing "tougher" onstage. Attempting to avoid dating the piece, Laurents tried to create "timeless" teenage tough talk – an attempt that by and large failed. Phrases like "Cut the frabba-jabba" and forms of address like "Daddy-o" (on the part of the Jets) come across as fey and dated; rather than seeming timeless, they betray their Fifties origin like tiny droppings indicate the presence of mice. As for the Sharks, faux-Spanish like "kiddando" comes across as a patronizing attempt at cultural awareness, too stagey to read as authentic.

The solution is simple: when it comes to restoring realism to the writing, go for the gold. For example, kids swear a lot, and in my experience far earlier than adults think they

pick up the habit, especially today. Talking like a human being might help them seem more human. If a line suggests a gang member is saying, for example, "Cut the shit," let him actually say that. With this axiom in mind, one could trim or revise Tony and Riff's first dialogue together without losing much, and would finally feel free to drop silly unrealistic exchanges where young women, contrary to their counterparts anywhere, ever, in real life, say anything like "Ooble-oo," whatever the hell that means.

And, with regard to the Sharks, who does it hurt to use what Lin-Manuel Miranda crafted for the 2009 revival? For authenticity in dialogue and lyrics, actual Spanish phrases and words do more heavy lifting than faux-Spanish, and go a long way toward treating both gangs more realistically than the classic *West Side Story* does. The fact that the revival met with respectable success indicates the average audience was not as "shut out" as purists claimed; there's no rational objection to going bilingual.

Last but not least, and perhaps most controversially, when I bought the Special Edition DVD Collector's Set of the film, I was struck by a tagline repeatedly used in advertising for re-release runs of the film: "Unlike other classics, *West Side Story* grows younger." I found that to be a very interesting point about the show (and film)'s topicality. *Romeo and Juliet*, its source material, will always be timeless; tales of forbidden love that flourished in a time of hate are as old as time. But the specifics of its descendant are – perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not – equally timeless. It may not be the 1950s anymore, but in America we still have a long way to go before we solve the problems in *West Side Story*: racial tension sparked by immigration, unconventional love (of all kinds), gang warfare, corrupt authorities concerned only for their own benefit, all still exist. Some of them are even considered national issues.

In re-reading Laurents' script (and Lehman's screenplay, thanks once again to my collectible DVD), it struck me that aside from a few obvious reference points; the story is still very *au courant*. There's nothing that definitively ties it to the past in any version of the script – it could happen today. True, it would require (massive) suspension of disbelief re: the use of technological devices, but even in the Fifties, Tony or Maria could have picked up a phone and avoided many of the plot's messes. One of the big parts of what made *West Side Story* a hit in 1957 was its currency – it reflected everything going on in the streets uptown. It's important to remind audiences that it still does.

I'm not normally one for modernizing period pieces, but with the above in mind, and recognizing that all the show's plot elements are still (to some degree) present in the streets today, it's my opinion that to reach and connect with today's audience, it is vital to set *West Side Story* in the present or near future, and further to align the production values – arrangements, casting, design, etc. – entirely toward that approach.

### *Music and Lyrics*

To strengthen connections to today's world, I'd advocate for minor adjustments in musical arrangements, to reflect current styles and trends. Of course, it wouldn't be so re-arranged that Leonard Bernstein's wonderful music is unrecognizable. Re-development in a more current style would take the orchestra to the same place at the same time, but take advantage of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and what it has to offer; for example,

there could be creative remixing and use of sampling from the original recordings, with current beats added, in sequences like "Dance at the Gym."

The only specific notes I have relate, ironically enough, to the two songs that changed the most in content in the film. Moving in chronological order, we'll start with "America." As has often been discussed, at length, the male/female lyrics are far superior to those currently featured in the stage version, and I would wholeheartedly incorporate them, and the searing, volcanic choreography that comes with them.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, let's briefly examine "Gee, Officer Krupke." In keeping with my thoughts about introducing realism to the book's dialogue, I feel today's audience is finally ready to hear the gang sing, "Gee, Officer Krupke, fuck you!" We already know it's what they mean, and we also know, per Sondheim, that the only reason it was changed in the first place was to sell the original cast recording across state lines without drawing obscenity charges.<sup>3</sup> It is 2016, people! How about, at long last, we let them say it?

### *Casting*

People have often remarked on the unrealistic "classically trained" gang members. I'm sure I'm not the only one who's heard Brian Kaman's parody of the "Jet Song," passed down from the 1980 revival: "When you're a Jet / You're a Jet all the way / From your first pirouette / To your last grand jeté!" Even if one makes all the other changes I've enumerated, it's still true that the way *West Side Story* is traditionally cast hasn't helped dramatic portrayals of the central conflict. Jerome Robbins' complex choreography calls for serious dance training. Unfortunately, this has led to casting certain types of dancers who, while exceptionally trained, are most realistic in their own skin performing the balletic steps required and least realistic playing their gang-banger characters.

Rather than casting for form and technique, and being accused of populating the show with "swishy," "effete" performers, I'd look for types that could conceivably kill each other if they started rumbling outside ten minutes before curtain. Granted, neither the Jets nor the Sharks are prepared for anyone to die in this rumble, and perhaps never seriously thought of killing anyone. As I've said above, the script leans more in the direction of "angsty, immature teenagers who want to belong to something, and have some sense of control of their lives" than "committed thugs." But, as "Gee, Officer Krupke" notes with its deconstruction of popular "reasons why kids ain't like everybody else," it's easier for people to stigmatize them based on how they look and act than get to know them, and arguably that's part of why they band together in the first place. People don't stigmatize average *West Side Story* casts as anything but stereotypical show people.

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<sup>2</sup> This, incidentally, is why I'd depart from the film's structure in terms of placement, and *not* reposition "America" before the fire escape scene. After the workout that is "Dance at the Gym," Tony singing "Maria" is not nearly enough time for the Sharks and their girls to recuperate for the even bigger workout that is the boy-girl "America." As I said before, not every structural change from the film is necessary to the success of a re-envisioned stage production.

<sup>3</sup> Today, we'd just stick an "Explicit Lyrics Included" sticker on the CD, provided it's even released on CD to begin with.



Casting a revival realistically, taking into account the cultural makeup of today's gang conflict in the streets of New York City, is also a unique opportunity to point out that racism comes from all quarters. Go back far enough in one's family tree, and every American is descended from an immigrant or colonizer. In a perfect world this would make racial tension utterly pointless, and yet it persists in ours. And, on occasion, the oppressed pay the prejudice they've encountered forward to their fellow oppressed.

Inspired partially by the name of the African-American periodical, *Jet Magazine*, and partially by today's reality, it seems almost a no-brainer to make the Jets a black gang, reminiscent of the Crips. To contrast with the Harlem-reoriented Jets, the Sharks would look like the present "Hispanic menace," the MS-13's – Colombians of an almost mercenary type and frightening size and proportion. Such casting sheds more light on the more subtle lesson about racism that most people miss with the usual choices, driving that point home more clearly to today's audience. Moreover, once one puts the "right" look onstage, by virtue purely of their image, anything they do will be seen as effectively menacing in theatrical terms by the typical musical theater audience.

### *General Staging and Design Ideas*

Bearing in mind the new casting, set and costume designs would reflect current styles, settings, and trends in the black and Hispanic communities, with light periodic updating as necessary to avoid pigeonholing the show into slightly newer "dated" territory than it has already occupied.

On a choreographic note, while not wishing (or able) to tamper too heavily with Jerome Robbins' classic – if tired – steps, with cast members' input, minor examples of current dance could be added without losing the ideas Robbins was going for in a particular sequence. For reference and ideas, check out the Teen Dance Company of the Bay Area's [recent tribute to West Side Story](#) from California, using Robbins-inspired moves and savvy re-arrangements of the score, particularly the "Prologue" and "Dance at the Gym" segments, giving the usual approach a fresh hip-hop style and take.

Another terrific example of the above is [Westside Story 2016](#), a video from Seth Epstein and choreographers Keone and Mari Madrid, who also felt that an update had explosive potential, embraced "Cool," and made it their own.