

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction. “My Heart’s Devotion”:

Finding *West Side Story* 1

Chapter 1. “Not a Photographed Stage Play”:

Creating *West Side Story* 9

Chapter 2. “A Different Medium”:

Making *West Side Story* 34

Chapter 3. “You’re the Only Thing I’ll See”:

Watching *West Side Story* 76

Chapter 4. “Long, Long Runs”:

Assessing *West Side Story* 129

Chapter 5. “Bernardo Was Right”:

Arguing Puerto Rican Representation in *West Side Story* 150

Notes 171

Bibliography 189

About the Author 193

Index 195

Illustrations follow page 61.

Color illustrations follow page 108.



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West Side Story **as Cinema**



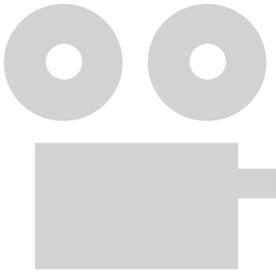
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Introduction

“My Heart’s Devotion”: Finding *West Side Story*



On 26 September 1957 the stage version of *West Side Story* premiered in New York’s Winter Garden Theatre after previews in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia that summer. The show was conceived, choreographed, and directed by Jerome Robbins from a libretto by Arthur Laurents, inspired by Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Leonard Bernstein composed the difficult, eclectic, yet catchy musical score, and Stephen Sondheim and Bernstein co-wrote the memorable if uneven lyrics.¹

According to many accounts, possibly apocryphal, Montgomery Clift had approached Robbins in 1949 in search of direction, or inspiration, to play Romeo with a fresh perspective. Intrigued by the idea of a new, contemporary look at *Romeo and Juliet*, Robbins scribbled down a short treatment, setting the story in modern-day New York City, and took it to Bernstein.² Playwright Arthur Laurents was brought in to build a structure around Robbins’s idea: a story about the doomed romance between a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy from the East Side of New York, set during the Passover season. But Bernstein judged it to be too close to *Abie’s Irish Rose*, a popular 1920s play with the same plot. The idea lingered in Robbins’s mind for several years, until a chance meeting between Bernstein and Laurents at the pool of the Beverly Hills Hotel resurrected the project in 1955. According to Laurents, a *Los Angeles Times* headline about gang activity and juvenile delinquency in the city led them to consider moving the setting to New York’s West Side and using the perceived rise in

Puerto Rican gang violence there as the story's catalyst. They contacted Robbins immediately, who happened to be in Los Angeles choreographing the film version of *The King and I*, and *West Side Story* was conceived.³

Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents then shopped around for lyricists. Bernstein was concerned that, given the amount and difficulty of the music he was composing, he might be overwhelmed if he had to write the lyrics as well. They approached the husband-and-wife team of Adolph Green and Betty Comden, whom Bernstein and Robbins knew from their previous collaboration on the 1944 Broadway production and the 1949 film version of *On the Town*, but the lyricists were busy with other projects and opted out. Laurents then suggested Stephen Sondheim, a young, fairly unknown songwriter from New York who was looking for his big break as a composer. Though initially concerned about his ignorance of Puerto Rican migration and gang warfare—Sondheim had “never been that poor, and never known a Puerto Rican”—he agreed to collaborate after consulting with his mentor Oscar Hammerstein II.⁴

With the principal creative team in place and the setting moved to the familiar streets of the West Side of New York, Bernstein wrote the music and Sondheim wrote the lyrics based on Laurents's scenes and dialogue. Meanwhile, the search for a producer proved problematic. Many potential producers and investors were turned off by the story's dark tone, its decrepit setting, and the death of two principal characters at the end of the first act. The show's first financial mentor, theater producer Cheryl Crawford, was on board, but as late as April 1957, the property was still struggling to find investors. A “backer's audition” was held on the West Side that month, but the wealthy audience was not impressed. As the show continued to develop, even Crawford started to lose faith. She wanted more sociological content explaining the resentment between the gangs and the Puerto Rican poverty angle. She wanted to know how Puerto Ricans and African Americans had replaced Jews as the city's poor population. Crawford gave the team an ultimatum about their creative differences, and they let her walk out.⁵

Nearly convinced that the show would never happen, Robbins contacted Roger Stevens, another early mentor of the project.

Stevens recommended the producing duo of Roger Griffith and Harold Prince, whose recent Broadway hits included *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees*; Bernstein and Robbins also knew the two from their 1953 production of *Wonderful Town*. Prince and Griffith, who were in Boston previewing *New Girl in Town*, agreed to come to New York and listen to the score. They did so in May 1957, immediately agreed to take on the production, and reportedly raised the \$350,000 budget within a week. *West Side Story*—then using the working title *Gangway!*—was finally on its way to the stage.⁶

A Show “Unlike Any Ever Seen”

The last pieces of the complex puzzle of the theater production of *West Side Story* fell into place with the addition of scenic designer Oliver Smith, costumer Irene Sharaff, and lighting director Jean Rosenthal. All had vast theatrical experience and were known as innovators—something the unorthodox *West Side Story* could benefit from. Smith’s credits included the original 1956 Broadway production of *My Fair Lady*, Rosenthal had worked for Orson Welles’s Mercury Theatre, and Sharaff was a veteran costume designer who had already won the Tony and the Oscar for *The King and I*, among many other accolades. Sharaff was the only member of the design team who would later work on the movie version of *West Side Story*.

Once the script, music, and dances were set, there was little variation in the concept, although some tryouts and rehearsals for friends and colleagues (including Richard Rodgers of Rodgers and Hammerstein fame) resulted in a few minor changes. In an article published in the *New York Herald Tribune* on 4 August 1957, Laurents noted that, from the beginning, *West Side Story* needed to be new yet recognizable and faithful to its Shakespearean origins. “Our hope,” he wrote, “was to make the stage more theatrical, more lyrical, more magically exciting” and to aim for a “lyrically and theatrically sharpened illusion of reality.”⁷

Even with a hasty schedule (the show went on to tryouts in the summer of 1957), a complicated musical score, a tragic tone, and unprecedented demands on the actors, singers, and dancers (mostly unknowns who were chosen after grueling auditions and went through six weeks of intense, exhausting rehearsals), *West Side Story*

previewed in Washington, D.C., on 19 August 1957 to a reported seventeen curtain calls. Vice President Richard Nixon was in attendance.⁸ The show's run in the nation's capital was soon sold out, and Robbins, Bernstein, and Sondheim were honored with keys to the city for their contributions to the fight against juvenile delinquency. From Washington, the show went briefly to Philadelphia for more tryouts, where the reception was positive and the box office quite promising.⁹

Finally, on 26 September 1957, the show that would later be promoted as “unlike any ever seen before” opened in New York's Winter Garden Theatre.¹⁰ Initial reviews were mixed, and the stunned audience sat “open mouthed, and gasping” when the curtain dropped.¹¹ Many critics seemed unsure what to make of the show, but it looked like Laurents's predictions in the *Herald Tribune* were not far off. Positive reviews came from some of the most influential reviewers in New York. The day after the opening, they wrote that the show was “splendid and super-modern”; “eye popping, ear soothing, and conscience-busting”; “a somber tragedy”; “superlative”; and even “the most exciting thing” since *My Fair Lady*. Others described its material as “savage, restless, electrifying,” and “horrifying,” while praising the “workmanship” as “admirable.” Critics called it “as exciting (and sordid) as a subway mugging with music” and “a chiller, a thriller, as up-to-the-minute as tomorrow's headlines.” Most, it seemed, agreed with the notion that *West Side Story* was “a bold new kind of musical theatre” and a “departure” from the usual styles and themes of musicals.¹² Even *New York Times* drama critic Brooks Atkinson (dubbed “the most important reviewer of his time”) set aside his reservations about Bernstein and wrote that “everything in *West Side Story*” was “of a piece,” giving a “total impression of wildness, ecstasy and anger.” Atkinson called the show “an achievement of the first order.”¹³

While *West Side Story* may not have been an entirely “new kind of musical theatre,” music historian Elizabeth Wells has argued that its greatest contribution was to create an intersection among “American musical theatre . . . popular culture and classical art music.” According to Wells, Sondheim himself described *West Side Story* as “sui generis”—literally, “its own kind”; thus, it had little influence on subsequent musical theater.¹⁴

Whether *West Side Story* did or did not change the course of American musical theater, its longevity and nearly unprecedented international success certainly made it a force to be reckoned with and a landmark in theater history. Significantly, Wells and other historians point to the commercial and critical success of the 1961 film version, directed by Robert Wise and choreographed by Jerome Robbins, as being partly responsible not only for the show’s staying power and popularity but also for bringing the concept of musical theater to audiences around the world who had little access to or even awareness of the Broadway musical.¹⁵ In short, music and theater historians consider the movie version of *West Side Story* an important turning point in American entertainment history.¹⁶

“Puerto Rican *Birth of a Nation*”

I was a young boy in Puerto Rico in the 1970s when my father brought home the sound-track album from the movie version of *West Side Story*. My brother and I played it over and over, and by the time we finally saw the movie on a pan-and-scan Betamax videotape sometime in the early 1980s, we were both sold on it. I was in awe of and enamored with *West Side Story* before I understood much about movies in general or the musical genre in particular (I had never seen a Broadway musical, either). First, I was intrigued by the words “Puerto Rico . . . my heart’s devotion” on the album, for I had rarely heard the name of my homeland mentioned in any movie. Later, I was overwhelmed and giddily proud to see “Puerto Ricans” represented onscreen, however inaccurate or stylized the portrayal. Other than the New York–based comedy *Popi* (Arthur Hiller, 1969) starring Alan Arkin, which my family had seen on television, I did not know of any Puerto Rican characters in American cinema. Throughout my childhood and into my college years, *West Side Story* was one of my family’s “go to” choices whenever we had an at-home movie night. We showed it to all our friends and neighbors who did not own videocassette players, which were quite rare at the time. Even as a child, the names Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins were familiar to me. I was not quite sure what a movie director did, but my father was a high school drama teacher, so I understood to a certain extent. Natalie Wood and Rita Moreno, who played the “Puerto Rican” girls (Moreno actually was Puerto Rican), were my first movie crushes.

Cultural critic and Columbia University professor Frances Negrón-Muntaner once wrote that *West Side Story* is the “Puerto Rican Birth of a Nation: a blatant, seminal, valorized, aestheticized eruption into the (American) national ‘consciousness.’”¹⁷ It was thus inevitable for Puerto Ricans on the island and on the mainland to be confronted with *West Side Story* as a product of Hollywood popular culture. It was the first look at any form of “Puerto Ricanness” that many of our friends and peers came across. As a Puerto Rican native and an American film historian, an interest in *West Side Story* was doubly inevitable for me. In short, *West Side Story* is the reason why I study films.

In the early 1990s, when I was applying to graduate schools, I noted that “one day, I’d like to do something with *West Side Story*.” I did not know what that might be, and my studies took me in other directions. Eventually, as I attained a better understanding of the formal and visual complexities of *West Side Story* as cinema, I started to incorporate the movie into my Introduction to Film Studies classes. I found it to be a good teaching tool to explain to my students, mostly freshmen, the possibilities of cinematic *mise-en-scène*. As one critic wrote of the movie in 1961, viewing *West Side Story* was like watching a film for the first time. So I used it to teach my students, most of whom were born in the home video era, how to really pay attention to a film. Later, *West Side Story* became the centerpiece of my very popular course titled *The Hollywood Musical*. The movie helped my students focus on strictly visual qualities and a holistic design that made sense; at the same time, the film enhanced and revised many of the narrative and structural conventions of the classical musical genre.

Soon, my students at the University of Colorado in Boulder started to ask questions about *West Side Story* that I found difficult to answer. Why does it feel so modern? Why can’t María and Tony just live happily ever after, like the couples in other musicals? What is the meaning of all the chain-link fences? How did the filmmakers do that dissolve? Why is the lighting so peculiar? These questions, and the desire to satisfy my students’ curiosity, led me to do further research on *West Side Story*. To my surprise, there had been little scholarly work on the film. The few books available were based mostly on

secondhand accounts, marketing materials, “making of” publicity, and advertising copy. The few articles I found were mostly sociological or cultural criticisms of the treatment of the Puerto Rican characters. There was precious little information about how the movie was conceived, what the technical difficulties were, why a codirector left before the production was “wrapped,” what really happened with the ghost singers, and many other genuine questions.

Thus, my search for answers led to several years of research and analysis that culminated in the current volume. After intense research conducted during the summer and winter breaks between 2007 and 2011, I carefully pieced together many different elements that did not always seem to be related. Although a portion of the story of *West Side Story* has been told in memoirs, interviews, and secondary accounts, I consulted original sources that I believed would complete the picture, including the Robert Wise and Ernest Lehman Collections at the University of Southern California and the Linwood Dunn and Boris Leven files at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. I also read contemporary newspaper accounts, trade journal updates and gossip, “buzz” features in magazines, oral histories, and published memoirs. The result is probably an imperfect chronicle and a somewhat biased assessment of the film’s contribution and impact, but it is more complete than any other history or analysis of *West Side Story* published so far. It contains the answers to many of the questions that guided my research, and it even answers some questions that nobody asked or imagined.

The book is meant to appeal to a crossover readership. On the one hand, its historical information will be of use to general readers who are interested in *West Side Story* as a landmark in American filmmaking and to those who are curious about how deals are closed and movies are made. On the other hand, its formal analysis and assessment of the film’s controversial topics, especially the Puerto Rican issue, will interest a scholarly audience, perhaps those concerned with film genres or cultural studies.

Chapter 1 chronicles the early visual and formal concepts of the film and the gathering of a creative and artistic team to consolidate those ideas. Chapter 2 presents many details about the production—scripting, casting, filming—and the creative differences and

financial difficulties that led to the dismantling of the directorial duo of Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. Chapter 3 is a sequence-by-sequence and number-by-number analysis of the film's content and narrative, emphasizing the technical achievements and the visual and aural logic of the finished product. Chapter 4 is a "post-history" of *West Side Story*, including its distribution and reception, legacy, precedent-setting practices, longevity, and currency in contemporary media. Chapter 5 is a theoretical and historical exploration of Puerto Rican identity in the film, which is not as transparent or as abject as some critics have argued. With evidence from the movie itself—details of the *mise-en-scène*, narrative subtleties, and some of the lyrics—I argue that although the "identity" of Puerto Ricans in *West Side Story* is certainly problematic, it is also much more complex and possibly better articulated than that of their assorted "American" rivals. Although the original creative team for the theatrical production of *West Side Story* insisted that the show was not about Puerto Ricans, that it was "a poetic fantasy, not a sociological document,"¹⁸ it remains a much-debated text in Latino and cultural studies.

Perhaps my own familiarity with *West Side Story* has led me to write of the characters as if they are people I know and to reveal plot information that might be, for the uninitiated, shocking or disappointing. I thus confess that I have written this book for those who are at least acquainted with the plot: a rivalry between gangs, a doomed love story, a few gruesome deaths. If you are not familiar with *West Side Story*, I would advise you to put down this book and watch the film first. Knowing who the characters are and how the story unfolds will lead to a better understanding of my arguments and examples. I hope you enjoy the movie, and I am grateful that you have chosen to give this book your precious attention.