

Crossing Broadway

West Side Story's landmark opening and enduring legacy

by John Mauceri

How can one measure *West Side Story*? Do we compare it to the other Broadway shows of 1957? Do we value it because of its influence on music theater? Can we speak of it in terms of other musical versions of *Romeo and Juliet*? Do we quantify it in terms of the social history of its time? And, most of all, 50 years after its September 26, 1957 opening on Broadway, does it mean something important to us today?

The answer to all those questions is yes, of course.

The 50th anniversary of a work of performing art is most telling and significant. That is because after a half century the work has passed out of its contemporary phase and is either becoming a classic or has been forgotten altogether. After 50 years, members of the original creative team are generally still able to pass on what they experienced once upon a time; and yet, for many, it is an opportunity to experience and judge it for the very first time.

Rereading an original *Playbill* from the week of February 3, 1958 (I was twelve years old when I saw the show a few months after it opened) is indeed a cause for multiple surprises and discoveries. Consider the musicals playing on Broadway that week: *Bells Are Ringing*, about a telephone operator; *Jamaica*, a new Harold Arlen musical with Lena Horne; *Li'l Abner*, based on a popular comic strip; *My Fair Lady* with Julie Andrews; *New Girl in Town*, based on O'Neill's *Anna Christie*; Tony Randall starring in *Oh, Captain!*, based on the Alec Guinness film *The Captain's Paradise*; *The Music Man* with Robert Preston and Barbara Cook.

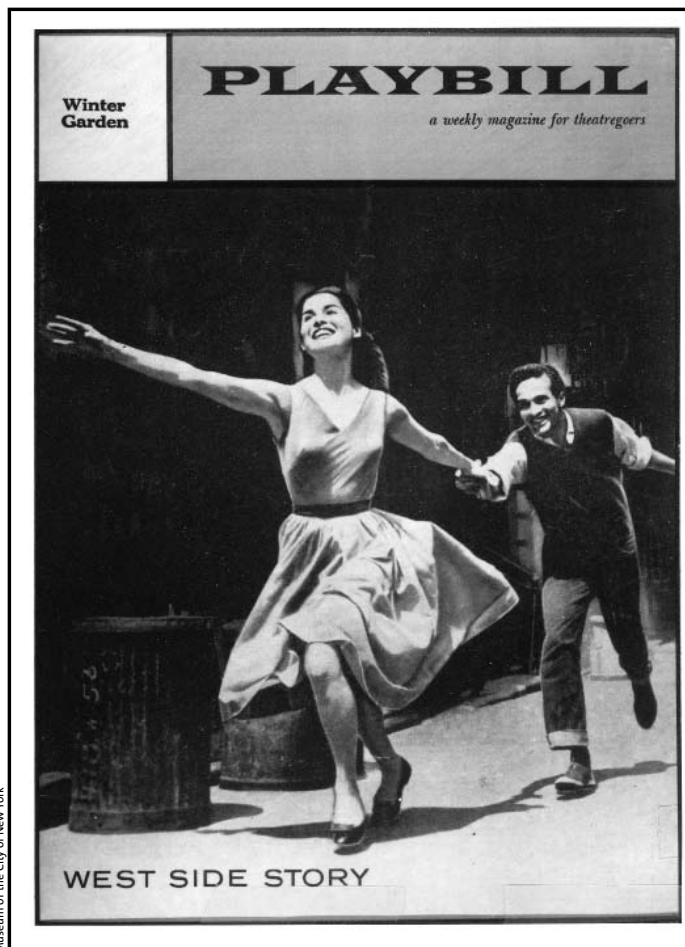
And that was just Broadway. Paging through this "weekly magazine for theatergoers" one is struck by the ads for cars, liquor, and cigarettes. And then one begins to read. The first article is by contributing editor Leo Lerman. His series, "The Playbill Diarist," records two events: a dress rehearsal of *Vanessa*, the first American opera to be produced at the Metropolitan Opera in eleven years; and a concert at Carnegie Hall.

But it was the second part of his diary that took my breath away. "Precisely at 12 noon on Saturday, Leonard Bernstein, new musical director and conductor of the New York Philharmonic, opened the Young People's Concert series. It was the first time that one of these concerts had ever been televised." The musical program, called "What Does Music Mean?" included works by Rossini, Richard Strauss, Beethoven, Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Webern, and Ravel's *La valse*.

Fifty years on, I wondered at this simultaneity and if such a thing could ever happen again. A composer of four Broadway shows had been selected to be the New York Philharmonic's music director—not its pops director (not that any such position would ever exist at all). And while *West Side*

Story was in its first months on Broadway, Bernstein, who had been appointed in November, was already rewriting how a music director should communicate and expand his audience. He, and not an assistant, was writing and conducting the Young People's Concert series. And it was on television.

On page 9, Arthur Laurents returns to *Playbill's* subject: *West Side Story*. His article "Musical Origins" tells the story of how a proposed musical, *East Side Story*, became *West Side Story*. He had changed the characters' backgrounds when a new wave of street violence followed an upsurge in Puerto Rican immigration. As many may already know, the original plan was to have a New York *Romeo and Juliet*, but told from the point of view of an Italian Catholic Romeo from Mulberry Street and a Jewish Juliet from the Lower East Side, and it would all take place



An iconic photo of a joyous Maria and Tony adorned the original *Playbill* cover.



Museum of the City of New York

The creative team, left to right: Stephen Sondheim (lyrics), Arthur Laurents (book), Harold Prince and Robert E. Griffith (co-producers), Leonard Bernstein (music), and Jerome Robbins (direction and choreography)

during the concurrent observance of Passover and Easter. Jerome Robbins had come up with the idea, Laurents was to write the book, and the music was to be by Leonard Bernstein. Laurents writes: “‘*Abie’s Irish Rose* set to music,’ laughed a part-time witch the three of us know... ‘Furthermore,’ she predicted darkly, ‘you’ll never get the show on. Put your three temperaments in one room and the walls will come down.’ The walls did come down.”

Something’s Coming, Something New

It is not surprising that Laurents would find the exact words to describe what the three (plus lyricist Stephen Sondheim) had achieved. They pulled the walls down that separated art forms and genres. They created something along the lines envisioned by the Camerata when those early Florentines invented a genre called *opera*, because it included the works: movement, music, and visual art—all at the service of the drama.

It is one thing for a Wagner to create

a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total art work” all by himself—maybe Cosima had an editorial hand every now and then, who knows?—but consider the odds of having four demanding and brilliant creative men, at the top of their game, making

A composer of four Broadway shows had been selected to be the New York Philharmonic’s music director. And while *West Side Story* was in its first months on Broadway, Leonard Bernstein was already rewriting how a music director should communicate and expand his audience.

something up that had never been tried before by working equally together and succeeding in creating a masterpiece. While one might give the nod to Jerome Robbins as “the boss,” it was clearly a group effort. As Leonard Bernstein wrote in his log on August 20, 1957, “I guess

what made it come out right is that we really *collaborated*; we were all writing the *same* show. Even the producers were after the same goals we had in mind.”

Bernstein’s score manages to come in and out of Laurents’s text without ever making an “entrance.” He almost never uses underscoring, as Kurt Weill did in his 1947 *Street Scene*, which is one of the antecedents of *West Side Story*. (When Bernstein saw a production I conducted at the New York City Opera in the 1980s, he said, “I am still not convinced.” I always took this to mean Bernstein’s assessment of the Americanization of Weill. I did not agree.) As someone who has just conducted *West Side Story* for the very first time, I can say that there is not a single wasted word of dialogue. The dance literally comes out of the spoken text. The sung text comes out of the dance. There are no “steps.” Everything contributes to the storytelling. Brooks Atkinson said it in his *New York Times* review of September 27, 1957: “Everything in *West Side Story* is of a piece. Everything contributes to the total impression of wildness, ecstasy and anguish. The astringent score has moments of tranquility and rapture, and occasionally a touch of sardonic humor. And the ballets convey the things Mr. Laurents is inhibited from saying because the characters are so inarticulate.”

And that is an important point. The dance expresses what these young people cannot say. Laurents makes up a spoken language that stands for real street talk. If this show were written today, it would be filled with profanities. Instead, Laurents and Sondheim invent words like “frabberjabber” and use phrases like “On the whole ever mother lovin’ street,” or “You bet your sweet A I do.” “Krupp you!” has only one meaning, and yet the civility of the replacement allows those who would find the real-life text obscene and too alienating to enter into this world and empathize with the plight of these young people.

Laurent’s other brilliant move was to leave *Romeo and Juliet* behind after the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio and let his new play move in 20th-century urban terms. No magic sleeping potions. No

Friar Laurence. The twists and surprises in Act II took my breath away in 1958, as they do today. Above all, letting Maria live at the end is the ultimate wound we all have to bear.

Fifty years on, I find myself asking, “Where is Maria today? What is Anita doing?” They are in their 70s, living somewhere—perhaps New York. Did they marry? Carol Lawrence told me she always played the last scene knowing that Maria was pregnant. (And since she and Chita Rivera are very much with us, how I wish Laurents would write a play for them so we could see what happens to the survivors of gang violence 50 years later.)

Romeo and Juliet has been an endless inspiration for musical and theatrical adaptations. Consider for a moment the works of Berlioz, Gounod, Bellini, Tchaikovsky, and Prokofiev. In each case, a major work was created. Bernstein was clearly about to enter a world in which the bar was set at the highest level, and his instincts were to make the music serious and operatic. But from the first discussions about the work (in 1949!) the rest of the team did not want to cast professional singers since, as Bernstein wrote soon after its premiere, anything that sounded more professional “would inevitably sound more experienced, and then the ‘kid’ quality would be gone.” (His studio recording with Kiri Te Kanawa and José Carreras lets us hear what that might have been like.)

Bernstein ultimately could not musicalize the climax of the play. On a number of occasions he played for me a parody of what he had attempted in 1957. Hearing him sing, “How do you fire this gun, Chino?” as a recitative, remains a vivid memory. He and his collaborators did not want it “to sound like Menotti.” This clearly was the correct decision. A musicalized mad scene for Carol Lawrence—instead of her heart-rending dramatic lines—punctuated with absolute silence from the audience, was the greatest solution. (Weill had found this out in *Street Scene* where the murder is not musicalized, though the final peroration is.)

It is hard for many people today to



Museum of the City of New York



Donald Dietz

Jerome Robbins broke new ground with his cool choreography, recreated for the 50th anniversary production at the North Carolina School of the Arts.

understand the importance of Gian Carlo Menotti’s operas at the time of *West Side Story*. Broadway was the home of a significant number of operas, beginning in 1935 with *Porgy and Bess*. These operas did not win Tony Awards. They won Pulitzer Prizes. New York’s Broadway theaters remain New York’s most perfect European-sized opera houses. But an operatic *West Side Story* was not what anyone wanted. This was a battle Bernstein lost. He wrote to his wife, Felicia, on July 26, 1957, “All aspects of the score I like best—the ‘big,’ poetic parts—get criticized as

‘operatic’—and there’s a concerted move to chuck them. What’s the use?... *This is the last show I do*. The Philharmonic board approved the contract yesterday, and all is set. I’m going to be a conductor after all.”

And so history is written. Leonard Bernstein was never to write another successful Broadway musical. Twenty years later, *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*, a collaboration with Alan Jay Lerner, proved to be a bitter disappointment, and, as of this writing, with little hope of revival.

It would be snobbish and naïve to think that Broadway was a place for simple

music and simple thoughts before *West Side Story* came along. Even the most lightweight shows, like the Gershwins' *Girl Crazy* (1930) and Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes* (1936) were full of musical and literary references that presuppose a level of audience knowledge that is staggering. (The Gershwin song "Bronco Busters" includes rhythms and melodic material from *The Rite of Spring* to show how butch the cowboys are. The music teacher in *On Your Toes* asks his class "And what did Shostakovich write?" and the answer from the "dumb" student is, "*Lady Macbeth from Minsky's*." I leave it to the reader to do the math: *Lady Macbeth of Mtzensk* was first performed in 1934!) Tragedy was never far away from *Show Boat* (1927) and political activity was an ever-growing part of Broadway in the years following the Kern-Hammerstein masterpiece.

But nothing prepared Broadway for the concatenation of all elements in *West Side*

Story as a single musical work was composed simultaneously with *Candide*. When one considers the totality of Bernstein's life and work, nothing could be a more perfect summation of all that he was.

Story. And never again would a Broadway show have a separate singing chorus, dancing chorus, and company of actors. Everyone from that moment onward had to do all three. The orchestrations placed demands on the pit that were hard to achieve in 1957, as I remember clearly. But with a few notable exceptions, Broadway orchestrations were never more brilliantly conceived. Of the thousands of examples that could be cited here, consider "A Boy like That," which is scored for three bass clarinets and a bassoon.

West Side Story reached out beyond Broadway and America and helped change the world. Few people know—or remember—that the show found passionate acceptance in Vienna, Moscow, and Tokyo. The Soviets thought it would expose the weakness of capitalistic society, but instead, the Soviet youth came to love and admire our freedom to tell the truth, and blue jeans became the most desired clothing in the world. By wearing blue jeans, each person could acknowledge a desire to be cool, as well as a capacity for violence.

If today more people know *West Side Story* from the movie, that is unfortunate. While the picture is good, the show is what the authors intended. Bernstein really disliked the film ("too sentimental"), and there is no getting around the experience of seeing and feeling singing-dancing-actors risking all to perform this total work of art.

The "Dance at the Gym" sequence, known to orchestra musicians for its raucous shouts of "Mambo!" in the *Symphonic Dances*.



Donald Diets



Larry Kert as Tony and Carol Lawrence as Maria affirm their love during the “balcony scene.”

But Bernstein was to make sure the music would reach out even further, beyond both stage and screen. In 1961, the New York Philharmonic scheduled a fundraising gala for the evening before Valentine’s Day. The occasion—perfectly timed to celebrate Bernstein’s ongoing relationship with the orchestra, just cemented by a new seven-year contract—cried out for a new work. So he extracted nine sections from *West Side Story*, reordering them according to strictly musical principles; the result, *Symphonic Dances*, became one of the most popular and frequently performed of Bernstein’s works for orchestra.

Classical Genealogy

Bernstein might have been shunted in his desire to write operatic material, but this focused his genius not on proving himself to be a serious composer, but rather to be a composer of musical theater. His encyclo-

Never again would a Broadway show have a separate singing chorus, dancing chorus, and company of actors. Everyone from that moment onward had to do all three.

pedic knowledge tapped into a world of reference that reverberates in every level of audience experience. That he could write bebop and translate the magnetic energy of New York was already well established in his previous ballets and musical-theater works. But he also kept a subliminal world of classical music iconography going throughout the new score.

The “Somewhere” chords are taken from *The Rite of Spring*, just before the great violence (those eleven hammer throws in Part II) takes over that historic score. It is appropriately called “The Sacrifice.” At the end of “One Hand, One Heart,” Maria and Tony have married themselves (as Porgy and Bess do in that work). The divided strings are a clear reference to the prelude to Act I of *Lohengrin*, aptly called “The Descent of the Holy Spirit.” We know Tony and Maria are truly married, in contradistinction to the very devil (*diabolus in musica*) found in the ever-present tritone throughout the score. And finally, the music supporting the Sondheim text, “I have a love and it’s all that I have,” is a direct quotation of the “Redemption through Love” motif from Wagner’s *Götterdämmerung*. Even the orchestration, using the solo French horn, seals our subliminal understanding of the meaning of the text and the genealogy of its setting.


Bernstein once told me that when he was asked to take over the composition for *Wonderful Town* (after the score by Leroy Anderson was considered insufficient), the producer told him not to “write all that Prokof-off-iff [*sic*] stuff.” We also tend to forget that, like Gershwin and Copland,

“A milestone in Hitchcock criticism.”
—David Sterritt

HITCHCOCK'S MUSIC


Jack Sullivan

This “important new book” (Terry Teachout, *Commentary*) is the first to explore music's role in Hitchcock's movies.



“Fascinating. . . [Sullivan] examines Hitchcock's meticulous notes about film scores, pays attention to every casual coltlops tune and chronicles the director's arguments with studios and fallings out with composers while revealing new ways of thinking about Hitchcock's music.”
—Edward Rothstein, *New York Times*

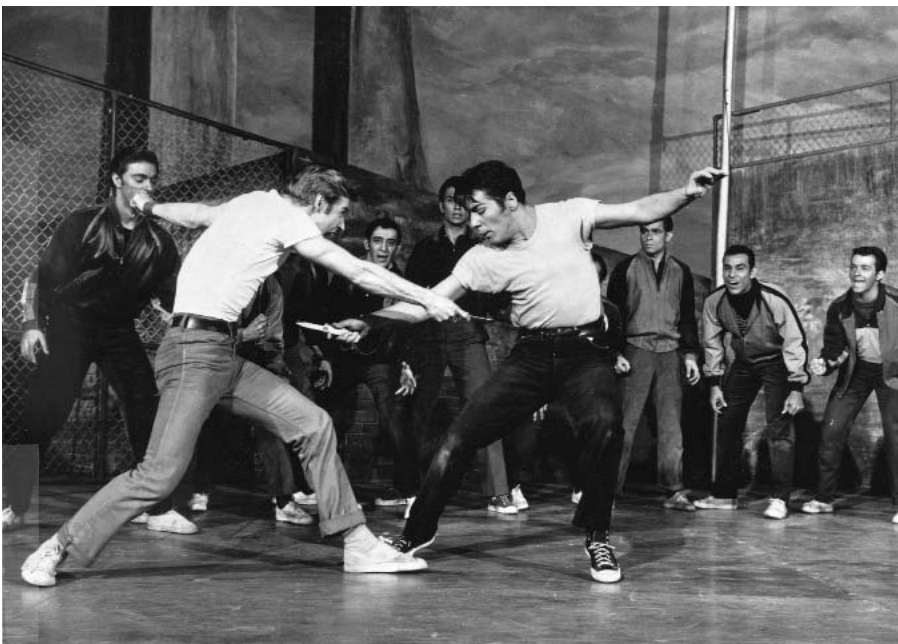
As accepted in the May/June issue of *Symphony Magazine*

 **YALE** University Press • yalebooks.com



Donald Dieltz

During the ominous Prologue, the leader of the Sharks slices off the ear of a rival Jet.



Museum of the City of New York

Switchblades flash as a rumble erupts between the gangs.

Bernstein was a Russian-American and that “astrigent” sound, described by every critic of his Broadway scores (and rarely by the classical-music critics), emerged from the Russian DNA that he shared with both Prokofiev and Shostakovich. *West Side Story*, if sung in Russian, would be an ear-opener!

And perhaps we should not view *West Side Story* as a single musical work. It was composed simultaneously with *Candide*. When one considers the totality of Leonard Bernstein’s life and work, nothing could be a more perfect summation of all that he was,

much like Beethoven’s simultaneous compositions of the Fifth and Sixth symphonies and Wagner’s *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* diptych. Leonard Bernstein was an American kid of Russian-Jewish descent who loved European culture and wanted the world to be a kinder and less violent place.

This spring, the North Carolina School of the Arts celebrated the 50th anniversary of *West Side Story* with a new production. None of the cast, born in the mid-1980s, had ever seen the show. Some of them knew the film. Here then was a perfect laboratory: The stage director, Gerald Freedman, dean

of the School of Drama, had served as Jerome Robbins’s assistant for the original production. The original choreography (licensed by the Jerome Robbins Estate) was recreated by Kevin Backstrom, who is blessed with a photographic memory of everything in *West Side Story*, down to the secret F-sharp played on the vibraphone when Chino fires his gun, thus giving Maria her starting note for “Hold my hand and I’ll take you there.” I, the newly appointed chancellor of the school and a graduate of eighteen years with Leonard Bernstein, would conduct.

Even better, members of the original cast—Carol Lawrence (Maria), Mickey Calin (Riff), and Grover Dale (Snowboy) were on hand to inspire the 20-year-olds. Chita Rivera (Anita) was on tour, but was close enough to Winston-Salem for the 21-year-old Jenna Fakhoury to see her show and go backstage for a magical hour. Even 88-year-old Sid Ramin (hired by Bernstein to orchestrate *West Side Story*) came to inspire an orchestra of high school and college students.

I know that 50 years from now—in the autumn of 2057—members of the North Carolina School of the Arts cast will be running seminars about *West Side Story* and how they learned and were inspired by members of the original production. They will explain that the “sailing step” comes from the drama and the storytelling, and is not merely a step. They will embody knowledge from a century before. By then, these recent apprentices will have become the sorcerers, inspiring those who will take on the mantle and responsibility of being artists, translating the creative forces that made a *West Side Story* in 1957 and confronting the negativity that surely will exist in the 22nd century.

That the world of gang violence is very much a thing of our day is a sad truth. Racial and tribal behavior dominates the news—everywhere. There is no better warning than *West Side Story*. We need to play it again. It elevates us. It teaches us. It entertains us. And we are better for having experienced it. ∞

John Mauceri is chancellor of the North Carolina School of the Arts and founding director of the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra.