

On the eve of the release of Steven Spielberg's remake of Bernstein's masterpiece

## New York Times sponsors a debate on the racial authenticity of *West Side Story*

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Steven Spielberg's highly anticipated new film version of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* is set to open on December 10. The movie's screenplay, by Tony Kushner, was developed in close collaboration with the last surviving member of the *West Side Story* creative team of 1957, lyricist Stephen Sondheim, who died just two weeks ago.

Leonard Bernstein provided for the lyrics of Steven Sondheim a musical score of astonishing depth and beauty. Before contemporary race-obsessed academics and ethnic nationalists targeted the work, discussions of Bernstein's score were often about whether the composition should be defined as a musical or an opera. It combines the best elements of both genres. With the exception of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, no other work by an American composer has so brilliantly managed to close the gap between popular and classical music. Its songs—they could also be called “arias,” such as “Who Knows,” “Tonight,” “Maria,” “I Feel Pretty,” “America” and “Somewhere”—belong both to the American Songbook and classical music literature. In purely musical terms, *West Side Story* is a work of genius that will still be performed a century from now—and perhaps longer.

Beyond its glorious music, unforgettable lyrics and the brilliant choreography of Jerome Robbins, a fundamental reason for the enduring legacy and popularity of *West Side Story* is the power of its evocation of youthful love and human solidarity. The tragic story is a powerful denunciation of racial and national bigotry. Bernstein and Sondheim transposed Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to a working-class neighborhood in New York. Verona's feuding Montagues and Capulets in the Italian Renaissance became rival youth gangs—the newly arrived Puerto Rican Sharks and the descendants of earlier immigrants, the Jets.

*West Side Story* was produced just a few years after the height of McCarthyism, the anti-communist witchhunt in which both Bernstein and Arthur Laurents, the author of the musical play, were victimized. It arrived during a time of substantial migration to New York, both by Puerto Ricans and by African

Americans from the US South. The stirrings of what would become the mass civil rights movement had also begun.

The show presented a left-wing and progressive opposition to prejudice and the whipping up of ethnic divisions, as well as to poverty and social ills. Moreover, like the original, the musical evinced hostility toward *all* the social forces and institutions, and prejudices, that work to destroy the possibility of human intimacy and happiness.

It remains to be seen how successfully the remake of the cinematic version of *West Side Story* realizes Bernstein's artistic vision. Even before the film's release, however, the musical is under attack. The *New York Times* published a two-page feature, entitled “West Side Story: The Great Debate,” only days before the premiere. The participants included *Times* chief theatre critic, Jesse Green; Misha Berson, the critic for the *Seattle Times* and the author of a book on the impact of *West Side Story* on US culture; and Carina del Valle Schorske, a contributing writer to the *Times* and a viciously ignorant critic of Bernstein's masterpiece.

What is this debate, an argument that the *Times* goes so far as to call a “great debate,” all about? The 1957 stage production and 1961 film version met with widespread critical as well as popular acclaim. Of course, great works are the subjects of recurring analysis and reappraisal. The interest they inspire testifies to their “greatness.”

The Broadway show was nominated for six Tony awards and won three, and the film won 10 Academy Awards. In the ensuing decades there have been literally thousands of high school productions, as well as many major revivals, productions throughout the US and also internationally, as far away as Hong Kong, Australia, Germany and Russia.

Despite all the acclaim and popularity, attacks on *West Side Story* have grown increasingly vehement in recent decades. This process reflects the impact of the reactionary political and intellectual climate, of which the obsession with racial, ethnic, gender and sexual identity is an expression.

The trumped up charges include the claim that the musical

stereotypes Puerto Ricans as violent gang members and that it lacks “authenticity.” At its core, this boils down to the racist demand, increasingly promoted by ruling class circles and above all by the *New York Times* itself, that creative artists should “stay in their own lane.” That four white men should have dared to address issues facing Puerto Ricans is attacked as a violation of cultural and racial border lines. Even more, their audacity is a form of impertinence and arrogance, another form of “white privilege.”

Several participants in the *Times* debate attack *West Side Story* along these lines. There is reference to “micro-aggressions,” such as the outrage that someone was once mistaken for a Dominican in high school—somehow or other *West Side Story* is held responsible for this insignificant incident. The main mark against the show is that it does not highlight Puerto Rican identity.

In fact, *West Side Story* does not highlight any form of ethnic or racial identity. The whole point of the work is the call for the transcendence of all forms of racial and ethnic divisions. But this is precisely what its racist critics find so objectionable.

Del Valle previously spelled out her denunciation of the show, in a column published by the *Times* almost two years ago, entitled, “Let West Side Story and Its Stereotypes Die.” This piece, dripping with disdain and sarcasm about Bernstein’s and Sondheim’s alleged ignorance of Puerto Rican culture, is obsessed with things like “distinctively Nuyorican ways of moving.”

This is an attempt to reduce artistic imagination to a truly vulgar form of ethnic anthropology.

Shakespeare set his play in Verona, which he had never visited.

Del Valle entirely ignores the hostility to the cops that is expressed by the youth in *West Side Story*. The reason is clear: She is hostile to the theme itself, to the concept of unity across racial and ethnic boundaries, and to the fight against poverty and inequality. She scornfully dismisses last year’s statement by Jamie Bernstein, Leonard Bernstein’s daughter, that *West Side Story* is “more timely than ever,” a reference to the racism and anti-immigrant prejudice being whipped up today.

Nationalists like del Valle magnify racial and ethnic divisions—and make a living from them. They seek to make the divisions permanent. Del Valle advances the demand for “new narratives, which ultimately require new distributions of power.” This sums up the social agenda behind the insistence on tribalism and the stoking of divisions within the working class. “New distributions of power”—the opportunity for an upper-middle-class layer to grab its “piece of the pie,” the demand for parity in sharing the fruits of exploitation, not for an end to poverty and inequality.

Jesse Green stupidly wonders whether classics like *West Side Story* “have become the equivalent of Confederate statues that need to come down.” Del Valle reluctantly concedes that the show “might not be a Confederate monument, but it is a

monument to the authority of white Americans to dominate the conversation about who Puerto Ricans are.” This is an echo of the recent decision of the New York City Council to remove the statue of Thomas Jefferson from City Hall. According to the racist Democratic politicians, Jefferson might not be a Confederate, but he still has to come down. “I’m not advocating the wholesale erasure of *West Side Story*,” states Del Valle. But then she adds: “I’m saying, let’s stop pouring literally hundreds of millions of dollars into propping up its relevance...”

Such is the right-wing racist and nationalist agenda promoted by the *Times*. The newspaper pretends to hear “both sides,” and its own theater critic points out some of the flaws in the racist argument. The editors make their own agenda quite clear, however, in giving the opponents of *West Side Story* a megaphone. The feature’s very first paragraph reads, “Since its Broadway premiere in 1957, *West Side Story*—a musical based on *Romeo and Juliet* and created by four white men—has been at once beloved and vexed.” And the very last words in this debate are given to Del Valle, who venomously declares, in anticipation of Spielberg’s film version of the musical, “I want it to flop so we can move on.”

Move on to where? Bernstein is not the only musical giant under attack. In fact, he is in good company. Professor Philip A. Ewell of Hunter College in New York is calling for an end of a “white racial frame” that unjustly privileges the “only average” music of Beethoven.

But notwithstanding the objections of the racial and ethnic nationalists, *West Side Story* will endure. Unless there is some fundamental flaw in Spielberg’s work, one can safely predict that his new cinematic interpretation will attract a large audience. *West Side Story* was embraced by a world audience decades ago, which even after 60 years has not changed its mind.



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