The new *West Side Story*: A remaking of the Leonard Bernstein classic at war with itself

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15 December 2021

West Side Story, directed by Steven Spielberg and scripted by Tony Kushner, opened December 10 in movie theaters. The film is based on the 1957 Broadway musical, with a score by Leonard Bernstein, a book by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and choreography by Jerome Robbins. A 1961 film version, directed by Robert Wise, with Natalie Wood, Richard Beymer, Russ Tamblyn, George Chakiris and Rita Moreno, was a critical and commercial success. *West Side Story* is based on William Shakespeare's tragic love story *Romeo and Juliet* and set in New York City in the 1950s.

The appearance of the new version is a much-anticipated event. In the works for a number of years, Spielberg's film was shot and edited in 2019, but its opening was delayed a year by the pandemic.

Like *Romeo and Juliet*, *West Side Story* is driven by the all-consuming passion of two young people for each other in the face of fierce social, familial and tribal opposition. Bernstein and Laurents chose to set their work on the Upper West Side of Manhattan amid conflicts between rival, ethnically-based teenage gangs. Standing in for Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets are the Jets, made up of white adolescents (Polish, Irish, Italian), and the Sharks, a Puerto Rican gang, respectively. The new film retains that framework.

Tony and Maria, Bernstein-Laurents' Romeo and Juliet, like their counterparts in Shakespeare, have their possibility of love and happiness destroyed by society. Their striving for freedom in love comes into opposition against the dominant, anti-human mores. In *West Side Story*, ethnic divisiveness forms part of the reactionary social code that Bernstein and Laurents criticize and reject.

At every opportunity, veteran American director Steven Spielberg has insisted that the latter is one of his central concerns as well. The filmmaker indicates that the film project was given new life around the time of Donald Trump's nomination as Republican Party presidential candidate in 2016.

No doubt, this is a healthy impulse, speaking to a broader rebuff of racial prejudice, anti-Semitism and social backwardness in various forms. Kushner (*Munich*, *Lincoln*), a left liberal, indicates the same sort of sentiments in various interviews and statements.

Given the current social-ideological climate, in which race- and gender-obsession has taken hold of a considerable layer of the affluent middle class, including significant portions of the film and music world, it comes as no surprise that the pressure of identity politics makes itself harmfully felt in the Spielberg-Kushner version. This takes the form of a fixation on "Latinx" elements, virtual racial quotas in casting, the obtrusive presence of petty bourgeois identity politics, etc. We will return to this issue.

The details of *West Side Story* 's plot are widely known, but we can indicate its general outline.

The new movie is set in the late 1950s or early 1960s, when a chunk of the Upper West Side is being demolished to make way for the future Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. The camera passes over a sign indicating "Slum Clearance" under way. A portion of the residents, however, Latino and otherwise, remain behind.

The film opens with the famous finger-snapping and whistling by members of the Jets. After getting hold of cans of paint, they assemble and begin to deface a Puerto Rican flag painted on a concrete wall. Some of the Sharks appear, and a ruckus begins. The general tone and framework have been established.

The chief of the Jets is Riff (Mike Faist), who co-founded the gang with his childhood friend, Tony (Ansel Elgort). His Shark counterpart is Bernardo (David Alvarez), a boxer, whose younger sister Maria (Rachel Zegler) has recently arrived from San Juan. Bernardo's fiancée is the strong-willed Anita (Ariana DeBose). Maria's suitor is Chino (Josh Andrés Rivera) a mild-mannered accountant who will play a significant and devastating role in subsequent events.

Inevitably and appropriately, in this urban drama-crime story, the police throw their weight around, led by the bigoted Lt. Schrank (Corey Stoll) and Officer Krupke (Brian d'Arcy James), the subject of one of the musical's most memorable and satirical tunes.

Schrank heaps scorn on both outfits. Addressing the Jets' captain, he sneers (in Kushner's dialogue),"You're the last of the can't-make-it Caucasians. By the time you get out of jail, Riff, this [neighborhood] is going to be full of shiny new apartment buildings for rich people with Puerto Rican doormen to evict white trash like you."

Events rapidly unfold. At a dance organized by good Samaritans, aimed at assuaging tensions between the Jets and the Sharks, Tony and Maria meet. It is love, literally, at first sight. Bernardo immediately takes offense, forcefully telling Tony to stay away from his sister. Having heard the girl's name, Tony wanders the streets, declaring "Maria… the most beautiful sound I ever heard."

Emotions between the rival ethnic cliques run high and a "rumble" is planned. Tony, Romeo-like, furtively visits Maria while she stands on her "balcony" (fire escape). In the tenderly melodic "Tonight," she sings "All the world is only you and me! … I saw you and the world went away." The lovers spend the next day together. Maria implores Tony, who has just served a year in prison for assault, to do everything in his power to stop the street fight. Riff, however, insists that he take part. Tony shows up to prevent the clash, but, through a horrible turn of events, the brawl turns lethal. Two young men lie dead, with more tragedy to come.

Shakespeare created his play some 425 years ago. His final lines still cause one to weep:

"For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

The 1957 musical and the 1961 film version each possessed its own considerable degree of heart-breaking "woe." As does the new production, importantly. At the conclusion, the various repressive social forces, including the ethnic factions, have triumphed: a great love has been stamped out. Here too, the young pair, as Shakespeare's Capulet patriarch laments, have become the "Poor sacrifices of our enmity!" But, out of this, perhaps a genuine reconciliation will emerge? The filmmakers

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deserve credit for staying faithful to this painful, but promising, moment.

Moreover, of course, one of the greatest strengths of the original *West Side Story* and the 1961 film remains, Bernstein's "musical score," as the WSWS recently noted, "of astonishing depth and beauty." The composition combines the best elements of two genres, the Broadway musical and opera. Bernstein, as we commented, "brilliantly managed to close the gap between popular and classical music." The songs (with Sondheim's lyrics)–which "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."

At a time when so many composers were turning their backs, politically and musically, on the population, Bernstein—possessed of an ardent democratic sensibility—was making a greater effort to reach, delight and enlighten the broadest public possible.

The songs in *West Side Story*, deeply embedded in the popular experience of postwar America, have been performed tens of thousands of times in the US and globally for more than 60 years. In explaining their enduring quality, one musicologist points out, the show contains "distinctive operatic qualities: a deep orchestral texture, a plot that is frequently developed through song, and a libretto centered on romantic tragedy." It also has "the popular music flavors of jazz and Latin American music."

The same commentator observes that "Somewhere" contains echoes of Beethoven's *Emperor* concerto, that "'Cool' is written in the style of a twelve-tone fugue … 'The Rumble' shares a striking resemblance with Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes* 'Storm' interlude" and that the "Quintet" is "operatically informed, made in the tradition of 'Bella Figlia dell'amore' from Act III of Verdi's *Rigoletto* ." In 1984, memorialized in a remarkable documentary film, Bernstein (as conductor) recorded *West Side Story* with opera singers.

In Spielberg's film, the music and songs are given their due by an immensely talented cast of actors, singers and dancers. Zegler as Maria and Elgort as Tony deserve special mention. They are believable, intense and lyrical, both in their scenes with others and in their most intimate moments, including in a segment set in Manhattan's Cloisters ("One Hand, One Heart"). A dynamic dancer and singer, and affecting as one of the "deplorables," Faist also stands out as Riff. In the part of Schrank, Corey Stoll offers his usual compelling screen presence. The legendary, 90-year-old Moreno, as Valentina, the only cast member from the 1961 film to appear in the Spielberg version, provides continuity and emotional weight.

The filmmakers both make use of modern technologies in the new *West Side Story* and slightly update its time-frame, with mixed overall results. The decision to locate the drama during the period of "slum clearance" is intriguing. It could have helped bring to the fore the social and class tensions. It doesn't do much of that, unfortunately. Instead, as a substitute, we are too often confronted by a cluttered set, with heaps of rubble everywhere, that makes itself physically felt, but ends up adding little to the drama.

Far more damaging, however, has been the coercive influence of ethno-communal politics. Sadly, the project was to a certain extent tainted from the outset. In fairness, one must recognize that Spielberg and Kushner no doubt came under colossal pressure in each and every meeting involving the film's development. There are certain decisions simply forced on filmmakers at present, compromises extorted by the affluent identity politics industry.

To one extent or another, the film's representation of the "greatest of all love stories" was inevitably disrupted and weakened in the process.

During an unannounced visit to San Juan in 2018, for example, Spielberg told a group of University of Puerto Rico faculty members and students, "The reason we've hired so many Puerto Rican singers and dancers and actors is so they can help guide us to represent Puerto Rico in a way that will make all of you and all of us proud."

That is a poor starting point for any artistic production. The new arrivals from the Caribbean island in *West Side Story* have every right to defend themselves against discrimination and police violence, but that is not the same thing as providing a platform for unbridled clannishness.

The *L.A. Times* notes, "Twenty members of its cast are Puerto Rican or of Puerto Rican descent; eight of these actors were found at casting calls in San Juan. A notable portion of its dialogue is in Spanish, delivered without subtitles appearing on-screen. And a newly added moment sees the Sharks singing the original version of 'La Borinqueña,' which became the official anthem of the U.S. territory after it was rewritten with less confrontational lyrics."

The characterizations of Anita and Bernardo suffer in particular from a hyperventilating nationalistic belligerence. Moreno and the Greek-American Chakiris in the 1961 film, frankly, presented more lifelike and appealing personalities.

What's going on here?

Bernstein jotted down on the first page of his copy of *Romeo and Juliet* that the play was an "out-and-out plea for racial tolerance." Referring to current ethnic conflicts, Spielberg remarked that "in a more contained, microcosmic way–what happens on stage and the original production … is what has been played out today with the division that we are all super aware of in this country and around the world." Both film versions end with the same image: the two rival gangs–ashamed of their blood feud–joining to carry off the corpse of a central protagonist.

And yet… And yet, ethno-racialist rubbish is given far too much credence and legitimacy in this *West Side Story*. The irony is that Spielberg and Kushner–and nearly everyone else too–seem to forget in all the hullaballoo that Tony and Maria are combating *and then become the victims of* the very sort of racialism to which the filmmakers have made too many concessions.

At a critical juncture, Anita urges Maria to "stick to your own kind" repeatedly in the song "A Boy Like That," "one of your own kind," while Maria retorts, "It isn't true, not for me … I hear your words … I know they're smart … But my heart knows they're wrong." Eventually, Anita gives way to the strength of Maria's feelings and the pair sing, " When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong, your love is your life!" What does this have to with boosting national pride?! This is what we mean by a film at war with itself.

Kushner, for example, told *Time* magazine, quasi-apologetically, that the musical was "a product of its time … There were certain kinds of articulations unavailable to the four gay Jews [Bernstein, Laurents, Robbins, Sondheim] that wrote the thing originally. And there are mistakes that they made, absolutely."

In truth, the four gay *left-wing* Jews (three of whom, Bernstein, Laurents and Robbins, were pursued and persecuted by the FBI and the anti-communist witch-hunters in the 1950s) were more gifted and knew more about the world than all their present, race-fixated critics put together. And if they fully stood up for themselves, that would hold true as well for Kushner and Spielberg. The categorization of art and artists by race and religion is simply poisonous.

Furthermore, contrary to all the claims about the undying importance of "Latinx" motifs, a modern interpretation of *Romeo and Juliet* 's "love against everyone and everything" could be set anywhere, with or without ethnic or racial conflict (an element absent of course in Shakespeare), and *has been*, to a considerable extent, in countless adaptations and variations. Bernstein and Laurents, for that matter, first envisioned their future musical involving a conflict between Catholics and Jews.

At least Spielberg and Kushner appear aware of the conflicting

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impulses in *West Side Story*, even if they are incapable of satisfactorily resolving them. Almost universally, on the other hand, the ignoramuses in the media are simply blind to the piece's urgent and overriding theme: the bitter and fatal consequences of one section of the working class being pitted against one another, only to the benefit (at least by implication) of those on top. However, even all the film's surrendering has not satisfied the identity politic zealots, who still bray for more.

One could introduce 100 wretched examples, but, mercifully, a handful will suffice. In "West Side Story Can't Be Saved," whose headline says everything, *New York* magazine's Andrea González-Ramírez writes that in the Spielberg film, like the 1961 version, "the white-triumphs-over-brown coding remains, prioritizing fidelity to the story over nuance. … Ultimately, I want more than the broken English, hypersexualized, otherized crumbs we've been given for decades. Anita wanted Maria to 'forget that boy and find another.' I just want us to move on, leaving West Side Story in the past, where it belongs."

The *L.A. Times* carries an equally foul piece, by Ashley Lee, "Spielberg tried to save 'West Side Story.' But its history makes it unsalvageable," in which she writes, "No matter how many Nuyorican actors are cast, how many lines are recited in Spanish, how many Puerto Rican consultants are hired and how many panels with historical experts are held, the collective effort does not correct the problematic appropriation on which the musical was built."

In the *New York Times'* two-page feature, "West Side Story: The Great Debate," critic Carina del Valle Schorske claims that the musical "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. And each revival renews that authority and co-signs the narrative for a new generation." How intellectually filthy such people are! The obsession with race and blood leads in only one direction, toward extreme political reaction.

To measure the foulness of the attack on the Bernstein-Sondheim work in its various incarnations, one has to return to the ultimate source, Shakespeare's immortal work. His most popular play, continuously performed since the 1590s, *Romeo and Juliet*, has also inspired at least 24 operas, most famously by Gounod and Bellini, innumerable instrumental works, by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Delius and Duke Ellington, among others. Prokofiev composed an oft-performed ballet. *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most filmed (and televised) plays of all time, including adaptations directed by George Cukor and Franco Zeffirelli. Indeed, it says a great deal that in the turbulent, rebellious 1960s, a film indirectly inspired by Shakespeare's work (Wise's *West Side Story*) and a second based on the original play (Zeffirelli's 1968 version) both powerfully, viscerally influenced youthful audiences in particular.

Why this enduring fascination and emotional impact? First, there are the instantaneous and profound feelings of Romeo and Juliet for one another and the determination with which they pursue them. No work better depicts the idealism and optimism of love, which defies convention and "ancient grudge," all the stupidities, falsities and encrusted traditions of the older generations. Shakespeare gives Juliet, a young girl, these lines:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

And then comes the crushing of this great love at the hands of all the institutions and forces that conspire against the youthful paramours. Beyond that, "what a scourge is laid" upon the feuding factions as a whole, "all are punish'd."

Shakespeare raised this situation, both the ecstasy and the calamity, to immense heights, transcending the immediate conditions of Renaissance Verona and 16th century London.

The arbitrary elements in the play (an unexpected encounter, an undelivered letter, a deep sleep mistaken for death), as György Lukacs noted, do not detract here from the "dramatic necessity," shaped by the conflict between the lovers and their social circumstances. If that essential conflict, with its social-historical element, is accurately represented, "then every individual accident, as at the close of *Romeo and Juliet*, occurs in an atmosphere of necessity, and in and through this atmosphere its accidental character is dramatically erased."

As we have pointed out, the new film version of *West Side Story* retains various features of the original musical play, including its musical score, its general dramatic contours and its wrenching conclusion. However, in so far as its creators have come under the baleful influence of ahistorical moralizers and race fetishists, that "atmosphere of necessity" is only fitfully present.

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