West Side Story

based on a conception by JEROME ROBBINS
book by ARTHUR LAURENTS
music by LEONARD BERNSTEIN
lyrics by STEPHEN SONDHEIM
directed by JOSEPH HAJ

PLAY GUIDE
Inside

THE PLAY
Synopsis, Setting and Characters • 3
About the Source: *Romeo and Juliet* • 4
Scenes and Songs • 4
Responses to *West Side Story* • 5

THE AUTHORS
About the Authors • 8
In Their Own Words • 11

CULTURAL CONTEXT
Juvenile Delinquency in the 1950s • 14
Gang Slang • 15
Fighting Street Clubs: Reports from the Time • 16
Puerto Rico at a Glance • 18
People, Places and Things in the Musical • 20

BUILDING THE PRODUCTION
From the Director • 22
From the Creative Team • 24

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
For Further Reading and Understanding • 28

The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.
The Play

On Manhattan’s West Side during the waning days of summer, rival gangs prowl the streets. The Jets, a motley crew of “American” youth, find their territory threatened by the Sharks, a gang of newly arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. After their most recent skirmish is broken up by the local cops, the Jets decide to rumble with the Sharks to determine once and for all who owns the streets. The Jets’ leader Riff asks his best friend Tony, a former Jet now working in Doc’s drugstore, to back him at the neighborhood dance when he challenges the Sharks’ leader Bernardo. Tony reluctantly agrees.

At the dance, the gangs remain defiantly separated. Among the Sharks are Bernardo’s girlfriend Anita and his sister Maria, who is attending her first dance in America. In the midst of a mambo, Tony and Maria lock eyes and dance, reveling in each’s other presence until Bernardo separates them. Undeterred, Tony later finds Maria’s apartment, and they pledge their love to each other on her fire escape. But a war council between the gangs sets the time and place for the all-out rumble, leaving the young lovers caught in a world of prejudice and hate.

Setting

1957. The West Side of Manhattan during the last days of summer. Most of the action takes place over the course of two days, from 5 p.m. on the first day to midnight on the second day.

Synopsis

The Jets and Their Girls
- Tony, a former leader of the Jets
- Riff, Tony’s best friend and current leader of the Jets
- Velma, Riff’s girlfriend
- Diesel, the Jets’ best fighter
- Graziella, Diesel’s girlfriend
- Baby John, the youngest member of the Jets
- Anybodys, a wannabe member of the Jets

The Sharks and Their Girls
- Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks
- Maria, Bernardo’s sister
- Anita, Bernardo’s girlfriend
- Chino, Maria’s intended suitor
- Pepe
- Indio
- Nibbles
- Anxious
- Juano

The Adults
- Doc, owner of the local drugstore and Tony’s employer
- Schrank, a plainclothes lieutenant
- Krupke, a uniformed sergeant
- Glad Hand, supervisor of the dance at the gym

Characters

On Manhattan’s West Side during the waning days of summer, rival gangs prowl the streets. The Jets, a motley crew of “American” youth, find their territory threatened by the Sharks, a gang of newly arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. After their most recent skirmish is broken up by the local cops, the Jets decide to rumble with the Sharks to determine once and for all who owns the streets. The Jets’ leader Riff asks his best friend Tony, a former Jet now working in Doc’s drugstore, to back him at the neighborhood dance when he challenges the Sharks’ leader Bernardo. Tony reluctantly agrees.

At the dance, the gangs remain defiantly separated. Among the Sharks are Bernardo’s girlfriend Anita and his sister Maria, who is attending her first dance in America. In the midst of a mambo, Tony and Maria lock eyes and dance, reveling in each’s other presence until Bernardo separates them. Undeterred, Tony later finds Maria’s apartment, and they pledge their love to each other on her fire escape. But a war council between the gangs sets the time and place for the all-out rumble, leaving the young lovers caught in a world of prejudice and hate.

Setting

1957. The West Side of Manhattan during the last days of summer. Most of the action takes place over the course of two days, from 5 p.m. on the first day to midnight on the second day.

Synopsis

The Jets and Their Girls
- Tony, a former leader of the Jets
- Riff, Tony’s best friend and current leader of the Jets
- Velma, Riff’s girlfriend
- Diesel, the Jets’ best fighter
- Graziella, Diesel’s girlfriend
- Baby John, the youngest member of the Jets
- Anybodys, a wannabe member of the Jets

The Sharks and Their Girls
- Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks
- Maria, Bernardo’s sister
- Anita, Bernardo’s girlfriend
- Chino, Maria’s intended suitor
- Pepe
- Indio
- Nibbles
- Anxious
- Juano

The Adults
- Doc, owner of the local drugstore and Tony’s employer
- Schrank, a plainclothes lieutenant
- Krupke, a uniformed sergeant
- Glad Hand, supervisor of the dance at the gym

Characters

On Manhattan’s West Side during the waning days of summer, rival gangs prowl the streets. The Jets, a motley crew of “American” youth, find their territory threatened by the Sharks, a gang of newly arrived Puerto Rican immigrants. After their most recent skirmish is broken up by the local cops, the Jets decide to rumble with the Sharks to determine once and for all who owns the streets. The Jets’ leader Riff asks his best friend Tony, a former Jet now working in Doc’s drugstore, to back him at the neighborhood dance when he challenges the Sharks’ leader Bernardo. Tony reluctantly agrees.

At the dance, the gangs remain defiantly separated. Among the Sharks are Bernardo’s girlfriend Anita and his sister Maria, who is attending her first dance in America. In the midst of a mambo, Tony and Maria lock eyes and dance, reveling in each’s other presence until Bernardo separates them. Undeterred, Tony later finds Maria’s apartment, and they pledge their love to each other on her fire escape. But a war council between the gangs sets the time and place for the all-out rumble, leaving the young lovers caught in a world of prejudice and hate.

Setting

1957. The West Side of Manhattan during the last days of summer. Most of the action takes place over the course of two days, from 5 p.m. on the first day to midnight on the second day.
About the Source: 
Romeo and Juliet

In 1949, Jerome Robbins was struck with the idea of putting Romeo and Juliet in his own contemporary world. The story of doomed love is as old as storytelling itself, and in putting their own spin on this tale, Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim were only doing what Shakespeare himself had done with his source material.

Romeo and Juliet is a relatively early work in Shakespeare’s canon, usually dated between 1591 and 1596. Speculation varies about when it was first performed, though between 1595 and 1598 seems probable. The play was first published in 1597 when the first quarto book appeared.

The primary source for the play was Arthur Brooke’s poem, The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet (1562), which was based on a French version of the Romeo and Juliet story, Of Two Loves by Pierre Boaistuau, and the Italian novel Giulietta e Romeo by Matteo Bandello, both of which date back to the 1590s.

Among the changes and inventions Shakespeare made for his version are creating the character of Mercutio, condensing the action’s timeframe from months to mere days and placing the Capulet-Montague feud front and center from the first scene.

Scenes and Songs

ACT I
Scene 1: The Street
“Prologue” ORCHESTRA
“Jet Song” RIFF, JETS

Scene 2: A Backyard
“Something’s Coming” TONY

Scene 3: The Bridal Shop
Scene 4: The Dance at the Gym
“Blues,” “Mambo,” “Cha-Cha,” “Jump” ORCHESTRA
“Maria” TONY

Scene 5: A Back Alley
“Balcony Scene” MARIA, TONY
“America” ANITA, ROSALIA, CONSUELO, FRANCISCA, TERESITA

Scene 6: The Drugstore
“Cool” RIFF, JETS

Scene 7: The Next Day at the Bridal Shop
“One Hand, One Heart” TONY, MARIA

Scene 8: The Neighborhood
“Tonight” RIFF, BERNARDO, ANITA, TONY, MARIA, JETS, SHARKS

Scene 9: Under the Highway
“The Rumble” ORCHESTRA

ACT II
Scene 1: Maria’s Bedroom
“I Feel Pretty” MARIA, CONSUELO, ROSALIA, FRANCISCA, TERESITA
“Ballet Sequence” TONY, MARIA
“Somewhere” SOPRANO SOLOIST

Scene 2: Another Back Alley
“Gee, Officer Krupke” JETS

Scene 3: Maria’s Bedroom
“A Boy Like That”/“I Have a Love” ANITA, MARIA

Scene 4: The Drugstore
“Taunting Scene” ORCHESTRA

Scene 5: The Street
“Finale” MARIA, TONY
Gang warfare is the material of “West Side Story,” which opened at the Winter Garden last evening, and very little of the hideousness has been left out. But the author, composer and ballet designer are creative artists. Pooling imagination and virtuosity, they have written a profoundly moving show that is as ugly as the city jungles and also pathetic, tender and forgiving. …

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 that Mr. Laurents is inhibited from saying because the characters are so inarticulate. …

The subject is not beautiful. But what “West Side Story” draws out of it is beautiful. For it has a searching point of view.


My opinions of “West Side Story” are, I have to admit, very mixed. The plot, though certainly racking, seems to me strangely empty of real emotional content. Partly, this may be due to the fact that Shakespeare’s ideas of what is permissible in the way of dramatic coincidence aren’t easy to accept today, and it is hard to escape a feeling of patness and contrivance in the way each fatal encounter is arranged. It is also, however, almost equally the result of the difficulty of reconciling the characters who appear on the stage with their actual prototypes uptown.

All my reading, vividly assisted by photographs, has led me to think of the members of juvenile gangs as vicious, senseless, and degraded. The boys and girls at the Winter Garden are tough all right, but somehow we are asked to believe that they are simultaneously rather winsome and picturesque, with essentially a high regard for chastity in the young women who accompany them, and even a certain delicacy and style in their employment of the English language. They are capable of murder in moments of great stress, but it is impossible to suspect them of rape, mugging, perversion, drug addiction, torture, or any other practices that would naturally be repugnant to the normal American boy. It is probably necessary to present them in this disinfected light in the theatre, but the whole conception is just beyond my powers.

Asked to believe that significant tragedy and tender, not unliterary romance frequently exist among juvenile delinquents, I remain, I’m embarrassed to say, incredulous and unstirred.

Wolcott Gibbs, “Hoodlums and Heiresses,” The New Yorker, October 5, 1957

If West Side Story is certain to run a year, why not two? The commercial limitation is related to an artistic one. People who want to see a Broadway musical do not particularly crave a “tragedy” of social significance in which ugly sentiments and violence must play a major role.

My sympathies in this case go with this lowbrow opinion. Although I appreciate the show’s merits – and sat in a theatre echoing with
“bravos” – I did not enjoy it. In fact, I resented it: I thought it a phony. I am not above enjoying the phony on occasion, but I could not do so here. I do not like intellectual slumming by sophisticates for purposes of popular showmanship. It is vulgar, immature, unfeeling. …

Our theatre is too clever by far. Talent we possess to a formidable degree, but in true moral-artistic perception (they are indissolubly linked) we are pathetically underdeveloped. So it is possible for such gifted people as the authors of West Side Story to mix the pain of a real problem, penny sociology, liberal nineteen-thirtyish propaganda, Betty Comden-Adolphe Green fun and the best of the advanced but already accepted musical comedy techniques into an amalgam which eliminates what is supposed to be the heart of the matter. For above all we want at one and the same time to be progressive and to please several million playgoers, the ticket brokers and the movie companies. That is not how Threepenny Opera was made.

Harold Clurman, “Theatre,” The Nation, October 12, 1957

What they have done with “West Side Story” in knocking it down and moving it from stage to screen is to reconstruct its fine material into nothing short of a cinema masterpiece.

In every respect, the recreation of the Arthur Laurents-Leonard Bernstein musical in the dynamic forms of motion pictures is superbly and appropriately achieved. The drama of New York juvenile gang war, which cried to be released in the freer and less restricted medium of the mobile photograph, is now given range and natural aspect on the large Panavision color screen, and the music and dances that expand it are magnified as true sense-experiences.

Bosley Crowther, “Film at the Rivoli is Called Masterpiece,” The New York Times, October 19, 1961

Now, “I Feel Pretty” was Jerry’s least favorite number in the show, because it dealt with the inane behavior of a young woman in love – it was something he didn’t understand and didn’t care about and didn’t feel was integral to the work. He actually wanted it cut. It was the only time in the whole show that I smiled. …

Anyway I loved the number – apart from Lenny’s beautiful music, it was a fun, wonderful moment which was very necessary in the show, because he had so few of those. And at the end of the day [of final rehearsal!] I realized that we had not rearranged all of the choreography for “Pretty.” So I said: “Oh my God, Jerry, we didn’t restage it …” He said, without flinching and without a second’s delay: “Ad-lib it.” …

At the end of the number there was no room for the big dance thing, so all I could think of was to jump on the bed, and like a four-year-old to twirl, twirl, twirl and then fall on my behind. And that’s what I did. I finished like that and the audience went crazy. And it stopped the show!

But the most wonderful part, told to me afterward by Arthur Laurents, was that after the show, as Oscar Hammerstein was walking up the aisle, he came over to Jerry and Arthur and Lenny and Steve, who were at the top, watching from the back row and said: “Congratulations to all of you. This is an incredible milestone in the theatre.” And he raved and raved about every aspect of the show. And then turning to Jerry, he said: “But my favorite moment in the entire show came with the spontaneity of ‘I Feel Pretty.’ I don’t know how you did it, but you encapsulated the joy of a young woman in love. And you are to be congratulated.” And Jerry said: “Thank you.”

Carol Lawrence, who played Maria in the original Broadway cast, quoted in Conversations about Bernstein edited by William Westbrook Burton, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995

Photo: Marco Antonio Santiago (Bernardo) and Ana Isabelle (Anita) in West Side Story (T Charles Erickson)
Responses to West Side Story (continued)

The first movie I ever saw in a theater was “West Side Story,” the 1961 musical about warring street gangs in 1950s New York. The latest was an advance screening of “Tortilla Soup,” a romantic comedy about a widowed father and his three grown daughters that is scheduled to premiere Friday in the Twin Cities.

More than time separates the two movies. “West Side Story” served as a template for how Hollywood would largely portray Puerto Ricans and other Latinos for years to come – as gang members, juvenile delinquents, the poor, thick-accented and obedient dishwasher, garden hand or housemaid. The new film, with a mostly Latino cast, serves as a template for how we should have been portrayed all along.

“West Side Story” was a visual spectacle for me, as it was also the first movie I had ever seen in color. My 16-year-old cousin frowned as we headed home from the old RKO Theater in New York’s South Bronx.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Except for Maria, we were all made out to look like hoodlums,” she said. “And we killed Tony (the romantic lead), so we’ll get jumped at school.”

I was 7 years old, too young to understand the concept of “we” or why she felt that way. The realization has sunk in after four decades of largely negative portrayals. ... 

[Hector] Elizondo plays a restaurant master chef in “Tortilla Soup,” which also stars Raquel Welch and comedian Paul Rodriguez. The movie, inspired by the Taiwan international hit “Eat, Drink, Man, Woman,” touches on universal themes such as family and love relationships and the conflicting emotions of leaving the parental nest.

Members of the screening audience – mostly journalists attending this year’s National Association of Hispanic Journalists convention in Phoenix – broke into applause at the end of “Tortilla Soup.” Those of us who clapped, I believe, did so in part because such mainstream portrayals remain a rarity and we felt a need, almost a duty, to acknowledge them. I know I clapped for my cousin, who should have no fear of getting jumped on the way home from movies like this.


Tony (Polish-American Anton) and Maria (from Puerto Rico) are the Romeo and Juliet. Anita, Maria’s friend from the bridal shop where they both work, is both the Nurse-confidante figure and an age-mate for Maria; her love for Maria’s brother Bernardo, who replaces Tybalt as the victim of Tony/Romeo’s ill-advised but well-intentioned intervention, gives Anita a powerfully tragic as well as a wittily knowing voice. Chino, Maria’s hapless suitor, is a version of Juliet’s suitor Paris, but with, again, a great implication in the outcome, since it is Chino who kills Tony, precipitating the double tragedy. Riff, the lead of the Jets, is based in part on Mercutio – since his accidental death triggers the gang war – but Riff is from the first a partisan, not (as is the case with Mercutio) a kinsman of the Prince, and therefore a medial figure. The Friar Laurence of West Side Story is Doc, the owner of the drugstore where Tony works. Except for Doc, the clueless social worker Glad Hand, and Officers Krupke and Schrank, who represent all the repressiveness of a broken adult system, the entire cast is “young.”

Marjorie Garber, Shakespeare and Modern Culture, New York: Pantheon Books, 2008

I never appreciated how artful Arthur Laurens’ book was until the play went into rehearsal – how concise, how important, in particular, the language he was able to invent to remove it just enough from real street language so that it would be at one with Robbins’ dances.

Harold Prince, Sense of Occasion, New York: Applause, 2017

I loved playing Anita: she’s a mother image to Maria, protective of her, but also saucy and passionate, very much in love with Bernardo. We had a whole cast of young, excited dancers and all that energy in a room feeds off itself. “America” was tremendous fun to perform because of the tempo, the Latin rhythm. Stephen’s lyrics for that song are so biting and comical. I got letters from Puerto Rican people who had totally misunderstood it – they thought that I really meant it was an “ugly island” and didn’t realise that Anita was joking to make a point. They were highly emotional about it.

Chita Rivera, who played Anita in the original Broadway cast, quoted in “How we made West Side Story,” by Chris Wiegand, The Guardian, September 18, 2017
THE AUTHORS

LEONARD BERNSTEIN was born in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on August 25, 1918, to Ukrainian parents Jennie and Samuel Bernstein. He began piano lessons as a boy and studied music at Harvard University and Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music, as well as at the then newly created summer institute, Tanglewood, at the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Bernstein was appointed assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic in 1943 and gained almost instant worldwide fame when he was a last-minute conductor substitution for a Carnegie Hall concert on November 14, 1943.

Bernstein’s career is notable for its dual path in conducting and composition, and for his interest in classical as well as jazz, Latin and Broadway music. As a conductor, Bernstein frequently appeared on international stages, notably being the first American to conduct opera at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. He was a lifelong advocate for American composers, including Aaron Copland. Wearing his conducting hat, Bernstein is perhaps best known for holding the position of music director at the New York Philharmonic from 1958 to 1969 and for his “Young People’s Concerts” aired on CBS.

Among the highlights of his many classical compositions are Symphony No. 1 “Jeremiah” (1943); Prelude, Fugue and Riffs for solo clarinet and jazz ensemble (1949); Symphonic Dances from “West Side Story” (1960); Chichester Psalms (1965); and the operas Trouble in Tahiti (1952) and A Quiet Place (1983). He collaborated with choreographer Jerome Robbins on three major ballets: Fancy Free (1944) and Facsimile (1946) for the American Ballet Theater and Dybbuk (1975) for the New York City Ballet.
For the theater, Bernstein collaborated with Betty Comden and Adolph Green on the musicals *On the Town* (1944) and *Wonderful Town* (1953) and wrote the music for *Candide* (1956). The next year he collaborated with Robbins again, along with Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim, on *West Side Story*. In 1976, he and Alan Jay Lerner wrote *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue*. Bernstein received many honors during his illustrious career, including a Lifetime Achievement Grammy Award, 11 Emmy Awards, Tony Award, election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Kennedy Center Honors and many medals from various composer societies. In 1990, Bernstein received the Praemium Imperiale, an international prize awarded by the Japan Arts Association for lifetime achievement in the arts. Bernstein used the $100,000 prize to establish the Bernstein Education Through the Arts (BETA) Fund before his death on October 14, 1990.

Edited from the Leonard Bernstein at 100 biography at www.leonardbernstein.com

**ARTHUR LAURENTS** was born on July 14, 1917, in Brooklyn, New York, to Ada and Irving Levine. After graduating from Cornell University, he returned to New York to launch his career by writing radio plays. When he was drafted in 1941 to serve in World War II, he wrote training films and propaganda radio plays for the U.S. Army. After the war, he made his Broadway debut as an author with *Home of the Brave* (1945) and three years later collaborated with Jerome Robbins on the musical *Look Ma, I'm Dancin'* (1948).

In the late 1940s, Laurents also worked in Hollywood, where he wrote the Alfred Hitchcock-directed thriller *Rope* (1948) and the melodrama *Anna Lucasta* (1949) before being blacklisted during the McCarthy hearings for several years, though he wrote *Anastasia* starring Ingrid Bergman in 1956. Later in his career, he wrote the screenplays for *The Way We Were* (1973) and *The Turning Point* (1977).

But Laurents is best known for his work in the theater as a playwright and director. Among his plays are *The Bird Cage* (1950), *The Time of the Cuckoo* (1952), *A Clearing in the Woods* (1952) and *An Invitation to March* (1960), for which he also made his directorial debut and Stephen Sondheim wrote incidental music. He collaborated with Robbins again when he wrote the book for *West Side Story*, with music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by Sondheim. Two years later, he collaborated again with Robbins and Sondheim on the musical *Gypsy* (1959), with music by Jule Styne. He wrote the book for and directed the Sondheim musical *Anyone Can Whistle* in 1964, and the next year adapted his 1952 play *The Time of the Cuckoo* into the musical *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, with lyrics by Sondheim and music by Richard Rodgers. He won a Tony Award in 1968 for *Hallelujah, Baby!*, which won Best Musical, and returned to Broadway several more times with the original musicals *The Madwoman of Central Park West* (1979, book and director), *La Cage aux Folles* (1983), for which he won a Tony Award for his direction, and *Nick & Nora* (1991, book and director). He also directed *I Can Get It for You Wholesale* (1962) as well as revivals of *Gypsy* and *West Side Story* on Broadway when he was in his 90s. Laurents passed away on May 5, 2011.

Edited from a Turner Classic Movies biography

**JEROME ROBBINS** was born October 11, 1918, in Manhattan to Lena and Harry Rabinowitz. He began dancing in high school and, after studying chemistry for a year at New York University, launched his dance career. He broadened his study of dance to include ballet, among other styles, to build on his foundation in modern dance. As a member of American Ballet Theatre, Robbins danced a number of character roles and made his choreographic debut in 1944 with *Fancy Free*, followed by *Interplay* (1945) and *Facsimile* (1946).

He quickly turned his attention to Broadway, where he choreographed *On the Town* (1944), with music by Leonard Bernstein, *Billion Dollar Baby* (1945) and *High Button Shoes* (1947), before also taking on the mantle of co-director for the Arthur Guthrie Theater
Laurents musical *Look, Ma, I’m Dancin’* (1948). Other musicals that featured Robbins’ choreography included *Call Me Madam* (1950), *The King and I* (1951), *Peter Pan* (1954) and *Bells Are Ringing* (1956) before he collaborated with Bernstein, Laurents and Stephen Sondheim on *West Side Story* in 1957. Also on Broadway, he directed and choreographed *Gypsy* (1959), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964) and *Jerome Robbins’ Broadway* (1989), a musical revue celebrating Robbins’ work, as well as a 1963 production of Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* starring Anne Bancroft. Robbins also became a well-regarded show doctor, helping out or taking over for shows that weren’t quite working.

Parallel to his career in theater, he continued to choreograph for the New York City Ballet, where he was associate artistic director and created more than 50 ballets, for his own company Ballets U.S.A. and for American Ballet Theatre, among many others. He made a foray into opera in 1954 to direct Aaron Copland’s *The Tender Land*, and the next year he directed Mary Martin in a telecast of *Peter Pan*, for which he won an Emmy Award. When *West Side Story* was adapted for film, Robbins co-directed with Robert Wise and together they received the Academy Award for Best Direction.

Among Robbins’ additional honors are the Kennedy Center Honors, honorary membership in the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Handel Medallion of the City of New York, the National Medal of the Arts and five Tony Awards. Jerome Robbins passed away on July 29, 1998, just shy of his 80th birthday.

Edited from a New York City Ballet biography

---

**STEPHENV SONDHEIM**

was born on March 22, 1930, in Manhattan to Etta Janet “Foxy” and Herbert Sondheim, who worked in the fashion industry. His parents divorced when Sondheim was 10, and Foxy and Stephen moved to Pennsylvania, not far from a designer friend of Foxy – the wife of lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II. Sondheim befriended the Hammerstein’s son James and spent much of his time away from his mother and with the Hammersteins. Estranged from both his parents, Sondheim found a father figure in Hammerstein, who brought Sondheim with his family to see Broadway shows. Hammerstein became both a teacher and source of inspiration, providing invaluable, if harsh, criticism of Sondheim’s first show, *By George*, written when he was a teenager.

Another great influence on Sondheim was his first music teacher at Williams College, Robert Barrow, who taught him the logic behind music. Sondheim loved Barrow’s practical, dry approach to something he had once seen as “romantic.” During his first big break in 1957, Sondheim was asked to write the lyrics for a new musical reworking of *Romeo and Juliet*, which would become *West Side Story*. It was his artistic introduction to the Broadway stage. Sondheim worked alongside composer Leonard Bernstein to write the show’s lyrics despite their vastly different approaches.

A *Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1962) was the first show for which Sondheim wrote both music and lyrics. The musical won many Tony Awards, including Best Musical, but Sondheim’s score was not well received. This has been a recurring theme for many of Sondheim’s musicals: he’s received consistent criticism that his lyrics are too dark, his tunes are not “hummable” and the subject matter is “wrong” for a musical. Sondheim’s response to those who think his work inaccessible is that “what I write has to be listened to more than once.” His shows would often close after a short run with little profit gained, only to receive critical acclaim much later. Sondheim’s many awards include an Academy Award for Best Song (“Sooner or Later” from *Dick Tracy*), eight Grammys, eight Tonys and a Pulitzer Prize (*Sunday in the Park with George*, 1984), which are testament to his critical acclaim. His body of work includes *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964), *Company* (1970), *Follies* (1971), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981), *Into the Woods* (1987), *Passion* (1994) and *Road Show* (2008; formerly titled *Bounce*)

Edited from a biography written by former Guthrie literary intern Emily Gustafson
“I don’t remember the exact date – it was somewhere around 1949 – this friend of mine was offered the role of Romeo. He said to me, ‘This part seems very passive, would you tell me what you think I should do with it.’ So I asked myself, ‘If I were to play this, how would I make it come to life?’ I tried to imagine it in terms of today. That clicked in, and I said to myself, ‘There’s a wonderful idea here.’ So I wrote a very brief outline and started looking for a producer and collaborators who’d be interested. This was not easy. Producers were not at all interested in doing it. Arthur and Lenny were interested, but not in getting together to work on it at that time, so we put it away.” ...

“Arthur had the hardest job of anybody converting a Shakespeare play into musical theater of today. Lenny, Steve and I had nothing to put our work against. Arthur had that text by Mr. William S all the time. We could make our poetry out of the music, the dancing, the song lyrics, but Arthur had the burden of making his text go along with Romeo and Juliet and still communicate some of the poetry, the argot, the drives and passions of the 1950s, while trying to match, somehow, the style we were creating as we went along.” ...

“I don’t like to theorize about how or if the show changed future musicals. For me what was important about West Side Story was in our aspiration. I wanted to find out at that time how far we, as ‘long-haired artists,’ could go in bringing our crafts and talents to a musical. Why did we have to do it separately and elsewhere? Why did Lenny have to write an opera, Arthur a play, me a ballet? Why couldn’t we, in aspiration, try to bring our deepest talents together to the commercial theater in this work? That was the true gesture of the show.”

Jerome Robbins, quoted in Broadway Song & Story edited by Otis L. Guernsey, Jr., in a conversation moderated by Terrence McNally, Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986

“In the case of West Side, it wasn’t my idea at all; it was Jerome Robbins’ idea. And the timing turned out to be wrong, because when we started a project about Romeo and Juliet in the slums, the East Side was what we had in mind.”

Photo: The cast of West Side Story (T Charles Erickson)
- a story about kids fighting in the streets on the Lower East Side of New York. We took the story from Shakespeare to that setting. We – Jerry Robbins, Arthur Laurents and I – all got excited. This was 1949.”

Originally the plot was to center on a Jewish girl and a Catholic boy. “Arthur wrote a couple of scenes,” Bernstein says, “and we all began to see at a certain point that the show was dated. There was a faint odor of Abie’s Irish Rose. So we gave it up. Five years later, the right time came.” …

“I was at a Beverly Hills pool, with Arthur Laurents. I think I was in California scoring On the Waterfront. And we were talking ruefully about what a shame it was that the original West Side Story didn’t work out. Then, lying next to us on somebody’s abandoned chair was a newspaper with a big headline, ‘GANG FIGHTS.’ We stared at it and then at each other and realized that this – in New York – was it. The Puerto Rican thing had just begun to explode, and we called Jerry, and that’s the way East Side Story – as opposed to West Side Story – was born.”

Leonard Bernstein, quoted in Notes on Broadway: Conversations with the Great Songwriters by Al Kasha and Joel Hirschhorn, Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1985

“Every musical, like every play, begins with the word – no matter how much music it is set to or muffled by. We began with an outline I put on the table, giving us more to discuss than theory. I divided the play into two acts, detailing in each scene the characters, action and musical elements. The story line followed Shakespeare’s fairly closely, although I eliminated and changed to suit contemporary time and place, and to allow song and/or dance tell as much of the story as one or the other or both could.

The first change I made was early, in the opening scene, in fact: I threw out Rosaline. … Love at first sight for [Juliet] is her first love; I made it his as well. Jerry’s suggestion that each have a short, introductory scene before they meet added to the effectiveness of both roles but his staging of the meeting did more than any words could. It was theatre magic, a literally breathtaking example of why he was without peer in staging a musical. No one else could have or would have taken a murderous knife fight and an attempted gang rape and choreographed them so vividly and theatrically that the impact was emotionally devastating.

The parents of both lovers I also eliminated because the play no longer centered on a family feud but on a tribal feud: ethnic warfare between juvenile gangs. The impartial, civilized Duke who ruled the territory became the police who ruled the streets. Bigoted and brutal themselves, they encouraged and promoted bigotry and brutality among the kids they controlled. … West Side Story’s Prologue sets up a world of violence and prejudice in which the lovers try to survive. …

I made other changes: no potion for Maria (Juliet) to fake death with – Jerry’s suggestion she take a sleeping pill garnered three blank looks – and no suicide for her, either; this girl was too strong to kill herself for love. The change I was most proud of was the reason that prevents Tony (Romeo) from getting the message that Maria is alive. In Shakespeare, it’s a convenient plague; in West Side, it’s prejudice – the factor basic to the story and the theme. In England, that change was regarded as an improvement on Shakespeare. Hardly a reviewer failed to praise it; in this country, to my knowledge, not one reviewer noticed it.”


“When we worked together, Lenny would sketch out something that was purple prose not poetry. It screamed: ‘Look at me! I’m being poetic!’ I’d learned from Oscar Hammerstein, my mentor, that the whole point is to underwrite not overwrite because music is so rich an art itself. Poetry makes, generally, very poor lyrics unless you’re dealing with a certain kind of show. It’s too allusive, that’s not what you want. When Lenny failed, he failed big. He was always jumping off the top of the ladder. When you’re young, you want to take chances but you get discouraged by failure. I learned, as a composer, to be less square – that you don’t always have to write in four-bar phrases.

Jerome Robbins was a taskmaster, as choreographers are. He’s the only genius I’ve ever met but he was demanding and easily offended. You came out scarred, but you came out with good work.

There’s a lot of plot in West Side Story but its scenes are probably the shortest of any book musical that’s ever existed. Arthur packed so much into it. He also did something very smart. He said the trouble with street slang is that it dates. So he made up a lot of language and has the guys say things like ‘riga tiga tum tum.’ It’s a sort of Alice in
Wonderland language that doesn’t date. … The simplest songs, like Maria, were the hardest to write. ‘Gee, Officer Krupke’ was easier. I wanted to be the first guy to use a four-letter word in a musical. I did but the line became ‘krup you’ instead. The record couldn’t have been shipped over the state line if I’d used an obscenity.

We knew we were going to write a number about America for the Sharks and their girls. Lenny went on vacation to Puerto Rico and said: ‘I’ve been listening to this wonderful musical form called huapango.’ He played this very fast tune and I said, boy it’s going to be hard to shoehorn lyrics into that but I’ll try. It’s a very crowded lyric: some of it works and some of it doesn’t. I found out, years later, that he’d written the tune in his teens for an unproduced ballet called Conch Town. … Lenny had made up this entire story to make it seem more spontaneous, then just pulled out an old tune that he liked.”


“Casting [West Side Story] was a very tough problem because the actors had to be able to sing and dance and be taken for teenagers. Hah! Impossible! Everybody said we were crazy and to just forget it. Columbia Records didn’t want to invest in it or record it, so Steve Sondheim and I auditioned it like crazy, playing the piano four-hands and screaming it out, trying to convey quintet or all the contrapuntal things, those crazy fugues like the twelve-tone ‘Cool’ fugue. No one, we were told, was going to be able to sing augmented fourths – Ma-reee-aaaah – C to F#. Impossible! Also, they said, it was too rangy for pop music – Tonight, Tonight … it just went all over the place. Besides, who wanted to see a show where the first-act curtain comes down on two dead bodies lying on the stage? That’s Not A Broadway Musical Comedy.

So we were very much discouraged. And casting it was the ultimate problem: trying to find teenagers or people who looked like teenagers or who, with the aid of a hair piece and some good makeup, could pass for teenagers. So we settled on a mixture – some were actual teenagers, some were twenty-one years old, some were thirty but looked sixteen. Some of them were wonderful singers but couldn’t dance very well. Or there were great dancers who couldn’t sing very well … and if they could do both, they couldn’t act. We went through hell.”


“Many say West Side Story forever changed the American musical – a claim made these days by shows like Rent and Spring Awakening with no visible proof – because of its use of dance and music. To me, it used those elements better than they had ever been used before; but what it really changed, what its real contribution to American musical theatre was, was that it showed that any subject – murder, attempted rape, bigotry – could be the subject of a popular musical.”

Arthur Laurents, quoted in Mainly on Directing, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009
“Hey, I Got a Social Disease!”
Juvenile Delinquency in the 1950s
by Carla Steen
Production Dramaturg

Although young people misbehaving wasn’t anything new in the 1950s, the scope and scale of the problem of juvenile delinquency was. A marked rise in crime and violence among teenagers post-World War II proved to be a matter of grave concern and frequent discussion.

In the late 1950s alone – the time of West Side Story – Look and Life magazines, The New Yorker, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report and other news organizations had many and lengthy stories about the rise and increase of delinquency among teens and preteens, the crisis in the schools, police and governmental response to delinquency or the latest gang incident. These articles frequently speculated about or offered up suggestions for what the solution could be.

In March 1958, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Harrison E. Salisbury had a seven-part series in The New York Times about what he called the “Shook-Up” generation. “Shook-up in teen-age terminology means upset, disturbed,” he wrote. “The consequences of this shook-up condition constitute one of the principal social problems of our day.” Through his seven articles, Salisbury wrote about youth gangs, New York City schools, lack of housing and difficult home life – all of the problems that contributed to juvenile delinquency among this “Shook-Up” generation. Salisbury bookended his pieces with references to West Side Story, which was still running strong on Broadway.

Around the same time, stories of juvenile delinquency were also playing out on the silver screen, with movies like The Wild Bunch in 1953 and Rebel Without a Cause in 1955 setting the stage for later films like The Delinquents (1957) and High School Confidential (1958) about kids getting caught up in the wrong crowd or with local gangs and the rising use of alcohol and drugs, especially marijuana, among young people. The Delinquents, written and directed by Robert Altman, ended with a voiceover epilogue exhorting people to deal with the problem of delinquency:
“This is one story. Who’s to blame? The answers are not easy nor are they pleasant. We are all responsible. And it’s our responsibility not to look the other way. Violence and immorality like this must be controlled and channeled. Citizens everywhere must work against delinquency just as they work against cancer, cerebral palsy or any other crippling disease. For delinquency is a disease. But the remedies are available. Patience, compassion, understanding and respect for parental and civil authority. By working with your church group, with a youth organization in your town, by paying closer attention to the needs of your children, you can help prevent the recurrence of regrettable events just like the ones you have just witnessed. You can help halt this disease before it cripples our children. Before it cripples society.”

Part of New York City’s response to the growing problem of juvenile delinquency was to form a Youth Board in 1947, which was intended to coordinate the services to youth provided by public and private agencies. Two years later, the Youth Board created two of its own service programs – one for outreach to street gangs and another for services to families and children. In 1960, the Youth Board published a book titled Reaching the Fighting Gang based on the organization’s experience and outreach with gangs. Many of its descriptions of gang structure, membership, activity and behavior parallel those depicted in West Side Story. The Jets’ frustration pouring out in “Gee, Officer Krupke,” as they describe the ineffectual adults and structures of society that continually fail them, is strongly echoed in the words of the Youth Board:

“He reacts negatively to a community which shows its concern only when he or his group is in trouble and then acts repressively. The application by the community of the label of ‘delinquency’ or ‘gang’ crucially affects the self-definition or self-image of the member and the group. In many instances a feeling of self-rejection is projected onto the community and the boys talk about how ‘the world ain’t no good, the neighborhood ain’t no good and I am no good.’ … He both fears and dreads apprehension by the police and other law enforcement institutions, seeing these not in terms of their societal function, but only as they impinge upon him and the group. His rejection of adults and the community is characterized by a ‘no one cares for us’ attitude.”

GANG SLANG
(both real and made up by Laurents)

Crabbin’ Find fault with, criticize, peck at
Cracko Jacko “Cracko” is 20th-century slang for lunatic, insane, eccentric
Daddy-O Term of address between males
Dig Appreciate, enjoy, understand
Frabbajabba Nonsensical chatter; derived from “jabber”
Gassin’ Chattering, offering only hot air, talking inconsequentially
Hoodlums Street ruffians, thugs or gangsters
Jitterbug Participate in gang fighting; go into combat
Kick Stimulating or intoxicating effect
Mix Fight, brawl
Rumble Mass fight between rival gangs
Schmuck Fool, putz
Square Conventional, old-fashioned
Tea Drugs, especially marijuana
Tin-Horn Inferior, second-rate
Tomato Attractive woman
Turf Street(s) or block(s) that constitute a gang’s territory

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE LEGACY

Google Arts and Culture: West Side Story
Dive into the world of the iconic musical, with photos of the original Broadway production, teens and New York, a history of Manhattan’s West Side and links to many related online exhibits.

NPR Podcast: 50 Years of West Side Story
An hour-long documentary hosted by Scott Simon in three parts: Making a New Kind of Musical, Casting Calls and Out-of-Town Trials, Broadway to Hollywood and Beyond

Leonard Bernstein at 100
2018 marks Leonard Bernstein’s 100th birthday – an event so notable that it launched a global, two-year celebration with more than 2,000 events across six continents to honor the legendary composer.

EXPLORE MORE
LISTEN NOW
LEARN MORE
**ETHNIC MAKEUP OF GANGS**

“Most gangs follow the racial pattern of the residential area. The ‘integrated’ gang is not uncommon. Most include at least a sprinkling of an ethnic minority. Geography rather than race is the major determinant in membership and conflict.”


**“FAIR FIGHT”**

“The fights themselves may vary from a clean fight where the boys will limit themselves to boxing and sparring, to a knock-down, drag-out fight with both members calling upon all their knowledge of street fighting, which includes kicking, gouging and biting. If other members of the respective gangs are present, and a decision has been either verbally or non-verbally communicated that this is a ‘fair one’ restricted to the two participants, they will not involve themselves. They will cheer, razz, encourage, make fun of the participants and generally act as any audience watching a fight.

Each group zealously watches the other group to make sure that there is no intercession on behalf of its own member. There is always the possibility that a boy watching the fight will become anxious or carried away and in some way help his own group member or try to hinder the rival. This then becomes an explosive situation.”

New York City Youth Board, *Reaching the Fighting Gang*, 1960

**FIGHTING**

“Many provocations for gang fighting occur on Friday evenings, even though the fighting itself may not develop then. This is the period of time in which they come together at dances, games, parties and outings. This is the time many youths receive their weekly allowances and get paid. Disputes about girls, money, manners, courtesy and recognition cause conflict, but these, however, seldom result in homicide on Friday evenings. Usually this comes as the result of retaliation after the Friday evening fracas. As regards time of day, most rumbles occur sometime between 5 and 9 or 10 p.m. It is seldom that a full-fledged gang warfare occurs outside of these times.”

New York City Youth Board, *Reaching the Fighting Gang*, 1960

**GANG MEMBERSHIP**

“There are between 80 and 100 juvenile gangs that fight one another in the streets of New York. Yet, there is no such thing as a typical street gang. The gangs vary greatly in size, composition, dress, protocol, choice of weapons and degree of criminality. One of the few things they have in common, besides pushing delinquency statistics to new heights and constituting a top civic worry, is that they are all – even the most murderous – founded on friendship.”


**HOMICIDE**

“Two boys suspected of wielding the weapons in two playground slayings here early Sunday were held without bail on homicide charges yesterday. The magistrate sitting in the case demanded ‘more drastic action’ in the handling of juvenile delinquency. During the day, as renewed complaints against ‘coddling’ of young offenders were heard in various part of the city, the police seized another youth as the thirteenth member of the playground invaders.”

JACKETS
“These [leather] jackets can be bought on Orchard Street for about fifteen dollars. The cloth jackets cost a few dollars more; they are usually made to order, in special colors and with legends on the back, for clubs, baseball teams and the like, and they appear to be a mainstay of the gangs to which Puerto Rican and other slum boys belong. ... A jacket fills such needs [of solidarity] symbolically, and it is often a burning question, for priests and social workers as well as for a boy himself, whether he will get a jacket for sports or for gang activities.”

Christopher Rand, *The New Yorker*, November 30, 1957

SWITCH-BLADE KNIVES
“With juvenile crime and mayhem on the increase, as registered by local and state police and FBI statistics, it is high time that something was done about the present interstate traffic in switchblade knives. The lethal weapons play a key role in an appalling number of youth crimes. ... [T]he switch-blade is the favorite weapon of juveniles who commit assaults with intent to rob and a large percentage of robberies are committed by juveniles. In New York in 1956, there was an alarming increase of those arrested for the possession of dangerous weapons, which frequently included switchblade knives.”

*Saturday Evening Post*, July 12, 1958

TURF
“The best way to understand the teen-age gang and to comprehend its significance is to visit one on its own “turf” – the streets or blocks that constitute its demesne. The use of this medieval term for possessing an estate is not accidental; Richard the Lion Hearted would recognize many gang concepts. ... The prime occupation of the Cobras is ‘minding our turf.’ Their turf or demesne is precisely defined. They know the exact lines and so do their traditional enemies the Rovers, as well as the Apaches, another enemy group that lives not far away. This is the world of the Cobras and the Rovers. Of what happens beyond the radius of these few blocks they know little and care less. Many have never been more than a mile away from home.”


ZIP GUNS
“Teen-age terror on the grand scale came to the United States in 1943, after hours in a vocational training school in the Harlem section of New York City. That was the year an unsung genius invented the zip gun. Using one of the school lathes, this genius took a piece of metal tubing intended as insulation for the wiring inside an electric-lamp stand and fashioned it into a gun barrel that could fire a single pointed pellet propelled by heavy, tightly twisted rubber bands. It was inaccurate much beyond 10 feet, but it could kill.”

Puerto Rico at a Glance

GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE
Puerto Rico [“rich port”] is about 40 miles wide north-south and about 110 miles long east-west, with the Cordillera mountains running the length of the island and separating areas of coastal plains. To its west are the rest of the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica and Hispaniola), and to its east and south are the Lesser Antilles (including U.S. Virgin Islands, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago). The island is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the north and the Caribbean Sea to the south. The island has about 45 mostly non-navigable rivers.

Most of the rain falls on the north (Atlantic) side, so the humid, tropical north can include lush green vegetation and colorful flora while the dry, tropical south is browner with more desert-like vegetation. Temperatures range from 70 to 88 degrees, and it can rain throughout the year though mostly between May and December; hurricane season is August through October.

Most of its animal life are birds, snakes, lizards and frogs. There aren’t any large wild mammals.

From 1900 to 1917, the island was run by an independent civilian government (heavily influenced by the U.S. federal government) and was subject to U.S. federal laws but exempt from federal taxes. In 1917, Congress granted U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans and the island got a locally elected House and Senate, though other positions were still appointed by the U.S. The number of Puerto Rican immigrants to New York increased with citizenship but didn’t really take off until the 1930s, when the island suffered from economic distress during the Great Depression and due to U.S. government neglect.

In 1946, President Truman appointed the first Puerto Rican governor of the island (Jesús T. Piñero); the next year Congress allowed Puerto Rico to elect its own governor, and in 1949 Luis Muñoz-Marín was elected. In 1950, Truman signed the Puerto Rico Commonwealth Bill, and the next year Puerto Ricans held a referendum vote and approved commonwealth status. The island’s new constitution took effect on July 25, 1952, which made it self-governing with an elected governor, a legislative branch and a new judicial branch. The U.N. no longer considered it a colony. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 codified a number of existing laws and included a section stating that all people born after April 11, 1899, are citizens of the U.S.

POPULATION AND LANGUAGES
Between 1900 and 1950, the population almost doubled from one to two million people, making it one of the most overcrowded places in the world. (As of 2017, 3.4 million live on the island, which has held fairly steady since 1990.)

Spanish and English are both official languages, though Spanish is predominant. Today’s Puerto Ricans are descended from Taino and Carib Native Americans, Africans and Spanish colonists. The island’s original inhabitants were the Arawak people who called the island Borinquén. Roman Catholicism is the major religion.

A BRIEF HISTORY
Puerto Rico was colonized in 1493 by Spain (Christopher Columbus and Ponce de Leon) and remained affiliated with Spain until the Spanish-American War in 1898 forced Spain to relinquish its hold on Cuba (to eventual independence) and Puerto Rico. The Treaty of Paris in 1899 officially made Puerto Rico a U.S. possession. The beginnings of Puerto Rican migration to New York date to 1898.

GOVERNMENT
As a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico is mostly self-governing but has a close relationship with the federal government. Its citizens born in
Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens (but Puerto Ricans are not represented in the electoral college, so they can’t vote in presidential elections unless they have established residency in one of the 50 states). The constitution adopted in 1952 created an elected bicameral legislature, an executive branch headed by the governor and a judicial branch, with a supreme court of seven justices.

The legislature consists of 27 senators (11 at-large) and 51 representatives (11 at-large) elected to four-year terms, as is the governor. The size of the legislature can vary because one-third of the seats must be filled by members of the minority parties based on the proportion of votes in the previous election; the legislature can be expanded to guarantee one-third are minority held. Three political parties are most prominent: Popular Democratic Party, which favors the commonwealth status; New Progressive Party, which favors statehood; and Independence Party, which favors self-rule.

The U.S. handles all foreign relations, defense, postal service and customs regarding Puerto Rico.

**ECONOMY**

Agriculture has been an economic engine for the island for generations, with fertile soil producing sugar, coffee, pineapples and other fruits and vegetables, though only about one-third of the land is tillable and most of the island’s food is imported. Since the 1940s, industry and manufacturing (food processing, oil refinery and machinery manufacturing, among others) have increased, as U.S. corporations take advantage of tax exemptions. Tourism is also important. The U.S. is Puerto Rico’s largest trading partner. Most travel to the island is via the air, while transportation within the island is on roads by car, bus or truck (no long-distance trains).

**TIMELINE OF PUERTO RICAN MIGRATION TO NEW YORK CITY**

1898: The first Puerto Ricans move to New York after 1898, settling primarily in three spots: one in Brooklyn and two in East Harlem.

1900: The Foraker Act establishes a civilian government for Puerto Rico. It also put all federal U.S. laws into effect in Puerto Rico, though it is exempt from federal taxes.

1917: Responding to demand by Puerto Ricans for more local control, Congress passes the Jones Act, which gives Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, creates a bill of rights and establishes a locally elected House of Representatives and Senate. The number of Puerto Ricans settling in New York increases after citizenship is given, though it doesn’t hit significant numbers until the 1930s.

1942–1945: U.S. military sets up garrisons on Puerto Rico as part of the defense of the Panama Canal, and a large naval base is built as a destination for the British fleet if it should have to flee Britain. About 60,000 Puerto Ricans serve in the military during World War II. 13,000 Puerto Ricans enter New York in 1945. The number almost triples the next year. When direct flights to New York are established after the war’s end, five- to six-hour flights replace a four-day trip by sea, with tickets dropping from $85 ($740 today) to $35 ($300 today).

1950: Public Law 600 authorizes Puerto Rico to draft its own constitution, and President Truman signs the Puerto Rico Commonwealth Bill. 70% of Puerto Ricans in New York worked in the three lowest-paying job sections (garment industry, service and light manufacturing). The number was the same in 1960.

1953: Annual migration from the island reaches 75,000.

1957: The estimated population of Puerto Ricans living in New York is 550,000 (out of 7.7 million total) – about 7% of the city’s population. Most had arrived – by birth or immigration – during the last 10 years. In Puerto Rico, 15% of the workforce is unemployed, with another 15% only employed part-time.

**People, Places and Things in the Musical**

**ATOMIC RAY GUN**
A (fictional) weapon that fires particle beam energy, most closely associated with Buck Rogers, a comic book character created in 1928. Rogers is a 29-year-old World War I veteran who gets trapped in a coal mine cave-in, exposing him to radioactive gas. It puts him into a state of suspended animation for the next 492 years. Rip Van Winkle-like, he wakes up in the year 2419, where he finds America in the midst of another war and uses his World War I experience to join in the fight.

**BUICK**
An American car company that incorporated in 1903 and in 1908 surpassed Ford and Cadillac to be the number one producer of automobiles. Buick's owner, William Durant, formed General Motors (GM) in 1908 with Charles Stewart Mott. GM acquired Oldsmobile and Cadillac, among others, within the next two years. The Buick line produced “premium” cars – below Cadillac in luxury but above the mainstream brands. In 1953, it introduced the Roadmaster Skylark Convertible as its 50th anniversary car, with a base price of $5,000 ($45,000 today).

**CADILLAC**
The leading luxury car company in the U.S. founded in 1902 and bought in 1909 by the newly formed General Motors (GM). Cadillac developed and maintained a reputation for innovation, introducing the first electric self-starter in 1912, the V-8 engine in 1915, the curved glass windshield after World War II and power steering and automatic windshield washers as standard equipment in 1954. The Eldorado Brougham was conceived as the company’s dream car for GM’s Motorama in 1955. The 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham was the third generation of the Eldorado and the most luxurious of Cadillac’s luxury cars. It had standard quad headlights, air suspension, unique trim, compact low-slung chassis, suicide doors, power seats, cruise control, front and rear speakers, brushed stainless steel roof, 15-inch forged aluminum wheels, automatic trunk opener, electric door locks and sold for the remarkable sum of $13,074 ($114,000 today) – more than the 1957 Rolls Royce and double the price of other Cadillac Eldorados. Also standard on the Eldorado Brougham, perhaps to Bernardo and Chino’s delight, were air conditioning and magnetic whisky glasses. Alas, no telephone or television.

**CHA CHA CHA**
A popular ballroom dance of the 1950s derived by Cuban composer Enrique Jorrin from the Mambo and Danzón. It was introduced to the U.S. in 1954 and was almost immediately popular, in part because it was less syncopated than the Mambo so a little easier to dance. It remains one of the most popular Latin dances and gets its name from the dance steps – two slow steps and three quick ones: one-two-three-four-and-one-two-three-cha-cha-cha-two-three-etc. (Also just called the “Cha Cha.”)

**DTs**
Delirium tremens – delirium that may accompany the withdrawal of severe alcohol dependency. It may consist of whole-body trembling, hallucinations, disorientation and seizures.

**LIEUTENANT**
A supervisory position overseeing the day-to-day business of a bureau, watch, squad or unit. Duties include evaluating the work of officers, implementing orders from higher-ups, coordinating crime scenes and directing the processing of arrested suspects and lockup. It also involves a lot of paperwork. Schrank would have passed two promotional exams to become a sergeant and then a lieutenant. Manhattan currently has 21 precincts. The West Side (between 50th and 86th streets) is the 20th precinct. The size of the NYPD in 1957 was just below 24,000 officers, though the then-police commissioner repeatedly appealed to have it increased to 28,000.

**MAMBO**
An up-tempo dance music that originated in Cuba in the 1930s and was made popular by bandleader Perez Prado. The dance took off in Mexico City and New York City and was enormously popular by 1950.

**“MY COUNTRY ’TIS OF THEE”**
A patriotic song also known as “America.” The tune’s origin is obscure, but it was published in England by 1744 and became as popular as “God Save the King” by the next year. By the 1790s, the
tune was also used as the national anthem for a half-dozen other countries, including Denmark. After U.S. independence, the tune was set to new lyrics for George Washington, and it became one of several versions set to the tune. The lyrics we know today were written by Rev. Samuel Francis Smith in 1831.

MARIJUANA
Drug from the leaves of the cannabis plant, which has been in use as a drug since ancient times. The International Opium Convention of 1925 put the international trade of marijuana under its control. By 1949, 67 countries – including the U.S. – were covered by the drug treaty. By the 1950s, the head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics, Harry J. Anslinger, was suggesting that marijuana was a gateway drug to heroin usage, which was on the rise among teens. He pushed for tougher drug laws, and Congress obliged by passing the Narcotic Control Act in 1956, which essentially labeled marijuana a narcotic like heroin.

MISS AMERICA
The Miss America Pageant launched in 1927 as a tourist attraction for Atlantic City, N.J. Until 1959, contestants often represented cities – not the 50 states. College scholarships were awarded beginning in 1945, and the pageant was broadcast nationally beginning in 1954. The 1957 Miss America (crowned in September) was Marian McKnight.

MORNING STAR
A bright planet (could be Venus, Mercury, Mars or Jupiter) that is visible in the east just before sunrise.

OFFICER
Krupke is identified as a sergeant in “Gee, Officer Krupke.” A sergeant is a supervisory position responsible for patrol officers on the operational level, administrative duties like writing reports and implementing orders from higher-ups. Krupke would have passed a promotional exam to make the rank of sergeant.

SETTLEMENT HOUSE
A neighborhood or community-based organization that offers classes in English language learning, job training, early childhood education, after-school programming, legal counsel and more depending on the needs of a specific neighborhood. The first settlement house in the U.S. was established in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in 1886. Until the mid-20th century, staff of settlement houses lived in the same buildings where they provided services and activities to the neighborhood. The Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center opened in the West Side in 1947.

SUPERMAN
The Superman character was created by Jerome Siegel and Joe Shuster of Cleveland, Ohio, and debuted in Action Comics in spring 1938. In June 1939, a monthly comic titled “Superman” also began publication, so Superman appeared in two different comics in 1957. Superman is the premier icon of the Golden Age of comics, which lasted to the mid-1950s. The Superman described as “Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky. It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!” was introduced on the radio show “The Adventures of Superman” that ran from 1940 to 1951. In 1952, “The Adventures of Superman” debuted on television as a half hour program, starring George Reeves as Superman. It was filmed and broadcast in black-and-white until 1954 and shot in color from 1955 to 1958 (though shown in black-and-white).
On May 15, 2018, the cast and creative team for West Side Story came together for the first day of rehearsal. Director Joseph Haj and his team described their visions for the musical and the rehearsal process, and their comments have been transcribed and edited on the following pages.

Most of us know West Side Story from the iconic film that opened in 1961 and won 10 Academy Awards including best picture, but the stage musical predates the film by four years. It opened on Broadway on September 26, 1957, and ran for more than 700 performances. It was nominated for a Tony Award for best musical but it lost to The Music Man. And it’s important to note this because it marks a shift in trajectory in the American musical. Some of the themes in West Side Story examining bigotry, race and rape were thought to be inappropriate for a musical.

When I think of West Side Story, I think of a community that is fractured, of dreams and ambitions, of immigrant tensions, of my own family’s journey. I think of what it means to be American. West Side Story is such a timely production for our current moment with its exploration of the immigrant experience, its yearning and all of its humanity and heart.

I want to read something to you from a couple of reports sent to City Hall in New York City by observers commenting on a district with a solidly immigrant population: “The tenants seem to wholly disregard personal cleanliness, and the very first principles of decency, their general appearance and actions corresponding with their wretched abodes. This indifference to personal and domiciliary cleanliness is doubtless acquired from a long familiarity with the loathsome surroundings, wholly at variance with all moral or social improvements.”

A second report about immigrants in New York City reads “clustering in our city, unacquainted with our climate, without employment, without friends, not speaking our language, certain of nothing but hardship and a grave.” Those two reports weren’t filed about New
York’s Puerto Rican population in the 1950s; the first was filed in 1864 about a district with a solid Irish population, and the second from even earlier in 1827 at a time when 95 percent of New York City immigrants were from European countries – Irish, German, English, Polish – long before heavier waves of immigration came from elsewhere.

So while most productions of West Side Story underline a white vs. Puerto Rican narrative, our production seeks to examine the question a bit more broadly. Most gangs in New York City in the 1950s, our research teaches us, were ethnically diverse. The question of turf was a much stronger leader than a question of race or cultural background. All of the Jets come from a background where their own families were once, and perhaps in some cases still are, embattled and loathed as immigrants. They’ve become assimilated and now localize their fears and their rage on the most recent immigrant community, the Puerto Ricans.

West Side Story is for me very much a story of our fear of the new immigrant, who will take away our jobs, our opportunities, of the new arrivals who are thought to be dangerous, unclean, immoral, indecent. And the play is stunningly aligned to the architecture of Romeo and Juliet – it’s a love story and a tragic one. Tony and Maria can no more survive the brutality of their world than Romeo and Juliet can theirs. West Side Story describes our fear and our intolerance. The very first page of the script in the stage directions describes that the Sharks are Puerto Rican and that the Jets are “an anthology of what is called ‘American.’” I don’t think it’s intended to be a homogenous group; I think it’s intended to be a plural one. And we’ve taken that as our guide as we’ve selected our astonishing acting company for a major revival of this play.

West Side Story began in 1949 when Jerome Robbins took his idea of a contemporary, New York City-set Romeo and Juliet to Arthur Laurents and Leonard Bernstein. It was to be set on the Lower East Side during Easter and Passover with Juliet and the Capulets as Jewish and Romeo and the Montagues as Catholic. It was tentatively titled East Side Story. And they worked long distance, Laurents in Hollywood and Robbins and Bernstein in New York. They wrote an outline, maybe a couple of scenes. But the creators stalled, and they didn’t move ahead with the idea until years later in 1955. Laurents and Bernstein both found themselves in Hollywood, and the idea of a musical of Romeo and Juliet came up again, as did the recent phenomenon of juvenile gang warfare, prompted by headlines in that morning’s paper. As the conversation continued into themes of immigrant experience, shared resentment, passion and anger, it became clear that the potential was there and work began anew. The setting was moved from the Lower East Side to the Upper West Side, the title became West Side Story and the rest became the history which is now a legacy.

Photos: Marc Koeck (Tony) and Mia Pinero (Maria); The cast of West Side Story (T Charles Erickson)
From the Creative Team:
Choreographer Maija García

When I let people know that I’m charged with making original choreography for *West Side Story*, there are two responses. The first is, “Oh, that’s wonderful. How exciting!” And I nod with a few doses of humility. And the other response is, “Wow. Is that daunting?” A few people have even asked me, “That choreography is so iconic. How are you going to outdo Jerome Robbins?”

I’m just going to put it out there now that I have no intention of outdoing Jerome Robbins. I have the utmost respect and reverence for his work, not only as a choreographer but as a storyteller, as the one who conceived of this play, who saw the need for this play and who gathered with other genius composers and writers to put this together.

I love that Joe [director Joseph Haj] highlighted this idea of the Jets as an anthology of what it means to be American because I think that this piece really does challenge us to investigate and deconstruct what it means to be American. What is this human condition of “othering” that we struggle with, and why do we establish deep divides between us and them? Why do the Sharks and the Jets have such contempt and animosity toward each other, and what is it that they find in their gangs, in their groups, in their familial affiliations that gives them a sense of belonging? How do they feel empowered in their gangs, and how do we as humans, in our search to define ourselves, have the capacity for such inhumane violence?

*West Side Story* really holds all that up and asks us to take a look at who we are. It’s been said when you re-read a classic, you don’t find out more about the classic, you find out more about yourself. That’s true about *West Side Story*, and it’s going to require all of us to bring our greatest talents to the work and bring a real vulnerability to our process. We have our work cut out for us, that’s for sure. I’m not intending to outdo Jerome Robbins, but I do intend to outdo anything I’ve ever done.
I’m exceedingly happy to be doing this musical during the centenary of Leonard Bernstein. I could talk for about three and a half hours about Bernstein and this score ... so get a drink of water.

Bernstein was a classical star in 1951. He’d come to prominence in his 20s after guest conducting the New York Philharmonic in an emergency situation, which made him an overnight sensation. He had been hugely popular in the Phil and tonier New York music circles. He also, however, had a side where he liked “the jazz music” and musical theater. And this was not always terribly well-looked upon by people who know about these things. He had written two musicals already by 1951 – Wonderful Town, which is a straight-ahead musical comedy based on My Sister Eileen – and On the Town, based on a ballet called Fancy Free, which he scored for Jerome Robbins.

Bernstein was really trying to skirt these two halves of his life and wanted with West Side to begin to make this musical theater form into something that could bridge the classical and musical theater worlds, much the same way Verdi did with opera. And Joe is right when he says that these themes in the 1950s of violence, rape and murder were not typical musical comedy themes; they were, however, operatic themes.

They worked for six years on this score and in the course of it, he was also writing Candide, another musical, that maybe didn’t do so well, but was directed by Tyrone Guthrie, and Chichester Psalms, a classical piece. If you know Chichester Psalms, the second movement, both the 23rd Psalm theme and the violent men’s chorus theme, were written for West Side Story and cut. There’s a lot of music that goes back and forth between West Side and Candide and Chichester Psalms and a few other classical pieces of Bernstein’s.

Also, early in his life he was a student and great friend of Aaron Copland. Copland did a great deal of work and research in Latin America – he just loved the music. In fact, the first piece of music Bernstein had published was “El Salon Mexico,” a piano transcription of Aaron Copland’s symphonic piece, and so all through both of their careers, there was a fascination with Latin music. And it was terribly well-researched. This score is not a pastiche of the let’s-write-something-that-sounds-like-we-kind-of-think-Latin-music-is-like variety. It’s very much a Pan-Latin score, with themes from Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, all through the Caribbean – all these musics exist in West Side as does as a healthy dose of “the jazz music.” These two musical forms create a violent tension between the Sharks’ world and the Jets’ world, and it creates a tension and a momentum that is not only propelling the story but creates something that is uniquely American, and I can’t wait to bring it all to you.
Some of the visual cues that came up in our conversations over these past months had to do with the words “combustibility,” “unforgiving space” and “oppression.” And thinking about the neglected corners of New York City, we realized that this is a brutal and violent world where love for a moment breaks through. Those were the beginning ideas for the environment we would be placing this play in.

As Joe mentioned, the sense of immigration and what it means to be new in this country came up a lot in discussing the play, as did the symbol of what that represents in this country – the Statue of Liberty. So there is the shadow of Liberty present on the floor during the production. The actual statue itself will be in our pre-set and possibly come back in the second act. The newest immigrants in the story are the most threatened, but the Sharks will eventually become the Jets. The hope of liberation is part of what this play is about, and that’s represented in Tony and Maria and the idea that their love, just like someone entering this country, can find a sense of freedom to do as they please. Liberty has become a north star for us, a symbol really, that somewhere there is a place for all of us.

Against this idea, we wanted to create a space that felt dark and foreboding and also oppressive. Part of our process is to go through what is needed in each scene – to look at what’s actually happening in terms of action and try to discover the most efficient and minimal way to express that. The result is that we have a world divided on the ground, with tension between asphalt and clean, slick lines that represent the grid of the city.

Above the action is a canopy that oppresses the space. It’s also made up of the grid lines, and there are LED lights in the structure that will add energy when we get to those moments of musicality and performance. We also have glowing orbs that will be out in the house and flying in for the musical numbers. Our lighting designer will hopefully have a fun time because they’re changeable in terms of color and movement.

There are two towers, one in the back and on the left, which track and twist. One represents a building and one represents Doc’s drugstore. We have things that fly in or come up out of the ground to give us that sense of location. There’s a star drop, and we’ve got a moon box for those moments where the romance can break through. On the back wall, there’s a post and fence and the orchestra is right behind that, so they’re always present on stage.
When the team started talking about *West Side Story*, the big question came up of whether to modernize it or keep it in period. And it was important to us to keep it in period. The lens of the 1950s is really important because if this happened now, they’d have cell phones and everything would be different!

But we’re putting a little twist in the clothes so it does feel a bit modern in fit and in movement. We’ve taken the looks of hair and makeup and done little modernization so that to our modern eye, it’s not feeling nostalgic. Sometimes clothes from the 1950s feel more adult than what teenagers wear now. Pictures of the gangs from the time show that they’re in suits and vests as they’re walking down the street, and it feels different to us than what we think of as gangs. And the youth of this story are very important to represent in the clothes, because they’re our light in this oppressive world.

Maria, who’s new to this world, is a light of hope, so we started her in pink. For Maria’s dress for the dance at the gym, I think Anita’s actually trying to help her a little bit. We wanted her to feel open and youthful and having all of this hope for her future, especially in this oppressive world that they’re in. Something else that was really important to us is that so often, at the end, Maria is thrown into some black or red dress to go find Tony, but Joe and I didn’t think that fit her state of mind. So we decided to put her in pants and some sneakers; she throws her hair up and runs out the door. It feels more urgent.

The Sharks’ colors are the warm colors – they’re the reds, the oranges, the yellows, the pinks – and the Jets stay in the cool colors. The Jets’ song is “Cool,” so it is a little bit obvious, but it’s helpful to us when we’ve got 35 people on stage to be able to see who’s on which team.

Our Jets are living in a little bit of a rockabilly world, just to give us a modern feel to this period stuff. It borrows from the ‘40s and ‘50s; some of their clothes are a little bit worn – they’re not rich guys, so they’ve maybe pulled things from their family’s closets and reworked them so that they’ve got some modern feeling to them, but it’s not actually a brand-new garment. They’re in jeans and khakis and work pants and there’s a laziness and entitlement to their attire. They’ve been here and they feel like they should own this place. We’re using modern pants because they can move much better than vintage clothing. The Jets are also in tank tops with lots of skin showing – and tattoos. Things that can bring us into the now, but also speak to the 1950s.

What’s important about the Sharks is that they look like they have an ease in the heat that the Jets do not have, so their clothes might look to our eye to be a bit dressier, but they’re very comfortable in the heat and they look a little bit slicker. They are called the Sharks, after all.

And finally, what’s important to us about Anybodys is that she’s trying to be one of the guys. Joe said Leah [who plays Anybodys] came to the audition in a great look, so that’s where we started. There are a lot of research images of women in these gangs in jeans and a little tomboy-looking. It was important to us to keep her as close to the guys as possible.
For Further Reading and Understanding

BOOKS

Broadway Song and Story: Playwrights/Lyricists/Composers Discuss Their Hits, edited by Otis L. Guernsey Jr., New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1986


Mainly on Directing: Gypsy, West Side Story, and Other Musicals by Arthur Laurents, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009

The Making of West Side Story by Keith Garebian, Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1998


There’s a Place for Us: The Musical Theatre Works of Leonard Bernstein by Helen Smith, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011


ONLINE

Google Arts and Culture: West Side Story
Dive into the world of the iconic musical, with photos of the original Broadway production, teens and New York, a history of Manhattan’s West Side and links to many related online exhibits. https://artsandculture.google.com/project/west-side-story

Google Arts and Culture: Somewhere still: The Legacies of West Side Story

New York City Fighting Gangs: Teenage “Jitterbugging” Gangs from 1950–1959
Created and maintained by David J. Van Pelt as a pet project for his research into gangs of the 1950s. Includes images, articles and interviews. http://newyorkcitygangs.com/

PODCASTS/RADIO

Hidden Brain Episode: “The Huddled Masses and the Myth of America”

NPR: 50 Years of West Side Story
**Shakespeare Unlimited, Episode 80: “Leonard Bernstein and West Side Story”**
About 30 minutes with a Bernstein biographer and archivist produced by Folger Shakespeare Library, August 22, 2017.
https://www.folger.edu/shakespeare-unlimited/west-side-story-leonard-bernstein

**FILMS**

**The Wild One**
Directed by Laslo Benedek. Written by John Paxton. Johnny leads a biker gang that invades a small town in California and falls for local good-girl Kathie. Starring Marlon Brando, Mary Murphy, Robert Keith and Lee Marvin. 79 minutes. 1953.

**The Delinquents**
Written and directed by Robert Altman. Scotty gets involved in the wrong crowd, putting him and his girlfriend Janice in danger. Starring Tommy Laughlin, Peter Miller, Helen Hawley and Dick Bakalyan. 72 minutes. 1957.

**12 Angry Men**

**High School Confidential**

**West Side Story**

**The Warriors**
Directed by Walter Hill. Written by David Shaber and Walter Hill. The Warriors are falsely accused of killing a charismatic gang leader and, in order to get home to Coney Island, have to fight every other gang in New York City. 93 minutes. 1979.