“West Side Story” (Original cast recording) (1957)

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Original “West Side Story” cast members at recording session
(from left: Elizabeth Taylor, Carmen Gutierrez, Marilyn Cooper, Carol Lawrence)

“West Side Story” is among the best and most important of Broadway musicals. It was both a culmination of the Rodgers and Hammerstein integrated musical, bringing together music, dance, language and design in service of a powerful narrative, and an arrow pointing toward the future, creating new possibilities for what a musical can be and how it can work. Its cast recording preserves its score and the original performances.

“West Side Story’s” journey to theater immortality was not easy. The show’s origins came in the late 1940s when director/choreographer Jerome Robbins, composer Leonard Bernstein, and playwright Arthur Laurents imagined an updated retelling of “Romeo and Juliet,” with the star-crossed lovers thwarted by their contentious Catholic and Jewish families. After some work, the men decided that such a musical would evoke “Abie’s Irish Rose” more than Shakespeare and so they set the project aside. A few years later, however, Bernstein and Laurents were struck by news reports of gang violence in New York and, with Robbins, reconceived the piece as a story of two lovers set against Caucasian and Puerto Rican gang warfare.

The musical’s “Prologue” establishes the rivalry between the Jets, a gang of white teens, children mostly of immigrant parents and claimants of a block of turf on New York City’s west side, and the Sharks, a gang of Puerto Rican teens, recently come to the city and, as the play begins, finally numerous enough to challenge the Jets’ dominion. The idea of turf ownership is important to the gangs because both are the targets of a societal ideological effort to control them by labeling them and containing them in specific class-, race- and ethnicity-based boxes. They form gangs in order to create a sense of connection and to claim some control over their turf, a minuscule bit of control in a society in which they are otherwise controlled. This idea is illustrated in “Jet Song,” which begins as a celebration of the community a gang offers, then transitions into a belligerent statement of their superiority and the lines that have been drawn to mark the clear distinction between those who are in the gang and those who are not, Us and Other. In establishing and defending such boundaries through language and violence, the gangs

unconsciously replicate the ideological processes that have been directed at them by the larger society.

The gangs enact their ideology through the practice of cool, a philosophy that encourages the repression of anger, frustration, love, kindness—any kind of emotion that might leave one vulnerable to the larger social world, the local adult world (Doc, Glad Hand, Schrank, Krupke), or the other gang. As one of the characters notes, the gang members allow their feelings to come out only when they dance or fight. This philosophy is demonstrated just before the act one war council in "Cool," in which Riff, the Jets' leader, lectures the gang on the importance of hiding their feelings and then leads them in a wild dance that releases their emotions and allows them to recompose themselves just before the arrival of the Sharks.

It is in this context of control and cool that the love story of Tony and Maria develops. Tony is cofounder of the Jets and Riff's best friend, but recently he has grown away from the gang, taking a job at Doc's drug store, which he sees as a step in maturity but which some of his old friends see as selling out to the socially-dominant economy. Maria is the sister of Bernardo, the leader of the Sharks, only recently joining him in New York. She has looked forward to an exciting life in America but is frustrated by the short social leash her brother keeps her on and an apparently prearranged engagement to the dutiful and dull Chino, another Shark. Tony's and Maria's eyes meet across a crowded dance floor at the gym, and they fall in love at first sight. In so doing, they violate both the ideology of control and the philosophy of cool. First, their love affair penetrates the boundary that separates insiders and outsiders, the boundary that is so important in establishing and maintaining group identity and territorial control. Second, far from hiding their emotions, they are so obviously in love that almost everyone who sees them guesses the nature of their relationship. The musical asks if such a love, so in conflict with its immediate social context, can survive.

After Tony fails to stop the rumble, Bernardo kills Riff, and Tony in revenge kills Bernardo, Tony and Maria, in the "Somewhere" ballet, try to imagine a place they can be together without prejudice and hate. However, even in their fantasy the pastoral setting, free of the city streets, walls, and fire escapes, where the gang members can interact joyfully and lovingly, is sadly temporary. The idyll is interrupted by the figures of Riff and Bernardo, the knife fight and deaths are reenacted, the city walls come crashing back in, and the lovers' dream is shattered. Nevertheless, they plan to run away together, naively hoping they can find a place they can live free of the social forces that make their love so difficult. Tragically, when Maria enlists Anita, her best friend and Bernardo's lover, to take Tony a message, she is intercepted, then verbally and physically abused by the Jets. Having been ready to cross group boundaries for Maria's sake but now firmly back on her own side of the line, Anita spits out a false message: that Chino has killed Maria. In despair, Tony wanders through the gangs' contested territory, sees Maria, alive after all, coming to meet him, but is shot by Chino before he can embrace her. In her grief, Maria first threatens the gang members with Chino's gun, but then, after a final good-bye to Tony, she brings Jets and Sharks together to bear away his body. As the orchestra plays "Somewhere," the cast reenacts the procession from the dream ballet, suggesting, at least for a moment, reconciliation, understanding, and love.

In bringing "West Side Story" to Broadway, the creators faced a number of challenges, two of them especially significant. First, although Bernstein had originally intended to write his own lyrics, owing to various outside pressures (his simultaneously writing the score for "Candide," his busy conducting schedule, and his impending appointment as music director of the New York Philharmonic), he decided he needed a co-lyricist. His longtime songwriting partners Betty Comden and Adolph Green were committed to a project at MGM. Laurents suggested a young composer-lyricist whose lyrics for an aborted Broadway musical, "Saturday Night," he had admired. Stephen Sondheim and Bernstein hit it off immediately, but Sondheim was hesitant about accepting the job; he didn't want to do lyrics only. His mentor, Oscar Hammerstein II, urged him to do the show for the experience of working with such accomplished collaborators, and so he took on the assignment, but, to his frustration, he was consequently labeled a "lyrics first" writer for many years.

Second, the creators had a difficult time finding a producer willing to risk money on a musical with two dead bodies on stage at the end of the first act and another one at the end of act two. They were turned down by just about every major Broadway producer, including George Abbott and Rodgers and Hammerstein, until Cheryl Crawford and her partner Roger L. Stevens took the show on. At the 11th hour, however, Crawford, having decided the material wasn't ready to go into rehearsal, dropped the project; Stevens remained committed, but he was a fundraiser, not a managing producer. Just as it seemed the project would go back into the authors' trunks, Sondheim's friend Harold Prince and his partner Robert E. Griffith, agreed to produce it, as soon as they brought their new show, "New Girl in Town," from the road to New York.

After an unprecedented eight-week rehearsal period, "West Side Story" played pre-Broadway engagements in Washington and Philadelphia. There was comparatively little rewriting on the road, but there was one major development in the show's billing: Bernstein, feeling that Sondheim and his contributions were not being sufficiently appreciated, gave him sole lyric writing credit in what Laurents called "the most magnanimous act I ever heard of in the theatre before or since." The musical opened at the Winter Garden Theater on 26 September 1957 to generally favorable reviews and ran for 732 performances, it went on a national tour, and then returned to Broadway for an additional 249 performances.

Bernstein's score, uncommonly sophisticated for its time and even for today, draws on Latin rhythms and styles in such numbers as "America" and "The Dance at the Gym" and on jazz styles in the "Prologue" and "Cool." Much of the score is held together by a tritone motif that is introduced at the very beginning of the "Prologue," where it is associated with the Jets, and is developed through "Cool," "Maria," and "Somewhere." Although Sondheim never tires of disparaging the show's lyrics, they do an excellent job of expressing the anger, frustration, yearning, and aspirations of modestly educated teenagers, and they integrate well with the discourse Laurents created for the characters' dialogue. Bernstein, Sid Ramin, and Irwin Kostal are credited with the astonishing orchestrations, but Ramin and Kostal did virtually all the writing, while Bernstein supervised. The score produced a number of songs that achieved popularity outside of the show, including "Maria," "Somewhere," "Tonight," and "I Feel Pretty."

"West Side Story" was recorded by Columbia on 29 September 1957, three days after the opening, in a session that lasted from 10:00 A.M. to 1:00 A.M. Production of the record began

the next day, and it was in stores by 7 October. (A stereo version was released the next year.) The album was produced by the legendary Goddard Lieberson, and the orchestra (augmented from 31 players to 37) was conducted by musical director Max Goberman. Among the performers were Larry Kert (Tony), Carol Lawrence (Maria), Chita Rivera (Anita), Mickey Calin, who later changed his name to Michael Callan (Riff), Ken Le Roy (Bernardo), future Tony Award-winner Marilyn Cooper (Rosalia), future director-choreographer Grover Dale (Snowboy), and future "Annie" lyricist and director Martin Charnin (Big Deal). All of the songs and most of Bernstein's dance music were recorded. Major deletions included the "Blues," "Promenade," "Meeting Scene," and "Jump" sections of "The Dance at the Gym"; the dialogue and underscoring in the central section of "The Balcony Scene" ("Tonight"); and the "Taunting Scene." Following his usual practice, Lieberson sped up the tempo of the dances so as to convey the excitement they generated in performance. The most significant change was the addition of a finale that is not performed in the show; at the end of the recording, the cast sings "Somewhere," recalling the dream ballet and suggesting for the listener the coming together of the gangs indicated on the stage by the procession.

Over the last 60 years, "West Side Story" has been produced all over the world, from leading opera houses to local high schools. An Academy Award-winning film version, directed by Robbins and Robert Wise, was released in 1961 and produced an enormously successful soundtrack recording. The play was revived on Broadway in 1981, directed by Robbins, and in 2009, directed by Laurents. The latter production enlisted Lin-Manuel Miranda to translate some of the Sharks' lyrics into Spanish. At this writing, another revival, directed by Ivo van Hove, is scheduled for early 2020. Van Hove is reportedly presenting the play without an intermission, cutting "I Feel Pretty" and the "Somewhere" ballet. A new film version, directed by Steven Spielberg, is also scheduled for release in 2020. In 1984, Bernstein conducted a studio recording of the score with Kiri Te Kanawa as Maria and José Carreras as Tony. Other recordings include the Leicester Haymarket Theater cast (1993), the Tennessee Repertory Theater/Nashville Symphony cast (2001), and the 2009 Broadway revival. Whatever their virtues, none of these recordings replace the achievement of the original cast recording, which remains required listening for all students of the Broadway musical.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.