



Left, Chita Rivera high-steps in the original, 1957 Broadway production of *West Side Story*; right, Robert Preston struts in the 1962 film version of *The Music Man*.

THEATER AND FILM

Clash of the Titans

In 1958, two Broadway hits, *West Side Story* and *The Music Man*, had a fateful showdown, and only one came out on top. This year, we are finally getting a rematch



BY JOHN MAUCERI

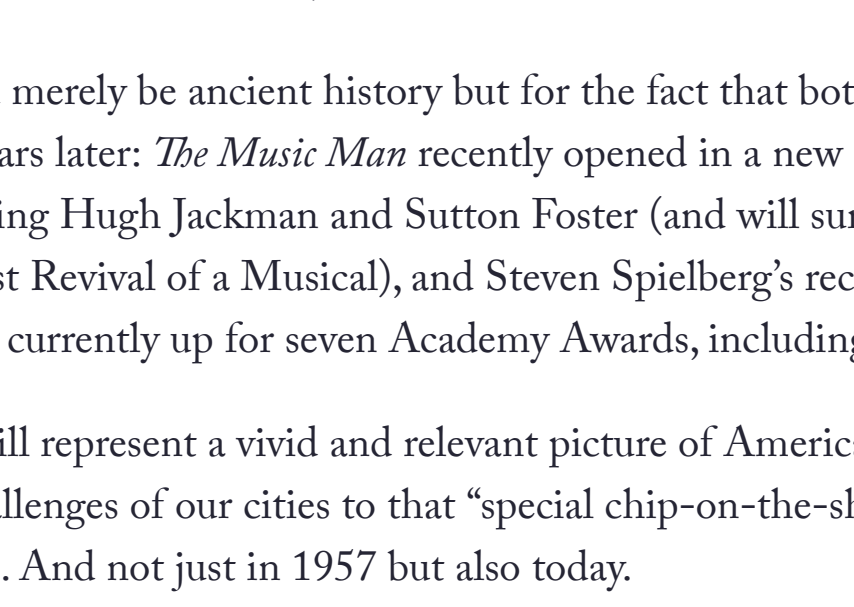
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READING TIME: 5 MINUTES

Leonard and Felicia Bernstein entered the glittering Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria on Sunday evening, April 13, 1958, with high expectations. It was his time, after all. He had inaugurated a new concert hall in Tel Aviv; he was in the middle of his first season as music-director designate of the New York Philharmonic; his first Young People's Concerts were a smash on national television; and on this night his fourth Broadway musical, *West Side Story*, was up for six Tony awards, including the big one: Best Musical.

"And the winner is ... *The Music Man*!"

The sting of this loss never subsided. "I never win awards," he said to me 20 years after that night. (The fact that his former piano teacher Helen Coates kept an entire room full of Bernstein's awards was irrelevant.) But as someone who saw both original productions, the decision was the right one. *The Music Man* was the better show.



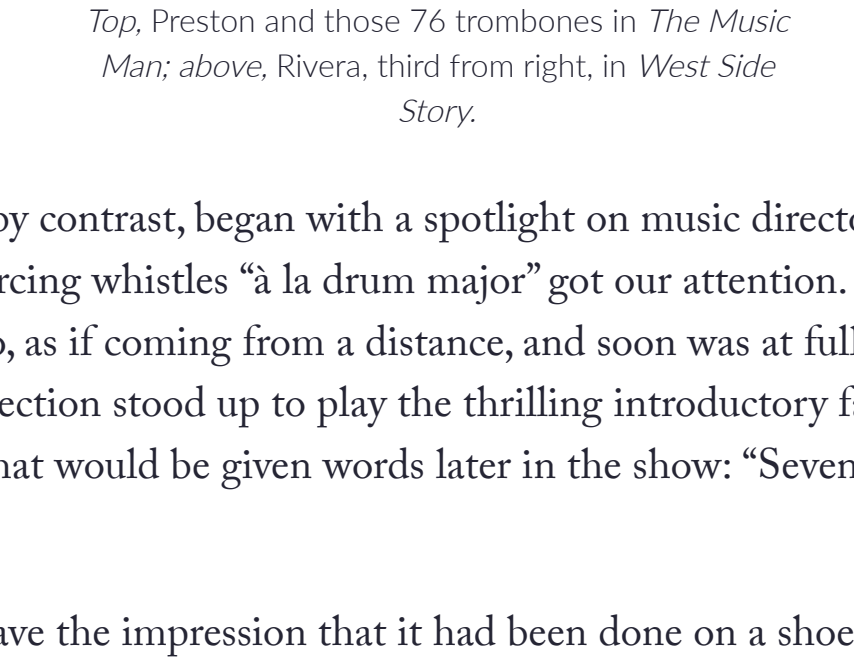
Hugh Jackman as Harold Hill in this year's Broadway revival of *The Music Man*.

All of this would merely be ancient history but for the fact that both shows are very much alive 64 years later: *The Music Man* recently opened in a new Broadway production, starring Hugh Jackman and Sutton Foster (and will surely be nominated for a Tony as Best Revival of a Musical), and Steven Spielberg's recently released *West Side Story* is currently up for seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture.

Together, they still represent a vivid and relevant picture of America—from the multicultural challenges of our cities to that "special chip-on-the-shoulder attitude" of our rural areas. And not just in 1957 but also today.

West Side Story had no overture. The houselights at the Winter Garden Theatre slowly went down, and as our eyes adjusted to the dark, a single streetlamp came up in silence to reveal six teenage toughs in front of a chain-link fence, one of whom was smoking.

Dressed in blue jeans and T-shirts, they shifted their positions, one at a time and precisely synchronized to the orchestra, which gave sound to their wordless boredom and simmering rage.



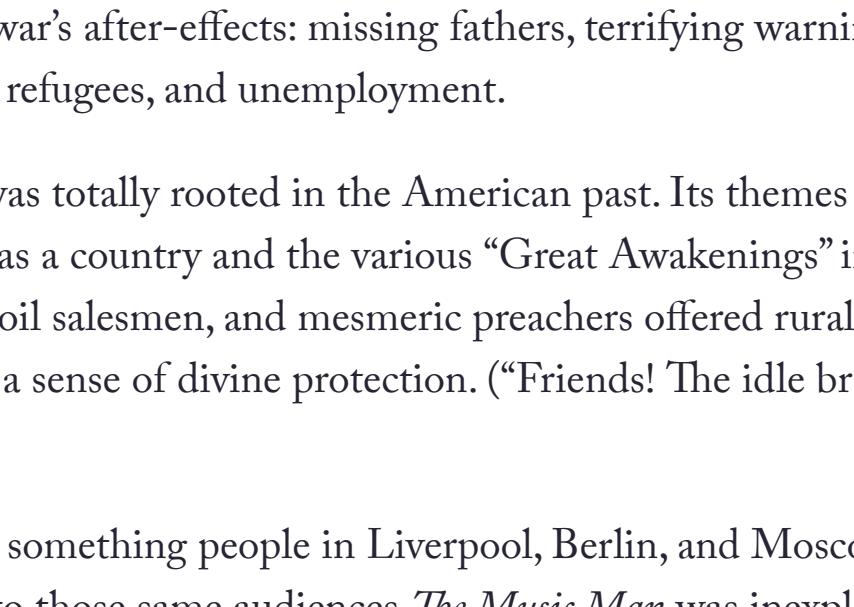
Top, Preston and those 76 trombones in *The Music Man*; above, Rivera, third from right, in *West Side Story*.

The Music Man, by contrast, began with a spotlight on music director Herbert Greene. Two piercing whistles "à la drum major" got our attention. A snare drum began pianissimo, as if coming from a distance, and soon was at full volume. Then the entire brass section stood up to play the thrilling introductory fanfare, which led into the march that would be given words later in the show: "Seventy-Six Trombones."

West Side Story gave the impression that it had been done on a shoestring budget. Director and choreographer Jerome Robbins needed empty space for dancing and had not yet mastered the art form he was envisioning. Thus, scenic designer Oliver Smith created "wagons"—large set pieces on wheels—that were pushed in from the left or right for much of the drama, reserving the empty stage for the big numbers, such as "Mambo" and "The Rumble."

The Music Man, on the other hand, was an ever morphing kaleidoscope of old-fashioned stage magic, giving the impression that we were seeing it in 1912, when it takes place. The sets moved this way and that, with foliage on semi-transparent scrims painted in beautiful colors to frame the stage.

West Side Story felt like it was trying to do too much: Larry Kert was a lovely performer and an empathetic Tony, but he came to grief with "Maria," which was just too high and operatic for him. *The Music Man* aimed lower, perhaps, but achieved its goals in a seamless and technically perfect production. That's why it won.



George Chakiris and Rita Moreno, with Rock Hudson, after both won Oscars at the 1962 Academy Awards for their roles in *West Side Story*.

The story, however, does not end there. A movie musical of *West Side Story* in 1961 changed everything, whereas the 1962 movie of *The Music Man* merely preserved what had been on Broadway a few years before.

West Side Story represented a contemporary global phenomenon of angry, violent teenagers who had been born during World War II and were, in the 1950s, confronting the war's after-effects: missing fathers, terrifying warnings of nuclear war, traumatized refugees, and unemployment.

The Music Man was totally rooted in the American past. Its themes can be traced to our first century as a country and the various "Great Awakenings" in which revival meetings, snake-oil salesmen, and mesmeric preachers offered rural America hope, moral order, and a sense of divine protection. ("Friends! The idle brain is the devil's playground!")

West Side Story is something people in Liverpool, Berlin, and Moscow could understand, but to those same audiences *The Music Man* was inexplicably alien.

Still, seeing *The Music Man* in 2022 reminded me just how astonishing it is. The play, the story, and the music were all composed by one man, Meredith Willson, while *West Side Story* was the result of a four argumentative and gifted men. We think of Lenny as the more "serious" musician, but Willson played flute in Toscanini's New York Philharmonic, and if you think he wrote simple ditties, listen to his score for William Wyler's 1941 *The Little Foxes*, which was nominated for an Oscar.



David Alvarez, center, in Steven Spielberg's 2021 remake of *West Side Story*.

Bernstein found his music from film noir's urban musical landscape, the music of Miklós Rózsa (*The Naked City*), Franz Waxman (*Crime in the Streets*), Leonard Rosenman (*Rebel Without a Cause*), and himself (*On the Waterfront*). To this he added reminiscences of Beethoven, Blitzstein, Wagner, and, above all, the toxic masculinity of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* ("Somewhere").

Spielberg and screenwriter Tony Kushner have kept Bernstein intact—complete with the glorious symphonic orchestrations of Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal. They have kept the dramatic arc of Arthur Laurents's play but removed its humor and its language. No more Dead End Kids. No more placeholders for profanity ("Cut the frabberjabber"). Instead, it fills out backgrounds, explains history to those who did not live in the 1950s, and sharpens the Jets' rage by evoking racist replacement theory. With all the adjustments, major and minor, it remains both new and true.

Fear of losing what we feel we own is as timely today as it was when *West Side Story*'s plot was ripped from the headlines of 1957. We still have gangs. We still have smug and ignorant communities looking to have their worst fears confirmed. The warnings of both *The Music Man* and *West Side Story* remain apt. One does it with a laugh, the other through tears. Miraculously, they both have won something beyond Tonys and Oscars. They have won a permanent place as classic masterpieces of the American musical theater. @

John Mauceri is the winner of a Tony, a Grammy, an Olivier, and three Emmys. His latest book, [The War on Music: Reclaiming the Twentieth Century](#), is available from Yale University Press

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