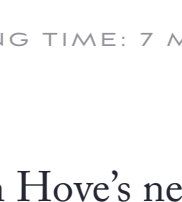


Carol Lawrence and Larry Kert in the original Broadway production of *West Side Story*.

THEATER

Something's Coming

The *West Side Story* story is a complicated one, and the new Broadway production has a lot of history to reckon with



BY JOHN MAUCERI

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For more than six months, Ivo van Hove's new *West Side Story* production has commanded a constant presence in New York print ads. The television commercial features the iconic theme of the Jets played on a solo piano with excerpts from 63 years of glowing reviews, thereby linking them to the new production (which is in previews and opens on February 20). Whatever excitement, and ticket sales, this has engendered was recently tempered by rumors and then a press release: it's down to one act, "I Feel Pretty" has been cut, and so has the "Somewhere" ballet. There is, in some circles, a palpable feeling of dread that simultaneously accompanies a general curiosity and a sense of expectation. Something's coming, all right. Will it click or merely shock?

First of all, we might ask: What is *West Side Story*? Or better: What was it in 1957, when it opened on Broadway? Most people know it from the 1961 movie that began with a thrilling overture, and had an intermission after the love song "Maria," rather than after the rumble. In 1957 the audience walked up the aisle having just seen two dead bodies left alone onstage as a single xylophone repeated a high E-flat and a distant church bell rang nine times.

Left in a dramatic place not experienced in a Broadway musical since the original 1943 production of *Oklahoma!*, which ended Act I with a dream of the hero being strangled and the heroine being carried off to be raped, the audience in 1957 had 15 minutes to think about teenagers murdering each other before returning to its seats. And as soon as it did, it heard, with sublime dramatic irony, a happy song, "I Feel Pretty," sung by girls who had no idea that their lovers were bleeding somewhere in the dark and that two of them were dead.

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The 1961 movie reordered songs, changed lyrics, replaced its small Broadway orchestra with an enormous symphony orchestra, and, like the 2009 Broadway production directed by Arthur Laurents (and van Hove's new one), cut the "Somewhere" ballet, which the choreographer Jerome Robbins saw as the dramatic climax of the musical drama. (In order to deal with the immense challenges of directing and choreographing the show, Robbins hired Peter Gennaro to create some of the dances, principally in "Mambo" and "America.")

The last time Broadway saw *West Side Story* as it was intended was in 1980, when its original creators were all alive and actively participating in its casting and preparations. However, an overture was added because, as Leonard Bernstein said to me, "the producers insisted on it."

By then, *West Side Story* had become a celebrated work with hit songs. In 1957 it felt as if there were no songs—just as there were no dance steps, and not a single wasted word. Its greatness was its totality, made all the more extraordinary when one thinks of who was in the room making it happen. As Bernstein wrote in his log on August 20, 1957, "I guess what made it come out right is that we really *collaborated*; we were all writing the *same* show. Even the producers were after the same goals we had in mind." *West Side Story* evolved in the minds and passionate conversations of Robbins, Bernstein, and Laurents. To this, we add the then-little-known Stephen Sondheim.

A Lurch, a Body Shift, a Turned Head

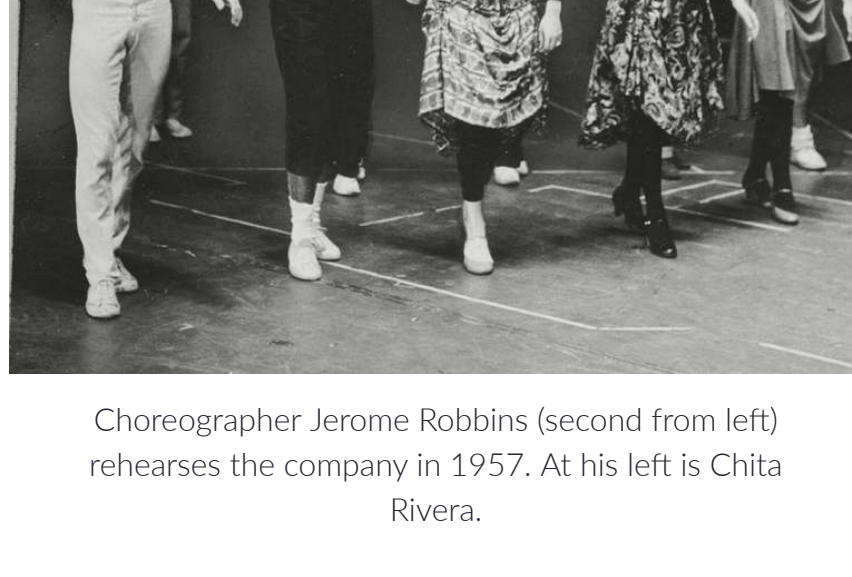
I was 12 years old when I saw *West Side Story* at the matinee of February 8, 1958. Sitting in the middle of the orchestra of the Winter Garden Theatre, I did not know what to expect. The house lights went out; there was no overture, just silence. When the lights came on, we saw six juvenile delinquents wearing blue jeans and sneakers, one of whom was smoking. A lurch, a body shift, a turned head—all were synchronized to short fragments of music. The silence that followed accompanied momentary stillness. (When Laurents brought his version to Broadway in 2009, not only was there the 1980 overture, played before a bright red curtain—and announcements about cell phones and "Please welcome the conductor and the *West Side Story* orchestra," which cued general applause—but Laurents destroyed the relationship of music and movement that was the essential building block of the work. In his version, the boys moved *in the silence*, not with the music.)

Brooks Atkinson understood the original miraculous achievement in his *New York Times* review of September 27, 1957: "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 Mr. Laurents is inhibited from saying because the characters are so inarticulate."

Wounded, Angry Young People

And that is an important point. The dance expresses what these young people cannot say. Laurents made up a spoken language that stands for real street talk. If this show were written today, it would be filled with profanities. Instead, Laurents and Sondheim invented words like "frabberjabber" and used phrases like "On the whole ever mother lovin' street," or "You bet your sweet A I do." "Krupp you!" has only one meaning, and yet the creativity of the replacement words allows everyone, no matter your age or sensitivities, to enter into its world and empathize with the plight of these wounded and angry young people.

Laurent's other brilliant move was to leave *Romeo and Juliet* behind after the deaths of Tybalt and Mercutio and let his new play develop in contemporary urban terms. No magic sleeping potions. Also, no Catholic priest to stand in for Friar Laurence, much as Karl Malden's character, Father Barry, did in *On the Waterfront*. The twists and surprises in Act II took my breath away in 1958, as they do today.



Choreographer Jerome Robbins (second from left) rehearses the company in 1957. At his left is Chita Rivera.

There seemed to be no consensus from the original creative team as to who did what and who lost which argument. Bernstein had lost many of them, as recounted in his letters to his wife, Felicia, on July 26, 1957: "All aspects of the score I like best—the 'big,' poetic parts—get criticized as 'operatic'—and there's a concerted move to chuck them. What's the use? ... *This is the last show I do.* The Philharmonic board approved the contract yesterday, and all is set. I'm going to be a conductor after all."

Rita Moreno told me that none of the original creative team (except Robbins) attended the filming, and Bernstein hated the sentimentality injected into the hugely successful movie. (Maria's heartbreaking final speech is underscored by strings in the film version. In the play, the orchestra is silent until Maria's lips leave Tony's, and a mere wisp of "Somewhere" accompanies the impromptu funeral procession that leads the cast off to an ambiguous somewhere.)

Today, only the 89-year-old Sondheim remains of the original creative team, and he has approved the textual changes in the new production. That alone should make this an event that will create even more Broadway buzz. Is this "his" version? Some say it is, even as the other rights owners have agreed to give van Hove permission to explore *West Side Story* and make whatever changes he and producers Scott Rudin, Barry Diller, and David Geffen deem appropriate. That said, Sondheim has been open about his feelings toward hearing "I Feel Pretty," which he finds embarrassing. Apparently, he won't be hearing it this time around.

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The idea of gang violence is, sadly, still very much alive—sectarian and factional behavior violates the news, everywhere. Gangs are still based on a common identity. There is no better warning than *West Side Story*. The show conquered the world—Vienna, Moscow, London—and proved to be a political weapon during the Cold War, one that earned the West the admiration of young people living under totalitarian regimes, because of its honesty. It made blue jeans a form of international currency, as any tourist from the West who visited the Soviet Union knew.

Music and theater require interpretation in order to exist. That is a given. Like all great works of musical theater, *West Side Story* needs to be played again and again. One of the unique challenges in disturbing its extraordinary balances, however, is that all its elements were created together: the music with its movements, the lean orchestral colors within each moment in the unfolding drama, the rhythms of its spoken words with the timing of scenes, the overall dramatic arc with the pacing of the audience's receipt of its storytelling.

West Side Story is about to return with its music changed, its choreography replaced, its spoken text adapted, and all of its elements edited to accommodate the vision of an important director. Its original balance of all-male scenes and all-female scenes, juxtaposed with three full-company scenes, will be compromised.

An Eternal Masterpiece?

It will, however, attempt to tell the same story, since it is called *West Side Story*. Controversies about revivals vs. "revisals" will abound. A new production of *West Side Story* is different from a "radical, thrilling new interpretation," as its Web site proclaims. The 1957 production was hardly perfect and need not be replicated, and we can argue that *West Side Story* was radical and thrilling in 1957, just as Wagner's *Ring* was in 1876. Does that invite us to reinterpret it—and therefore be true to its essence—by presenting it each time in a radical new way, or do we accept that it is no longer radical but has become something greater: an eternal masterpiece? How do we best love it and translate it as the decades pass?

The answer is not simple. The important thing is that this work of musical theater is alive and inspiring artists such as Ivo van Hove and Stephen Spielberg—who just completed location shooting for "his" *West Side Story*. Ultimately, we hope each return challenges us as it elevates us, warning us as it entertains us, and that we are better for having experienced it. That is our hope for any production of *West Side Story*. That is why we sit in the dark to experience it again and again. ☺

John Mauceri is a conductor, writer, and educator whose most recent book is For the Love of Music

Photos: Photofest; AP/Shutterstock; David Dietz (Mauceri)