

# Introduction

## Scope and Sources

'*West Side Story* is the best score ever written for musical theatre and still sounds ahead of its time.' So declared Stephen Schwartz in 2008.<sup>1</sup> This book sets out to explore a Broadway show that is often seen as a turning point in the history of musicals. In particular, it aims to consider aspects of the musical score in detail, but I should confess from the outset that this results in a title that is misleading: *West Side Story* is not 'by' Leonard Bernstein, but is the result of a collaboration by a remarkable creative quartet each of whom deserves equal credit for the work. My study cannot do them all justice, but the contribution of Jerome Robbins, Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim is of the greatest significance: without Robbins the show would never have existed at all, nor would Bernstein have had the opportunity to compose so much instrumental music for the extended dances; Arthur Laurents devised one of the most concise and least dated books for any Broadway musical – one that also served as a direct inspiration for several of the songs; and Stephen Sondheim – on the point of becoming Broadway's most innovative and exciting musical voice, but already a lyric writer of genius – made his Broadway debut with lyrics that only he has ever found it necessary to criticize. Like almost every musical, *West Side Story* was very much a joint venture, and the combination of talents in this case was especially successful; other vital contributions included those of the design team: Oliver Smith's strikingly evocative sets, Jean Rosenthal's lighting and Irene Sharaff's costumes. Moreover, as can be seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the collaborative nature of the project made a direct mark on the score: Bernstein's music gained greatly in impact and focus thanks to the theatrical instincts of his three colleagues. I am all too conscious that their contribution may seem undervalued in this book, with its emphasis on just one aspect of the show.

After a brief survey of Bernstein's work in the theatre up to 1957 (Chapter 1), the collaborative creative process of *West Side Story* – spanning nearly a decade – is considered in detail in Chapter 2, drawing on archival evidence, while Chapter 3 is devoted to a detailed discussion of the musical manuscripts. Chapter 4 examines aspects of Bernstein's musical language, first in broad terms (genre, the role of the orchestra, stylistic fingerprints), and then with reference to individual musical numbers. The way in which the show was financed is examined alongside a

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<sup>1</sup> Schwartz 2008. Schwartz (b. 1948) has written the music and lyrics for several shows, including *Godspell*, *Pippin* and *Wicked*. He worked with Bernstein on the libretto for *Mass* (1971).

consideration of the critical reception of *West Side Story* in Chapter 5, and the book concludes with an account of the original Broadway cast recording, a copy of which is also included on the accompanying compact disc.

I have laid particular emphasis on the genesis of *West Side Story*, especially its music, book and lyrics. A substantial part of this monograph is the result of a study of the magnificent collection of primary source material in the Leonard Bernstein Collection in the Music Division of the Library of Congress. The vast majority of the manuscripts, letters and drafts referred to in the book are to be found in this collection, which is by far the most important source for anyone researching Bernstein's music. Appendix I is a list of the musical manuscripts for *West Side Story* in the Leonard Bernstein Collection, referred to in the text by the abbreviation LBC. A heavily annotated copy of the earliest surviving full orchestral score for the complete show (1957 FS) is to be found in the Sid Ramin Papers in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Columbia University. The Ramin full score, and the reminiscences of both the show's orchestrators (Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal), make it possible to discuss the orchestration of *West Side Story* in some detail – an essential aspect of the musical character of a Broadway show that is often overlooked. The Ramin papers also include the full orchestral score of Ramin and Kostal's completely reorchestrated film version of *West Side Story*, but this lies outside the scope of the present study.

Since *West Side Story* was written for the commercial theatre, the wrangling over producers, the subsequent raising of the necessary finance to capitalize the show, and the economics of a Broadway run are also examined. This is possible thanks to another collection in the Music Division of the Library of Congress, the papers of the theatrical producer Roger L. Stevens.

The printed scores of *West Side Story* are noted in the Bibliography. The Sid Ramin papers include several of the separately printed piano-vocal scores used during rehearsals (1957 RS); these provide fascinating evidence for the state of the music and lyrics between Bernstein and Sondheim's manuscripts and the first public performances. Schirmer and Chappell published the first complete piano-vocal score in 1959 (1959 VS), but a definitive edition, revised and completely re-engraved, was issued by Boosey & Hawkes in 2000 (2000 VS). The 1994 Boosey & Hawkes edition of the full score (1994 FS) is a valuable source, and it has the unusual status of being one of the first orchestral scores of a Broadway show ever to be available for sale. For the libretto, references are to the first edition (Random House; 1958 LIB).

Anyone writing about Bernstein owes an enormous debt to Humphrey Burton's *Leonard Bernstein* (1994), a biography that is as scrupulous as it is entertaining and which contains a wealth of information not to be found elsewhere. Other sources that have been particularly valuable for my research include Craig Zadan's *Sondheim & Co.* (1974), Deborah Jowitt's *Jerome Robbins: His Life, his Theater, his Dance* (2004), Stephen Banfield's *Sondheim's Broadway Musicals* (1993), the memoirs of Arthur Laurents and Carol Lawrence, and the perceptive and provocative musical

commentaries on the work by Joseph P. Swain and Geoffrey Block. All four creators of *West Side Story* participated in a Dramatists Guild Landmark Symposium in 1985, providing much valuable first-hand information about the show's origins and genesis.<sup>2</sup> Invaluable groundwork on primary sources was published in Paul R. Laird's *Leonard Bernstein: A Guide to Research* (2002). Other literature is listed in the Bibliography.

Particular attention has also been paid to more ephemeral writings on *West Side Story*, especially newspaper articles from the time when the show was new. These reveal much about reactions to the work during its tryouts in Washington and Philadelphia, as well as the opening on Broadway; they also include interviews and features that are helpful in plotting the show's genesis – the Broadway gossip-column of the *New York Times* was clearly given much of what it reported about the show by one member or another of the creative team.

### ***West Side Story* since 1960**

There are some important aspects of *West Side Story* that I have chosen to place outside the scope of this book. Most conspicuous among these is the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*. Without doubt, this played a large part in the work's wider appreciation, as well as being showered in Oscars, including Best Picture. But my main concern has been to look at the processes involved in creating the stage show, as well as examining the score as it was composed for Broadway, rather than its later movie adaptation. In a 2007 radio broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR), Arthur Laurents voiced the opinion that the film was fundamentally flawed:

The movie, I thought, and still think, was appalling. Film is either realistic or surreal. And a musical, to succeed, needs illusion. *West Side Story* begins, and you see all these boys, with dyed hair and color-coordinated sneakers, doing tour jetés down a New York street. Not in this life. And then, when the so-called Puerto Ricans came on, made up to look like day-glo characters for some caricature of what they think Hispanics are – it was really disgraceful.<sup>3</sup>

In the same broadcast, Frank Rich was not quite so critical, but clearly felt that some of the immediacy of the original had been softened, its impact blunted. He described the film as 'very clean, and it seems sort of a Disneyfied version of gang warfare, but that was also, to some extent, true of the show'.<sup>4</sup> According to John Mauceri, Bernstein, too, disliked the film, considering it 'too sentimental'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Printed in Guernsey 1985, and in the *Dramatists Guild Quarterly*, 22 (3) (1985).

<sup>3</sup> NPR 2007.

<sup>4</sup> NPR 2007. Frank Rich, a senior journalist at the *New York Times*, was the paper's chief drama critic from 1980 to 1993.

<sup>5</sup> Mauceri 2007, p. 17.

Stage productions since 1960 have included two particularly significant revivals: the Jerome Robbins production in 1980 at the Minskoff Theatre on Broadway and, more recently, the production directed by Arthur Laurents that opened in December 2008 at the National Theatre in Washington – where *West Side Story* had its world premiere in August 1957 – before transferring to New York in 2009. But the show's success has been enduring. Freddie Gershon of Music Theatre International estimated that there had been a total of approximately forty thousand productions around the world in the half-century since *West Side Story* was first performed.<sup>6</sup> This extraordinary statistic demonstrates the impact the work has had far beyond the professional theatre (where there have been comparatively few full-scale revivals), with countless productions in schools, colleges, amateur and community groups, and even in Sing Sing maximum security prison (Ossining, NY). The show has also been used as the basis for social education programmes: in spring 2007, 'the Seattle police department hosted a youth-oriented anti-gang initiative based around the musical, featuring summits on gang violence and a performance of the musical by at-risk high school students'.<sup>7</sup>

### **'A social disease'? The Reality of New York Gangs**

In 1954, a United States Senate Subcommittee held televised public hearings on juvenile delinquency. Gang violence had become a national concern, but not necessarily the stuff of a musical. Frank Rich believes that '*West Side Story* was one of the first pieces of mainstream popular culture to put its finger on what was going to be a huge movement of social change in America in a new generation'.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1950s, Puerto Rican immigration was an important issue in America's largest cities. It was an article in a Los Angeles paper that Laurents and Bernstein always claimed was the spur for setting the story among rival gangs of Puerto Ricans and native New Yorkers. Gang violence was a frightening reality at the time, and in 1950 a news report painted a grim picture of gang warfare in the Bronx:

The increase in killings and other vicious acts by young gangsters has been the greatest in the few years during which families have been streaming from Harlem and East Harlem into the Bronx in one of the biggest population shifts in the city.

Most of the influx of Negro and Puerto Rican families has been into East Bronx. The Irish and Italian street gangs of the Bronx, whose occasional rowdiness had rarely reached the murder-street stage, made savage war on the newcomers.

The Negro and Puerto Rican youths quickly formed separate gangs in which they had been members in Manhattan ... and bloody war was on.

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<sup>6</sup> NPR 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Wise 2007.

<sup>8</sup> NPR 2007.

The pitched battles in the streets and parks of the Bronx have taken about twenty lives. For every youth killed, there have been at least five seriously wounded by knives and guns. ... Rivalry for the attentions of teenage girls has sparked some of the worst battles between some of the Puerto Rican and Italian gangs.<sup>9</sup>

Newspaper coverage ranged from a glossary of ‘Gang slang’<sup>10</sup> to interviews and profiles of gang members. In 1958, while *West Side Story* was in the middle of its first Broadway run, the *New York Times* published the second of a series of articles on ‘New York City’s students and their backgrounds and delinquency problems’. The principal subject was Vincent, leader of the ‘Silver Arrows’, a young Puerto Rican man who seems in some ways to resemble a real-life Bernardo:

Vincent has been the leader of his gang, based in one of Brooklyn’s older public housing projects, for about eighteen months. He is a slender Puerto Rican youngster of 17 years of age who looks a little like an African prince. He combs his black hair in a massive crest and carries his head high.

When Vincent came from Puerto Rico in 1949 his family first settled in Manhattan, near 110th Street and First Avenue. ...

In some ways, Vincent is not a typical gang member. For one thing he is a leader. Gang leaders are above average intelligence and ability – they must be or the gang will not long survive. But the façade of normality that Vincent presents can vanish in a twinkling. For Vincent like the other gang members is ‘shook up.’ Beneath the veneer – and not far beneath it – lies a disturbed and unstable personality. ...

Most gang members come from broken families. Not Vincent. He lives with his father and mother and eight brothers and sisters. The family is on relief. Vincent is the only member of his family who is involved with gangs. ‘I’m the only bad one,’ he says shyly.’ ...

Vincent learned street fighting in the Italian neighborhood into which his family first moved. He remembers being beaten up every day ‘just because I was a Puerto Rican.’<sup>11</sup>

While the plot of *West Side Story* was motivated by contemporary social problems, the result is a piece of theatre, not a documentary; Robbins, Laurents, Bernstein and Sondheim aspired to move, to shock and to thrill, not to preach a sociological tract.

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<sup>9</sup> Grutzner 1950.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin 1957. This includes several words and phrases that also occur in Laurents’s book and Sondheim’s lyrics for *West Side Story*. For example: ‘Cool it – to call off the rumble’, ‘Jump – a dance or other social event’ and ‘Turf – the neighborhood territory ruled by a gang. Rumbles frequently happen as a result of invasions of a gang’s turf, or from disputes over whose turf it is.’ Perhaps the quaintest definition in this article is ‘Pot – marijuana’.

<sup>11</sup> Salisbury 1958.

This is perhaps the reason for the show's continuing success today: half a century later, the precise circumstances that inspired it may have changed, but the value of human life – and the simple power of love – have not.