

INTRODUCTION

Some audience members may have been surprised to learn that Lyric Opera of Kansas City is taking part in the celebration of the Bernstein centennial with a production of *West Side Story*, a show that one might expect to find on one of Kansas City's other stages. They might well ask, "Is this really an opera?"

In fact, the line between shows written for Broadway and those written for the opera house is not as rigid as one might suppose, and many opera companies, especially in the U.S., regularly schedule works originally intended for Broadway (a generic term for all such shows, even if they don't make it to the Great White Way). In the 1980's, Lyric produced five such shows: *The Happy Time*, *Most Happy Fella*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Candide*. The real question one might ask is why the company waited thirty years to produce another such show.

Furthermore, it would be difficult to come up with a definition of opera that would create a clear distinction between the two genres. The first thing that comes to mind is that opera is "through-

composed;" that is, it does not have long passages of spoken dialogue. But some operas, such as *Carmen* and other works written for the Paris Opera Comique, include spoken dialogue. Opera companies regularly produce European operettas and the light operas of Gilbert and Sullivan (who eschewed the term operetta), all of which are structured more like musicals, as is Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which is generally thought of as an opera despite Mozart's designation of the piece as a "singspiel." And some musicals, such as *Les Miserables*, have little spoken text.

Another distinction might be the voice types that the music calls for. However, many Broadway roles require the legit, or operatic voice. Even the use or non-use of microphones is not a clear dividing line. Years ago, when theaters were smaller, Broadway singers did not rely on microphones, whereas today some opera composers insist on them. One advantage of microphones, as much as they offend some opera purists, is that they allow for clearer pronunciation of the text, which is especially important in Broadway-style shows, where wordplay is often an essential part of the lyrics.

In considering the link between Broadway and opera, it is important to remember that opera was once a popular art form, and a new opera by Verdi or Puccini generated the same excitement that shows such as *Wicked* and *Hamilton* do today. When supervising the rehearsals of *Rigoletto*, Verdi kept “La donna è mobile” under wraps, out of fear that if it was leaked it would become so popular that people would think that he had lifted the melody from a pop song. The American musical had its origins in light opera and operetta; theater historian Gerald Bordman has argued that without the popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan, the American musical never would have developed at all.

Since many of the composers in the early days of the American musical theater had their roots in Western Europe, the early musicals imitated the European operetta style, culminating in the work which has been called the last American operetta or the first Broadway musical: Hammerstein and Kern's *Showboat* in 1926. But it wasn't until Hammerstein teamed with Richard Rodgers in 1943 that the musical as we know it today was born. *Oklahoma!* was groundbreaking in that it was built on the model that was to dominate the

Broadway musical to the present day—the idea that the songs should support the story rather than the other way around.

This brings us to *West Side Story*, a gritty musical retelling of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Despite his training in classical music, Bernstein specifically said he did not want to “fall into the opera trap.” He deliberately did not choose classically trained singers, and he told the singers that he did not want “pear-shaped tones.” (Nowadays, many singers are equally comfortable with operatic and popular and/or Broadway singing, but that was not the case in the 1950s; when opera stars appeared on Broadway in those days they were generally given roles especially written for the operatic voice.)

Years later, Bernstein admitted that *West Side Story* could indeed be considered an opera, leading to the unfortunate decision to cast opera stars in what was to be the definitive recording of the work, despite their inability to demonstrate the proper diction for their roles. The original cast recording remains the CD of choice for Bernstein fans.

So, what makes this production of *West Side Story* so special? It is that Lyric Opera can bring the resources of a first-rate opera company to the production, including the original choreography and a full orchestra. So, sit back and enjoy this magnificent musical drama as if you were hearing it for the first time.

CHARACTERS

Tony: a young man, former member of the Jets gang (of native New Yorkers)

Maria: a young woman, recently relocated from Puerto Rico

Bernardo: Maria's brother and leader of the Sharks gang (of Puerto Rican origins)

Anita: Bernardo's girlfriend

Riff: Leader of the Jets gang

Chino: Recently arrived from Puerto Rico, Maria's intended bridegroom

Doc: an elderly pharmacist

Shrank and Krupke: police officers

Glad Hand: Master of ceremonies at the dance

Members of the Jets: A-rab, Baby John, Big Deal, Diesel, Gee-tar,
Mouthpiece, Tiger, Anybody's (a tomboy)

Jets' girlfriends: Graziella, Velma, Minnie, Clarice, Pauline

Members of the Sharks: Pepe, Indio, Luis, Anxious, Nibbles, Mouse

Sharks' girlfriends: Rosaleia, Consuelo, Teresita, Francisca, Estella,
Margarita

STORY AND DISCUSSION

The entire action of *West Side Story* takes place in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan, New York City, over the course of a few days. As in many Broadway musicals, the action is divided into several short scenes, a structure which may have been influenced by cinematic storytelling, in which the camera is constantly on the move.

Act I: Scene 1: 5:00 P.M.: The street

There is no overture. The play opens with an extended ballet, depicting the Jets and Sharks battling over control of their territory. The opening directly correlates to *Romeo and Juliet*, although here, no one bites their thumb at their rival. At first the Jets are in control, but the tides of battle shift as additional reinforcements come from each side. The music for this dance number is dissonant and jarring. The most prevalent musical motive is the tri-tone, the most dissonant interval in tonal music, resolving to a fifth. In the key of C, this would be C-F#-G. It has been noted that this is similar to the sound of the shofar, the ram's horn sounded in synagogues during the High Holy Days.

A police whistle—a non-musical sound—temporarily halts the fighting and the music. In fact, throughout *West Side Story*, no music is associated with the adult characters, who are seen as outsiders in the teen-dominated society. Shrank and Krupke enter and are greeted with mock politeness. The Sharks scatter. Though Shrank offers to help the Jets, who blame Puerto Ricans for their families'

economic woes, the Jets are distrustful of all adult authority figures and respond sarcastically. This underscores an aspect of the play which is sometimes overlooked; the conflict in this play is as much generational as it is ethnic.

Anybody's, a tomboy, wants to join the Jets rather than observe from the sidelines like the other women associated with the gang, but she is rebuffed. Riff tells the other Jets that they need to go to battle against the Sharks to protect their territory (the need for such territory is never made clear). He explains that he will persuade Tony to re-join the group.

The young men express their pride in their gang, singing the "Jet Song." While the melody has a rollicking optimistic tone, Scott Miller has pointed out that the song is just the first example of numerous references to death that occur in *West Side Story*: "When you're a Jet, you're a Jet all the way/From your first cigarette till your last dying day" and "which you'll never forget till they cart you away." One wonders if the young men expect to stay in the gang

through their adult lives or if this represents a foreboding of an early death.

Scene 2: 5:30 p.m.: A brickyard

Tony has forsaken the gang to take a job at Doc's pharmacy. Riff approaches him and asks him to rejoin the gang, but Tony sees a different future. He does not know what it is yet, but in the song "Something's Coming," he expresses his optimism that "something great is coming." (This song has been described as an "I want" song that is typical of the Broadway musical—the hero or heroine explaining early in the show what he or she is looking for.) The song breaks the traditional Broadway/pop song mold due to its shifting rhythms. Again, we hear a tri-tone motive, this time descending rather than ascending. The optimism of the song is in direct contrast to the Shakespeare play, in which Romeo has a vision of some undefined disaster about to happen.

Scene 3: A bridal shop

Anita and Maria are at their place of employment, preparing for a dance they plan to attend that evening. Maria protests that

the dress Anita has chosen for her is too modest. Anita reminds her that she is engaged to Chino, a young man whom the family has chosen for her, but Maria explains she has no feelings for him. However, she is in a good mood, and she sees the dance as the beginning of her new life in America.

Scene 4: 10:00 P.M.: The Gym

Riff and Bernardo have agreed to meet at the dance to discuss the rules of engagement for the planned rumble (battle). Both the Sharks and Jets, with their women, appear at the dance. The master of ceremonies, known as "Glad Hand," tries to arrange a mixer, and the men and women move in concentric circles, the idea being that when the music stops the person standing opposite them will be their partner for the next dance. However, as soon as the music stops, the two leaders signal that their girlfriends should dance with them and not with the randomly selected partner.

A dance competition ensues, but a change in lighting directs our attention to Tony and Maria, who are dancing together to a melody identified as a cha-cha. This delicate melody, which stands

in sharp contrast to the earlier dance music, is more remarkable than one might think on first hearing, because it is a variation of the song Tony will later sing about Maria. In other words, contrary to the way music normally functions, the variation is heard before we hear the melody in its basic form, although anyone familiar with *West Side Story* will recognize the melody. Tony and Maria kiss, prompting Bernardo to interfere. He orders Maria to leave with Chino, and the two leaders agree to meet at Doc's to agree to plan the rumble.

Left alone, Tony sings the song "Maria," rhapsodizing on her name. Stephen Sondheim, the lyricist, points out that this is all Tony can sing about, since he does not really know her at this point in the story. Singing about a loved one's name is not unusual; two prominent examples in opera are "Caro nome" from *Rigoletto* and "Donna non vidi mai" from *Manon Lescaut*. The opening of the song uses the now-familiar tri-tone motive, now slow and sweet instead of loud and harsh as we heard it before. An unusual feature of the song is that the final interval goes down instead of up.

SCENE 5: 11:00 P.M: A back alley

The most iconic moment in Shakespeare's play is the balcony scene. In *West Side Story*, the balcony is replicated by the fire escape outside the apartment where Maria lives with her parents. Tony and Maria sing the soaring duet "Tonight." At the end of the song, the orchestra briefly introduces the "Somewhere" theme that will be prominent later in the show.

Maria goes inside, and Tony exits. The stage is bare for a brief moment. Bernardo enters with some of the other Sharks. He refers to Tony as a Polack, but Rosalia comes to Tony's defense by pointing out that at least he has a job. Bernardo retorts by pointing out that Tony earns twice as much as Chino does. They speak of the differences between New York and Puerto Rico, leading to the song "America," stylistically based on two Latin-American dance styles, in which Rosalia's nostalgia for Puerto Rico is met by Anita's derision and her love for her new home. The other women agree with Anita, as they join in a rousing dance number. Of course, as Anita points out, Puerto Rico is in fact part of the U.S.

Scene 6: Midnight: The drugstore

At the time this play takes place, drugstores such as Doc's with soda fountains and places to sit were commonplace. The Jets are seated, waiting for the Sharks to arrive. When Doc questions the need for a fight, the young men rebuff him, with Action telling him, "You were never my age." In the song "Cool," based on a number of jazz riffs (pun intended by the writers?), Riff tells the Jets to keep their heads about them. The Sharks enter, and Doc and the women are ordered to leave. Tony enters and persuades the two gangs that weapons are for cowards and that the rumble should be a fist fight.

Shrank enters. As he represents a common enemy, the Sharks and Jets refuse to talk to him. He orders the Sharks to leave, which they do while sarcastically whistling "My Country 'Tis of Thee." Tony tells Doc, "Buenos noches," and Doc, anticipating the danger of an inter-ethnic romance, tells Tony "I'm frightened enough for the two of you."

Scene 7: 5:30 P.M. the next day: The bridal shop

Maria and Anita are working. Tony enters, and Maria asks him to stop the rumble. Before he leaves, the two perform a mock wedding ceremony, expressing their vows in the duet "One Hand, One Heart." The ominous death theme of *West Side Story* occurs again, as the line "only death will part us now" changes to "even death won't part us now."

Scene 8: 6:00 to 9:00 P.M. that night

This scene consists of an ensemble in four parts, as the Jets and Sharks prepare for the battle while Anita looks forward to a night with Bernardo after the rumble and Tony and Maria optimistically reprise "Tonight." This is probably the most operatic number in *West Side Story*, not in the voice quality but in the complexity that one generally does not associate with Broadway music.

Scene 9: 9:00 P.M. The Rumble

The gang has gathered for a fight, having agreed that the battle should be decided by a one-on-one fist fight between the strongest men on each side. Tony tries to make peace between the two, but Riff and Bernardo reach for their knives. Tony's intervention ironically gives Bernardo the advantage (a direct parallel to Shakespeare) and Riff is killed. Instinctively, Tony grabs the knife and stabs Bernardo, killing him. A police siren causes the two gangs to scatter, and Tony cries out "Maria!" as Anybody's tries to drag him to safety.

ACT II: Scene 1: 9:15 P.M.: A bedroom

Maria and her friends have gathered, unaware of what has just transpired. Maria's song "I Feel Pretty" describes her joy at being loved, while her friends mock her with a counter-melody in a minor key, suggesting the song's Hispanic flavor. Chino enters, clearly emotionally shaken, having trouble getting his words out. When Maria asks first about Tony, he finally blurts out, "He killed your brother." Maria is momentarily left alone.

Tony enters, and after Maria berates him for being a murderer, he explains what actually happened. He sings, "Let me take you away," and the scene dissolves into a dream sequence. In the dream ballet, we hear the iconic song "Somewhere (A place for us)" and we see "a world of space and air and sun." The dream world, however, morphs into a re-enactment of the rumble. Tony and Maria sing the final verse of "Somewhere" together.

Scene 2: 10:00 P.M.: Another alley

The Jets are still in shock. Krupke enters, but they trick him into heading in the wrong direction. The Jets then sing the famous, "Gee Officer Krupke," mocking all of the adults who have tried to help them. While Sondheim described this song as comic relief, similar to the drunken porter scene in *Macbeth*, this comic song is actually the most pessimistic number in *West Side Story*, expressing as it does the despair of the young men who have no hope that their lives will ever be any better.

It is notable that while the general tone of the melody is light, each verse begins with a dissonant tri-tone in the orchestra.

Originally, the writers wanted to have the singers shock the audience with an “F-bomb,” but Bernstein came up with the substitute “Krup you,” which Sondheim acknowledged was a better word choice, realizing that implying a swear word is more effective than saying it. Anybody's rushes in and tells the Jets that Chino has a gun and plans to kill Tony. She has finally gained acceptance into the gang. The Jets run off to find Tony and warn him of the danger.

Scene 3: 11:30 P.M.: The bedroom

Maria and Tony are in the bedroom, as Anita enters. Tony leaves, saying Doc will provide money for them to get away. In the duet that follows, in contrasting melodies Anita berates Maria for loving the boy who killed her brother and tells her to find a Puerto Rican lover instead, while Maria explains, “When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong.” Schrank enters to ask what Maria knows about the rumble. She lies about the relationship, and as a ruse she asks Anita to get some medication for her at the pharmacy.

Scene 4: Shortly afterward: The drugstore

The Jets are sitting around the drugstore, when Anita enters with a message for Tony, but the Jets refuse to believe she is there to help, and they accost her both verbally and physically. No longer wishing to help, Anita tells the young men that Chino has killed Maria. Recoiling at this additional violence, Doc exclaims, "You make this world lousy," but Action responds, "That's the way we found it, Doc." This scene has a parallel in Shakespeare's play, in which the messenger who was to inform Romeo of Juliet's faked death is detained by a quarantine.

Scene 5: Immediately afterward

Doc informs Tony of what Anita told him. Rather than directly stabbing himself, as in Shakespeare's version, Tony in effect commits suicide by running into the street and calling upon Chino to kill him too.

Scene 6: Midnight: The street

Tony continues to call for Chino, despite Anybody's' attempt to stop him. He sees that Maria is still alive, but it is too late. As he and

Maria approach each other, Chino shoots Tony, who lives just long enough to sing two lines of "Somewhere."

Although thus far book writer Arthur Laurents had more or less followed the outline of Shakespeare's play, the final tableau of *West Side Story* seems to call to mind Richard Wagner's opera *Gotterdammerung*. Like Brunnhilde, Maria leans over the body of her slain lover and berates the people whom she sees as responsible for his death. "I can kill now because I hate now," she exclaims. Schrank enters, but Maria shouts "Don't you touch him!" Turning to both gangs, she grabs Chino's gun and asks, "How many can I kill, Chino? How many—and still have one bullet left for me?"

As in Wagner's opera, the members of the two gangs carry the body offstage, in the same procession they made in the dream ballet. Wagner's opera concludes with the redemption-through-love motive; here, a melancholy repetition of the hopeful "Somewhere" theme accompanies the procession, with the final two chords implying the word "Somewhere." Originally, the writers had considered continuing the parallel to Shakespeare's play by having

Maria commit suicide, but upon seeing an early draft, Richard Rodgers advised them that in effect she was already dead, and “It’s sadder if she has to live on alone.”

When writing Maria’s speech, Laurents had intended his words to be sort of dummy lyrics for a song that Bernstein and Sondheim would compose, but after several efforts, they realized that nothing they wrote could express the stark emotions of the scene, so Maria’s powerful words were included as Laurents had written them. In the words of Scott Miller, the conclusion of *West Side Story* indicates that “Here was a musical with the unheard-of message that love not only *will not* triumph over all, but *cannot*.”

LEONARD BERNSTEIN

Leonard Bernstein—composer of *West Side Story*—was truly a larger-than-life figure. A thoroughly charismatic celebrity capable of charming anyone who came in contact with him, he is perhaps the only classical conductor to ever achieve rock-star status. While teens screamed and stomped their feet for Elvis, Leonard Bernstein—known simply as Lenny to his admirers—evoked the same reaction

from their parents. It is hard to think of anyone else who excelled in so many areas of music: pianist, composer, conductor, and commentator.

He wanted to have it all, a trait for which his bisexuality was only one indication. He set no limits on himself, and struggled against such limits that reality imposed. Stable family life vs. promiscuity; robust good health vs. chain-smoking; a globe-hopping conducting career vs. the lonely life of a classical composer and involvement in one's children's activities—something had to give.

Bernstein (rhymes with “mine,” not “mean”) was born August 25, 1918 in Lawrence, MA (near Boston), the son of Ukrainian immigrants Sam and Jenny Bernstein and the grandson of a rabbi. He developed an obsession with music even before he could talk, often crying until someone put a record on the phonograph. When he was ten, his aunt gave the family a piano, and the young boy quickly began to play.

Although Sam, who associated musicians with the impoverished wanderers he had encountered in the Ukraine,

discouraged his son from considering a career in music, he did agree to pay for his son's piano lessons. (Years later, marveling at his son's success, he commented, "How could I have known that my son would one day become Leonard Bernstein?") He was first exposed to serious music at the Conservative synagogue that the family attended. He also demonstrated his intellectual gifts in the religious-school program, and at his bar mitzvah he delivered a speech in both English and Hebrew.

Educated in the Boston public schools, including the rigorous Boston Latin School, he moved on to Harvard, where he majored in music. A chance meeting with Aaron Copland led to a long association that gave a boost to his composing career. After Harvard, Bernstein went on to study music at the prestigious Curtis Institute in Philadelphia and at the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood, where the famed conductor Serge Koussevitzky became the most important mentor of his life.

Fearing that anti-Semitism would prevent his young protégé from realizing his potential in the music world, Koussevitzky advised

him to change his name to Leonard A. Burns, but the young man replied, "I'll do it as Bernstein or I won't do it at all." In fact, Bernstein's Jewish heritage played a significant role in many of his works, including the *Jeremiah Symphony*, composed in 1942, which used the traditional synagogue chant for the Book of Lamentations.

Bernstein initially rose to fame as a conductor. He had been serving as assistant conductor for the New York Philharmonic when he was called upon to conduct the orchestra as a last-minute replacement for Bruno Walter, who was too sick to conduct that day. The November 14, 1943 concert, broadcast nationwide, made the young conductor an instant sensation. Over the course of the next several years his fame as a conductor spread, and in addition to becoming the principal conductor of the New York Philharmonic, he frequently travelled overseas, especially to the fledgling nation of Israel, where he helped the Israel Philharmonic establish itself as a world-class orchestra. Throughout his career, he championed the works of contemporary composers.

In addition to jump-starting his conducting career, 1943 was pivotal in his composing career, when he composed the ballet *Fancy Free* for Jerome Robbins, a dancer/choreographer who was to remain a major force in his life. The following year Oliver Smith suggested that he expand the concept of the ballet—three sailors on shore leave in New York before being shipped off to war—into a Broadway musical. The result was *On the Town*, a successful show which is performed much too infrequently today. (Don't judge it by the film version, which scrapped most of the brilliant songs featured in the show.) His librettists were his former roommate Adolf Green and Green's long-time sidekick Betty Comden.

One remarkable feature of this show was the decision to include African-Americans in the chorus (something we take for granted today) and, more boldly, to cast Japanese-American dancer Sono Osato as the “all-American girl” Ivy Smith. Unfortunately, Koussevitzky told Bernstein that the Broadway stage was unworthy of his attention, and he did not return to the genre until shortly after Koussevitzky's death, when he again teamed with Comden and Green to write another New-York based musical,

Wonderful Town. About that time Bernstein also composed the score for the film *On the Waterfront*, and first became known as an explicator of music through his lectures on the television show *Omnibus*, which led to his famous Young People's Concerts a few years later.

In 1951, he reconnected with and married Chilean actress Felicia Montealegre Cohn, with whom he had a relationship a few years earlier. Because of her husband's desire to have a Jewish family, she converted to Judaism (though she was of partly Jewish ancestry, she had been raised Catholic). She was so deeply in love with her husband that when she recognized his bisexuality, she wrote him a letter giving her blessing to his physical relationships with men. Despite such relationships, however, Felicia remained the true love of Bernstein's life.

When she developed breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy, he lamented that he no longer found her desirable—an indication that the marriage was not simply a cover for his alternative lifestyle. Late in her life, he separated from her briefly in

order to live as an openly gay man, but when her cancer returned he came back to her and remained with her until her death.

During the 1950's Bernstein also composed a one-act opera, *Trouble in Tahiti*, about a troubled marriage in an unnamed American suburb—apparently inspired by the relationship between his own parents. (The title refers to a grade-B film the wife sees when she should have attended her son's school play.) Ironically, it appears that he began composing this opera while he and Felicia were on their honeymoon.

About the same time, Jerome Robbins suggested that Bernstein consider another topic for a musical, a play to be called *East Side Story*, an updated version of *Romeo and Juliet* involving a romance between a Jewish boy and a Catholic girl. Thankfully, the project never got anywhere. A few years later, however, Bernstein and playwright Arthur Laurents were sitting poolside in Los Angeles when they came across an article about immigrant Mexican gangs. Given that New York was (and still is) the center of the musical theater world, they moved the action to New York City, exchanging recently

arrived Puerto Ricans for the Mexicans and changing Robbins's original locale to the West Side of Manhattan. *West Side Story* was born.

At the same time, he was working on another musical, *Candide*, and music that was removed from one project was sometimes moved to another. ("One Hand, One Heart" and the melody for "Officer Krupke" were originally composed for *Candide*.) Originally, Comden and Green were asked to write the lyrics, but they turned the project down due to other commitments, and a little-known librettist, Stephen Sondheim, was chosen instead.

Since Robbins was responsible for the original concept, he took charge of the project. A believer in method acting, he forbade the actors playing members of the two gangs from fraternizing with each other and even went out of his way to create ill feelings between the two groups. The actors considered him to be a tyrant, and Bernstein was often called upon to calm the performers down after Robbins's scathing criticism. Carol Lawrence, the original Maria, remarked, "His role was as the gentle teacher...who inspired you so that you

wanted to please him more than life itself." Being too busy to complete the orchestrations, Bernstein assigned that task to Irwin Kristol and to his childhood friend Sid Ramin.

Since Broadway musicals were still at that time referred to as "musical comedies," Bernstein used the oxymoron "tragic musical comedy" to describe *West Side Story*. (This was hardly the first tragic Broadway musical; Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel* preceded it by several years, and most of the pair's other best-known musicals, including *Oklahoma!*, *The King and I*, and *South Pacific*, had tragic subplots.) At the conclusion of the first performance, the audience sat in silence for several seconds, too stunned to applaud, but they quickly burst into thunderous applause after that pause. The play ran for 722 performances (and was revived for another long run in 1960), but ironically, given the lead character's name, it lost to *The Music Man* for the Tony award, though Robbins took home the award for best choreography. The film version of *West Side Story* in 1961 brought the play to a worldwide audience and won numerous Oscars.

Those audience members who are familiar with the film might notice some changes that were made from the original. The songs “Cool” and “Gee Officer Krupke” changed places in the film, because the directors felt this was more logical. Some of the language was cleaned up; for example, in the original, Anita sings “he’ll walk in hot and tired, so what/No matter if he’s tired, as long as he’s hot.” Since in 1950’s slang “hot” meant sexually aroused, not attractive, as it does today, the line was changed to “He’ll walk in hot and tired, poor dear/No matter if he’s tired, as long as he’s near.” The most noticeable change was in the lyrics to “America.” In the play it was sung only by the women since Robbins wanted an all-female dance number. In the film, the men also sing, and the new lyrics, rather than simply being a series of put-downs, expressed anger at the discrimination suffered by the Puerto Ricans. In response to a protest from the Puerto Rican government, the line about “tropical diseases” was also changed.

Candide, which opened shortly before *West Side Story*, was less successful, largely due to problems with the libretto, which was the work of several different writers. It was considered too operatic to

succeed on Broadway and not serious enough to be an opera. The popularity of the cast album kept it somewhat in the spotlight, and today it is generally performed primarily by opera companies, as it was at Lyric Opera of Kansas City three decades ago.

During the twelve years following the premiere of *West Side Story*, Bernstein devoted himself primarily to conducting, but he did compose two masterpieces during the period: the *Kaddish Symphony* and the *Chichester Psalms*, both of which expressed his own religious beliefs and struggles. The former is set to the text of the Aramaic prayer traditionally associated with mourning, but it also includes a non-singing narrator who expresses her anger at God for the terrible things that happen in the world. (Commenting on the symphony, Bernstein reminded people that Jews are expected to argue with God.) While the *Chichester Psalms* are a straightforward setting of the Biblical text, his insistence on setting the psalms in Hebrew for a performance at a cathedral is an indication of the significance he placed on his Jewish heritage. Never one to waste a good melody, he included some of the discarded *West Side Story* music into the score.

During this time, Bernstein had become a personal friend of John F. Kennedy, and he was devastated by the president's untimely death; his daughter commented that the Kennedy funeral was the only time when she ever saw her father cry. As a memorial to the president, Bernstein conducted Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* on national television as a gesture to bring some hope to the grieving nation. He also dedicated the *Kaddish Symphony* to Kennedy's memory.

JFK was also connected to another major Bernstein composition, *Mass: A Theater Piece*, which was to open the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Having his usual deadline problems, Bernstein was unsure how to proceed with the work until his sister, a theatrical agent, suggested that he attend a musical written by one of her clients—Stephen Schwartz's *Godspell*. After the play, Bernstein met with the young composer/lyricist, and the result was a collaboration on a work which is most likely Bernstein's most controversial composition.

Using parts of the traditional Latin Mass, the work also features English lyrics which sometimes call traditional religious teaching into question as it tells the story of a celebrant who is struggling to make his faith relevant in face of the challenges of the modern world. In many ways, the priest seems to represent the composer himself, who once told an interviewer, “I wouldn’t say that it’s God up there watching over me as much as me down here looking up to find him—I guess you would call that the chief concern of my life.”

It was during this time that he suffered a major public-relations disaster when he and Felicia hosted a fund-raiser party for a group of Black Panthers (a radical African-American organization) whom they had believed to be wrongfully imprisoned. Unfortunately, author Tom Wolfe was in attendance, and his article (later a book) *Radical Chic* ridiculed the Bernsteins as phony liberals. Forgotten was the fact that the accused men were never convicted.

While much of his later years were devoted to conducting, Bernstein did produce some significant compositions: *The Dybbuk* (1974), a ballet with Robbins based on Jewish folklore; *A Quiet Place*

(1984), a sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti* which incorporated the earlier one-act opera as a flashback; and two song cycles, *Songfest* (1977) and *Arias and Barcarolles* (1988). In 1989, he conducted Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* in Berlin as part of the city's celebration of its reunification—a remarkable honor for a Jewish conductor.

Sadly, his final years were not happy ones, despite several short-term romances with various men. He suffered from depression following Felicia's death, and he frequently drank to excess. He regretted having allowed his conducting commitments to limit his composition career, and he feared that he would be remembered simply as the composer of *West Side Story*. In 1990, it appears that his chain-smoking habit finally caught up with him, and he developed lung cancer. But his kind disposition did not entirely leave him.

In October of that year, Carol Lawrence and Larry Kert (the original Maria and Tony) were performing a cabaret act, and they wrote to the composer asking for permission to perform "Tonight." Regretting that he was too sick to attend, Bernstein sent flowers to

the couple to wish them good luck. The next day, as his doctor was about to give him an injection to ease his pain, he died.

THE CREATIVE TEAM BEHIND *WEST SIDE STORY*

“When you’re writing a song, and you’ve a partner/The room is filled with jokes and chatter...But when you’re writing a song without a partner/That’s a completely different matter/No one tells you ‘That’s not funny’/No one says, ‘Let’s cut that bar’/No one makes you better than you are.” Thus, John Kander wrote in his musical *Curtains*, as a tribute to his long-time lyricist Fred Ebb, who passed away during the writing of the show. One significant way that music written for Broadway differs from opera is that whereas in opera (at least until modern times) has generally been a composer’s art, musicals are much more of a collaborative effort.

In the creation of many operas of the past, the composer and the librettist never even sat down together in the same room; this would be virtually unthinkable in the creation of a Broadway musical. This is why in Broadway shows, lyricists, ever since the days of

Gilbert and Sullivan, share top billing with the composers, this is rarely the case in the world of opera. (*West Side Story* is an exception to this rule.) And although many opera composers worked with two librettists, there was never the formal division between the lyricist and the writer of the book (storyline) that there is in the world of Broadway—though the book writer rarely shares top billing with the composer and lyricist.

Originally, Bernstein himself had tried to write the words as well as the music, but he soon realized that a more skilled lyricist would be needed. That role ultimately was filled by Stephen Sondheim, who was at the time relatively unknown.

Born March 22, 1930 in New York, Sondheim's interest in music was initially aroused by his father, a self-taught pianist. However, while he was still a youngster, his parents divorced, with his mother gaining full custody, and soon afterwards she and Stephen relocated to Doylestown, PA, a move which she never could have foreseen would change the course of the American musical for years to come. Sondheim described her a “psychologically

abusive," as she seemed to take out her anger at her ex-husband on the young boy. She was also a "celebrity hunter," and when she learned that Oscar Hammerstein and his family lived nearby, she arranged for Stephen to become friends with their son, Jimmy, who was a year younger than 10-year-old Stephen.

Escaping his unhappy home life, Stephen spent as much time as possible with the Hammersteins, who became in effect his surrogate parents. As Sondheim explained, "I wanted to do what Oscar did. If he had been a geologist, I would have become a geologist." While still in school, Sondheim tried writing a musical as a school play, and he proudly showed it to Hammerstein, only to be told it was "terrible," but Hammerstein went on to offer his young protégé several hours of constructive criticism, a session which Sondheim considered the most valuable educational experience of his life.

After high school, Sondheim went on to study music at Williams College, and he also studied with the composer Milton Babbitt, a classical composer, though Sondheim knew that he really wanted to

write for the theater. Based on his relationship with Hammerstein, he became acquainted with a number of Broadway personalities, and one evening he met playwright Arthur Laurents, who told the young writer that he was working on the book for a musical based on the *Romeo and Juliet* story and that the team was looking for a lyricist, since Bernstein's previous collaborators, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, were committed to another project.

At first Sondheim was reluctant to take on that role, since he wanted to write his own music, but Hammerstein explained to him that the opportunity to work with people such as Bernstein and Robbins was an experience not to be missed. Though originally he was to share credit for the *West Side Story* lyrics with Bernstein himself, the composer came to recognize the young man's talent and gave him full credit. Sondheim was later to call this play "the show which shaped my professional life."

A few years later, Sondheim again was approached to write the lyrics for *Gypsy*, a star vehicle for Ethel Merman, and again it was Hammerstein who convinced him to accept the project, because

he felt that writing for a specific Broadway star would be valuable experience.

The rest, of course, is history. Beginning with 1962's *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, he wrote both the lyrics and music for a string of Broadway hits (along with a few misses), though he generally worked with a collaborator who wrote the book, not only because he did not consider himself a playwright, but also because, as an only child, he enjoyed the give-and-take of a collaborative effort.

Company (1970) is considered one of the major landmarks in the development of the musical theater, breaking as it did from strict chronological story-telling. Some of his musicals could well be considered operas. *A Little Night Music* is written in a style of a Viennese operetta, and *Sweeney Todd* and *Passion* (both tragedies) have many operatic features. In general, his shows have been plot-driven, featuring songs that are fully integrated into the story, so much so that he has written only one hit song, "Send in the Clowns"

from *A Little Night Music*. He has won eight Tony awards, more than any other composer.

Another key player in the creation of *West Side Story* was Arthur Laurents (1917-2011, born Arthur Levine), who was responsible for the book. After graduating from Cornell in 1937, he wrote a number of radio dramas and later became a screenwriter; his most famous works in that genre were *Rope*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, and *The Way We Were*, starring Barbara Streisand and Robert Redford. He also wrote and/or directed a number of other musicals and stage plays.

As we have noted earlier, the driving force behind *West Side Story* was director/choreographer Jerome Robbins (1918-1998, born Rabinowitz). Beginning his career as a Broadway dancer, he soon moved on to choreography, beginning with the ballet *Fancy Free*, with music by Bernstein. Among the best-known musicals for which he provided the dance numbers (in addition to *West Side Story*) were *Call Me Madam*, *The Pajama Game*, *The King and I*, *Gypsy*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (for which he

suggested revisions that saved a show which seemed destined for failure), *Funny Girl*, and *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Normally, one would not take the time to mention a back-up rehearsal pianist in an article of this type, but in this case, it is worth noting that the pianist in question was Kansas City native John Kander, whose meeting with Jerome Robbins while working on this show gave him the break he needed to begin his fabled career as a Broadway composer.

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