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## Same City, New Story

By [PATRICIA COHEN](#)

WHEN [Leonard Bernstein](#), [Stephen Sondheim](#), [Jerome Robbins](#) and [Arthur Laurents](#) created “West Side Story” in the mid-’50s, they lived within walking distance of the concrete alleys and playgrounds that were the backdrop for their updated version of “Romeo and Juliet,” the crowded tenements where new Puerto Rican migrants rubbed up against the Irish, Poles and Italians who had preceded them.

The postwar “Migración,” or Great Migration, was in full swing, and every year tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans, lured by better jobs and wages, left their homeland to settle in New York City. Robbins, who choreographed and directed the show, immersed himself in this historical stream. He attended a high school dance in Puerto Rican East Harlem to observe movements; and when rehearsals with the cast started, he posted an article about a gang killing in the studio on West 56th Street, scrawling above it, “Read this; this is your life.”

On Thursday the first Broadway revival of “West Side Story” in nearly three decades opens at the Palace Theater, and clearly the worlds inside and outside the theater are vastly different from when Tony just met a girl named Maria more than 50 years ago.

Being “Spanish” in New York then meant being Puerto Rican and being treated as an outsider. Officials didn’t even start counting island natives as a separate ethnic group until 1955. By 1960 the 41,000 Puerto Ricans who lived on the Upper West Side between 58th and 110th Streets made up 14 percent of the neighborhoods’ population. After that, “slum clearance” was the political slogan of the day, and the streets where the 1961 movie version was filmed were dismantled to make way for high-rises and [Lincoln Center](#). Now Puerto Ricans in that same area amount to just 6,700, about 3 percent of the total.

Today if Maria, her brother Bernardo and his girlfriend, Anita, were magically airlifted out of their 1957 lives of chewed-up brick and fire escapes into modern-day New York, among the many astonishing wonders awaiting them would be bilingual public schools, a Puerto Rican Day Parade on Fifth Avenue and a city with a majority of minorities. They would also be able to tune in to at least four Spanish-language television stations and five big radio stations for news, music and soap operas.

Puerto Ricans are still the city’s most numerous Spanish-speaking group — with 787,000 residents in 2007, one out of three, according to an analysis of United States Census Data by the [Queens College](#) sociology department — but their total has steadily declined over the last 25 years. They are no longer the insecure newcomers, compelled to fight for a patch of turf. They are veterans now, their walk and talk aped by the growing numbers of teenage Central and South American greenhorns from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Ecuador and elsewhere trying to fit in.

These and other changes are partly why Mr. Laurents, who wrote the book for “West Side Story,” decided that, at 91, he was ready not only to revive this classic musical but also, for the first time, to direct it himself.

“I don’t believe in reviving anything unless you have a fresh approach,” he said by phone from his home in Quogue, N.Y.

For Mr. Laurents that fresh approach includes two critical elements: having the Puerto Rican characters speak in Spanish and focusing on what he believes was always neglected, the story. “The original was really about how you tell the story,” he explained — at the time a new and sophisticated integration of dance, music and book. This version would focus on telling “the story of Tony and Maria and love.”

The idea went over big in the pre-Broadway run in Washington. Peter Marks wrote in The Washington Post that making the script bilingual gives “a truer sense of the cultural misunderstandings at the heart of ‘West Side Story’ as expressed in the characters’ disparate languages.”

The initial inspiration for a reimagined revival came from Mr. Laurents’s companion, Tom Hatcher, who died in 2006. He had seen a performance of “West Side Story” in Spanish by a local company in Bogotá, Colombia, in which the usual sympathies were reversed so that the Latino Sharks were the heroes. Mr. Laurents liked the idea of a production in which both gangs were perceived equally as villains; Mr. Hatcher suggested that a bilingual version was the way to do it.

“It gives the Sharks infinitely more weight than they’ve ever had,” Mr. Laurents said.

So when Bernardo (George Akram) and his gang take the stage at the Palace, they speak to one another in Spanish, and when Maria confides to friends about her secret love, she giddily swirls to “Siento Hermosa” instead of “I Feel Pretty.” When the America-loving Anita (Karen Olivo) angrily confronts Maria after she learns that Tony (Matt Cavenaugh) has killed Bernardo, she abandons English to sing “Un Hombre Así” instead of “A Boy Like That.”

Sipping a cup of tea in the theater district, Josefina Scaglione, the 21-year-old ingénue from Argentina who plays Maria, explained in her accented English that her character “is from Puerto Rico, so she would speak Spanish with her friends.”

“I think it’s more real,” she said, “and the more real the better, the truer feeling.”

Mr. Laurents was insistent that Maria and the other Puerto Rican characters in the cast be Latino. “It can’t be high school Spanish,” he said.

Certainly not when “In the Heights,” written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, which won a Tony last year for best musical, features the Latino neighborhood, rhythms and Spanglish of the immigrant community in Washington Heights. As one character in that musical sings:

My Mom is Dominican-Cuban,

My Dad is from Chile and P.R., which means

I'm Chile-Domini-Curican,

But I always say I'm from Queens.

Kevin McCollum, a lead producer of both "In the Heights" and "West Side Story," suggested that Mr. Miranda translate Stephen Sondheim's lyrics into Spanish.

"It was the hardest bilingual crossword puzzle I've ever done," said Mr. Miranda, 29, in the meatpacking district recently to perform with his hip-hop comedy troupe. As he sat on a bar stool in a restaurant and added three sugars and milk to make his coffee light and sweet, the way he gets it uptown, he said that he had played Bernardo in the sixth grade and directed a production of "West Side Story" while at Hunter College High School in New York.

In his own musical Mr. Miranda struggled to balance English and Spanish; he said that, surprisingly, the amount of Spanish doubled between the Off Broadway and Broadway productions. In the song "Breathe," he noted, when one of the characters returns home confused after dropping out of college, her friends sing about how she has always been the star of the neighborhood.

"It's much more visceral to hear them sing in Spanish," said Mr. Miranda, dressed in a hooded blue sweatshirt from Wesleyan, where he first started writing "In the Heights."

Mr. Sondheim, who has said he was never particularly fond of his lyrics in "West Side Story," especially "I Feel Pretty," told Mr. Miranda to use whatever imagery he wanted.

"The idea of the song is so simple," Mr. Sondheim said at his Midtown town house, as one big black poodle jumped on the couch to lick his face and a second gave a squeaky-toy serenade by chomping on a plaything. "I was only concerned that Lin observe the rhyme schemes."

Mr. Miranda's father, Luis, who was born in Puerto Rico and came to America at the same time the Sharks were staking out their turf, acted as his thesaurus. "I basically holed up there," Mr. Miranda said of his parents' Inwood apartment. "Stephen Sondheim and Luis Miranda are the two tent poles I'm trying to satisfy."

As for the libretto, he took a Spanish version that had been used in South American productions and changed what he described as its high-toned, Cervantes-like style to the language of the streets.

Mr. Laurents fiddled more with the script after previews in Washington, where English supertitles were tried during the Spanish scenes and quickly dropped. But after complaints that some dialogue was difficult to follow, English was strategically deployed more frequently so non-Spanish speakers could understand what was going on.

For both Mr. Laurents and the producers, integrating Spanish was about heightening the emotional drama and not about sales. "This show, like 'In the Heights,' is being marketed as a Broadway musical," Mr. McCollum said. "If there is a show that appeals to a certain demographic, that audience will find it. You don't have to market to that group specifically."

(Over all Hispanics make up just a tiny portion of Broadway's audience. In the 2007-8 season, according to the

[Broadway League](#), they bought 5.7 percent of all tickets purchased, compared with 4.8 percent the previous season.)

In addition to the language Mr. Laurents made other changes, some to heighten the verisimilitude and others to depart from it. He took out the scene at the end in which a few members of the Sharks help the Jets shoulder Tony after he is killed, for instance, because he felt it was inauthentic; in real life, the police would not let anyone carry off a body from a crime scene.

At the same time, for the dance scene he put the Jets' girls in anachronistic form-fitting orange miniskirts with slits and took the guys out of their suit jackets. Instead the costume designer, David Woolard, punctuated each outfit with a flash of the gang's color — orange for the Jets, purple for the Sharks — in a bandanna, a sweatband, a shirt pattern.

“We started out with costumes, and we ended up with clothes,” said Mr. Laurents, who has just published a book, “Mainly on Directing,” detailing the experiences he had reviving both “West Side Story” and “Gypsy,” with Patti Lupone, on Broadway. In that account he mentions that soon after the costumes were designed, the creative team heard about a gang fight in Nyack, N.Y., that was triggered when one member yanked off the colored bandanna a rival gang member's girlfriend was wearing.

The gangs in “West Side Story” shocked in 1957. Brooks Atkinson in *The New York Times* called their conduct “neurotic and savage,” with a code “rooted in ignorance and evil.” While writing the original book, Mr. Laurents said, he at times feared they would be too unsympathetic. Now he worried about the opposite problem: that those “savages” seemed too much like benign, lovable misfits, particularly in the opening “Jet Song” and in “Gee, Officer Krupke,” which had always been performed in the style of musical comedy.

One way to communicate the gangs' thuggishness was to make the attempted rape scene with Anita more violent and graphic. The comic aspects of “Jet Song” were eliminated and the vaudeville toned down in “Krupke,” despite the original's popularity with audiences.

Because “West Side Story” deals with social change, previous revivals have been burdened with a comparison between what was happening onstage and what was happening on the street, and critics have complained that revivals have seemed dated. In 1968 William Kloman wrote in *The Times* that “events have outrun its message.” When Robbins staged a revival in 1980, Frank Rich wrote that “the sociology and liberal faith of Arthur Laurents's book are now fairly meaningless,” and that audiences “no longer feel ghetto tragedies can be overcome by pleas for tolerance and understanding.”

One reason Mr. McCollum said he was so excited about this revival is that using a bilingual script keeps it from being “a museum piece” and gives it new relevance that it would not have if the Sharks spoke in broken English.

Yet the more time that has elapsed, the less of a problem making “West Side Story” relevant may be. From the distance of half a century the impulse to link the performance directly to current economic and social trends abates, and it becomes easier to accept “West Side Story” on its own terms, just as audiences have accepted the 1949 sensibility of “South Pacific” and the hippie buzz of “Hair.”

To Mr. Sondheim questions of whether a show is dated or has a fresh approach are completely beside the point.

“Dated does not necessarily mean bad,” he said. Whether a show is relevant to what is on the front page of newspapers is “completely meaningless,” he said; that’s not where the value of a show lies.

“It’s relevant if it moves you,” Mr. Sondheim said. “It’s worth reviving because it’s worth reviving.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 22, 2009

An article last Sunday about the new Broadway revival of “West Side Story” included a quotation from Peter Marks, a critic for The Washington Post, who wrote in January, “It’s love at first sight for us.” He was referring to one of the stars, Josefina Scaglione, who plays Maria; he was not referring to the current version of the musical.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: March 29, 2009

An article on March 15 about the revival of the musical “West Side Story” referred incorrectly to Puerto Ricans who moved to New York City in the 1950s. As American citizens, they were migrants, not immigrants.

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[Verse 1] Same town, new story They bridged a fated span He was bound for a glory She found her winning man. [Pre-Chorus] So I bet she stood by him Through it all I bet she stood by him She was pounding on the wall. [Chorus] She said it feels like the whole world is up on my shoulders Feels like the whole world's coming down on me Frightening. [Verse 2] How many bombs went off? Cause he just had to play his hand His lot is a woman's duty And she was always tougher than (Same town, new story) She said who's gonna save them from you (Same town, new story) Who's gonna save the